

Pae White  
Selected Press

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# PAE WHITE

INEXHAUSTIBLE CURIOSITY DRIVES THE LOS ANGELES ARTIST'S EXPLORATION OF MATERIALS AS SHE MEMORIALIZES THE EPHEMERAL AND DEFIES VIEWERS' EXPECTATIONS

BY ERIC BRYANT | PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEVIN SCANLON

WHEN PAE WHITE WAS INVITED to prepare a series of shows at the Vienna Museum für Angewandte Kunst, home to legendary holdings by Vienna Secessionists, she found herself drawn not to the works of Adolf Loos and Josef Hoffmann but to a variety of anonymous objects from the turn of the last century. Several made it into "Others," her reinstitution of the permanent collections that seek to draw attention away from period masterpieces. After that show debuted last fall, White's attention kept returning to a group of painted-wood toys that had likely never made it out of MAK's storage rooms. To celebrate these objects, which she freely describes as of "ambiguous value," she reimaged nine a piece in a chess set and sent pictures to her worldwide network of collaborators for interpretation and fabrication.

Describing the chess project one drizzly afternoon in her temporary studio, she starts pulling boxes from under a large central worktable, and her usually considered speech quickens with enthusiasm. "This is from Ethiopia," she says, unpacking talismans of gritty found objects held together with wire. "From China, I'm having a set done like toys from McDonald's. A company here in Long Beach is doing a promotional toy version. The most amazing ones just came

in. I've worked with these people in Lithuania for many years, and they don't speak any English. These are porcelain and platinum with a gold glaze. I was just speechless when I saw them, they're so beautiful." When we met, she had commissioned eight sets, including ones in ceramic from Mexico and wood from Germany, and was so delighted with the results she was considering enlisting others in the project.

Some 14 different chess sets will go on display in October at MAK, along with one of her monumental tapestries, this one depicting digital debris. The show will be small compared to a pair of recent midcareer surveys—"Material Matters," which traveled from Toronto's Power Plant in 2010 to SITE Santa Fe in 2011, and "In Love with Tomorrow," on view at the Langen Foundation near Düsseldorf through July 7. Still, the works being prepared for MAK may well come as close as possible to summing up White's all-embracing and relentlessly experimental practice.

The artist's desire to render the same concepts in various media, simply to see what will turn out, attests to her deep curiosity about materials. And her decision to hand production to expert craft people with limited instructions demonstrates her embrace of chance. Her choice to represent the results as chess sets, rather than *objets*, reveals her longtime interest in blurring the border between design and art. And in her selection of those toys as subject matter, we can see White as champion of the overlooked, the undervalued, and the ephemeral, a role that has become her signature in the art world and, increasingly, with a broader public.

In her studio, overlooking the lush California greenery in her front yard, Pae White shows off a collection of reimagined versions of century-old Austrian toys produced by her coterie of artisans for an upcoming show at the Museum für Angewandte Kunst, in Vienna.





grew up not far from the temporary studio that the garage of the hilltop home, just north of in Los Angeles, that her architect husband, Tom, designed and built in 2004. As a child she attended classes at the Pasadena Museum of Art; by high school taking life drawing courses which she continued at Scripps College, about 30 minutes inland. "I don't even remember many hundreds and hundreds of hours of that and never enjoyed it," she recalls. "Then I took a video-media class, and all of a sudden it just opened up. It was total chaos. That was probably the first time I started feeling like there was potential in everything." After finishing graduation, she returned to Pasadena to pursue a degree at the Art Center College of Design, then known as the Art Center College of Art and Design. "They had a fine-art department the administration didn't really expect to bring in any money. There were only a few students," she says. "But it just so happened these people were teaching there: Steven Parrino and Mike Kelley. They were completely under their radar, so we could develop our department's direction. We felt equal with the faculty." After earning her master's degree in 1991, White worked as a studio assistant while taking steps toward a

career in film and television. "I liked that you would work very hard for three months, and then you would have time to do your own thing," she says. But within a few years she realized she would need to make a choice. In 1995 she incorporated much of the work she had done for a Gregg Araki movie into a show called "Summer Work" at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, in Santa Monica, and stopped taking art direction jobs.

The decision was based on time management rather than the hierarchies of commercial versus fine art. Through the 1990s she experimented with publication design, initially for museum exhibitions by her then boyfriend Jorge Pardo. White first worked with her longtime gallerist Brian Butler, of Los Angeles's 1301 PE, on a book and public sculpture that Wilhelm Schürmann commissioned for "The End of the Avant-Garde: Art as Service," a 1995 exhibition at the Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung, in Munich. She designed the benefit auction catalogue for the nonprofit LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) in 1998, the year she had her first solo show with Greengrass, which continues to represent her in London. The catalogue she created in 2000 for the Moderna Museet's "What If: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design," in Stockholm, is a box of paper elements that refer to the work of her colleagues in the show.



That project caught the attention of Gregory Burke, curator of White's Power Plant show, who at that time was the director of a regional museum in New Zealand, where he offered her a residency. "She was really pushing the potential of the print medium," Burke remembers of her work on the catalogue. "For her it is not simply about reproducing work. We wrangled with the printer for weeks. She is absolutely compelled by the process."

That same compulsion continues to guide White in all facets of her work. "I love the R&D," she says at one point when explaining how she used a laser in one corner of her studio to etch paper coated with layers of color. "I have all of these tests of what results I get with changes in the energy, the power, the speed, the thickness of the material." The ultimate results of these experiments are a series of drawings the artist dubbed "Phosphenes" for their attempt to capture the sense, if not the exact look, of those fluttering specks of light that appear when you rub your eyes.

White's studio is littered with the outcomes of tests in other media as well. There are countless garish swatches from the company in Belgium that use digital looms to weave her large-scale tapestries memorializing wisps of smoke (as seen in the 2010 Whitney Biennial) or crumpled piece of foil (on display as the proscenium curtain at the Oslo Opera House). She made a point of using cotton and polyester thread, enjoying the contrast between the common

series of cast-iron grilles in shapes reminiscent of kitschy tabletop animal figurines blown up to several feet high. The oldest work was *Goodnight Moon*, 2000, consisting of 49 hand-blown, mirrored glass bricks arrayed in a straight line where the floor and a wall met; earlier versions with different numbers of elements were meant to be arranged differently.

While White regularly creates portable work for gallery shows and fairs—several laser-cut drawings from "Phosphenes" and a different series were seen in the booths of International Art Objects and Kaufmann Repetto at Independent earlier this spring—when it comes to museum installations and commissions, the artist takes site specificity

The owl, left, from White's 2003 "Briquettes and Support" series, appeared in the sculpture park at May's Frieze New York, although visitors to various state parks along the Hudson River can see them year-round. The artist was pleased by how the reflected light of the pieces in her current show, "In Lovewith Tomorrow," at the Langen Foundation in Kassel, Germany, filled the open gallery space.

## ONE IMPORTANT GOAL OF WHITE'S ART IS TO CONFOUND VIEWER EXPECTATIONS.

material and the heroic proportions of her creations, as well as the alchemy involved in using its dullness to mimic the look of shiny metal or ethereal vapor. But when she began to tire of the series, she enlivened the process by asking her collaborators to include metallic thread in the mix. Currently, tests are being run to compare various patterns and textures, find ideal densities, and map color combinations, and she will use it in the MAK tapestry.

If the primary goal of White's art is to confound viewer expectations and get us to focus on the ordinary by giving the ephemeral permanence, by using humble material to create grandeur, and by undermining the heroic with the playful, she is no less contrarian in the face of the market. Despite frequent use of machines in her production, the artist seldom issues works in editions, preferring to create variants that grant her more room for experimentation. This past May at a Frieze New York booth cosponsored by Green Grass, Milan's Kaufmann Repetto, and Andrew Kreps Gallery of New York—a city where White has not shown in a gallery for 15 years—artworks spanning more than a decade of the artist's career were on view, including *Sick Amour*, 2009–11, an autumnal accumulation of leaves handcrafted from canvas, metal, and soot, and "Briquettes and Support," a 2003



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For her installation at the 2009 Venice Biennale, above, seed-covered chandeliers evoking a variety of design styles were intended to attract birds that would alter the work during the show's run. At right, metallic-glazed porcelain popcorn pieces are actually 6 to 10 inches in size. One of the artist's experiments with laser-cut paper drawings is below.



very seriously. As she was researching the holdings of MAK for her intervention, she was asked by a curator to create a work for an exhibition in a remote Turkish town. After learning more about the location of the show, she had fabric printed using a 1903 pattern she found at MAK, but with colors drawn from a recent prediction of the season's trendiest hues. Then she had the fabric displayed and sold just as any other fabric would be in the booth of a merchant at the local market.

"It was in Mardin, Turkey, very close to Syria," White explains. "I just felt like that's the kind of community that doesn't necessarily want an assault from some sort of extreme, disconnected artwork. I want it to be more stealth, to be a part of that community." Similarly, her submission for the 2007 Münster Sculpture Projects was a marzipan version of a soft taco, made by local pastry chefs and sold at a local shop. "It was really a way to have the pastry shop be a site," she says. "I love going to some place in Germany or Austria where they have a classic dish, and I haven't idea what it is, but I find a way to merge my work with it."

This ability to integrate local stories into her vision is just as important when she is working on a grand scale. For "Making Worlds," the 2009 Venice Biennale exhibition curated by Daniel Birnbaum, White took over a decaying, 13th-century open space. She installed a permeable ceiling of colored rope pierced in various places by chandeliers that had been coated

in birdseed. She invited local singers who practice an ancient style reminiscent of bird song to perform. In an interview at the time, she described them as "something of a raw material of the region."

Increasingly, White finds herself taking on such large-scale projects, often public commissions. She is currently producing one from miles of brightly colored fiberglass tubing at the Los Angeles airport. For a London tube station, she is creating a vast neon light she describes as an amplification of the lamps used to treat seasonal affective disorder.

**"THERE IS SO LITTLE ROOM FOR THE ELEMENT OF CHANCE WITH THE PUBLIC PIECES."**

Yet she feels ambivalent about becoming consumed by these projects. "I love developing these things," she says, "but then when you have to get down to insurance and legal stuff, contracts, it's a different process. And there is so little room for the element of chance with these public pieces."

