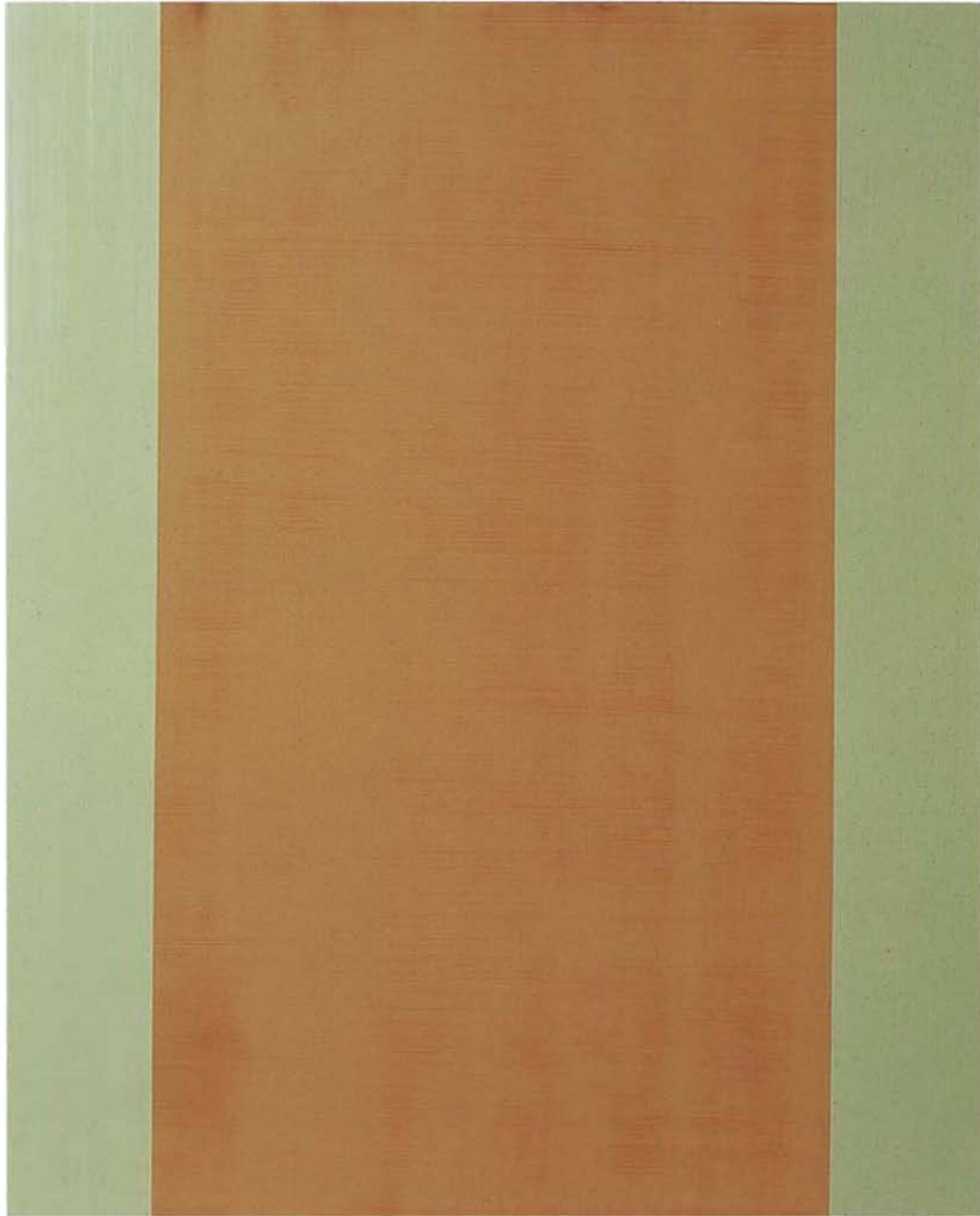


# POLLY LANNING

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Parallels



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

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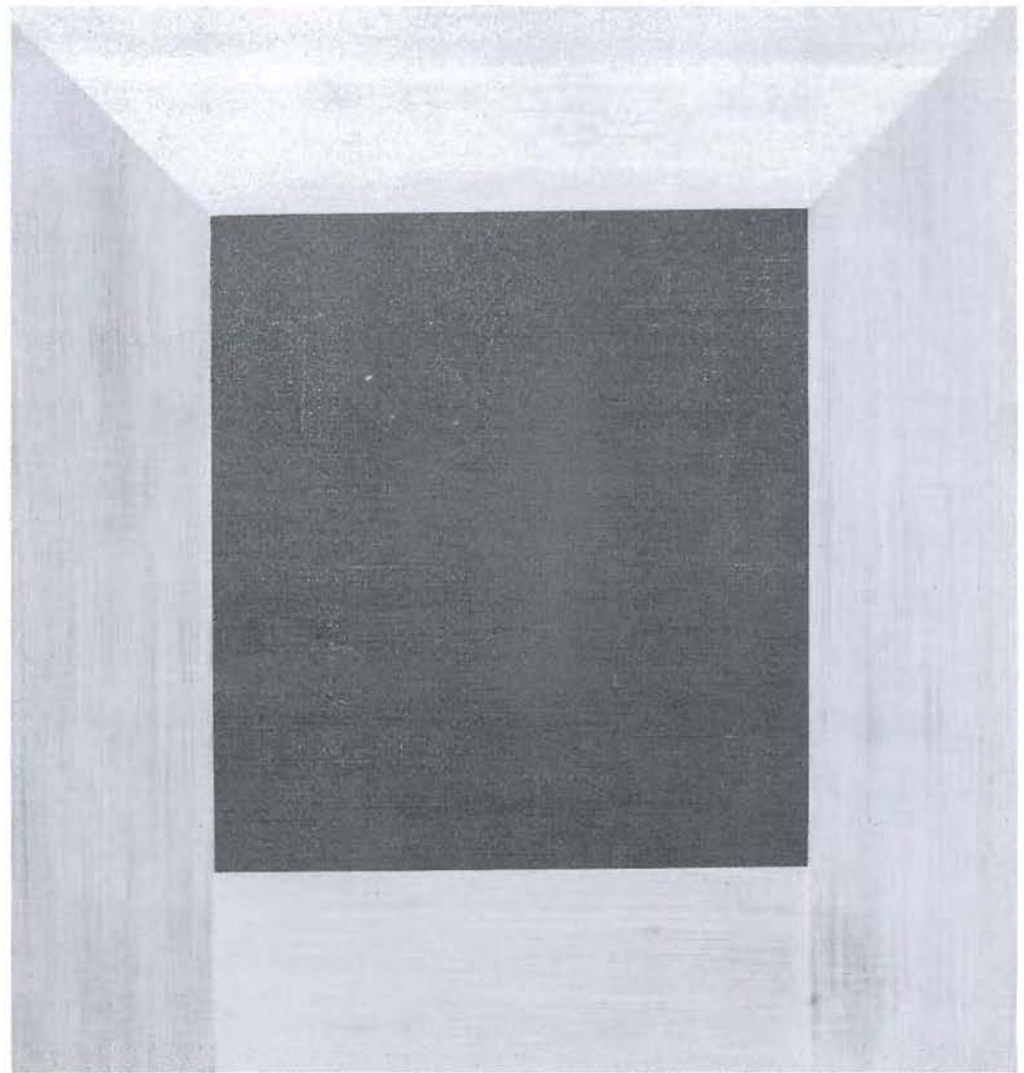
MAY 11 - JUNE 17, 2000  
AUSTIN, TEXAS

## Pictures – Frames

*“The ‘at-onceness’ which a picture or a piece of sculpture enforces on you is not, however, single or isolated. It can be repeated in a succession of instants, in each one remaining an ‘at-onceness’ an instant all by itself. For the cultivated eye, the picture repeats its instantaneous unity like a mouth repeating a single word.”*  
— Clement Greenberg, “The Case for Abstract Art” (1959)

Paintings cannot speak, but if they did, one would hope for more than an incessant and insistent one-word rant. Some semblance of a syntactical structure would be helpful as well. Otherwise one would hear – and see according to this analogy – little more than nonsense, equivalent to flashing lights. Comparing visual instants to an act of speech was an unusual strategy for the art critic Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) and an unfortunate one. These two types of acts and their modes of reception are not analogous, and both require thought, the binding of what one sees or what one hears with concepts, signification. Words need other, different words to make sense, just as pictures need other different instantaneous unities to be intelligible.

