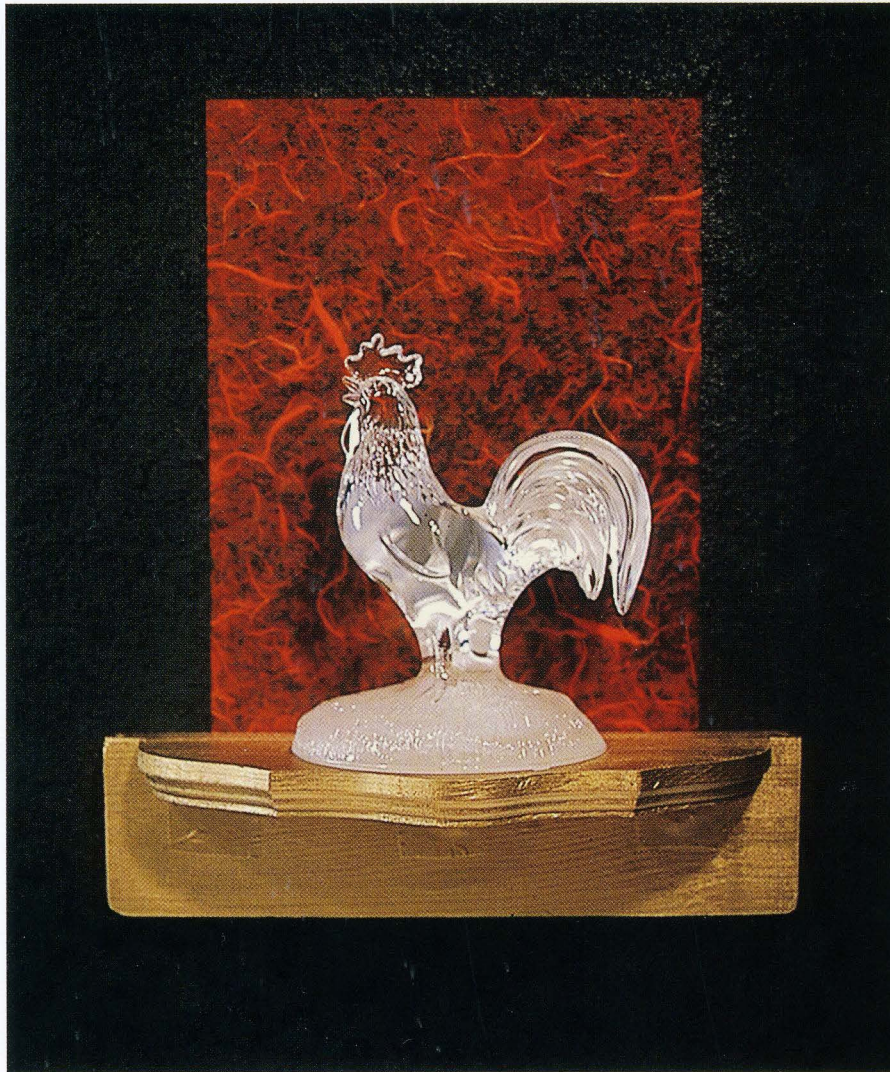


VICKI MEEK

quoteADVICEunquote



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

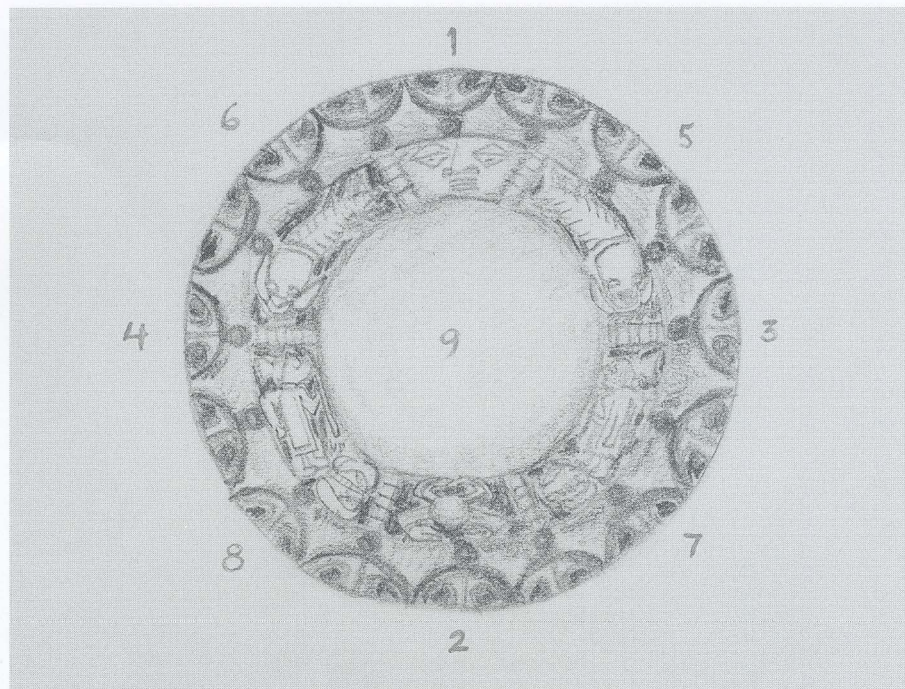
APRIL 24 MAY 29, 1999

AUSTIN, TEXAS

quoteADVICEunquote:
an installation by Vicki Meek

While discussing with a friend how mothers often speak “in code” when giving difficult or sensitive advice, I wondered if my daughter was being communicated with in this fashion. Has time influenced this pattern of communication? So I decided to poll a number of my friends, relatives, and acquaintances to find out. One hundred twenty eight women (ranging in age from 13 to 80) were sent letters asking for two pieces of advice—one that was useful and one that was not helpful and in fact may have been detrimental to their happiness. Respondents were asked to sign with their birthdate rather than their name in order to assess if the ways women communicate with each other had indeed changed over time. The ambiguous answer to this question is one of the issues this installation seeks to address.

Upon looking at the subject of advice-giving and women’s role in it, I realized that there existed a connection to another subject in which I have a passionate interest: the Yoruba divination system. Yoruba are the largest tribe of people in Nigeria; this Sixteen Cowries system of divination is based on the traditional Ifa religion. It is the only divination system in the world of Yoruba that allows women to be diviners. In its most basic form, divination is really “advice,” albeit advice from beyond the physical world. Reflecting upon the correlation between women dispensing advice on the temporal level and the spiritual level, I realized that both are driven by a similiar motivation to provide guidance. As in divination, the advice women give is usually cloaked in metaphor and must be decoded before becoming useful. And like divination, one is usually expected to take from the advice only that which is personally applicable. Thus, *quoteADVICEunquote* explores the relationship of informal and



Detail “quoteADVICEunquote,” 1999 multi-media installation with audio. Photo by Katherine Snedecker.