Perhaps that drive to stumble across something unexpected, to revel in the unpredictable is what is at the heart of her creations, both large and small. As she said of her Venice installation, "what's interesting to me is that you can make a world in a very small gesture and you can make a world in a very huge gesture." ■



FROM TOP: KAUFMANN REPETTO, GREENGLASS, LONDON, AND NEUSERREICHNEIDER; TWO IMAGES, FREDRIK NILSEN AND LOUISE

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# Afterall

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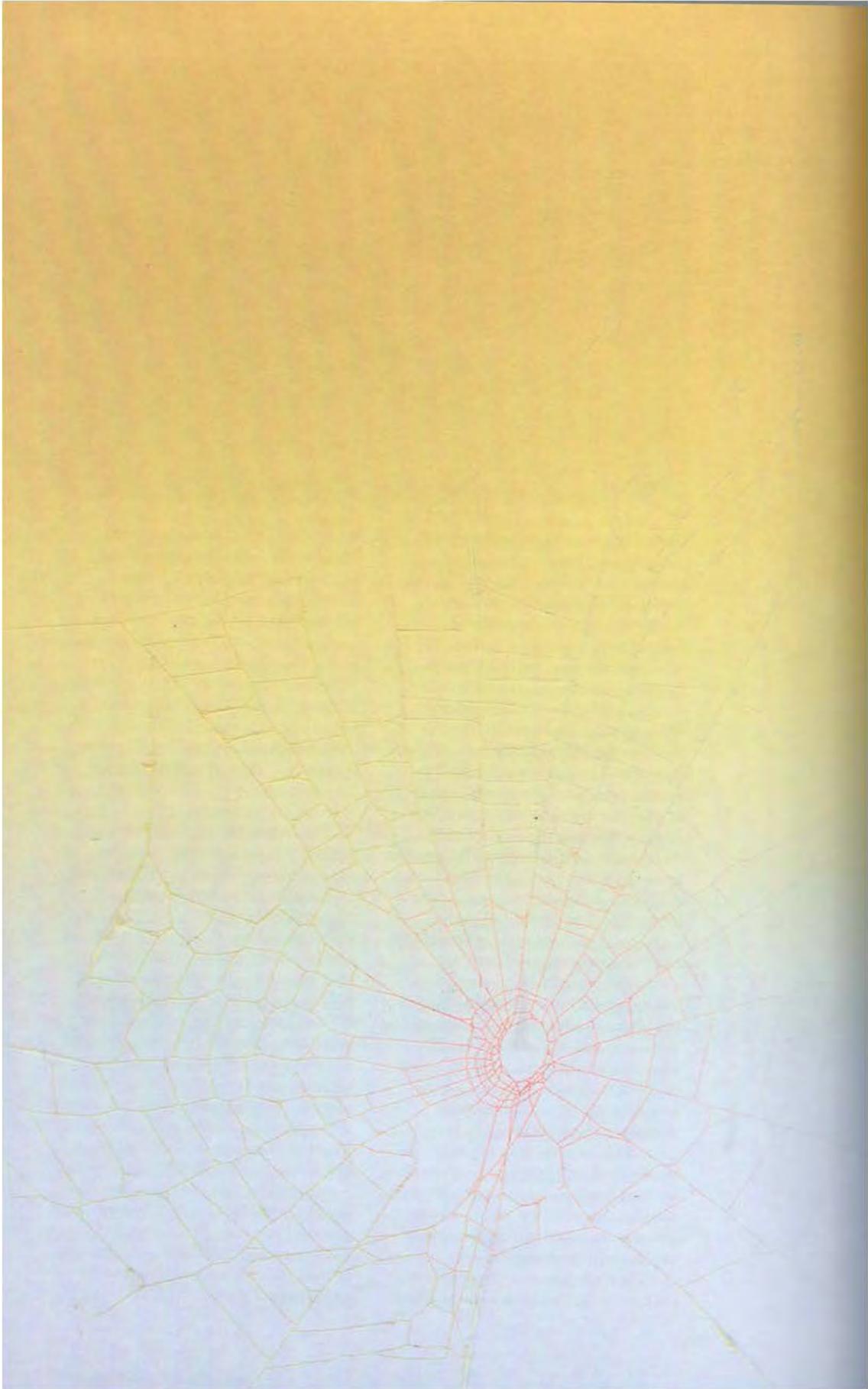
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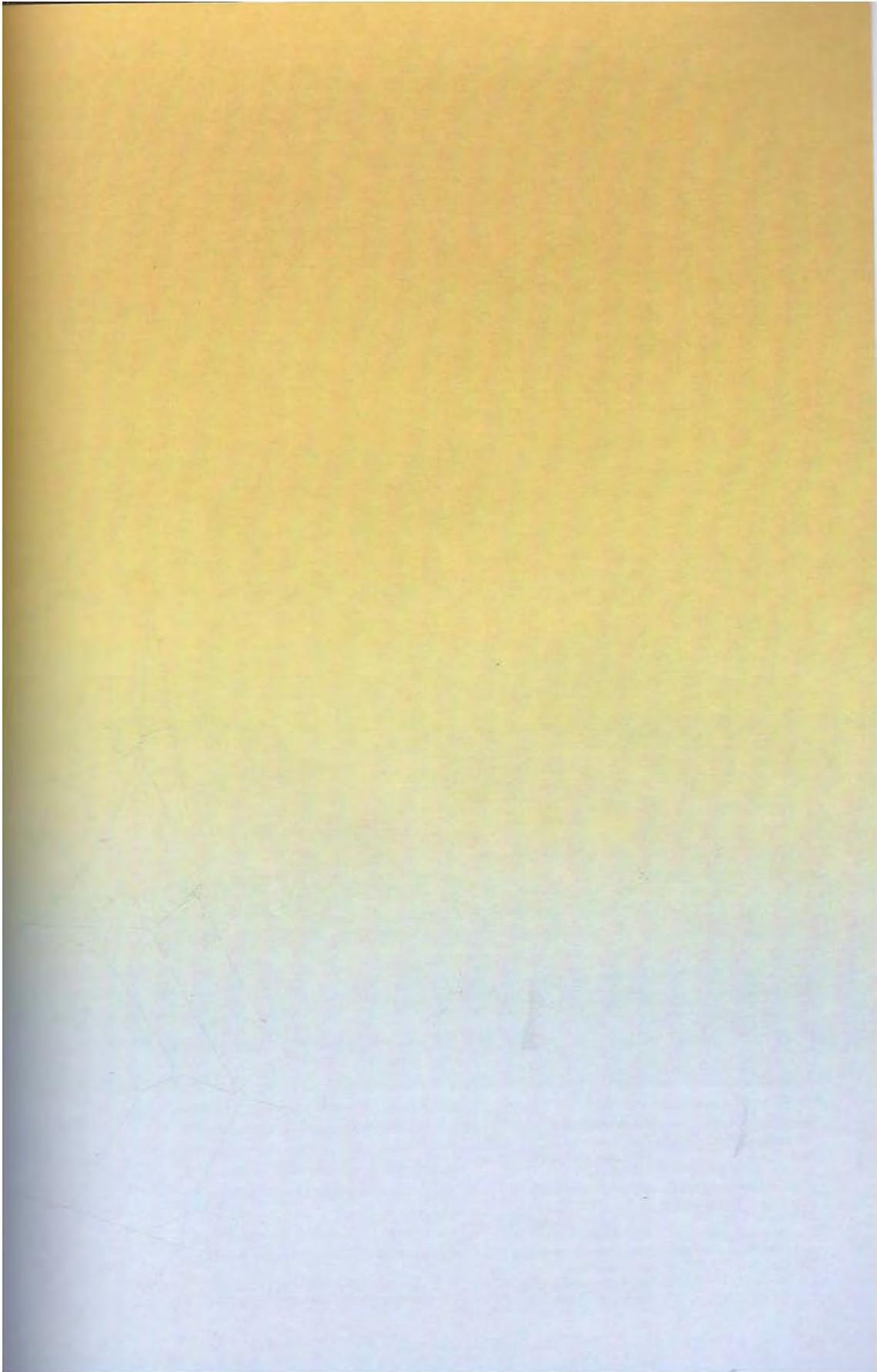


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Pae White,  
*Companions*, 2011,  
Southern Ice  
porcelain and gold  
glaze, dimensions  
variable. Photograph:  
Fredrik Nilsen.  
Courtesy the artist  
and 1301PE,  
Los Angeles

Previous spread:  
*Web Sampler #72*,  
2001, painted spider  
web on Perfect  
Paper®, framed,  
37.5 × 53cm /  
43 × 58.5cm framed.  
Photograph:  
Jens Ziehe. Courtesy  
the artist and  
neugerriemschneider,  
Berlin

## Summer Work: The Art of Pae White

– Glenn Adamson

In 2005, while walking through the Frieze Art Fair in London, I detected the distinctive whiff of fresh popcorn. I remember thinking it must be coming from the snack bar, but on turning into the next booth, I was confronted with a monumental artwork: a skip (in the US we'd call it a dumpster) filled to the brim with popped kernels. It turned out that this was a work by the Mexican artist Gabriel Kuri. My immediate reaction was: how very art fair. The beckoning but sickly scent; the explicit reference to mass entertainment; the inevitable onset of staleness; the sheer grandiosity and absurdity of it. Kuri had created the perfect emblem for an art world given over to commercial spectacle.

### Glenn Adamson discusses the working methods behind Pae White's fleeting, everyday beauty.

More recently, I encountered a sculptural use for popcorn a second time, at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2011. This time the popped kernels gave off no smell. That's because they were made of porcelain, coloured by hand to look like the real thing. They were also a bit oversized, and were arranged in rows hanging from the ceiling that together described a serpentine river of salty snacks. The installation was by the Californian artist Pae White – and I was smitten right away. If I had smiled ruefully at Kuri's arch gesture about the current condition of art production and viewership, and then moved on quickly, when I saw White's work I giggled and wanted to linger. The jaded, seen-it-all frame of mind that sets in so easily at art fairs drained away for a little while. In its place was the joy of finding something trivial made into something wondrous.

It's a reaction that White's work produces regularly, and not just in me.

Contemporary art does lots of things well, but this sort of considered optimism isn't one of them. For every artist who can pull off a genuinely life-affirming gesture, you'll find a hundred who remind you of our reasons (equally genuine) not to be cheerful. And of course, it's a hard act to keep up. White says that she's 'the most cynical, grumpy, impatient person I know' – and speculates that perhaps the positivity in the work 'comes from a desire for something that eludes me personally'.<sup>1</sup> She points out that the popcorn appears slightly burnt, so the piece is as much about disappointment as it is about little explosions of delight. Nor is it without a referential register ('pop art' – get it?). These aspects of the work seem to me subsidiary, but perhaps they are the key elements that prevent the work from becoming simple-minded spectacle.

One way or another, something somewhere is driving Pae White onwards. In common with many successful artists today, she is constantly on the move, completing multiple exhibitions and commissions scattered across the US and Europe. In 2009, at Art Basel Miami Beach, she erected a village of illuminated tower blocks that served as the principal nightlife spot for the fair. When I spoke to her last autumn she was also working on an architectural project for San Diego and a solo exhibition accompanied by an artistic intervention in the permanent galleries at the Museum für angewandte Kunst (MAK) in Vienna. The latter takes White's own globetrotting itinerary as its subject. She decided to work with a collection of toys in the museum's collection – reminiscent of early twentieth-century Wiener Werkstätte design, but signed indefinitely to storage because they were unattributed – and to ask various artisan workshops worldwide to interpret the forms as chess pieces, each in their own specialist medium and traditional decorative style. There are pottery and porcelain versions from

<sup>1</sup> All quotations come from a conversation with the artist, 1 September 2012.

