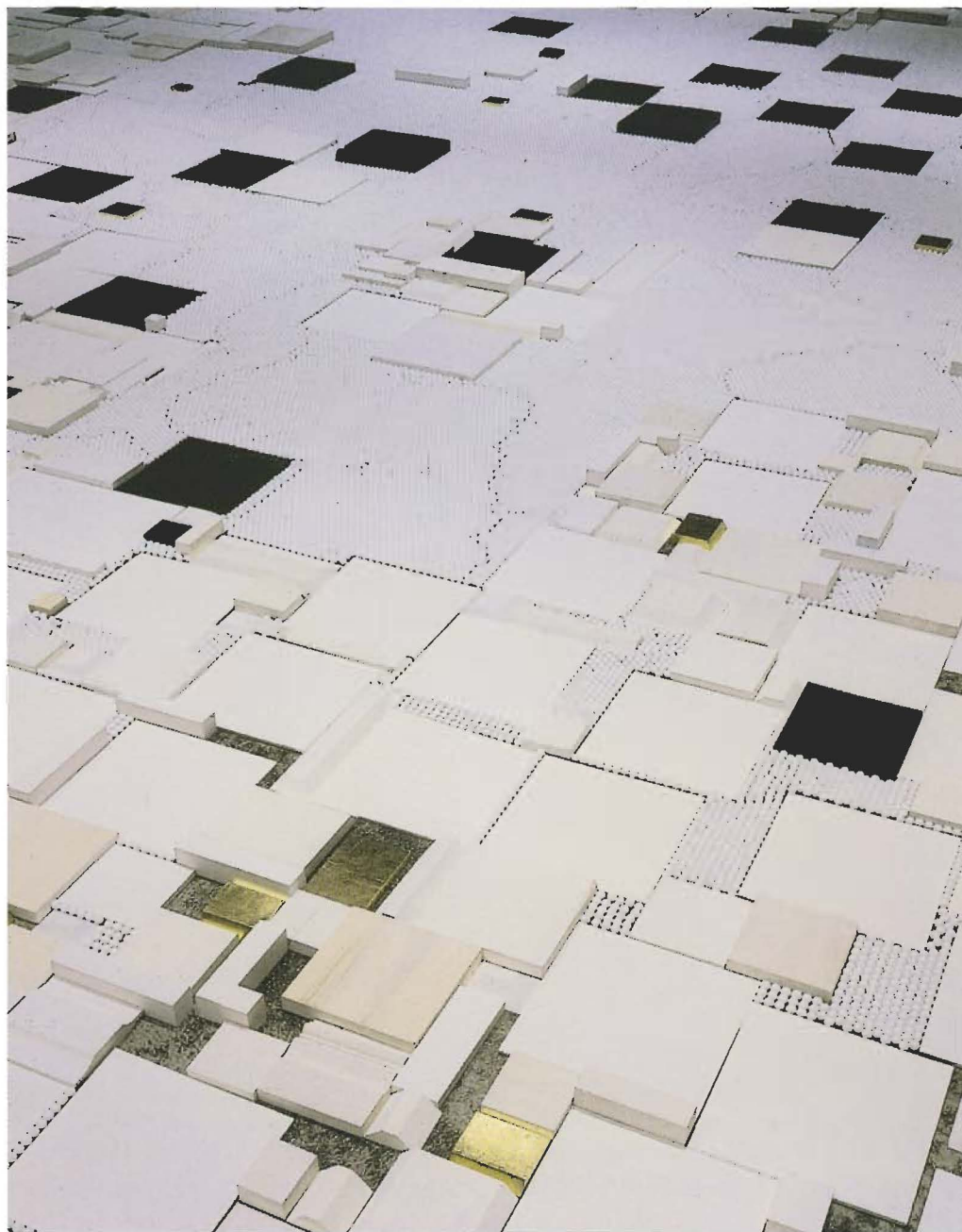


MARGO SAWYER

Transformation



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

JANUARY 21 - FEBRUARY 27, 1999

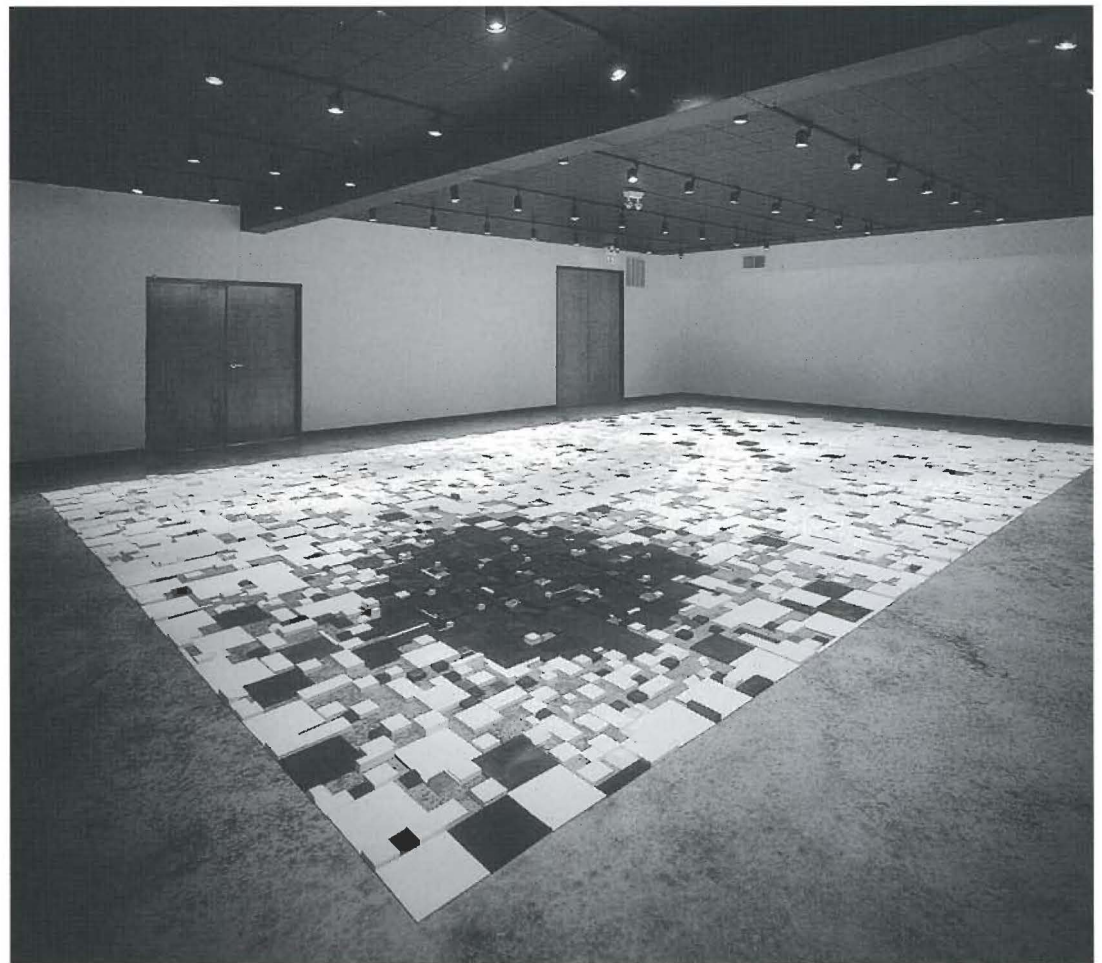
AUSTIN, TEXAS

TRANSFORMATION

In *Transformation*, her latest site-specific installation, Margo Sawyer reduces her palette to black, charcoal, white, and gold. She does not, however, in any way reduce the rich array of associations present in her always complex and evocative work. In fact, in title alone the new piece signals a whole series of the transformations it precipitates—from its materials, to the space it occupies, to the viewer herself. Sawyer seeks and delivers the best of all possible worlds from installation art, painting, and sculpture, and *Transformation* evokes and makes reference to historical precedents in each arena.

