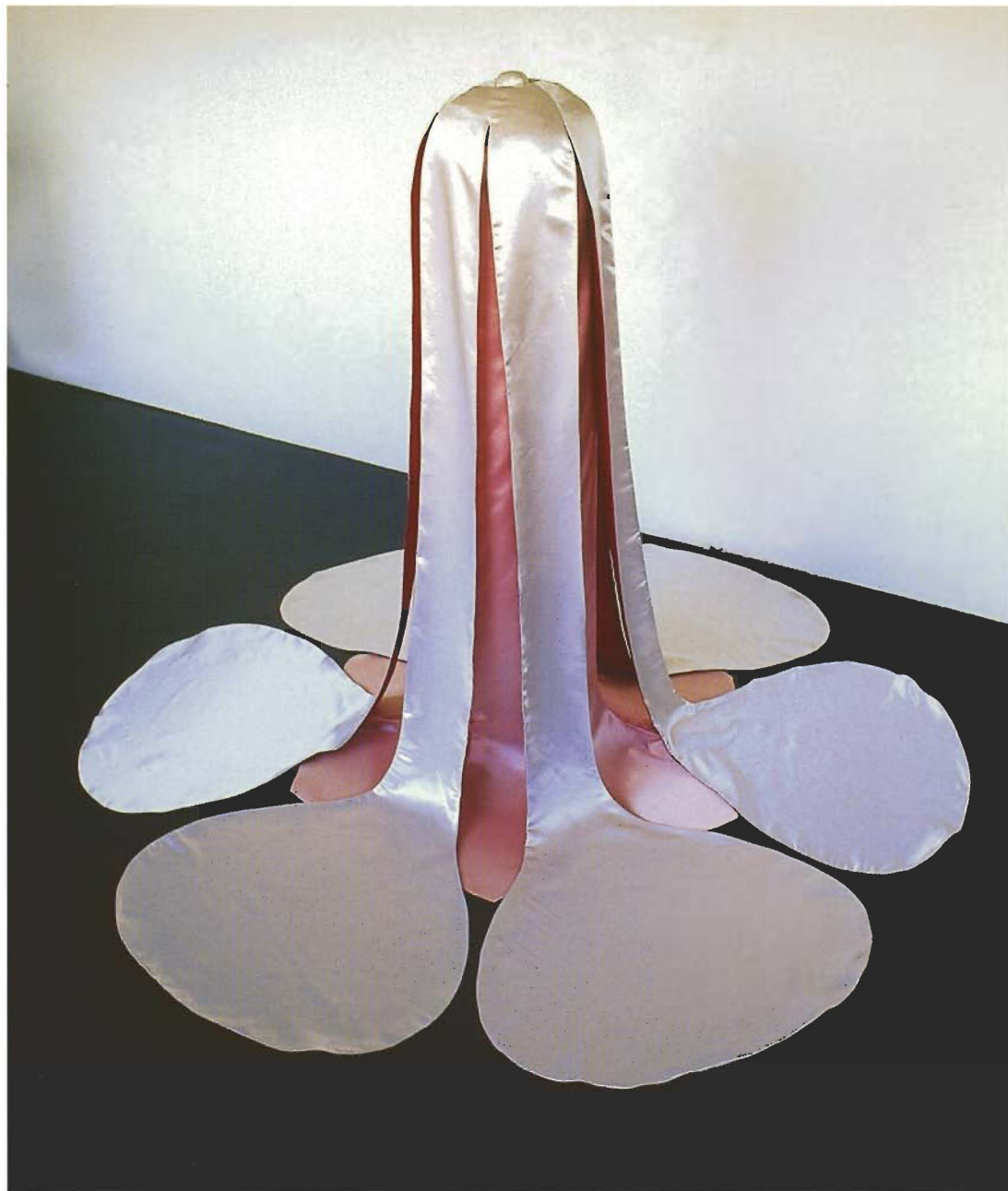


# LEA WHITTINGTON

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New Work



W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

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JULY 15 - AUGUST 21, 1999

AUSTIN, TEXAS

How open are we, really? Both makers and viewers of contemporary art have so many freedoms, it would be difficult to encounter a work or a subject that is beyond the pale of the artworld. Painters make paintings without a drop of paint. Sculptors appropriate objects in the spirit of Duchamp's ready-mades and do so without much flack. Cultural boundaries have all but disintegrated, making it difficult, if not impossible, to capture high, low, ethnic, or outsider art in any one category. It seems that artists can do just about anything without fear of resistance from their audience.