Mexico and Lithuania, wood from Ethiopia and China, and from the US a plastic set that she likened to a 'promotional toy from McDonalds'. Also for the solo exhibition component at the MAK, she is working with a tapestry factory in Belgium to realise a metallic textile no less than 29-metres long. The plan for its design is to represent hundreds of pieces of ephemera from the collection piled into a giant archive, a near-abstract jumble that would communicate the depth but also the inherent confusion of the toy collection.

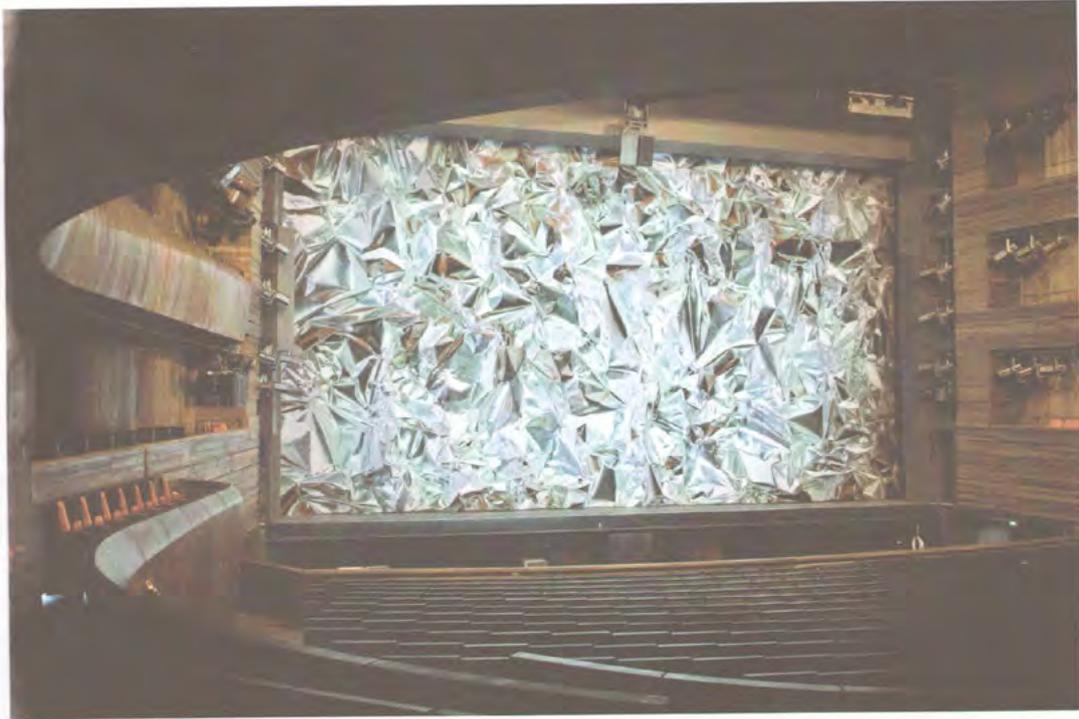
White's project in Vienna is the culmination of a trend that has been brewing for some time in her work. Like many artists today, she frequently has her work made by others. At the beginning of her career, she often crafted her works by hand, carefully and painstakingly. She still makes more than half of her work herself, but another important area of her expertise lies in the sourcing and management of skilful producers. Her popcorn, for example, is made by two trusted ceramic artisans in Lithuania. In fact, part of what gave her the idea of making popcorn in the first place was its universality, which eases the logistics of off-site production. You can get popcorn in most any corner store worldwide, so models are readily available for the artisans. Furthermore, given the near-abstract and wide variation of the form of a popped kernel, there is what she calls 'a high tolerance for interpretation' on the part of the fabricator. This deliberate margin of error is a consistent feature in White's work. Though she is determined to get a high-quality outcome achieved through precision craftsmanship, she is willing for this result to be approximate. She creates a big target so as to be more certain her producers will be able to hit it squarely. In effect, this means that she affords a calculated degree of agency to her collaborators. When she has a piece fabricated she rarely asks for a revision, and she values the lack of control that she has in the fabrication process, which makes for 'a richness, surprise, maybe even a contradiction that I'd be too self-conscious to produce on my own'.

These same dynamics hold true for what are perhaps White's best-known works: massive tapestries bearing images of fleeting beauty. The series, which began in 2006, has included such ethereal subject matter as a light effect playing in a bank of fog, or a single wisp of smoke against an

inky black background. Perhaps the best of these was a commission for the Oslo Opera House, partly because of the context. The building, designed by the Norwegian firm Snøhetta and completed in 2008, has been justly celebrated for its marriage of high-tech computer-generated form and intensive craftsmanship. That combination is symbolically represented in the upper tier of the Opera House, which sports a decorative motif that looks like Braille or computer punchcards, but was actually taken from nineteenth-century weaving patterns. The inner auditorium is sheathed in thousands of pieces of hand-split timber, and the exterior of the building in long, sloping planes of white marble. White won the competition to design a stage curtain for this fantastic space, the first thing the audience sees when they enter. Her proposal for the design expressed the spirit of the building beautifully: a digitally-woven tapestry representing a piece of aluminium foil blown up to gargantuan proportions. To derive the pattern, White carefully crinkled a piece of foil by hand until she got an evenly dispersed field of triangular facets. There's a mild joke here, in that the image recalls the all-over optical effects prized by Clement Greenberg in the work of Jackson Pollock or Jules Olitski. White comments, 'Understanding that the viewers were a captive audience, I was very careful to maintain an "overall abstraction" and not privilege any specific area. I wanted the eyes of the viewers to always be roving around the image.' As with the porcelain popcorn, White is aiming for the formal abstraction found in the context of the everyday.

The tapestry is powerfully illusory – in that it is dead flat – but reprises at grand scale the haphazard glints you might experience while unwrapping leftovers in your own kitchen. Though it looks like it is composed of metallic threads, in fact the materials are plain cotton and polyester, artfully interwoven to give a persuasive sense that the curtain is shimmering. White describes this magical effect in anthropomorphic terms, as if the threads 'had a dream of becoming something that was not in their nature, a fantasy of being silver and reflective... As if the material itself were in costume, and on stage.'

When making major commissions like the Oslo curtain, White's problem-solving capabilities come strongly to the fore. This is the designer/engineer side of her work,



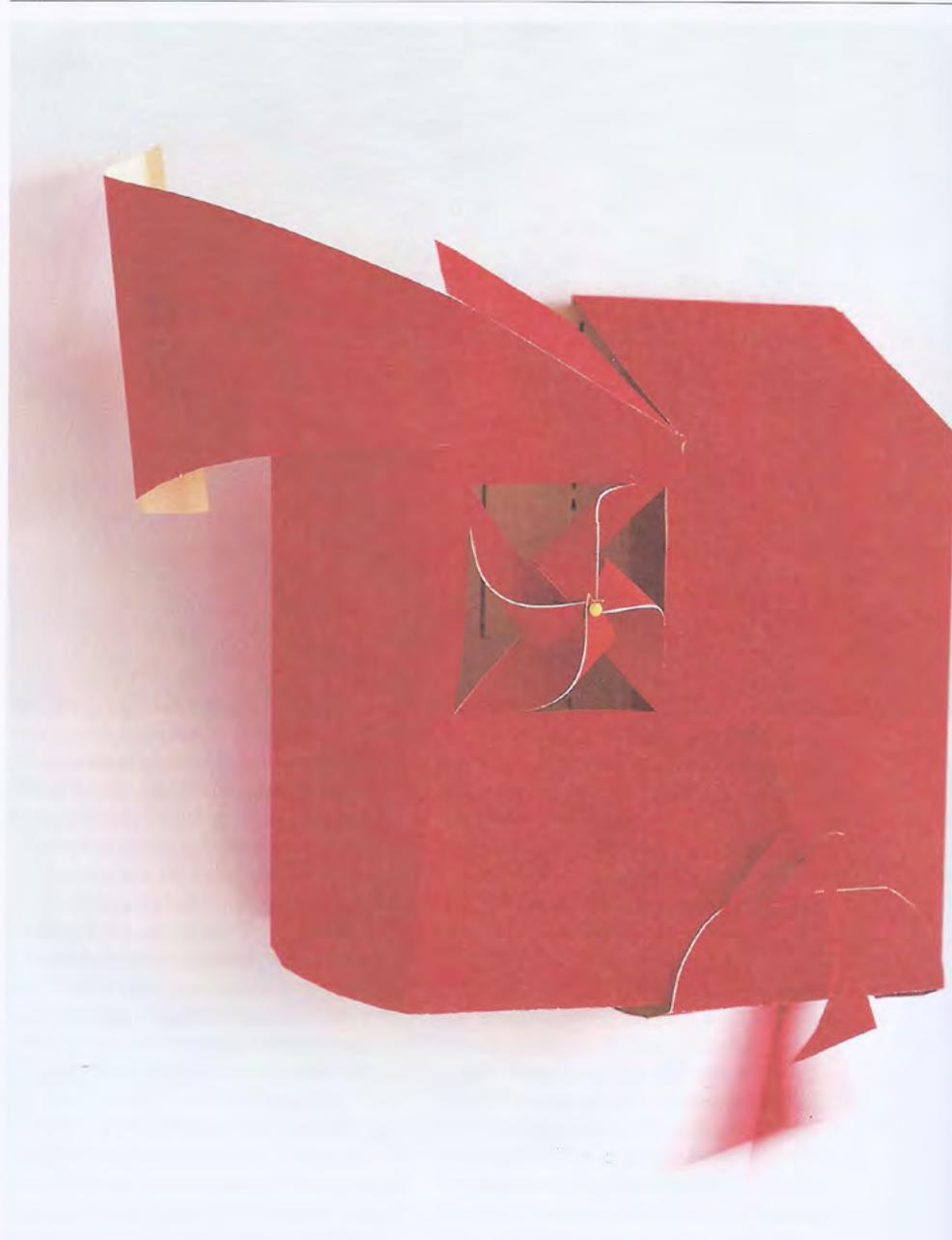
Pae White,  
*MetaFoil*, 2008,  
cotton and polyester,  
11 x 29m.  
Photograph:  
Eric Berg. Courtesy  
the artist and  
neugerriemschneider,  
Berlin

which makes her comparable to figures like Thomas Heatherwick, Joris Laarman and Mark Newson. Cross-disciplinarity is supposedly the norm these days, but it's still rare to find figures who traverse the realms of sculpture, installation art, product design and architecture so freely. White isn't very interested in such questions of category, but she has a designer's natural curiosity about different production systems and materials ('if you were to look at my studio, it's like a sample room') and an architect's ability to meet the conditions of a given site. These 'weird contingencies', as she puts it, lay at the heart of another of White's most successful projects – her installation for the 2009 Venice Biennale, where she was part of Daniel Birnbaum's 'Making Worlds'. The project had its origins in two haphazard discoveries: first, the ancient Venetian tradition of bird callers, or *chioccolatori*; and second, a recent injunction against feeding pigeons anywhere in the city. White was struck by the ironic disparity between these two trivialities, and decided to create an artwork to fill the conceptual gap.