Sawyer states that the present installation was inspired by the temple gardens at Tofuku-ji in Japan¹, her own photographs of which grace the entrance walls of the gallery and the exhibit's invitation. These images, taken after a substantial snow, are dominated by stark blacks and whites, emphasizing the exquisite geometries of the gardens. Her experience of these glorious spaces—themselves reduced to black and white—has clearly influenced Sawyer's palette in *Transformation*. A section of the garden featuring a checkerboard of snow-covered shrubs and squared stones is echoed in a distinctive section of the gallery floor. As with so many decisions in her complex works, the artist's colors here are rich with a multiplicity of meanings, not least of which are their symbolic ones. Within Buddhist iconography, for example, white symbolizes death, charcoal the transformative and purifying nature of fire, black the unknown, and gold transcendence. This is apparently not such a limited palette after all.

Sawyer's floor installations have a way of pointing in two opposing directions simultaneously, for example, toward the *macro* and the *micro*. They may resemble aerial views of crowded architectural vistas covering



Transformation, 1998 - 99, wood, paint, dutch gold, charcoal, white ammo (glass balls), 1 1/2" x 33' 10" x 22'. Photo Credit: Bill Kennedy

vast lands, and they may just as strongly evoke microscopic views of cellular or digital structures². Sawyer insures this indeterminate sense of (represented) scale within the work by insisting that the viewer not enter its space—except visually. If one could only get closer, the viewer imagines, the constituent objects might reveal their architectural nature, their details, perhaps even their inhabitants. Conversely, if one could gain a more distant view, perhaps from high above the floor, the composition might resolve from a sort of digital bitmap into a recognizable image. Of course, neither is possible within the purposeful constraints of Sawyer's presentation. In the brief history of recent installation art, we have become so accustomed to entering into the space of the work that, indeed, one of the

chief instruments of this art's power has been precisely that piercing of the picture plane—the privileged “window onto the world.” Sawyer is able to generate an extraordinary, quiet power in her work through dramatically different means.

By separating the viewer's space from that of the installation itself, she begins the process of transforming the work's constituent elements—the objects themselves—from the quotidian to the sacred. It is no accident that Sawyer draws her inspiration from the sacred architecture of Japanese temple gardens. There, in long-ritualized practice, nature and the manmade are intended to co-exist in a mutually beneficial arrangement. Of course, the ostensibly natural elements in a Japanese temple garden

are usually manipulated in some fashion—e.g. taken out of their “natural” context and repositioned in the garden, or, in the case of shrubbery, pruned or trained to grow in specialized ways. Sawyer’s works rely less on such a feigned naturalist purity. All the elements of her installations are clearly manmade, while it is their arrangement that seems to vacillate between overt geometries and a seemingly more spontaneous, intuitive—or “natural”—order.

Transformation’s humble materials—simple, boxy wooden constructions—are pigmented with a severely limited palette of colors. Most are painted white, either flat or pearlescent, some with the grain of wood showing through. Others are painted black or are literally burnt to a charcoal finish. A few gold-leaved blocks punctuate the sections of predominantly black or white, and create both respites from the sea of black and white, and dazzlingly reflective points of interest along the way. In between the blocks, strung like pearls or filling flat, squared areas of their own, are tens of thousands of opaque white glass balls. These, Sawyer points out, are manufactured in Mexico as ammunition for the slingshot—a primitive weapon—one used in sport and mischief. These marble sized balls are loaded, therefore, with the potential for violence, even as they function here as nothing short of exquisitely beautiful ornament. Despite the predominance of blocky, three-dimensional forms, the additive accumulation of these various means of “marking” the floor suggests an intuitive and surprisingly painterly approach.³

As Sawyer works on the floor (one might even suggest that the floor here serves as canvas, given *Transformation’s* numerous bits of exposed, raw, undecorated area) in an improvisational manner, one can hardly help but think of Jackson Pollock. The enormous scale and the sense of *horror vacui* in *Transformation* resonates with his work, and Sawyer’s insistence on a strict rectangular

perimeter recalls Pollock’s habit of cropping his improvised fields of paint. Yet, Sawyer’s installations remain on the floor where they are created. Here, Lynda Benglis may come to mind, whose poured acrylic works of the early 1970s were similarly improvisational—using floor as “canvas”—and remained floorbound in their presentation.