formal advice-giving in the African world. The installation is based on the number 16, the most revered number in the Yoruba cosmos. All elements are divisible by 16 and the divination tray painted on the wall is an adaptation of one which uses iconography most associated with women’s power, such as the bird form. In addition, it uses the face of Esu, the orisa, (the deity or enlightened ancestor) who transforms the sacrifices of humans into food for the other orisas. These include the mudfish and the crab, both creatures who, like Esu, move in marginal realms. I find this image to be particularly appropriate when referencing women since our lives often mandate that we move in very marginal realms. The walls provide an English version of the divination verse telling how Oshun, the most powerful female deity in the Yoruba cosmos, gained her power. From this, we can deduce how women too gained power. This verse echoes throughout the installation and is in Yoruba.

As in all my work, *quoteADVICEunquote* explores memory and reclamation, this time as they relate to our understanding of ourselves.

Vicki Meek
April, 1999

THE WORK OF VICKI MEEK: An Overview

I first had the privilege of working with Vicki Meek seven years ago when she was invited by Joseph Havel and Rick Lowe to create an installation for *Fresh Visions/New Voices: Emerging African-American Artists in Texas*, hosted in 1992 by the Glassell School of Art, the teaching wing of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. For the exhibition she created a remarkable installation titled

The Crying Room: A Memorial to the Ancestors. This eloquent and powerfully commemorative statement traced the horrors of the Middle Passage, and in the words of the artist offered a means of emotional release:

Public memorials are important because they allow a society or a community to reconcile its grief. The collective grief over the loss of the millions of ancestors lost during the Middle Passage and through the mass lynchings of the 20th century has never had an outlet. Consequently, this pent up grief manifests itself in many inexplicable ways. *The Crying Room: A Memorial to the Ancestors* is meant to allow us to remember and grieve for all those many ancestors whose lives were sacrificed.

