



## Linda Ridgway

Linda Ridgway and I are sitting in the studio behind her East Dallas home. We're looking at a work-in-progress called *Party Line*. It consists, by my rough estimation, of a paper chain well over one hundred feet long assembled from the cut pages of her 1966 edition of Janson's *History of Art*. To make the chain as strong as possible, Ridgway has dipped each link in a wax that slightly darkens the paper but leaves the type readable. She has found, however, that the plastic coating used on the book's color illustrations does not take the wax, and so periodically along the chain fragments of identifiable masterpieces by the likes of Matisse, Franz Hals, and Titian pop out with bright, unwaxed clarity. But since the 1966 Janson text is the edition famously devoid of women artists, with not one woman artist mentioned from Lascaux to Pop, no paintings or names of women artists will appear anywhere along Ridgway's chain. When she installs *Party Line* in Austin she plans to let it hang along a thirty-five foot wall and then pile onto the floor. In the confines of her studio, it is mostly the pile on the floor.

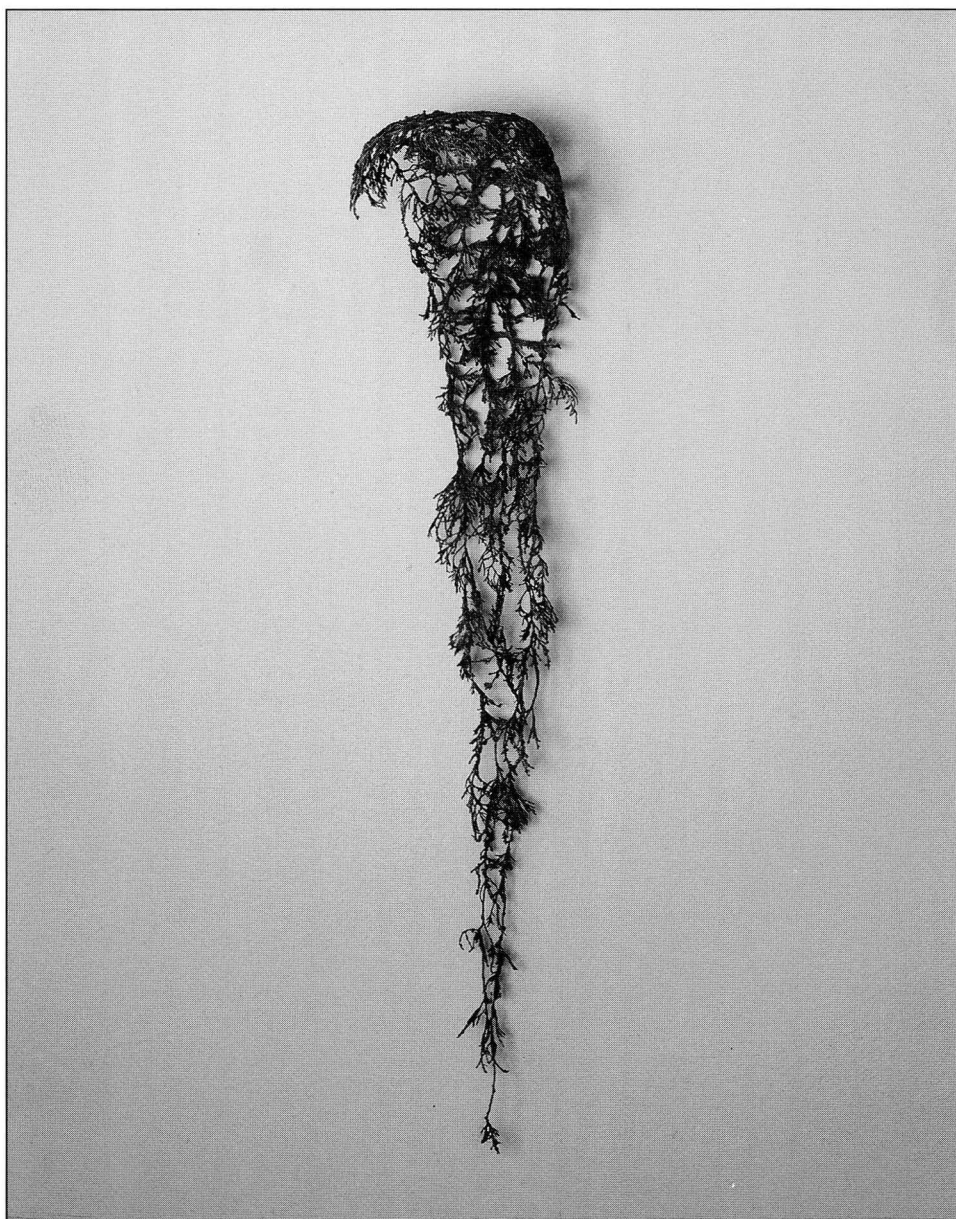
I am having some problems with *Party Line*. It seems not only atypical of Ridgway's work but seriously out of kilter with it. Also in the studio are bronze sculptures cast from dried roses, juniper leaves, or a very sexual flower that appears to have collapsed from the wall onto the floor. In contrast to these sensuous and private works, *Party Line* strikes me as too discursive and almost programmatic in its content and intentions. But just as I am trying to decide how to voice my problems, Ridgway comes out with this, "Art should be problematic. You know what I'm saying? I'm not interested in doing the same thing over and over again."