Perhaps Mondrian comes closest to providing a precedent in painting for *Transformation*. Think of *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, and the way in which its composition has been read as a jazzy improvisation of New York City’s streetscape, seen from above. If Mondrian sought to evoke the colors of the city, its rhythms, its architecture and its streets—using a carefully reduced set of means—perhaps so too does Sawyer evoke the gardens at Tofuku-ji. She uses her own highly refined elements to construct an equally improvisational suggestion of a very different place—and attempts to capture its colors, its quietude, its sacred gardens, and its meditative mood. Her work exists as an inspired, improvisational three-dimensional variation on the theme.

In the 1970s, Michael Fried and other critics decried the theatrical qualities of Minimal sculptures, reproaching the works’ reliance on viewer interaction for their activation—for their very life. Sawyer’s individual elements may often resemble such Minimal primary structures, and her installations do indeed assume a viewer’s participation and interaction. However, this activation is anything but a theatrical, exterior spectacle. Rather, Sawyer’s viewer is invited to experience the dialogue inwardly, perhaps as meditation. Standing outside its perimeter, one is overcome with *Transformation’s* quiet power and filled with awe.

Just as Sawyer’s individual elements are transformed by their very juxtaposition and presentation in a space now marked as sacred—through its scale and restricted

entry—so too does the viewer find him- or herself transformed. He or she is required to look in new ways—to absorb quietly, reflect, ponder, be still. The work expertly enacts its title, transforming everything it touches—its elemental materials, its environment, and ultimately its unsuspecting viewer/participant.

Margo Sawyer’s *Transformation*
Don Bacigalupi, Ph.D.
Winter 1999

¹ Tofuku-ji was rebuilt in the late 19th century and mid-20th after fire destroyed its Kamakura era original. The redesigned gardens by Mirei Shigemori (c. 1940)—which include arrangements of standing stones, raked white sand with stepping stones, and a squared grid of clipped shrubbery—have been hailed as a pivotal moment in Japanese garden design. Moving beyond the faithful replication of the master traditions, Shigemori’s work stands at the precipice of modern sculpture, designing in space with traditional garden elements. See Günter Nitschke, *Japanese Gardens: Right Angle and Natural Form*, Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1993. One might think also of the many uses of nature and garden materials as art in the intervening decades, from Isamu Noguchi to Michael Heizer to Meg Webster. Sawyer’s installation represents a different, yet equally successful, means of moving beyond tradition.

² The composition of Sawyer’s floor-bound installations may even remind us of fractals—simple mathematical formulae that can produce astoundingly complex visual and structural arrangements, often strikingly similar to patterns found in nature. Fractals retain consistent patterns of organization from the narrowest microscopic to the broadest macroscopic views.

³ In its accretion of monochromatic (especially black and white) structural elements, Sawyer’s work might also call to mind the sculptural work of Louise Nevelson. Nevelson’s works often have an organic quality in their arrangement, but we are always aware of their structure—the fact that they are carefully constructed to remain stable and static. Sawyer’s work, by contrast, seems almost weightless, able to mutate instantly, truly improvisational.

MARGO SAWYER
Born in Washington D.C.
May 6, 1958

EDUCATION

- 1976-77 Foundation, Brighton Polytechnic Faculty of Art, GB.
1977-80 B.A. Hon's, Chelsea School of Art, London, GB.
1980 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.
1980-82 M.F.A. Yale University.