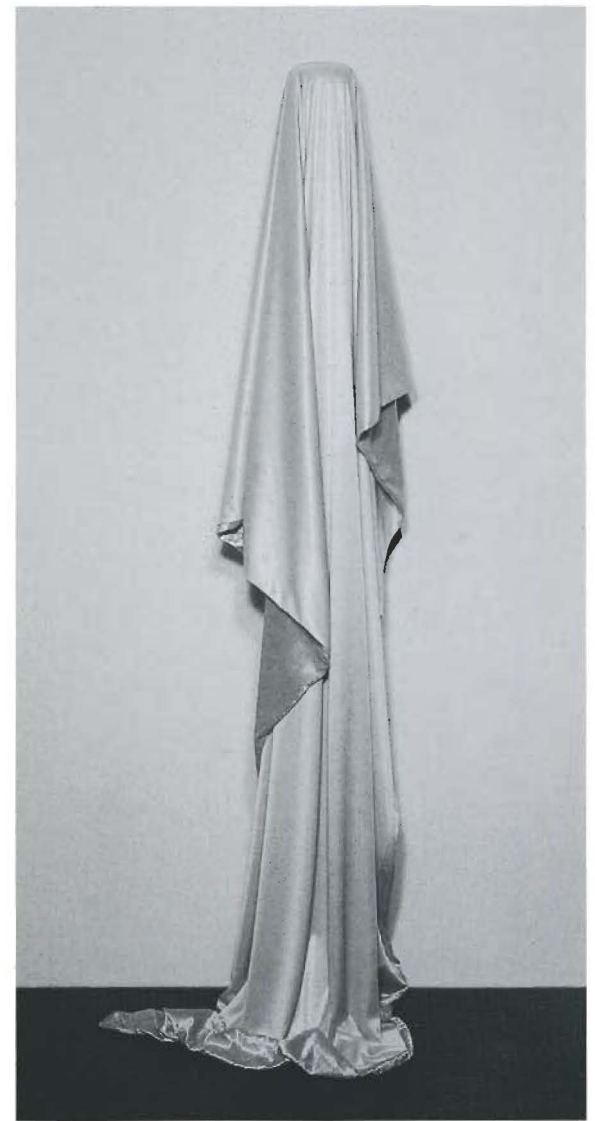
And yet, as sophisticated as any viewing audience might be, there still seems to be an unspoken code implying that whether an art work be Beautiful, Socially Relevant, or Hipper than Hip, it's artiness lies in its effect of seriousness, in its pretension to instill a profound sense of awe and reverence. If not that, at least some weighty, ironic social commentary. It's like having that smug knowledge that when you walk up to a Richard Serra you're that much closer to God. And when you're faced with a Louis Quatorze settee, you're not.

But must we feel profundity and gravity to experience higher truths? Must Beauty go hand in hand with loftiness to achieve its goals? Lea Whittington calls these commonplaces into question, working at the ambiguous edges of some of the artworld's last exclusions. In Whittington's sculptures and assemblages, form, function, and meticulous craftsmanship, together with an acute awareness of architecture and of the history of the fine and decorative arts, culminate in a manner that is at once formally beautiful, wonderfully playful, and intelligent as hell. The nature of frivolity, of luxury, of sentimentality, is deeply explored in both her earlier and her

more recent works; always, the artist challenges our ideas about art, decoration, and the values that society places on a work in relation to its utilitarian aspects.

Whittington's work has always called attention to the conspicuous consumption of the middle class, whether seen in the drawing rooms and salons of Victorian mansions or in the pages of Martha Stewart's *Living*. In earlier years, her use of heavy brocades, sumptuous and richly colored velvets, and European-styled architectural moldings heavily reference the Baroque, and even more the Rococo, era. The craft of Whittington's work – the padding, the drapery – bring to mind the confections of a 19th century tailor. One immediately appreciates the elegance, the excess of ornamentation and facade; every plaster curlicue reminds us of what fashion, what interior decor, serves to mask: our ordinariness. One is also reminded of how easily a decorative piece is dismissed simply on account of its utilitarian function. Her sculptures, wall structures, and more recently, her paintings, have always brought into question just how society marginalizes something beautiful if it happens simultaneously to serve a purpose.