Linda Ridgway, in the gentlest manner possible and quite unintentionally, has just put me in my place. She has reminded me that whatever my "problems"

may be with this particular work, they are the problems of a writer and a critic. As an artist she is too busy making the work, (exploring her interests, passions and concerns) to be bothered by my kind of questions about how this ties into that or whether any single piece may not fit with any other. A minute later she says something to the effect that she is interested in only asking those questions she doesn't know the answer to. My job, I am thinking, is really just to keep up, and one of

Ridgway's finest attributes as an artist is how difficult she makes that job.

Actually there are many ways to relate *Party Line* to Linda Ridgway's more familiar types of projects, and performing that tying together of all the work can lead to a fuller appreciation of the complexity of what she is up to. All of the what we unsatisfactorily refer to as the "formal concerns" found in Ridgway's bronze works are here in *Party Line*, but as always these issues of line and



Vale, 1998, Bronze, 40 x 9 x 6.5 inches. From the collection of Mr. and Mrs. William C. Ward, Dallas.

composition are completely fused with the emotional and intellectual import of the work. And although she is working simply with paper and wax, *Party Line* expresses Ridgway's ongoing interest in facing technical challenges that many an artist would find daunting.

*Party Line* is first and foremost a line, the compositional element that Ridgway has explored with unfailing creativity for most of her career. Line is an element of drawing that she has taken into sculpture with results that range from the sensuous to the humorous. Her bronze lines, mounted on the wall and freed in most instances from any representational chores, express themselves through their rigidity or illusory softness, their tendency to droop onto the floor or to arch improbably away from the wall. They suggest emotional states that range from defiance to extreme vulnerability. A work in this exhibition consists of wire-thin lengths of bronze only a couple of feet long, delicately joined into a single, lattice-like structure. Stranded on the wall and titled *Self-conscious*, this simple abstraction becomes a humorous and touching image of the wallflower at a dance, or more seriously, an agoraphobe exposed in a public space.

She has also used lines as a means of ordering disparate elements, creating works where a simple row of cast, found, and sculpted objects provide the viewer with a range of images for contemplation and visual enjoyment. *Party Line*, with its myriad details of print and image, is perhaps most closely related to that sort of project, but as it swoops along the wall and as I watch Ridgway adjust it so that its shadow is most to her liking, I can't help but see it as the latest variation on the many lines that have gone before. And if her other work seems more personal in many ways, you should know that the 1966 Janson text is the edition Ridgway studied in art school. In its way, *Party Line* is as autobiographical as the bronze line cast from dried roses titled *Portrait*, a work Ridgway created to measure her height on the year of her fiftieth birthday.