The resulting installation reflected her contradictory instincts for the Grand Guignol and the light touch. White stretched what she calls a 'ghost tapestry', a roof of colourful stretched threads, overhead in the Arsenale exhibition space.

The main sculptural elements were a set of monumental bird feeders encrusted with seed, whose elaborate forms were derived from a variety of sources: crystal chandeliers you might encounter at the opera house, cathedral gargoyles, modernist designs and the glass made on the island of Murano in the Venetian lagoon. Wandering through the space were professional bird mimics, recreating complex bird calls without any particular fanfare, like whimsical refugees from a Tino Sehgal performance. The idea was that visitors would hear birdsong all around them, but would be unsure initially of where the tweets were coming from. That could be a nice pun on contemporary social technology, but White's intention was simply to intrigue visitors to explore and inspect the space. Given the high-profile nature of the Biennale and the heavy Byzantine architecture of the Arsenale, the playful and deceptive installation came across as a deft sidestep of the gravity of the occasion, like a toreador neatly evading the charge of an enormous bull.

That manoeuvre, so characteristic of White's work, raises the possibility that she is a sort of escape artist – which is, in turn, only a hairsbreadth away from being escapist. She grew up in the California of the 1960s, at a time when the West Coast was portrayed as a place of eternal



summer. The undeniably upbeat quality of White's work has its origins in this cultural moment. Her early years were saturated in the material culture of Pop – Milton Glaser posters, Paolo Soleri bells, George Nelson furniture, Vera Neumann scarves – and though it is hard won, her work shares the easeful clarity, high colour and infectious energy of all those designers. White has an extensive collection of 'Vera' textiles, which were some of the first art she experienced, sleeping on her sheets and peering through her curtains. With her single-name brand (White: 'It was a mystery to me. Who does

she think she is?'), her apparently intuitive method of translating everything around her into designs ('her dinner last night becomes a scarf the next day') and talent for aesthetic condensation ('like a graphic haiku'), Vera is something of a cult figure for White, and an ongoing object of identification.

After Vera, White's next important aesthetic encounter was with Millard Sheets, the wide-ranging Southern California artist, whom White knew through his granddaughter, a family friend. Sheets is remembered today both for the

Pae White,  
Paper Clock, 1988,  
coated paper,  
clock elements.  
Photograph:  
Fredrik Nilsen.  
Courtesy the artist  
and 1301PE,  
Los Angeles

breadth of his career – though trained as a painter, he also was an architect, illustrator and designer – and for his work as an educator. He held teaching posts at one time or another at key art colleges in Southern California (including Scripps College and Otis College of Art and Design), and also headed the art component of the Los Angeles County Fair. Sheets was the first professional artist whom White encountered, and what she calls his ‘expanded approach’ of working across media (not to mention his tremendous work ethic) was an important permissive model. Though she is hardly alone among artists of her generation in referring back to 1960s design – think for example of Jim Isermann, Jorge Pardo, Simon Starling and Assume Vivid Astro Focus – White returns to the era with unusual fondness. She has made several hanging cut-paper cascades that call to mind various icons of Pop: a Calder mobile, a psychedelic light projection, the concentric glass designs of Michael and Frances Higgins or a particularly spectacular lava lamp. *Restless Rainbow* (2011), an outdoor installation she created for the Art Institute of Chicago, gives visitors the pleasurable feeling of wandering about on a giant Kenneth Noland painting. Less jovial, yet much funnier, is a tapestry titled *Sea Beast* (2010), depicting a found fibre-art hanging – complete with wooden stretcher bars – turned on its side and stretching nearly seven meters along the wall. Macramé, the ultimate in un-cool craft, is here laid out for inspection, like a frog awaiting a schoolchild’s scalpel. But it is also monumentalised through the medium of tapestry, a major textile art used to ennoble a minor one – another example of White’s use of technique and scale to call our attention to things overlooked, and to juxtapose radically different styles of making, from the handmade to the industrial.

Does White ever long to truly scale down? The answer is yes. ‘I fantasise about moving through a painting series in my studio,’ she says. ‘I want to make art that doesn’t involve attorneys.’ Will she ever get around to it? I’m not sure. If ever there was an artist who thrived on the big stage, she is it. But every so often, running through her work, you do see traces of longing for the simple life. One recent sculpture depicts the leaves that litter the Pasadena sidewalk where she takes her morning run. It’s

another image of everyday transience, this time memorialised in canvas and aluminium. That elegiac mode runs all the way back to the beginning of her career, and her first one-woman show, held at the Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Santa Monica in 1995 and wonderfully titled ‘Summer Work’, as if she were a student just back from the holidays. There she exhibited the series that first won her wide attention, a series of works of paper incorporating spiderwebs gathered from her neighbourhood. ‘The fabricators were living in the trees,’ she says, ‘and I would go and collect their output.’ She even got to know the weaving patterns produced by different species. That early project contained the portents of much to come: the instinct to collect the uncollectible, the discovery of abstract draughtsmanship in unlikely places, the permanent fixing of something ephemeral. Behind it all, there is the simultaneously lyrical and deathly sensibility that one finds in so many of her pinned beauties, a quality reminiscent of Romanticism. White’s spider webs put me in mind of that most British of quips, attributed to the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge: ‘the summer has set in with its usual severity’.

One last fact about Pae White, and perhaps a telling one, is that her first job out of art school was that of a film-prop maker. (She worked on Gregg Araki’s 1997 hyperactive teen romp *Nowhere*.) This wasn’t quite art – it was art direction – but it taught her a lot about the potent combination of detail, focus and narrative fiction. If you did it right, she says, ‘you could get the whole world into a cigarette’. By now White has left film sets behind, and assumed her role on the stage of contemporary art. But like any good movie-maker, she knows that this is a contrivance, that you know it too and that many possibilities arise from this complicity. When you encounter a work by Pae White, the best thing is to give in to its magic – because it’s sure to give right back.



Pae White, *Weaving, Unsung*, 2009, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, Venice Biennale, 2009. Courtesy the artist, Kaufmann Repetto, Milan, Sonngrassi, London and Gerriemschneider, Berlin

## Pae White's Welcome Climate Change

– Terry R. Myers

One of the more surprising takeaways from last summer's DOCUMENTA (13) is that tapestries are definitely back. The timely rejuvenation of Hannah Ryggen's anti-fascist weavings from the mid-1930s to the 50s; the poignantly delayed arrival of a 1972–73 *Mappa* by Alighiero e Boetti, which had been anticipated for Documenta 5; and the immediate splendour of Goshka Macuga's magical history montage *Of what is, that it is; of what is not, that it is not 1* (part one was shown in Kassel, and part two in Kabul; 2012) all came together at the Fridericianum in Kassel to reassure me that no material or medium will remain obsolete as long as an artist does something interesting with it. Pae White has made several stunning tapestries over the past few years, and none were included in this

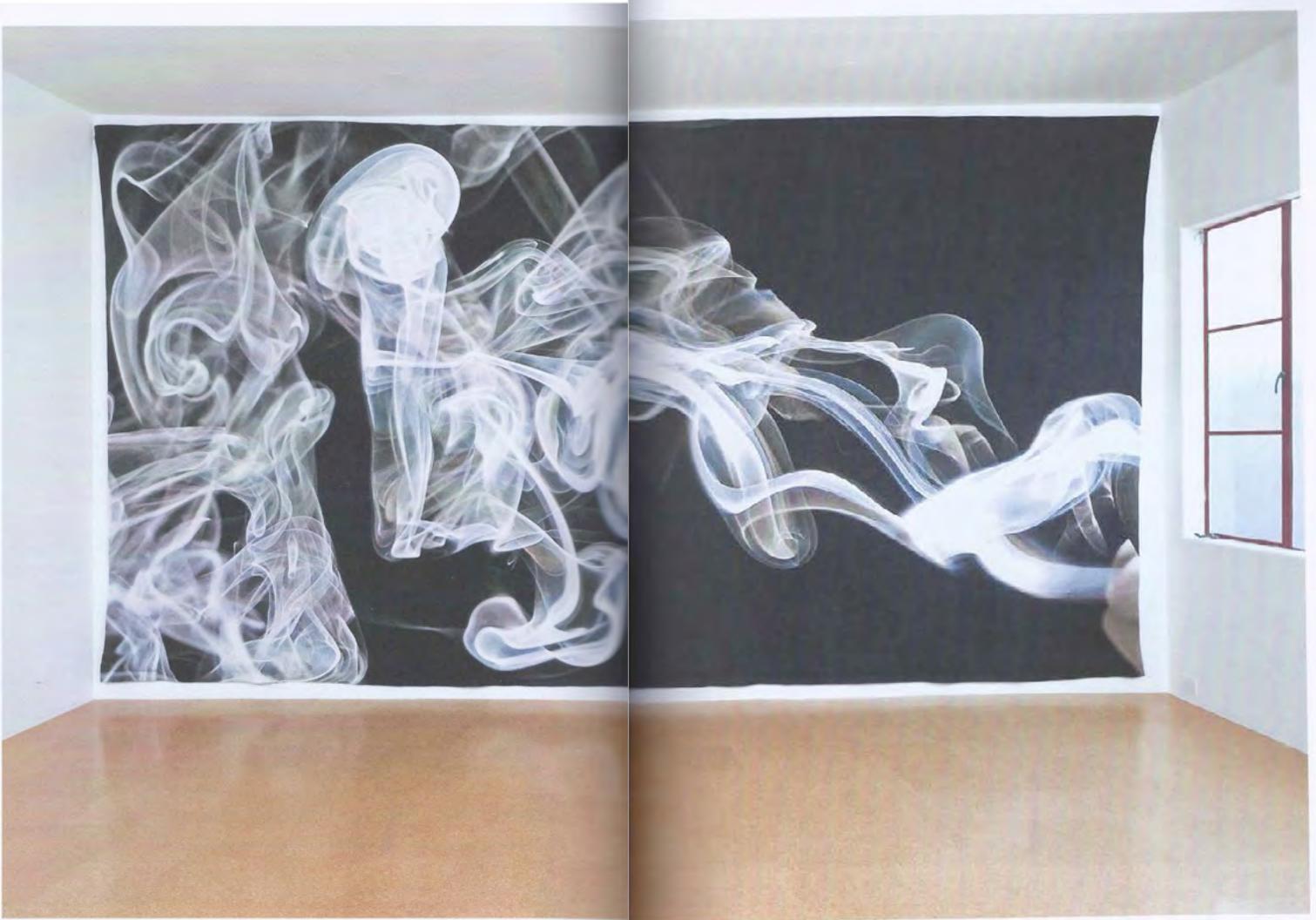
expectation of the unpredictability of the weather, not to mention life. The varied 'weather' of White's work, like the actual weather, can be, for example, pleasantly sunny or too 'bright' to tolerate; forlornly or invitingly cloudy; and on some occasions turbulent. All of these events take place in her different works without any permanent displacement of the steadfast climate of her overall enterprise and its atmosphere of simultaneous abundance and scrutiny.