TEACHING

- 1988- Associate Professor-University of Texas at Austin.

SELECTED HONORS

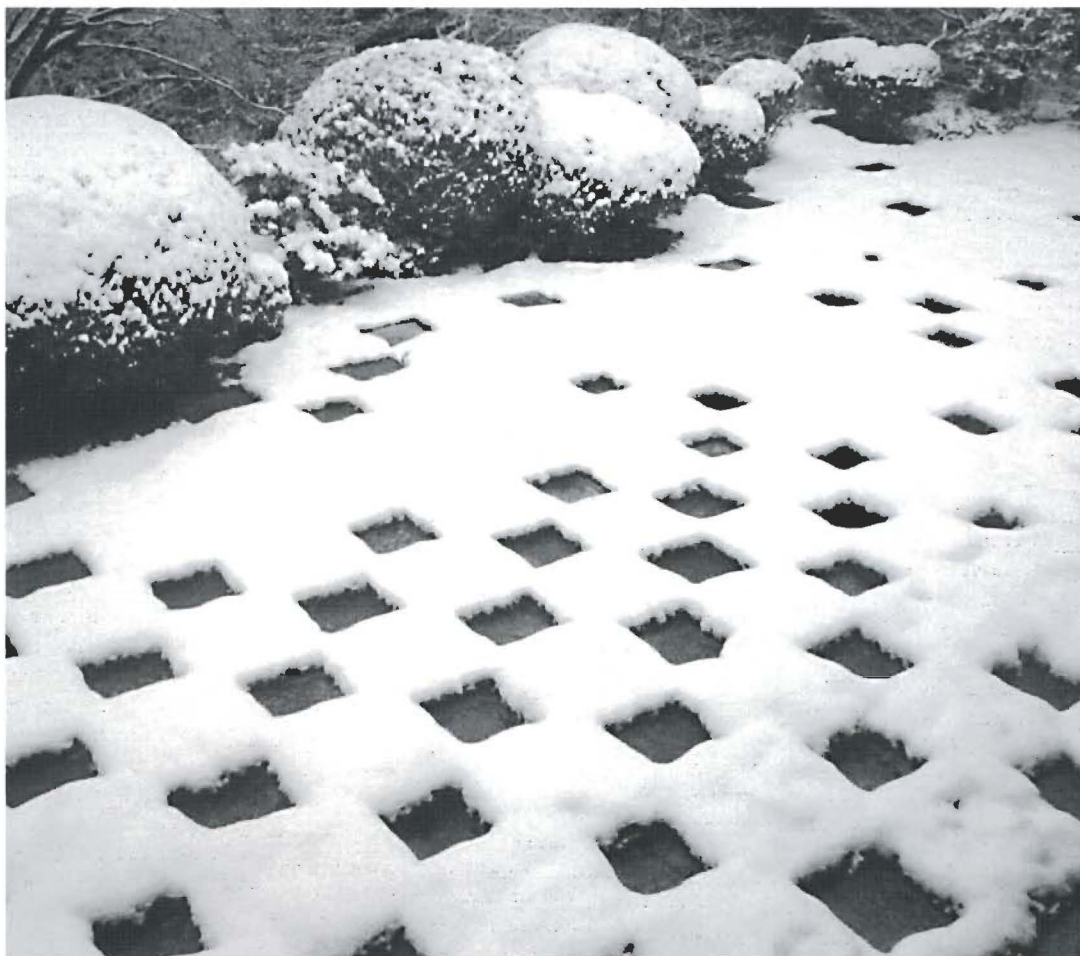
- 1980 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.
1980-82 Yale University.
1981 Ford Foundation Travel Grant.
1982-83 Fulbright Grant to India.
1986 National Endowment for the Arts Individual Artist Fellowship.
1986-87 American Academy in Rome Fellowship.
1987 New York State Council for the Arts Grant for Public Art.
Art Matters, Inc.
1988 Athena Corporation.
1989 Change, Inc.
1994 Travel Grants Fund for Artists, a joint project of the National Endowment for the Arts and Arts International. (Travel to Myanmar, Thailand and India)
1995-96 Fulbright Research Grant to Japan.
1996 Japan Foundation Fellowship for Artists.
1999-2000 ArtPace, The International Artist-in-Residency Program, San Antonio, TX.