Among the densest of Meek's installation works, *The Crying Room* offered a sophisticated layering of sources, ranging from the bleak records of the slave trade to the survival of Yoruba culture in the new world. Meek used each element of the installation to subtle dramatic effect: the floor was covered with white sand and a path of charcoal led to the rear wall. As viewers followed this path, they were confronted by a line of candles and an elaborate Abakuá ideograph, signifying the final ascension that takes one from death into the realm of the ancestors. An overturned flowerpot was an added symbol of death and resurrection. On the right-hand wall three panels of sardine tins represented slave ships, and Meek added the horrifying mathematical calculations of slavers who estimated acceptable losses. Balancing this text on the opposite wall, Meek inscribed the words of a Yoruba chant, and a recording of this chant could be heard as well. On leaving the gallery, visitors were invited to add comments on slips of paper to the memorial wall.

The Crying Room later entered the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, challenging the institution to reorganize its collecting methodology. Rather than acquiring a singular and precious object, we were entering into a collaboration with the artist, perpetuating her active dialogue within our community. When the work was later reinstalled for a temporary exhibition in the museum's galleries, over 1500 statements were gathered from our visitors, many of whom responded passionately to the opportunity to voice their own experiences, memories, and aspirations.

Meek's investigation of her African heritage has a vital tradition in American culture: in the first decades of this century such authors and artists of the Harlem Renaissance as W.E.B. Du Bois and Lois Mailou Jones first looked to Africa to anchor personal pride and identity. In the 1990s, a renewed interest in the spiritual and cultural heritage of African-Americans was explored by such exhibitions as *Black Art-Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art*, organized by the Dallas Museum of Art in 1990, and *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas*, organized by the Museum of African Art, New York, in 1993.

What makes Meek's installations unique within this tradition is her ability to establish an intimate exchange with her audience; her work calls out to visitors, demanding a response. Her first large-scale installations of the late 1980s were largely text driven and sharply political in intent, as is exemplified by such works as *A man in touch with his origins is a man who never dies*, 1989, which examined the devastating effects of Black-on-Black crime. Later works expanded upon more historical dimensions, as demonstrated by *The Crying Room*. In 1994, Meek created 2517 Memory House, an installation for Houston's Project Row Houses that dealt with more immediate community

memories, and *quote*ADVICE*unquote*, created for Women & Their Work, furthers her investigation of deep-rooted experiences and recollections.

An ongoing theme through much of Meek's work is her reclamation of Yoruba language and symbols. For Meek, Yoruba culture is the most probable source of her own heritage, and she has discovered in Yoruba cosmology potent analogues for contemporary issues. She has commented: "Without symbols, you don't have culture. I want to reintroduce these symbols to African Americans to instill the notion that we have a very rich ancestry. It's important that we have a sense of our past, a strong and viable sense of attachment." In 1994, Meek made her first visit to the Bahia region on the easternmost coast of Brazil, where a New-World Yoruba culture has survived with remarkable integrity. (The artist plans to return to Bahia in the coming year, and hopes to extend her research in Nigeria in the near future.) While in Brazil, Meek recorded prayers and chants which she has used in a number of installations, and visits with a Candomble priestess who introduced Meek to the rituals of divination that were later incorporated in *quote*ADVICE*unquote*.

Ultimately, however, Meek remains grounded in our present time and place, and she addresses a fully contemporary audience. Her installations are not created to replicate historical Yoruba altars; rather, by revisiting Yoruba archetypes, she strips away the conventions which limit understanding. As the artist acknowledges, we all too often speak "in code." *quote*ADVICE*unquote* invites us to reconsider the codes that we consciously and unconsciously adopt and pass along, reminding us that core to any sense of identity is a sense of autonomy, the freedom to make choices.