As straightforward as *Party Line* appears to be, and with its relation to

child's play so apparent, it has posed in its way as many technical challenges as Ridgway faces when working with bronze or other metals. But Ridgway relishes these challenges. Working originally as a printmaker and later in bronze has familiarized her with the need of consulting experts. In fact it was when she became one of those experts herself in the print shop that she lost interest and turned to sculpture. Collaborating with master bronze worker Harry Geffert in his foundry south of Fort Worth, she has experimented with casting objects as diverse as paper, grapes, and balls of twine. The marvel of many of her collaborations with Geffert lies in what would seem to be their ability between them to cast air itself, but it is the delight she takes in these projects and the often startling results she gets that keeps them from ever becoming mere exercises in technical expertise.

Knowing that her mammoth paper chain would be impractically delicate, she decided to dip it in wax, a substance she has some familiarity with through her bronze work. She found a wax used in casting that would infuse the paper rather than merely coat it, but still when she brought the short lengths of chain out of the boiling substance, their surfaces were gloppy and opaque. And so she has, in addition to cutting, pasting and dipping the links, meticulously reheated each one, melting away the excess wax until the paper had the translucency she desired. I personally find such labor-intensiveness mind boggling, but it is typical of the patience and care that goes into all of Ridgway's work, qualities that manifest themselves in the elegance and serenity that characterize the finished products.

But while we admire her work for such qualities as elegance and serenity, we should not lose touch with the fact that Ridgway is constantly in the process of destroying things to make others. The 1966 Janson text she "grew up with" as an artist has now been cut to ribbons and its new form both commemorates and obliterates the original. Whatever she casts in bronze is incinerated in the process. She never makes a mold and

has not produced an editioned work. The roses she saved over the years found their final purpose in the making of *Portrait* and now they are gone. They were fragile and destined to turn to powder, and what Ridgway has done to them makes them likely to last for centuries, but there is an inherent violence in the act. Things are burned and melted away at unimaginable temperatures so that this new state can be achieved.

For Ridgway, the unpredictability of bronze is one of its greatest attractions. She wants a sense of its once fluid state to survive in her sculpture. As she tells me this in the studio, I am examining *Vale*, a sort of hat made of juniper leaves, closely fitted to the skull but flowing down the back of the head. It has a Pre-Raphaelite extravagance about it, but also suggests, especially in its bronze state, a sense of constraint. Looking at it closely I can see where the casting process has fused the leaves. They remain unmistakably what they are, but they are strangely globular, swollen and almost tender in appearance. They appear to have been about to burst the moment before the bronze captured them.

There are frequent failures among Ridgway's bronze projects, substances that won't cast or that when cast will not hold together in the form she wants. But that comes with the territory of how she has chosen to work. Looking around the studio, at long chains of waxed paper, cast roses and juniper leaves, vines and flowers obviously waiting to be incorporated into new projects, I see the forward movement of Ridgway's work for which the casting process is the perfect image. She will take her material, substances she has come to know over the years or for which she has developed a recent fascination, work with it and then put it to the test. Whatever the result, whether a success or a failure, she will be ready to move on and ask another question she doesn't know the answer to.

# LINDA RIDGWAY

Born in Jeffersonville, IN 1947

Presently lives and works in Dallas, Texas

## EDUCATION

M.F.A., Tulane University, New Orleans, LA

B.F.A., Louisville School of Art, Anchorage, KY

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1997-98 *Linda Ridgway: A Survey, Poetics of Form*, Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; travelled to Dallas Museum of Art, TX (catalogue)
- 1996 *Visual Essays*, Gerald Peters Gallery, Dallas, TX  
Inman Gallery, Houston, TX
- 1994 Gerald Peters Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 1991 Gerald Peters Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 1990 Graham Gallery, Houston, TX  
*Night Voices*, Studio Gallery, Brookhaven College, Farmers Branch, TX
- 1987 *Formations*, DW Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 1982 DW Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 1977 DW Co-op Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 1976 Eastfield College, Mesquite, TX
- 1974 Louisville School of Art, Anchorage, KY