SOLO SHOWS

- 1983 British Council, Bombay, India
1989 Special Projects, P.S.1 Museum, Long Island City, NY, January 13 - March 12.
Barbara Toll Fine Arts, New York, NY, February 18 - March 18 1989
1991 Barbara Toll Fine Arts, New York, NY, January 3 - February 2 1991
1992 Women & Their Work, Austin, TX, May 14 - June 21 1992
1994 Projects, DiverseWorks, Houston, TX, January 29 - March 5 1994 (with Thana Lauhakaikul & Mike Scranton)
1996 Sagacho Exhibit Space, Tokyo, Japan, November 22 - December 15 1996
International House of Japan, Tokyo, Japan, December 4 - 13 1996
GalleryGallery, Kyoto, Japan, December 10 - 21 1996
1998 Austin Museum of Art at Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, TX, June 13 - August 30 '98
Tidbit, Portland, Oregon, July 11 - August 15 1998
1999 Women & Their Work, Austin, TX, January 21 - February 27 1999
Galveston Art Center, Galveston, TX, April - May 1999
2000 ArtPace, San Antonio, TX, June 2000

COMMISSIONS

- 1978 "Capital Elm," Hyde Park, London, Great Britain.
1986 "The Birdhouse Project," Collaboration with



Photograph of Tofuku-Ji, Kyoto, Japan, 1995, taken by the artist.

Architect Marek Walczak for Hong Ning Apartments, New York City. Produced by Cityarts Workshop and funded by New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