Alison de Lima Greene
Curator of Twentieth-Century Art
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
April 1999

VICKI MEEK

Resides in Dallas, Texas

EDUCATION

Tyler School of Fine Arts, Elkins Park, PA.;

Bachelor of Fine Arts

University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.;

Master of Fine Arts

Queens College, Queens, NY.;

Post-Graduate work in Art History

GRANTS / AWARDS / COMMISSIONS

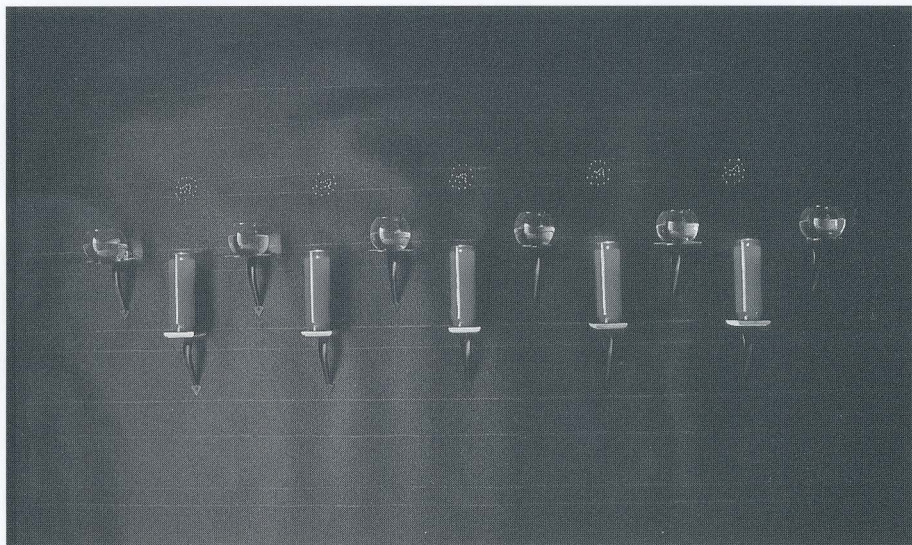
- 1997 Dallas Area Rapid Transit System
Public Art Program, Design artist
for two light rail stations to be built
in 2001.
- 1994 Otis and Velma Dozier Travel Grant
- 1990 National Endowment for the Arts New
Forms Regional Initiative Grant
- 1988 City of Dallas Public Art Program for
the South Dallas Cultural Center

ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 1995 **In Memory Of My Ancestors:** one
woman installation, Carver Cultural
Center, San Antonio, TX.
- 1995 **Martin: La Sangre Manda:** one woman
installation, Jump Start Theater
Gallery, San Antonio, TX.
- 1999 **quoteADVICEunquote:** an installation,
Women & Their Work Gallery, Austin, TX.
(Catalogue)