Unlike the actual weather, it is possible for White's work to push against (its) nature. She plays her work against type, enabling it to occupy the shifting space between art and design and, at the same time, to somehow resist and reinforce both categories. In the case of her tapestries, all that is air melts into solid: *Smoke Knows* (2009), a three-by-six-and-a-half-metre depiction of white smoke on a dark background, literally materialises the immaterial in a breathtaking expanse of cotton and polyester, as its blown-up wafts traverse its absorbent surface. Well, not exactly, of course, because this is an enlarged and rather art-directed photograph of smoke that has been digitally woven into a spacious cloth rather than the unstable (and potentially unpleasant) stuff itself. And it is a particularly ornate image at that, one that once upon a time might have turned up in a magazine or film, or on a billboard communicating the glamour of smoking. Such smooth transferrals usually pull at least double duty in White's works, establishing not only their sense of in-betweenness (in this case, the tapestry straddles painting/photography, art/craft, material/immaterial, high/low) but also a particularly tangible sense of movement. As White has stated, 'In fact one form of movement – that of weaving – speaks

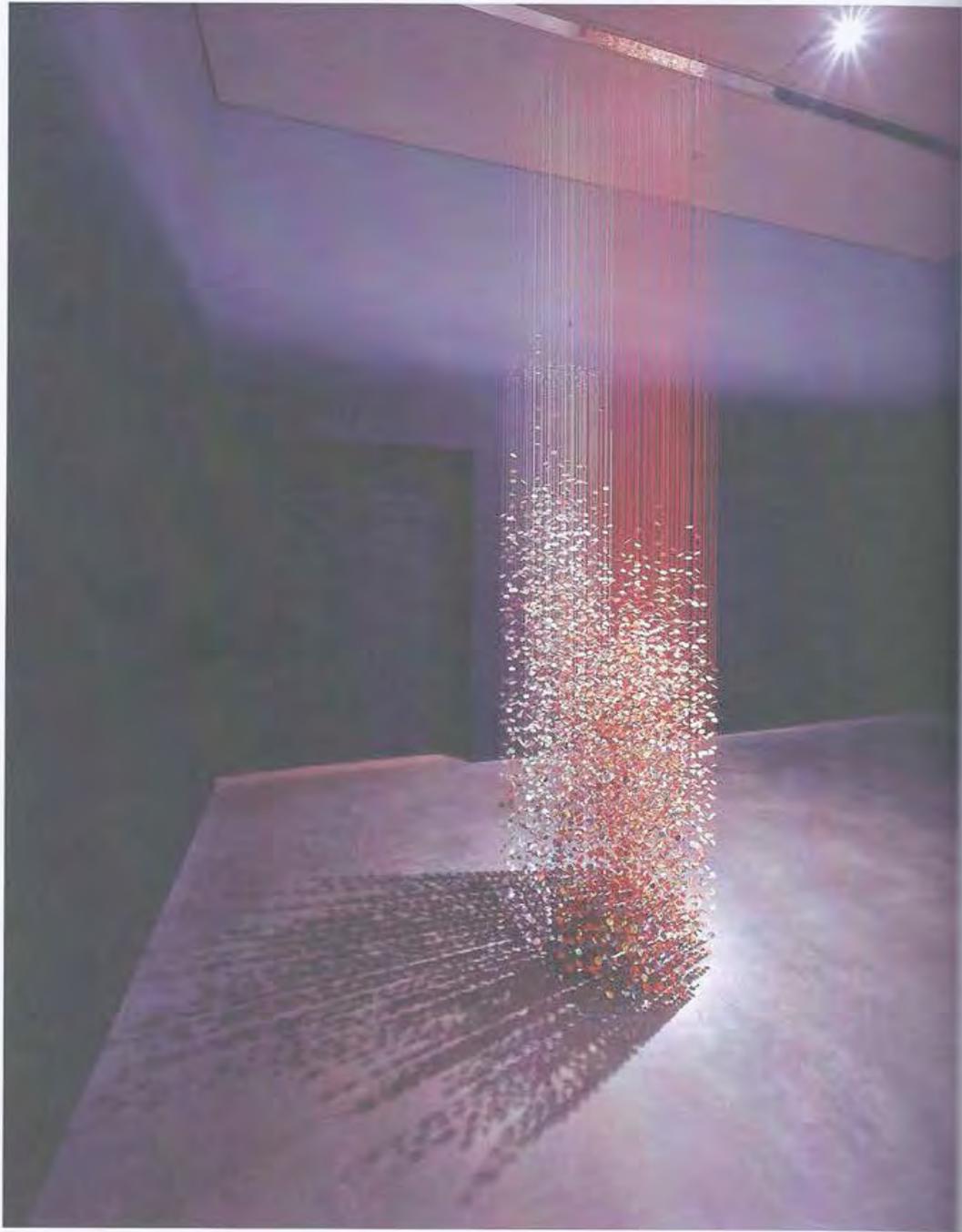
### Surveying Pae White's work from the 1990s to the present, Terry R. Myers admires its ability to play against type.

edition of Documenta, although the abundant expanse of her practice would have dovetailed strikingly with the ambitious scope of the exhibition.<sup>1</sup> I am not interested in protesting the absence of White's work in this particular show. I am, however, deeply interested in her varied practice, and have been ever since her MFA final exhibition at Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California in 1991. White's dynamic way of working has since resulted in a spectrum of objects and situations of remarkable diversity, but this body of work resists appearing random by its ability to achieve a steady assortment: a sense of coherence similar to the beauty of a bouquet of wild flowers or the pleasure suggested by a sampler box of candy or 31 flavours of ice cream – or even the

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the exhibition in terms of its ambition, see Terry R. Myers, 'Standing Still and Walking in Kassel: DOCUMENTA (13)', *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2012, pp.50–51, also available at <http://brooklynrail.org/2012/09/artseen/standing-still-and-walking-in-kasseldocumenta-13> (last accessed on 11 November 2012).



Dec White, Smoke  
2009,  
cotton and polyester,  
100x640cm.  
Photograph: Fredrik  
Widén. Courtesy  
Galleria, 1301PE,  
London and  
Galleria, London



Pae White,  
*Chocolate Mint,  
Maybe, 2005,*  
painted paper and  
thread, dimensions  
variable. Courtesy  
the artist and  
neuggeriemschneider,  
Berlin

about another form of movement — that of moving smoke.<sup>2</sup> The idea that the back and forth motion of the tapestry shuttle could speak about moving smoke is provocative: the labour (whether man- or machine-made) of producing the simultaneous figure and ground of a tapestry is active, accumulative and regular, while the 'labour' of producing moving smoke is passive, dispersive and random (unless, again, art-directed, manipulated, digitally enhanced or even 'designed' by an expert smoker). White's focus upon movement reminds me of the Color Field painter Jules Olitski who, in an interview in Emile de Antonio's film *Painters Painting* (1972), expressed his dismay at not being able to spray colour into the air and have it stay there. Olafur Eliasson solved that dilemma in his seemingly effortless work *Beauty* (1993): a rainbow created, like the 'real' thing, by water and light, but within a small room. Eliasson's *Beauty* and White's work in general have a great deal in common in terms of creating an accessible and, on occasion, crowd-pleasing effect, and both continue to explore a wide range of materials, even as Eliasson has streamlined the associative scope of his projects. White is an equal-opportunity objectifier when it comes to the active and the passive, the accumulative and the dispersive, the regular and the random, establishing oppositional strategies that can function like the warm and cold fronts of weather: in some instances following each other peacefully, in others colliding far more emphatically, all the while using movement to generate meaning.

In his essay for the catalogue of 'Material Mutters' (2010–11), White's exhibition at the Power Plant in Toronto, Oliver Zybok connects White's smoke tapestries (*Smoke Knows* is one of several she has produced since 2007) with the paper mobiles she started making in the 1990s. In an email message to him, quoted in his essay, White reinforces the connection:

*I wanted to play with the idea of portable chaos, the idea that one could pack a swarm of birds together and transport them in a suitcase, the idea that a volume could be defined by the fact that it is almost not there... The mobiles were like a flash-frozen waterfall, and their geometry could be at the same time intact and collapsible.<sup>3</sup>*

*Scissor Club (Neapolitan City)* (1999) remains one of my favourite paper mobiles, not only because of the chocolate, vanilla and strawberry colour scheme of its hundreds of small, cut-out paper hexagons strung on individual threads from ceiling to (almost) floor — like some sort of ice cream rain, sleet or snow — but also because of its engagement with questions of taste and choice. As I wrote when it was first shown in Los Angeles in 1999,

*White successfully uses the tricolour/flavour reference to allow us to contemplate what is markedly social in the simplest components of what we call 'taste', particularly as it is or is not acknowledged in an image/market, urban/suburban world which on its surface is presented as user-friendly, and made-to-order (forget 31 flavours, think one billion web pages).<sup>4</sup>*

At the time, I was very much under the influence of Siegfried Kracauer's assertion, in 'The Mass Ornament' (1927), that 'an analysis of the simple surface manifestations of an epoch can contribute more to determining its place in the historical process than judgements of the epoch about itself'.<sup>5</sup> White's use of the colours of Neapolitan ice cream reminds us that the flavour profiles they represent are thought to go together (although strawberry never worked for me), even though the packaging usually makes it possible to choose how to eat it: all three at once, or one or two at a time, even (again, in my case) leaving one untouched. Today the work strikes me as a consummate example of the ability of White's work to be both self-critical and to mete out

2 Quoted in Oliver Zybok, 'Pae White — Fold, Unfold, Re-fold', in Gregory Burke (ed.), *Pae White: Material Mutters* (exh. cat.), Toronto: The Power Plant, 2010, p.64.

3 *Ibid.*, p.72, fn.16.

4 T.R. Myers, 'Pae White', *artext*, no.69, May–July 2000, p.85. Thirty-one flavours relates to the US ice cream chef'n Baskin-Robbins and their number of ice cream flavours.