It is in this way that Whittington's work also seems to be asking its audience to contemplate the nature of frivolity. In her own words, the artist has mused on why it is that Fragonard's playful scenes, particularly those displayed in the rooms at the Frick Museum, are dismissed as decorative, while the walls of the Rothko Chapel are generally considered high art. Sentimentality, lightheartedness, gaiety: all seem to have been ghettoized, emotionally, in the same manner that the artworld has tended to dismiss fashion and the decorative arts. Such subjects have infused the



"Sad Sorbet", 1999. Velvet Acetate and metal armature.  
69" x 14" x 18"

sensibility of Lea Whittington's earlier work, and their claim remains strong in her latest pieces.

Each time the artist brings forth a new body of work, one is impressed anew at how completely she can invoke an era and a sensibility. It's as if Whittington, in sartorial fashion, binds us by the corset and pulls us into her rich and beautiful world. For example, in the exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Glassell School Core Fellowship exhibition in the spring of 1996, Whittington used blood red velvet in her wall mounted sculpture, "Swag," and heavy brocades and fringe in "Valance," to suggest a world fetid with disuse. The excess of fallen monarchies, the suggestion of vacuity masked by ornate facade, immediately drew one in, almost threatening to collapse and cover the viewer like the folds of the past itself.

In her exhibition in the fall of 1998 at the Art League of Houston, the setting still suggested bygone architectural spaces, but with a much lighter tone. Although the artist adorned the walls with structures, like "Rosettes," that suggested weighty, ornate interior embellishments, Whittington's use of playful colors and painted dioramas gave the room a whimsical feel. Here, typically, we were presented with a group of objects perhaps hinting at some antiquated function, but it is as though they had been upholstered by some Mad Hatter of a decorator, thus winding up with no use whatsoever.

In her solo show at Sherry Frumkin Galleries in Los Angeles in the fall of 1998, her "Untitled Panels, 1998" suggested a comic ode to the fop or dandy, as the brocaded panels lounged idly against the wall, elegant gentlemen standing at the sidelines, viewing their surroundings with haughty wit, though all the while precariously close to collapse. Whittington's meticulous craft and selection of materials consistently lent luster to this playful poke at the obsessions of middle class material culture.

In her most recent work, however, Ms. Whittington opens her circle of reference even wider than previously. The pieces on exhibition here still lightly invoke the sunny, carefree world of Fragonard, yet their less elaborate construction suggests

a reductive or minimalist mood from a much later time.

Ever-present is the nod to the tailor or upholsterer, which the artist executes in her usual expert manner. Whittington uses thick, sumptuous fabrics as she did before, but her palette has lightened. The rich forest greens and crimsons have been replaced with creamy yellows, pastel roses, baby blues. As with many of her earlier textile pieces, the artist's interest in fabric here forces one to reckon with the social codes embedded in the color, texture, and economic value of materials. In one wall-supported structure, a lavish piece in icy blue and lined with deep blue velvet, one must reconcile a world of contradictions. The fabric overlay evokes fairy tales, Cinderella, and nights at the senior prom; the underlying velvet suggests something more sinister, perhaps – a seductive knowing. The entire construction, draped partially over an upholstered dowel, simultaneously appears as a ludicrously misplaced window treatment, and a large, shaped, minimalist canvas. Whittington forces her audience to really look at how things are placed, and how they are constructed. Why, she seems to ask, should this large, gorgeously draped structure be secondary in the realm of art when it's as breathtaking as the painted canvas we might hang in its place?

More than ever, Lea Whittington's recent work focuses on simplicity. Her structures recall the shaped canvases of Ellsworth Kelly and the stark minimalism of Barnett Newman all the while incorporating the "non-serious" art world of interior decorating, antique collecting, and fashion. Her view of art is practical and generous, and she is absolutely fearless with materials (she did, after all, flawlessly construct a chandelier out of chicken bones in 1996). Whittington's flexibility demonstrates

that she is an artist willing to transgress boundaries and genres in order to question both art world and cultural mores.