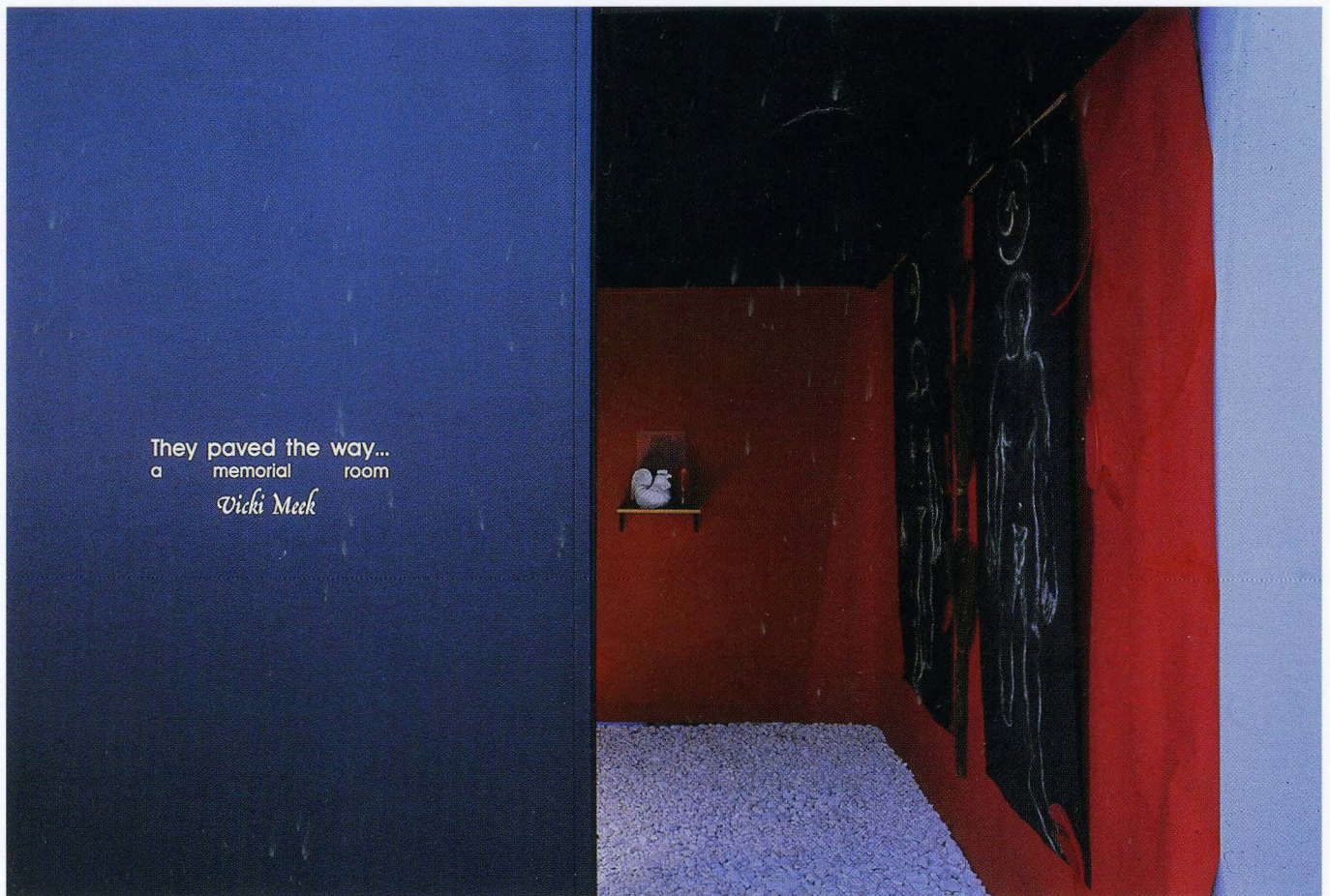
SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 1980-'83 **Forever Free: Art by African
American Women 1862-1980.**
Center for Visual Arts Gallery, Illinois
State Univ., Normal, IL; Joslyn Art
Museum, Omaha, NE; Montgomery
Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL;
Gibbes Art Gallery, Charleston, SC; The
Art Gallery, Univ. of Maryland, College
Park, MD; Indianapolis Museum of Art,
Indianapolis, IN; (Catalogue)
- 1984 **Diverse Idioms:** invitational exhibit
curated by Joy Poe, Lawndale Art and
Performance Center, Houston, TX.
- 1988-'91 **Coast to Coast:** A Women of Color
National Book Artists Project, collabo-
ration with Hung Lui, Celia Munoz and
Mary Ironeyes Hatz, DiverseWorks,
Inc., Houston, TX; Wooster Art Gallery,
Wooster College, Wooster, OH; Depauw
Univ., Greencastle, IN; Book Arts
Center, New York, NY. (Catalogue)
- 1990 **Contemporary Women of Color:**
juried national exhibition. Co-sponsored
by the Institute of Mexican Culture and
the Guadeloupe Cultural Center,
San Antonio, TX. (Catalogue)
- 1990 **Narrative Constructs: Contemporary
Trends by Women Artists of Color:**
curated by Kathy Vargas, Women &
Their Work Gallery, Austin, TX.
- 1991 **Tiny Tyrants syn: The Tyrant
Oppressed His People:** collaborative
work in progress with Katherine
Snedeker and Bob Barsamian, Dallas
Visual Art Center, Dallas, TX.



Details from "They Paved the Way: A Memorial Room," 1990 multi-media installation with audio.
Photo by David Wharton.