5 Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament' (1927; trans. Barbara Correll and Jack Zipes), in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (ed.), *Art in Theory: 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p.462.

judgements on the times in which it finds itself – times in which something like ‘portable chaos’ (recall White’s earlier suggestion of transporting her mobiles in a suitcase) reverberates out from the meticulous installation of one of her mobiles into the complexities of the world, doing so without hesitation or, better yet, without losing its aesthetic impact or integrity. In other words, White’s identification of this particular mobile as a city can move us from our preferences for certain flavours to much larger social considerations and conditions. Even at her most playful – for example in another, titanic tapestry, titled *MetaFoil* (2008) and commissioned by the Oslo Opera

***Such smooth transferrals usually pull at least double duty in White’s works, establishing not only their sense of in-betweenness (in this case, the tapestry straddles painting/ photography, art/craft, material/immaterial, high/low) but also a particularly tangible sense of movement.***

House as its stage curtain – White combines the material and social implications of reflection using actual brilliance. A massively enlarged image of foil that is both awesome and absurd, *MetaFoil* again plays with complications: because it is made of thread, its mirroring qualities are pure illusion; because it is an image of *crinkled* foil, it adds the suggestion of noise to the picture without actually being present; because it remains referential as well as ornamental, it makes a comfortable joke about those occasionally irritating noise-making members of the audience.

The intensity of the visual impact of *MetaFoil* was established early on in White’s more compact work. *The Inconsolable Wailing of the Damned* (1994), made of two roughly door-sized monochrome sheets of coloured plexiglas (the type of yellow found in stained-glass windows or, even, stained-glass candy) that have been sandwiched together with adhesive, is simply presented flat on the floor. When bombarded with light the work reflects a blast of colour up onto a nearby wall, or sometimes on the ceiling, creating a hyper-optical version of the

anguished cry named in the title. I distinctly remember seeing one of these pieces soon after my move from New York to Los Angeles in 1994, thinking then (and now) that they were a perfect manifestation of the ‘return’ to Minimalism (in the hands of someone like Felix Gonzalez-Torres) that was so pressing at that time, combined with a refreshing updating of the then under-appreciated accomplishments of so-called ‘finish fetish’ artists (John McCracken, Peter Alexander, etc.) in Southern California. With the advantage of hindsight, I can see how much these works facilitated the expansion of her practice into more perceptual terrain, asserting its ability to activate our visual experience of states of being, as if anything could move from vapour to liquid to solid to vapour, ad infinitum.

Also in 1994, White would contribute an important installation to ‘Pure Beauty: Some Recent Work From Los Angeles’, an influential group exhibition curated by Ann Goldstein for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles that travelled to California after inaugurating the exhibition space of the American Center in Paris. White’s *Vera® Retrospective Stations* (1994) consisted of several arrangements in which the boldly colourful and graphic scarves designed by the US artist Vera Neumann were set between sheets of glass and placed on the floor, each with an Arne Jacobsen Ant chair, as well as the occasional ashtray. Airing her influences in public not only because she loves them (this is how it seemed to me) but also because they were at that point undervalued in both art and design history, White’s installation, alongside the plexiglas works, solidified the diversity of her approach, providing a useful framework from which she would be capable, it would soon seem, of making many distinct, if not unusual things. A *Paper Clock* (1999), made of folded coloured paper and inexpensive clock parts, which was to become a series? Of course. It is playful, colourful, functional and much more than merely about time. A series of cast-iron outdoor grills in the shapes of animals – for example, *Briquettes and Support* (1993)? Absolutely. They are playful, not colourful, functional and much more than merely about grilling.

In 2011, White produced a large-scale installation for the outdoor terrace atop the Modern Wing at the Art Institute of



Pae White,  
*Smokes and  
Smoor*, 1993,  
cast iron barbecues,  
dimensions variable.  
Courtesy the  
artist and 1301PE,  
Los Angeles



Pae White,  
*Restless Rainbow*,  
2011, vinyl,  
dimensions variable.  
Photograph: The Art  
Institute of Chicago.  
Courtesy the artist  
and greengrassi,  
London

Chicago. Called *Restless Rainbow* (2011), it synthesised her interests in graphic and textile design and expanded her visual, conceptual and situational parameters into an ultimately loaded private/public situation. According to the press release, the work's source was White's imagining of a rainbow that had fallen from the sky; the installation moved past any mawkish trappings of such a source and brought things very much down to earth on the floor and glass walls of the terrace, in the form of concentric bands of strangely specific colours more suited to design (for clothes or cars, I would say) than representative of the generic hues associated with rainbows. With a sense of self-containment that still allowed for a focused view (through a circular opening) across Millennium Park to Frank Gehry's bandshell, White created a strange type of interior space that was still open to the sky where rainbows would normally appear, not to mention the Chicago skyline.

Not everyone, however, was won over by the work. Soon after it opened, the local press picked up the story of several future brides who had booked wedding celebrations on the terrace and were not happy with White's intrusion into the space.<sup>6</sup> When I heard the story, I thought of Marcel Duchamp. While I accept that the connection to *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (or *The Large Glass*, 1915–23) is fragile at best, the association reminded me of the still under-explored relationship between the act of pushing the limits of categories that Duchamp often embarked on (and, by extension, Dada) and the work of Wassily Kandinsky, whose *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) Duchamp translated from German into French.<sup>7</sup> In 1943, Duchamp would write that Kandinsky 'came to a purer expression' when his work became significantly more geometric, 'doing away with the skilful qualities of a hand'.<sup>8</sup> That I would end up in another unusual place of in-betweenness – this one art historical – is by now no surprise

to me, as White's work continues to provide perpetual changes of climate while maintaining the unpredictability of its weather.

6 See, for example, Cynthia Dizikes, 'Art Disrupts Wedding Plans at Chicago's Art Institute', *Chicago Tribune*, 17 May 2011, available at [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-05-17/news/ct-meet-art-institute-wedding-20110517\\_1\\_art-institute-s-modern-wing-erin-hogan-terrace](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-05-17/news/ct-meet-art-institute-wedding-20110517_1_art-institute-s-modern-wing-erin-hogan-terrace) (last accessed on 23 November 2012).

7 My line of thinking has been influenced by Maurice Tuchman's suggestion, in his essay 'Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art', that the 'effect of Kandinsky's ideas upon Duchamp merits further investigation'. See M. Tuchman (ed.), *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (exh. cat.), Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press, 1986, p.47.

8 This is from Duchamp's entry on Kandinsky for the 1950 catalogue of the Société Anonyme, reprinted in Robert L. Herbert, Eleanor S. Apter and Elise K. Kenney (ed.), *The Société Anonyme and the Design Bequest at Yale University: A Catalogue Raisonné*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, p.355.

# ARTFORUM

MILAN

## Pae White

KAUFMANN REPETTO

The new works that made up Pae White's recent exhibition, "A piece of the almost grey sky . . .," had each been assigned an allusive and ironic title. Two large tapestries with white backgrounds, coming after those enormous ones with black backgrounds seen at the 2010 Whitney Biennial, are called *Milan Hazy 1* and *Milan Hazy 2* (all works cited, 2011), the English words recalling through assonance the Italian name for the inhabitants of Milan: Milanese. The images were originally photographs of coils of smoke, to which White gave plastic relief and visual consistency while maintaining their two-dimensionality; they are dark, from black to a range of browns, but when examined at close proximity they are seen to contain a rich gamut of small, colorful touches. The two works were exhibited along with *Pop Corona*, a circular constellation of large objects shaped like popcorn, created in white porcelain, their interiors embellished with gold glaze. Hung from the ceiling by thin cables, they formed a circle suspended in midair. Several other works in the show featured similar imagery. A series of



Pae White, *Better Places*, 2011, mirror, aluminum thread, painted paper, vinyl, dimensions variable.

larger sculptures was lined up in front of the long reception table; titled "Companions," it is made up of many different subordinate units whose interiors are glazed in platinum.

The most complex work in this show, however, was *Pop Storm*, which comprises a much greater number of popcornlike objects, smaller and made from Japanese paper clay, embellished with yellow dyes, and then blackened with a propane torch. This avalanche of small elements, hung at eye level, was supported by a dense mass of black upholstery thread so that the viewer did not perceive the serpentine form of the whole, in effect bringing to mind an impending landslide. Instead, one could approach and enter amid the work's coils, as if in a silent snowstorm.

*Better Places*, meanwhile, was suspended low, almost touching the floor. It is made up of superimposed layers of small, paper-thin, two-sided hexagonal mirrors that reflect the colorful collages glued onto one side of each hexagon, in a

chain of glimmers and reflections, to great visual effect. Here, White again evinces her masterful use of color, accentuating its somewhat artificial intensity in a way that recalls the psychedelic cultures her works often evoke. Seen in her native California, her work would relate to commonplace and popular lifestyles, but seen in Italy, it seemed striking in its exoticism and formal complexity, even bordering on the eccentric.

Examples of this were seen in the paintings scattered throughout the gallery, all the same size (just under eighteen square inches) and created by applying clay to a wood support and then burning into the clay, inserting colored inks into the incisions, and burning it again. White creates abstract schemes made of images of stars in undulating linear series, or of circular white on black grids, or with inserts of delicate pink amid extremely subtle vertical white lines. Among all of these works, the most intriguing piece was perhaps *Challenged Text*, which bears a colorful legend that seems like an ironic statement addressed to the viewer/critic of the work. It reads THIS IS A DRAWING OF REGULAR LOVE DESCRIBED BY ME AND NOT INTERPRETED BY YOU. Even more than in knowing how *not* to interpret, the problem may lie in the impossibility knowing what "regular" signifies.

—Giorgio Verzotti

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

ARTFORUM - September, 2011

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# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

April 2011



Pae White: *Still, Untitled*, 2010, cotton and polyester tapestry, 12 by 40 feet; at the Power Plant.

## PAE WHITE THE POWER PLANT

This exhibition of recent works by Los Angeles-based artist Pae White, titled “Material Mutters” and curated by Power Plant director Gregory Burke, included two projected animations, a series of works on paper and a newly commissioned fabric work, but it focused primarily on 15 of the monumental tapestries (as large as 12 by 40 feet) that White began producing in 2004. For these tapestries, White assembles landscapes of everyday materials and photographs them; then artisans, aided by computers, reproduce the digital pictures in woven form.

White’s tapestries jam-pack items of consumer culture—depicting, for example, wrapping paper, fabric swatches, food, junk mail and newspaper clippings—in flat compositions that suggest a *horror vacui*. Their humble subject matter stands in ironic contrast to their spectacular scale and to the heroic tradition of tapestry art—a medium rooted in sprawling medieval battle and hunting scenes. Take, for instance, *Studio A–Z, MMVII #5* (2007)—one of four tapestries exhibited from a series of five—which portrays at roughly

24 by 10 feet a hoard of pumpkin seeds interspersed with apricots and highlighted by specks of steel-blue glitter.

The tapestries’ dazzling palette is as arresting as their grandiosity, particularly in the eight-work series “Skygazing” (2006). In (*Skygazing #3*) *ursa minor*, a smattering of bubble-gum pink and glossy white blobs covered with multicolored marks, representing icing-drenched animal crackers covered in sprinkles, is set against a layered backdrop of hexagonal cutouts of Yellow Pages ads. Here we have California Pop artist Wayne Thiebaud’s confectionary-counter paintings played to Wagnerian proportions.