This flexibility, particularly with the palette she has chosen for her recent works, brings to the fore a most interesting issue: Where does art belong? It gets re-arranged, just like the furniture. And don't we switch out the Rothkos for the Stellas come spring? The items Lea Whittington displays in this exhibition ultimately ask us to consider why we compartmentalize things as we do. In their creamy, pastel satins, her sculptures and assemblages make us think of special occasions: the prom, a wedding, life's dressy times. Once a person, or object, has been enveloped in such finery, he, she or it has rendered him/her/itself positively useless. Oh, the bridesmaid may have a dance or two, but the basic goal for any individual in such attire is mainly to stand around and look good. An ornamental, occasional prop. And no matter how hard the bridesmaid tries to alter it, that dress will never be good for anything again.

Lea Whittington's work takes these notions and gives them a smart, yet sympathetic, turn. While a piece may remind one that nothing is sacred, it also cleverly demonstrates that it, individually, is precisely so. Her art draws you into its beautiful folds and makes you think of that satin lavender sachet in your granny's top drawer, while taking you to that spot where only fine art allows you to go. And in the case of Lea Whittington's work, the path can start anywhere, and it can be constructed of anything.

Laura Lark  
Houston, Texas 1999

# LEA WHITTINGTON

Born California, 1960  
Resides in Houston, Texas

## EDUCATION

- 1991 **Claremont Graduate School**,  
Claremont, CA, Masters of Fine Arts.  
1989 **C.S.U. Fullerton**, Fullerton, CA.  
Bachelor of Fine Arts.  
1980 **A.A. Brooks College of Design**,  
Long Beach, CA.

## AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

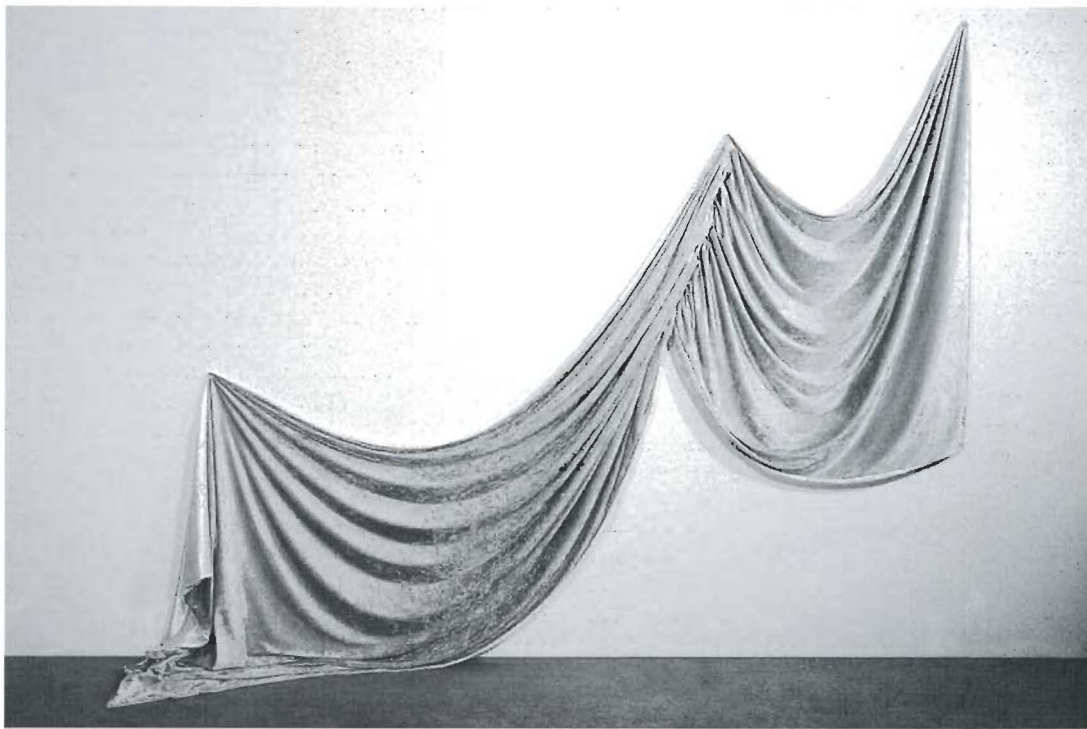
- 1996 Foundation Antorchas Fellowship, Buenos Aires, Argentina.  
1995 Core Program Fellowship, Museum of Fine Art, Glassell School of Art, Houston TX.  
1995 NEA/MAAA Regional Fellowship in Sculpture.  
1994 Core Program Fellowship, Museum of Fine Art, Glassell School of Art, Houston TX.  
1990/1 Claremont Graduate School Research Grant, Claremont Graduate School Fellowship.