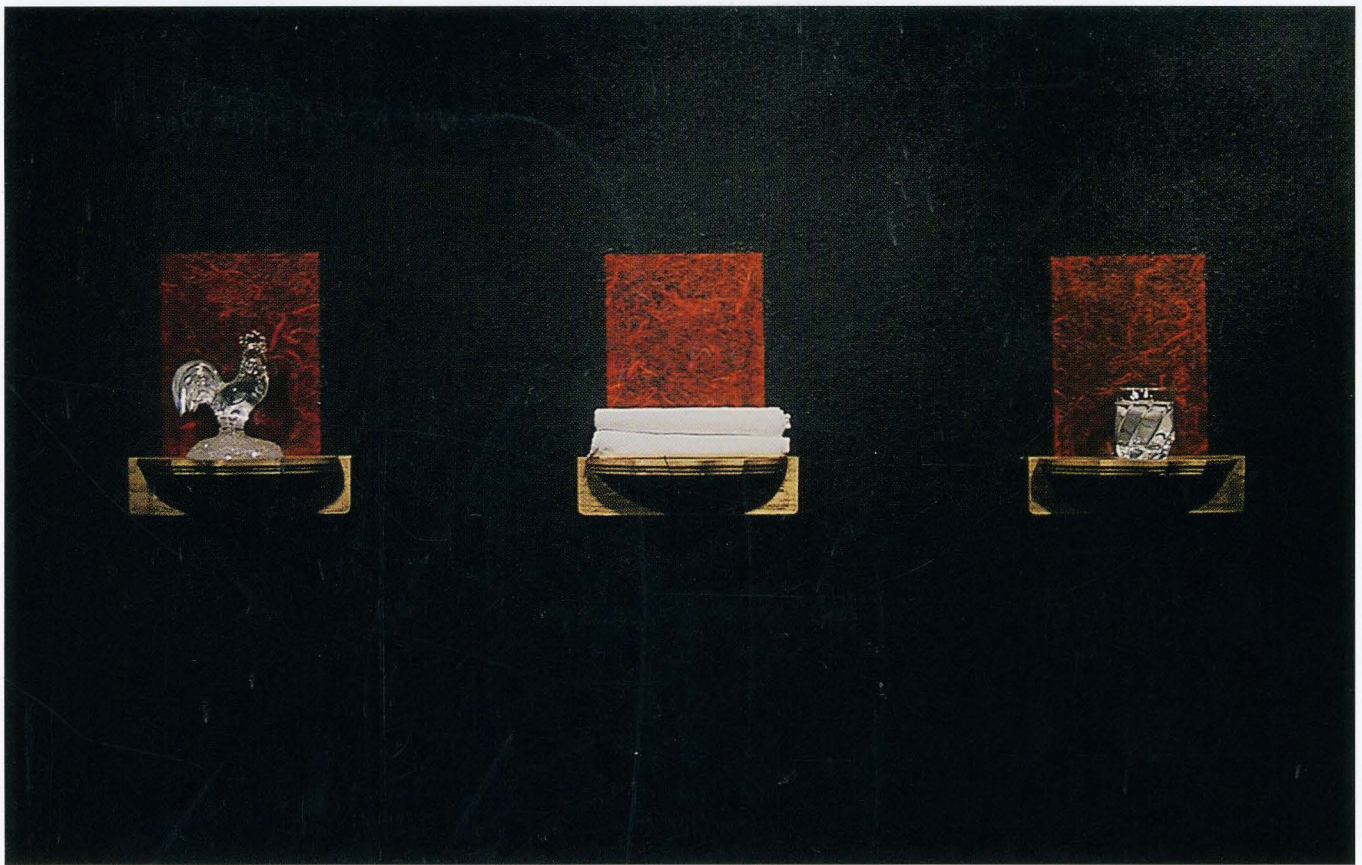
- 1992 **Art/Music/Culture: Visual
Vanguards:** Lubbock Art Center,
Lubbock, TX. (Catalogue)
- 1991-'93 **Counter-Colon-Ialismo:** Centro de la
Raza, San Diego, CA; Dinnerware
Artist Cooperative, Tucson, AZ;
DiverseWorks, Inc, Houston, TX;
MEXIC-ARTE Museum, Austin, TX;
Galeria Posada & Center for
Contemporary Art, Sacramento, CA;
MARS/Heard Museum, Phoenix, AZ;
Centro Cultural Tijuana, Baja,
California, Mexico. (Catalogue)
- 1992-'93 **Fresh Visions/New Voices:** Museum
of Fine Arts, Houston; Galveston Art
Center, Galveston, TX; Arlington
Museum of Art, Arlington, TX.
(Catalogue)
- 1993 **Contemporary Identities: 23 Artists:**
The Phoenix Triennial: Phoenix Art
Museum, Phoenix, AZ. (Catalogue)
- 1994-'95 **Project Row Houses:** Houston, TX.
(Catalogue)
- 1994-'95 **Private Identities, Public Conscious:**
works from the permanent collection:
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston,
Houston, TX.
- 1996 **The Heart That Sings, The Spirit
That Soars:** Dallas Museum of Art,
Dallas, TX.
- 1996 **Project Row Houses: A Sampler,**
Space 111, Birmingham, AL
- 1996 **Breaking Into the Mainstream:**
Texas African American Artists,
Irving Art Center, Irving, TX.
(Catalogue)
- SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**
- 1998 **Schneider, Beth,** A Place For All
People, Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston Publications.
- 1995 **hooks, bell,** Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology
of Contemporary African American
Women Artists; MidMarch Arts Press.
- 1995 **Tyson, Janet,** STATE OF THE ARTS:
HOUSTON, a melting pot of paint,
Fort Worth Star Telegram.
- 1993 **Nilson, Richard,** "Exhibiting
Tolerance" The Arizona Republic,
August, pp E1-E3.
- 1993 **Robert S. Cauthern,** "Tough, Brave,
But Too Familiar" The Arizona Daily
Star, September.
- 1993 **Kutner, Janet,** "Building Bridges"
Dallas Morning News,
September, 20, p.1C.
- 1993 **Tyson, Janet,** "African American talent
exhibition takes chances but avoids
dogma", September 9, Sec. E PP 1-3.
- 1992 **Ennis, Michael,** "Raw Visions"
Texas Monthly Magazine, November,
1992, p.48.
- 1990 **Clemmons, C.J.,** "Vicki Meek"
International Review of African
American Art, Vol.9 No. 2.
- PUBLIC COLLECTIONS**
African American Museum at Dallas, Texas
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas
Norwalk Community College, Norwalk, Connecticut
- ART CONSULTANCIES**
Eastfield College Public Art Selection Committee
Milwaukee Center, Public Art Selection
Panel Member
Dallas Convention Center, Co-Project Artist
Shreveport Arts Council, Public Art Selection
Panel Member
Dallas Area Rapid Transit, Public Art Program
Design Team Member
Eller Media Billboard Competition, Selection
Panel Member
Oklahoma City Arts Commission/MAPs Ballpark
Public Art Selection Panel Member