Standing independent of the other tapestries, *Still, Untitled* (2010) focuses on fleeting immateriality rather than on dense materiality. Exhibited first at the 2010 Whitney Biennial, and shown here with a series of 36 related drawings, it depicts winding ringlets of white smoke in close-up against a rich black ground, offering a Mannerist-style contrast of light and dark.

The video animation *Dying Oak—Elephant* (2009) is based on a three-dimensional scan of a massive 800-year-old

oak tree, taken using light detection technology. A swirling abstraction of geometric beads of light rising from earthy sepia tones, it hints at rather than resembles its source. By animating a dying tree, White carries out a process opposite to that of *Still, Untitled*, in which she “stilled” unfolding smoke curls. Both works, however, bear a tension between subject and medium, the ephemeral smoke freeze-framed in thick fabric and the sturdy oak rendered with ethereal light.

The commissioned *Sea Beast* (2010) seemed superfluous. The nearly 10-by-22-foot weaving, based on a photo of a tacky ’70s macramé hanging, recalls Mike Kelley’s crocheted afghans and countless other works that have subsumed home craft into high art. Indeed, “Material Mutters” itself betrayed a *horror vacui* in terms of exhibition planning, providing a curatorial overload that at times obscured White’s playfully engaging, ironical pairing of incompatible subject matter and medium.

—Earl Miller

SEPTEMBER 16, 2010, 3:37 PM

**Seeing Things | Studio Visit: Pae White**By  
**BROOKE HODGE**

I recently visited the artist Pae White in her Los Angeles studio, where she was busy working on a new exhibition for [the Power Plant](#) in Toronto. The exhibition, which opens on Oct. 9, will feature a number of her recent tapestry works as well as a new commissioned tapestry called “Sea Beast.” White has called the show “Material Mutter” because, she explained, “it’s about the exploration of process and the material is doing the talking.” Smoke has been a recurring motif in her work lately, and she has been exploring ways to capture its elusive qualities in various media, including a series of carved paper works that she was finishing for the Toronto show. Because smoke moves so rapidly and changes form so quickly, White likes the way the image of something so immaterial contrasts with the physicality of fabric. “It’s one material trying to understand another and it turns the fabric into something other than itself,” she said. At the [Whitney Museum’s Biennial](#) this spring, her monumental digitally woven tapestry “Still, Untitled” was a showstopper.

Visiting an artist’s studio offers a glimpse into a much more personal and intimate space than the gallery or museum, where the artist’s work is usually seen. White’s studio, a large airy garage attached to her house, is a colorful, vital place, full of books, fabric samples, tapestry swatches, prototypes and found objects, including a papery wasp’s nest, a beautifully formed leaf, images of butterflies and birds. Some of these things are works in progress, like an editioned work that will be a small box containing the pieces of a broken butterfly, while others she simply finds beautiful for their natural forms and textures. White is always working on multiple projects at many different scales. She showed me a briefcase that contained a “swatch book” of neon tubes that she used for a massive installation, of five layers of neon, that will open at the Gloucester Road underground station in London for the 2012 Olympics. She described it as being “like a Persian rug S.A.D. lamp” because its range of white shades will counteract seasonal affective disorder. The neon installation, like much of White’s work, is physical and ephemeral, tactile yet elusive. If you’re in Los Angeles this fall, you can see White’s work in the Museum of Contemporary Art’s coming exhibition “The Artist’s Museum,” for which she has also designed the title graphic.



White in her Los Angeles studio.

Paola Noe, *Art Forum*, September 2008

each other we kiss and hug. For Pae White, as Californian as her work has always been, this mode of expression (and behavior) has become a persona that is revealed in the title she chose for her solo show at Francesca Kaufmann: "Mt. Baci e Abbracci."

The first gallery space was occupied by one of the mobiles for which White has become well known. *Suncloud* (all works 2008; her title here, as always, based on a natural phenomenon that is not seen) is made up of almost one thousand small hexagonal pieces of paper confetti suspended from thin (but not invisible) threads hung from the ceiling in a circle. The outer portion of the monumental installation is a kaleidoscope of different colors (green, pink, red, blue), while yellow dominates its center. The title helps us interpret the work but only to a certain point: Yellow is the ray of sun that pierces the haze with its luminous power, even if it is hard to compare the chromatic fantasy dancing around it to the grayness of a cloud.

Also on view was a series of new paintings titled "Around the World in 11-14 minutes." White selected banal, anonymous photographs shot at the "It's a Small World" ride in Disneyland, downloaded them off the Internet, and transformed them into canvases created by a professional billboard artist, constructing images in which architecture (the Eiffel Tower, Venice, the entrance to Disneyland) and landscape (the green of Ireland, the ocean floor) are transfigured into blotches of flat color. We are presented with a graphic image, almost a biomorphic abstraction—the world seen as if by someone passing its sights too quickly to register them, with all their shadows and imperfections.

In the other two rooms of the gallery, White continued her creation of imaginary landscapes, this time tending toward the domestic, with a small greenhouse-studio installation (a gallery within the gallery) surrounded by vases and potted houseplants made of paper and canvas. These were of different types: small, medium, and large, some flowering, some not, colored or in black and white—what seem to be red primroses, pink begonias, hydrangeas, violets, succulents, and climbing plants, but also other, perhaps invented, species. They were placed everywhere, yet with a minimalist sense of order: on the floor, in corners, on shelves, on the windowsill, and on the door frame that led into the second room. Here, an autumnal courtyard opened up, populated by dry leaves (created using a particular type of scorched, fireproof canvas), which seemed to be awaiting a gust of wind before swirling in an eddy on the gray stone floor. The mute botanical scenario points to an important aspect of White's work: her ability to reconstruct the normalcy of things, which never merely serves to decorate, but rather to explore space, creating new geometries and dimensions through color. Her choice of materials, with their simplicity and precariousness, emphasizes the ephemeral—the usual state of things in White's eyes, whether it be embodied in flower petals, a ray of sun, or a kiss and a hug.

—Paola Noe

*Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.*

Pae White, *Studio Plants*, 2008, paper, thread, aluminum, and cotton. Installation view.



MILAN

Pae White

GALLERIA FRANCESCA KAUFMANN

When writing, we Italians sign off to friends and people we are fond of by saying "baci e abbracci" (kisses and hugs). And in fact when we see

ARTFORUM - September, 2008



# If I could change...

Pablo Lafuente explores the world of Pae White, where animals become barbecues, chandeliers turn into sculptures and magazines contain artworks

If you drive from New York City along George Washington Bridge towards New Jersey and continue to the end of Palisades Parkway North, you'll see a roundabout with signs indicating the way to Bear Mountain Inn, in Bear Mountain State Park. To the left of the inn, among the trees, there are a few wooden tables and benches. It's the perfect spot for a picnic.

Nearby, you'll find something strange: several sculptures of animals (an owl, a fox, a turtle), cast in iron, around one and a half metres high, that look like cartoon versions of creatures you might encounter if you ventured deeper into the woods. Look a little closer and you'll realize that they are not just sculptures: inside the owl's belly and beneath the shell-lid of the turtle you'll find a grill. The animals are perfectly functioning barbecues, but they also operate on another level as signs.

In this sense, they are reminiscent of *The Long Island Duckling in Learning from Las Vegas*, the 1977 book by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. A small roadside store in the shape of a duck (the entrance is through the breast), this building is both "sculptural symbol and architectural shelter". It does what it's supposed to do – 'host' a shop – but with some extras. Its strangeness attracts customers and calls out for attention, and it provides a friendly sight in an otherwise bleak landscape.

This contradiction between the outside and inside is shared by Pae White's barbecues in Bear Mountain and Franklin D Roosevelt State Parks. Entitled *Briquettes and Support* (2003), they are as comfortable with their symbolism as they are with their function. Furthermore, if you took the sign away there'd be nothing left to use. And because of this, they make perfect public art.

Pae White's ability to modify the conventional status of things crops up repeatedly in her work. She has turned chandeliers into sculptures by placing them inside a gallery (*More Moons of Tunis* appeared as part of her exhibition "Giraffes" at Galerie Daniel Buchholz in 2003); she has also shown them in a shop window, transforming a commercial space into a public art space (London's Selfridges, 2003); and her contribution to the group show "the object sculpture" (Henry Moore Institute, 2002) was the design of the exhibition catalogue. Her work is decidedly varied and she's unafraid to explore a range of mediums: painting, sculpture, video and installation. This, and her appetite for multiple projects, many of them unusual, brings to mind the word promiscuity. To the extent that one of the notions pervading White's work is exchange, promiscuity is meant here as a compliment.

Some of the strategies that she employs come straight from the late 1960s. Placing slabs or bricks on the floor of a gallery, or using periodicals and other publications as a platform to display art are actions that comment on the status of the artwork (by displacing it

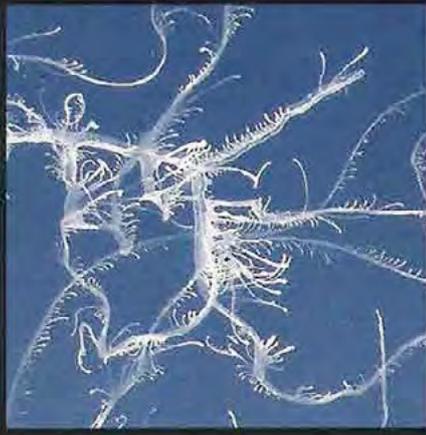
and reducing the object to its essential form) and investigate the possibilities and constraints of the exhibition space. Three decades ago, artists generally did this with an almost monastic self-awareness, but White adopts the opposite approach: the bricks in the gallery are a deep translucent blue, and when she contributes art to a publication it's in the subtle form of the design.

In works like *Silverfish* (2002) – a pile of platinum- and gold-glazed bricks – or *Copy Cat Lap* (1998) – two flat pieces of pea-green Perspex on the floor – she proves that the formal simplicity championed by the Sixties conceptualists can be voluptuous, as the light reflected on the bricks and Perspex transforms the gallery space into a sea of colour. Here, pure visual pleasure takes centre stage, relegating critical issues about art and its context to a secondary level. The viewer doesn't need to read the work, just to follow the colours and shapes, engaging in an experience which, in terms of accessibility, is eminently democratic.

Her mobiles are another example of this. Made out of paper (*Grief*, 2002; *O R O S C O P O*, 2004) or glass (*Flowers in the Forest*, 2003) hanging from coloured threads, they direct the viewer by mapping the surrounding space and suggest ideas of movement with their delicate spinning and swinging – not abstract ideas of movement, but something closer to everyone's experience: swarms of bees and flocks of birds flying in the sky, fields of flowers moved by a gentle breeze. These pieces work as symbols but, as with *Briquettes and Support*, what they recall through shared emotional resonances is the everyday.