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1998 *Oso Bay Biennial*, Weil Gallery, Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi and Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi
- 1997 *Link*, Gerald Peters Gallery, Dallas, TX  
New Work: Gallery Artists, Inman Gallery, Houston, TX
- 1996 *Establishment Exposed: Part I*, Dallas Visual Art Center, TX (catalogue)  
*Link*, Gerald Peters Gallery, Dallas, TX  
Five Year Anniversary Show, Inman Gallery, Houston, TX
- 1995-96 *Genesis and Fire: Works from the Green Mountain Foundry*, The Glassell School of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX (brochure)
- 1995 *Link*, Gerald Peters Gallery, Dallas, TX  
*Showing Off the DCCCD: Works by Art Faculty of the Dallas County Community College District*, D-Art, Dallas, TX  
*Gang Warfare*, The McKinney Avenue Contemporary, Dallas, TX
- 1994 *Small Objects*, Inman Gallery, Houston, TX  
*Private Identity and Public Conscience: Contemporary Works from the Museum's Collection*, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX  
*Texas Axis: 4 Artists Exploring Space*, Arlington Museum of Art, Arlington, TX (catalogue)  
*Works on Paper*, Longview Art Museum, Longview, TX  
*Harry Geffert and Friends*, D-Art, Dallas, TX
- Drawings*, Gerald Peters Gallery, Dallas, TX
- Essentials*, Glassell School of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
- Abstract Matters: Recapitulation and Transcendence*, Forum Gallery, Center for the Arts, Brookhaven College, Farmers Branch, TX
- Faculty Show, Cedar Valley College, Lancaster, TX
- 1992 *Forty + Views*, Arlington Museum of Art, Arlington, TX
- Presence*, Center for Research in Contemporary Art, University of Texas at Arlington (brochure)
- Metal and Stone: Six Young Sculptors*, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, TX (catalogue)
- 1991 *Sculpture Invitational*, Brookhaven College, Farmers Branch, TX
- 1990 *The Vessel*, Hickory Street Annex, Dallas, TX (catalogue)  
*Making Metaphors*, Richland College, Dallas, TX  
*New Sculpture*, Graham Gallery, Houston, TX  
*Working with Harry*, University of North Texas Art Gallery, Denton
- 1989 Group Show, N. NO. O Gallery, Dallas, TX  
*A Family of Artists*, 500X Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 1988 *A Moveable Art Feast/Treasure Hunt*, Beverly Gordon Gallery, Dallas, TX  
*Metroplex Artist Series*, exhibition and lecture, TCU, Fort Worth
- Recent Work: Gallery Artists*, DW Gallery, Dallas, TX
- Taking Shape*, DW Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 1987 *100 Under 1000*, DW Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 1985 *The Crescent Collection II: A Celebration of Texas Artists*, The Crescent Marketing Center, Dallas, TX
- 1984 *Drawing Show*, DW Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 1983 *Art from Dallas Galleries*, Caltex House, Irving, TX  
*Group Show*, DW Gallery, Dallas, TX  
*Faculty Show*, Brookhaven College, Farmers Branch, TX
- 1982 *Texas Fine Arts Association Competition*, City Hall, Dallas, TX  
*Black and White*, DW Gallery, Dallas, TX  
*Works on Paper*, Forum Gallery, Brookhaven College, Farmers Branch, TX  
*Invitational 80-81*, Longview Museum and Arts Center, TX
- 1979 *Fire*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX (catalogue)  
*Made in Texas*, Archer M. Huntington Gallery, University of Texas, Austin (catalogue)  
*12: Artists Working in North Texas*, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas, TX



*Receiving Line, 1997, Steel, Dimensions Variable. Courtesy of the artist and Gerald Peters Gallery, Dallas.*



*Cover Image: Poet's Line, 1998, Bronze, cotton line, and paper, 50 x 4 x 5 inches.*

*From the collection of Deedie and Rusty Rose, Dallas.*

*Inside Flap and Back Image: Party Line - 1966, 1997-98, Paper and wax, Dimensions variable.*

*Dedicated to Dora Jane Janson. Courtesy of the artist and Gerald Peters Gallery, Dallas.*



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