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 **New Work**, Women & Their Work Gallery, Austin, TX.  
**Drawings**, Purse Building Studios, Houston, TX.  
**Sculpture**, Art League of Houston, Houston, TX.  
1998 **Decorum**, Solo Exhibition, Sherry Frumkin Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.  
1991 **Masters Thesis Exhibition**, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA.  
1990 **Truth in Dreams**, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA.  
**Floating Gown & Grounded Sphere**, Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA.  
1988 **BFA Thesis**, Exit Gallery C.S.U. Fullerton, CA.

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 1998 **Highlights from the Permanent Collection**, Kiasma, Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland.  
**Purse Building Studios**, MSC Visual Arts Gallery, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX.  
1997 **Women's Work**, Arlington Museum of Art, Arlington, TX.  
**Big Show**, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX.  
**Studio Artists**, Taller de Baracas, Buenos Aires, Argentina.



"41, 71, 91", 1999. Silk, velvet and pins. Dimensions are variable.

- Art Crawl '97**, Houston, TX.  
1996 **CORE 1996**, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX.  
1995 **The Whole is Greater than the Sum of its Parts**, Sherry Frumkin Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.  
**Faculty Exhibition**, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX.  
**June Bride**, Sherry Frumkin Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.  
**Sight Unseen**, University of Grenoble, France.  
**CORE 1995**, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX.  
1994 **Get Back**, Kohn Turner Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.  
**F. A. R. Bizarre**, Annual Exhibition, Los Angeles, CA.  
**Dia de los Muertos**, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX.  
1993 **Downtown Lives**, D. A. D. A. Annual Exhibition, Los Angeles, CA.  
**Downart**, D. A. D. A. Annex, Hope Grand Park, Los Angeles, CA.  
**Spectral Delinquency**, Stuart Katz Loft, Laguna, CA.  
**Shooting Gallery**, Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, Los Angeles, CA.  
1992 **F. A. R. Bizarre**, Annual Exhibition, Federal Building, Los Angeles, CA.  
1991 **VEX**, Whight Gallery, USC, Los Angeles, CA.  
**VEX**, University Gallery, U.C. Irvine, CA.

**Queen for a Day**, Da Gallery, Pomona, CA.  
**10 Installations**, Century Gallery, Sylmar, CA.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1999 **Laura Lark**. Women and Their Work, (Catalog).  
1998 **Tricia Torvar**. Purse Building Studios, (Catalog).  
**Laura Hernandez**. ArtScene, v. 18:3 Nov.  
**Leena Honkavaara**. Helsingin Sanomat, July 12.  
1997 **Mary Lochridge**. Star Telegram, Arlington, TX, August 15.  
**Jennifer Rankin**. Arlington Morning News, Arlington, TX, August 15.  
1996 **Houston Chronicle**, April.  
1995 **Susan Kandel**. L. A. Times, June 22.  
**Peter Frank**. Artweek, June 23-29.  
**Lauri Nelson**. Artlies, #6 April-May  
**Lane Relyea**. Core Exhibition Catalog, Mar. International Daily News, March 24.  
**Susan Chadwich**. Houston Post, March 31.  
1993 **Cathy Curtis**. L. A. Times, Orange County, May 11.  
**Jeanne S. M. Willette**. Artweek, May 6.

## PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Kiasma. Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland.



This Panel: "*99, 88, 44*", 1999. Silk, velvet and dowel. 99" x 56" x 9"  
Cover Panel: "*Tuffet I*", 1999. Satin and metal armature. Dimensions are variable.  
Back Panel: "*Ghost of Disco*", 1999. Velvet, acetate and metal armature. 51" x 69" x 11"



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*This publication has been made possible through the generous support of the National Endowment for the Arts. Special thanks to BAH! Design.*

Now celebrating its 21st anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1585 artists in 188 visual art exhibitions, 81 music, dance, and theater events, 19 literary readings, 12 film festivals, and 130 workshops, in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and National Public Radio and was the first organization in

Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 5,000 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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