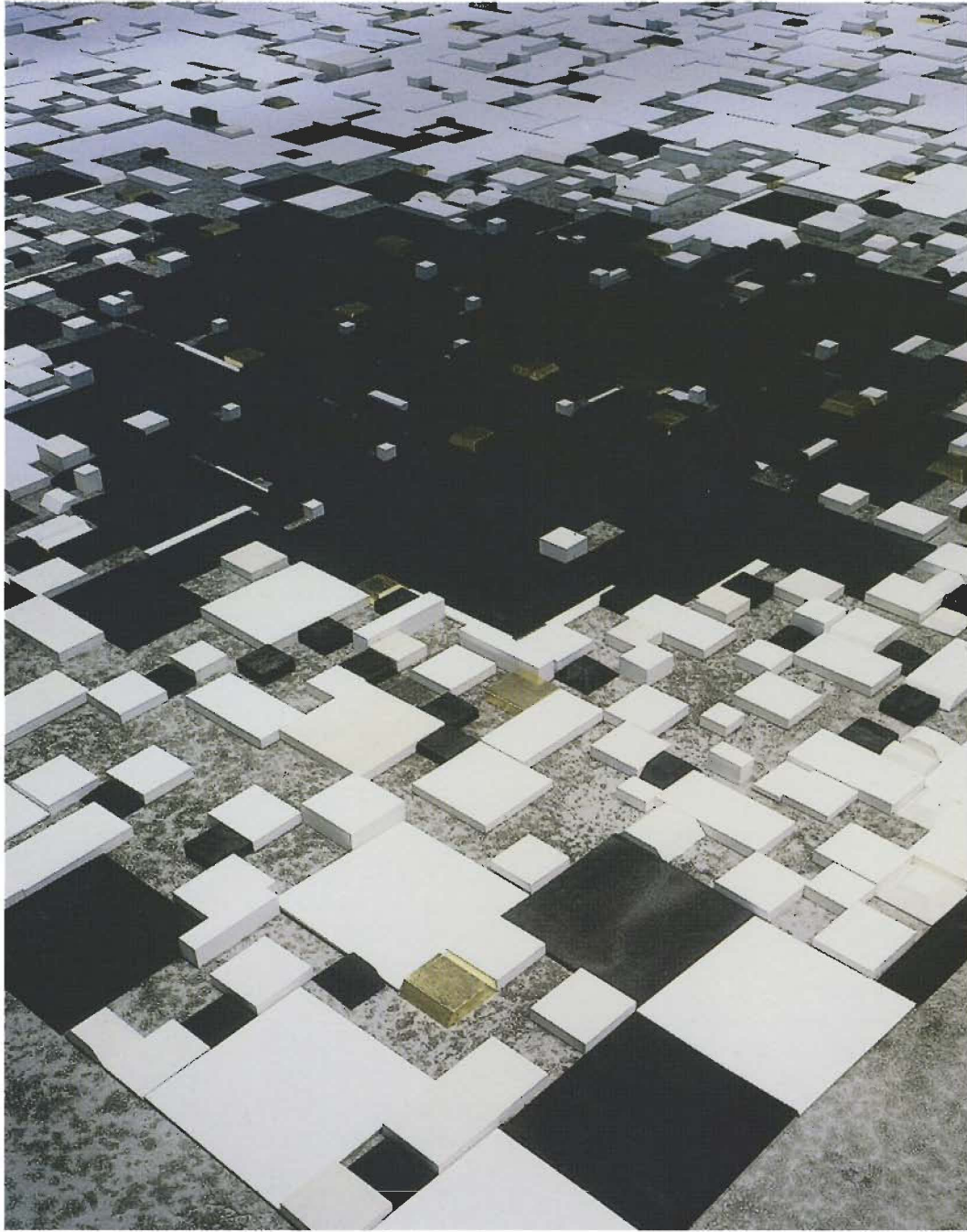
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Patricia Phillips—"Margo Sawyer & Marek Walczak "The Birdhouse Project," Artforum, pg. 117, Dec. 1986, ill. 117.
Michael Kimmelman—"Margo Sawyer," The New York Times/Living Arts, Friday, February 24, 1989, pg. Y23.
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Susie Kallil—"Art as Ecstasy - Three disarming and mesmerizing installations at DiverseWorks", The Houston Press, March 3-9, 1994 pg. 31.
Bernard Bruon—"Drawing Crossing the Line", DiverseWorks Exhibition Catalogue, pg. 16,18, ill. 24.
John Clarke—"Margo Sawyer at DiverseWorks", Art in America, September 1994, pg. 121.
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Akiko Kasama—"The Yomiuri Shimbun, Tuesday November 22 1996, pg 35, ill. 35.
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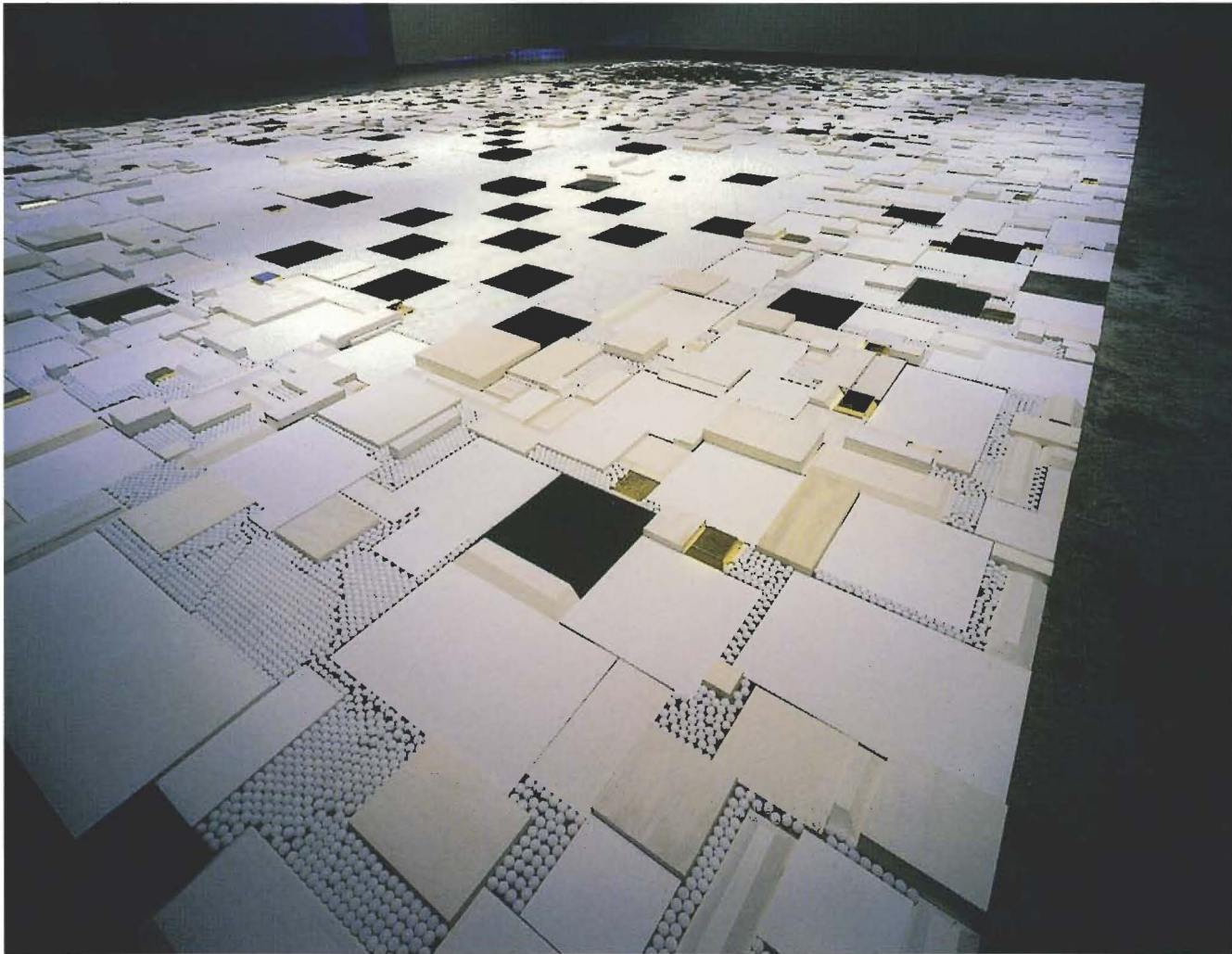
- Yomiuri, Tuesday December 3 1996, pg 10, ill. 1, 10.
Mila Rosenthal—"Pachinko Fields of Paradise", Asahi Evening News, Thursday December 5 1996, pg. 11, ill. 11.
Toshio Shimizu—"Margo Sawyer: Elysian Fields", Sagacho Exhibit Space 1996. (Catalogue).
Dana Friis-Hansen—"Margo Sawyer: Presence and Absence", Austin Museum of Art at Laguna Gloria, 1998 (Catalogue).
Jeanne Claire Van Ryzin—"Rooms with a View", Austin American Statesman, June 25 1998, pg. 51, ill. 51.
Kate Bonansinga—"Gardens of Meditation", Willamette, August 5 1998, pg. 57,58.
Rebecca Cohen—"Spiritual Presence" The Austin Chronicle, August 21, 1998, pg. 42, 44, ill. pg. 42, 44.
Christopher Shade—"Margo Sawyer-Austin Museum of Art-Laguna Gloria" Art Lies, Fall 1998, Number 20, pg. 49, ill. pg. 49.

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This Panel, Cover and Back: Detail of Transformation, 1998 - 99, wood, paint, dutch gold, charcoal, white ammo (glass balls), 1 1/2" x 33' 10" x 22'. Photo Credit: Bill Kennedy



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