"We shall emphasize image – image over process or form – in asserting that architecture depends in its perception and creation on past experience and emotional association and that these symbolic and representational elements may often be contradictory to the form, structure, and program with which they combine in the same building." Again, the architectural theories of Venturi *et al* perfectly relate to White's work. In her exhibition at greengrassi in December 2002, she managed to bring the splendour of L.A light to the London winter by simply covering the gallery windows with self-adhesive vinyl (one of them in the same colours she used to design this month's *ArtReview* cover). She creates ornaments that don't necessarily accord with the essence of the object but, deceptively simple and universally appealing, they have the ability to communicate the most unexpected emotions.

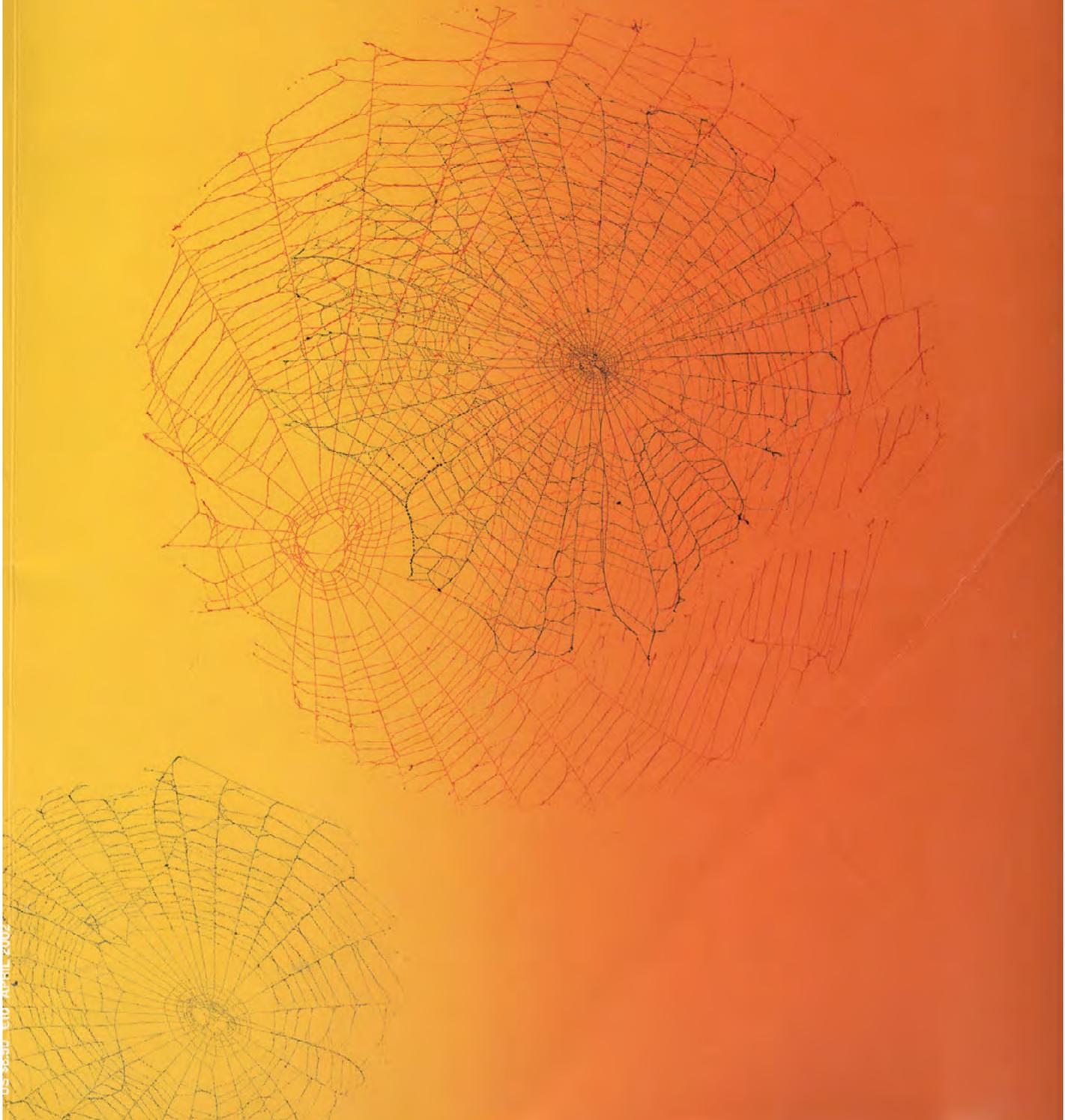
From left to right, top to bottom: Pae White, *Ship to Shore*, 2003; *Polymeric Meetinghouse*, 2004, detail; *Briquettes and Support*, Owl, 2003; seat fabric for Los Angeles Metro Rapid bus line, 2000-04; installation view of "Giraffes" at Daniel Buchholz, 2003, with *More Moons of Tunis* chandeliers; *Flowers in the Forest*, 2003, detail; *Briquettes and Support*, 2003; *Maylanian Detail*, 2004; *O R O S C O P O*, 2004; *Monster*, 2003, detail; *Grief*, 2002; *August Bye Bye*, 2003, detail



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# frieze

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# Luxe, calme et volupté

## Jennifer Higginson on Pae White

When Pae White's recent show 'The Actual Tigers' at greengrassi in London was reviewed in a national newspaper, the headline contained a beautiful mistake: her name was printed as 'Pale White'. For an artist whose imagination free-associates with the speed of sunlight and for whom colour is cardinal, this was an eerily apt typo, a tiny *haiku* to the unexpected interconnectedness of things. The show itself bore this out. It comprised a transparent Perspex grandfather clock benignly positioned beside a chain-mail of over 1000 platinum- and gold-glazed ceramic ingots which drifted across the floor like a summer stream; three gallery windows covered with kaleidoscopic acetate designs of a biomorphic landscape of a full moon, birds and golden fields; and, loitering in the corner, a giant turtle, whose shell could be lifted to reveal a barbecue. Every element of this surreal picnic scene played off the others; light from the windows mottled the surface of the ingots like expensive rainbows, while the mad barbecue juxtaposed with the see-through clock evoked dim, tumbled memories of childhood gatherings populated by eccentric relatives. By day the natural light filtering into the gallery coloured the installation with varying degrees of intensity, and by night, when the gallery was closed, the acetate landscapes were backlit so brightly that their colours spilled out and dissolved into the usually rainy London street like the promise of somewhere warm, somewhere golden and good.

clock 2002, Perspex 99x35x35 cm



• Catalogue for **Jorge Pardo** Person's Weekend Museum, Tokyo 1993

White's design work is an integral part of her art practice, a way of invigorating assumptions about the function of objects and their worth.



• Catalogue for **Jorge Pardo** Kunsthalle Basel 2000

Paul Klee could have been writing about White when he observed that 'the artist has studied the world of variety and has found a way in it'. To describe her hybrid approach as fertile is an understatement. Her eclectic influences include postwar textile designer Vera, the West Coast nun Sister Corita's breezy graphic celebrations of modern consumerism and Alexander Calder's mobiles. Her relationship to art history is of the casual pick 'n' mix variety; less about being prescriptive than about brightening up a dull day with whatever tool springs to hand or mind (in fact, she appears to be influenced as much by the weather as by design, as much by the fracturing of sunlight in a puddle or the infinite shapes of the moon as by art history). In other words, White's way is certainly varied; pigeon-holes are an anathema to her as she moves merrily between disciplines. As well as exhibiting in galleries she designs magazine advertisements, shopping bags, catalogues, books and invitations for herself, other artists and galleries. This design work is neither a sideline nor simply a means of earning money; she considers it an integral component of her art practice, a way of invigorating assumptions about value systems, about the function of objects and their worth.

Whereas White's exhibitions often tend to embrace the ephemeral (cobwebs, birds, water and mobiles are recurring motifs), her 'commercial' work teasingly spins variations on themes of communication and ownership. For example, neugerriemschneider commissioned White to design a series of 15 advertisements in this magazine; while wonderful to look at, as ads they are, to put it mildly, coy about giving out information. The gallery name is often obscured or even non-existent; artists' names create patterns that obliquely reference the content of their work; and scrambled groups of letters make about as much sense as alphabet soup. White seems to imply that if something – an image, an idea, a feeling – interests you, then it's more fun to be forced to play detective in order really to understand it; or conversely that, if you are interested enough, you will learn more (about yourself and the world) if you let your imagination create connections, meanings and patterns from elements that your reason might dismiss. This approach can also be seen in the countless art catalogues she has designed. Often it is impossible to work out whether an image 'belongs' to White, to the artist whose catalogue it is, or – as when White appropriated images of Vera's textiles for a Jorge Pardo

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Untitled 2000 Poster

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• **Aviary** (detail) 2000-2001 Paper, thread Dimensions variable

I once had a dream in which I was allowed to wander around inside a painting. I was amazed how liberating it was to look at colour and objects from unexpected angles.

catalogue for example – to someone else entirely.

Every element in White's work depends on another either to support or to define it: translucent, shimmering, often overlapping colours repeat themselves before self-destructing or evolving into something else; words blow apart; information is teased from space and then abandoned; signs pile up until they become a component of something else. This interdependence is central to White's work – what would life be like, she seems to be saying, if nothing or no one influenced or needed anything or anyone else? Imagine art without design, or design without art or people who kept their imaginations to themselves. The world would be a very different place, and not a better one.

Whether constrained by the limits of page or paper or allowed to run riot in space, White's somewhat restless work always looks as if it has been designed with movement in mind – across media, disciplines or, more literally, through space. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is her mobiles, which she usually makes from hand-painted cardboard cut-outs, which she hangs on string from floor to ceiling. These tiny, floating drawings tend to be so delicate that you can make them move just by breathing on them; when this happens, colours twist and turn to change the whole look of the piece. Her paper and, more recently, Perspex clocks are another case in point: what could be more literally about movement than time-



• Berlin for Spain to Berlin from LA 2000 Paper and clock mechanisms 49x20x18cm

pieces? Cobwebs are another of White's fascinations; she spray-paints them and then fixes them to brightly coloured paper. It's easy to see how a web's perfect fusion of design, function and mythology would appeal to her.

A long time ago I had a vivid dream in which I was looking at a painting that intrigued me. Suddenly I was allowed to wander around inside it to see how it was made. I was amazed at how liberating it was to look at colour and objects from unexpected angles. I had forgotten about this dream until I started thinking about the capricious, often contradictory, impulses that seem to drive White: the way she isolates components in busy areas, fuses representational images with a kind of dizzy abstraction, makes art that embraces commerce and vice versa. It is maybe surprising that her approach is never bewildering – it's too sunny to make you feel stupid. Chaos can be a bad or a good thing; I know which it is here.



• Silverfish 2002 Platinum and gold-glazed ceramic Dimensions variable



• Picture Windows: Summer View, New Moon and Bird News 2002 Self adhesive vinyl Dimensions variable