This Panel: Details from "They Paved the Way: A Memorial Room," 1996, multi-media installation with audio. Photo by David Wharton.

Cover Panel: Detail of "quoteADVICEunquote," 1999 multi-media installation with audio. Photo by Katherine Snedeker.

Back Panel: Detail of "quoteADVICEunquote," 1999 multi-media installation with audio. Photo by Katherine Snedeker.



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

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Suzanne Rose, *President*

Stephanie Barko

Genny Duncan

Diana Fuentes

Bobbi Graves

Frances Jones

Jane Lilly

Eva Lindsey

Cat Reynolds

Elizabeth Salaiz

STAFF

Chris Cowden, *Executive Director*

Kathryn Davidson, *Associate Director*

Holly Durham, *Operations Manager*

Trent Sharp, *Preparator*

Angela Villarreal, *Education Coordinator*

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

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 1583 artists in 186 visual art exhibitions, 81 music, dance, and theater events, 19 literary readings, 12 film festivals, and 128 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.

The artist thanks the following people who made this installation possible: Barsamian, Katherine Snedeker, Joseph Lockwood, Uriah Elion Jr., and Jim Ebersol of Promise Land Dairy for the use of the bottles.



WOMEN & THEIR WORK
1710 LAVACA ST
AUSTIN TEXAS 78701
(512) 477 1064
w@eden.com
www.austin360.com/community