Polly Lanning has considered Greenberg’s observations about abstract art, which by the late fifties, were practically dictates, when developing the fundamental terms of her art. But her paintings are true speech acts that enunciate these now infamous dictates or what Greenberg calls the “limitations” for Modernist Painting – “the flat surface, the shape of the support, and the properties of the pigment” – in terms of representation and in terms of reference while remaining irrefutably abstract. Her paintings are linguistic objects, visual images loosely



*Untitled*, 2000. Acrylic on birch ply., 19" w. x 20" h. x 2 1/4" d.

tied to concepts and to actual things. Looking at them over time produces a succession of insinuated and yet unstable meanings, and not an insistent and relentless diatribe.

The first thing is Lanning’s color, the “properties of her pigment.” It is categorically imprecise, not quite green, not quite blue, not quite orange, therefore not immediately referential but still somehow familiar: the color of old kitchen appliances, southwestern bungalows, the unstable tones of old

instamatic color photographs or the color of Texas dirt. It is actually “local color” and also often literally “found” in paint chips from derelict houses or in materials imbedded in the plywood Lanning uses for her paintings’ support. Found in and as objects, Lanning then renders these local colors into objects again through a painstaking and deliberate series of steps. Each painting consists of two to four sheets of plywood cut, stacked, and fastened together, fifteen to twenty coats of gesso, ten to twenty coats of paint, and incessant sanding at every stage. They become

thick and heavy objects with surfaces built up and worn smooth to the texture of fine formica or aluminum siding. They are bits of displaced architecture as well as images of actual bits of displaced architecture.

Then there is the "shape" of her supports. The overall shapes of her images equal the shapes of the flat surfaces of her chosen supports. That much is self-evident, but the designs of her images are a bit more disorienting since they can be read in a number of contradictory ways. For example, Lanning bases her designs on framing devices such as common wooden frames, horizontal or vertical borders, or mounting corners or on support devices such as stretchers, braces, brackets, or corner supports. Most of her images can be read as both frames and supports. The first type of image suggests that one is looking at an image of the front of a painting, an image with some sort of frame. The second suggests that one is looking at an image of a painting's back, a stretcher and the canvas it supports. These images provide "pictures" of the physical conditions of painting that are not actually present in Lanning's work. Some of Lanning's sources for these images, such as the thin, often "transparent" mounting corners commonly used to fix photographs in albums, tend to minimize their own physicality in order to enhance the physicality of the images they contain. In Lanning's paintings, the contained "image" seems to be missing from its corner mounts or borders, sanded away by the artist until the color of its and the border or mounting corners' support appear. Alternately, when Lanning surmounts a field of color with a more conventional illusion of a three-dimensional frame, she breaks off this illusion along at

least one edge before it has a chance to take hold. The sheer thickness and heft of the paintings also render a frame redundant. These paintings can literally stand on their own in space. And, if this were not enough, many of them possess beveled edges at all four corners that perversely transform their plywood supports into framing mounts. Images give way to the physical realization of what they depict, a subtle redundancy with a wicked twist of humor.

Greenberg's dictates and his image of a picture repeating a single word are deliberately non-narrative. Nothing develops; all is revealed in an instant, or at least in a series of self-sufficient instants. Generally, Greenberg left story telling to representational art. Lanning is a storyteller and a maker of abstract art. Her paintings are palimpsests. They embody a sequence of interdependent events, some additive and others subtractive, which reflect the history of how they were made, layer by layer, and unmade or revised. Sometimes a decision early on in the process, such as a choice of an under painting color, can undermine a painting later on when this color shows up unprofitably under a series of additional colors as the result of deep sanding. A loose plot thread or inconsistent character development can do the same for a novel. Lanning's process requires her to think ahead and consider the whole even as she must make her decisions sequentially.

When creating her work, she must think back as well since her entire process depends on memory, the physicalized memory of the "local color" in the form of a paint chip reproduced in the hand-mixing of this precise color, and the memory of what is under each

successive layer of color. This latter memory is necessary to controlling or at least to anticipating what will reemerge in the sanding process. Her process and her resulting works literally frame the memory process, fix it, physicalize it, and render it visible. That is why her pictures do not need frames. They are frames. To quote Frank Stella, "What you see is what you see," but also what you remember seeing, instant to instant, visual experience in real time.

April 2000

Ann Reynolds, Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Texas at Austin, is the author of *Robert Smithson: Learning From New Jersey and Elsewhere*, forthcoming in 2001 from MIT Press.

# POLLY LANNING

Born in Houston, Texas

Lives in Austin, Texas

## EDUCATION

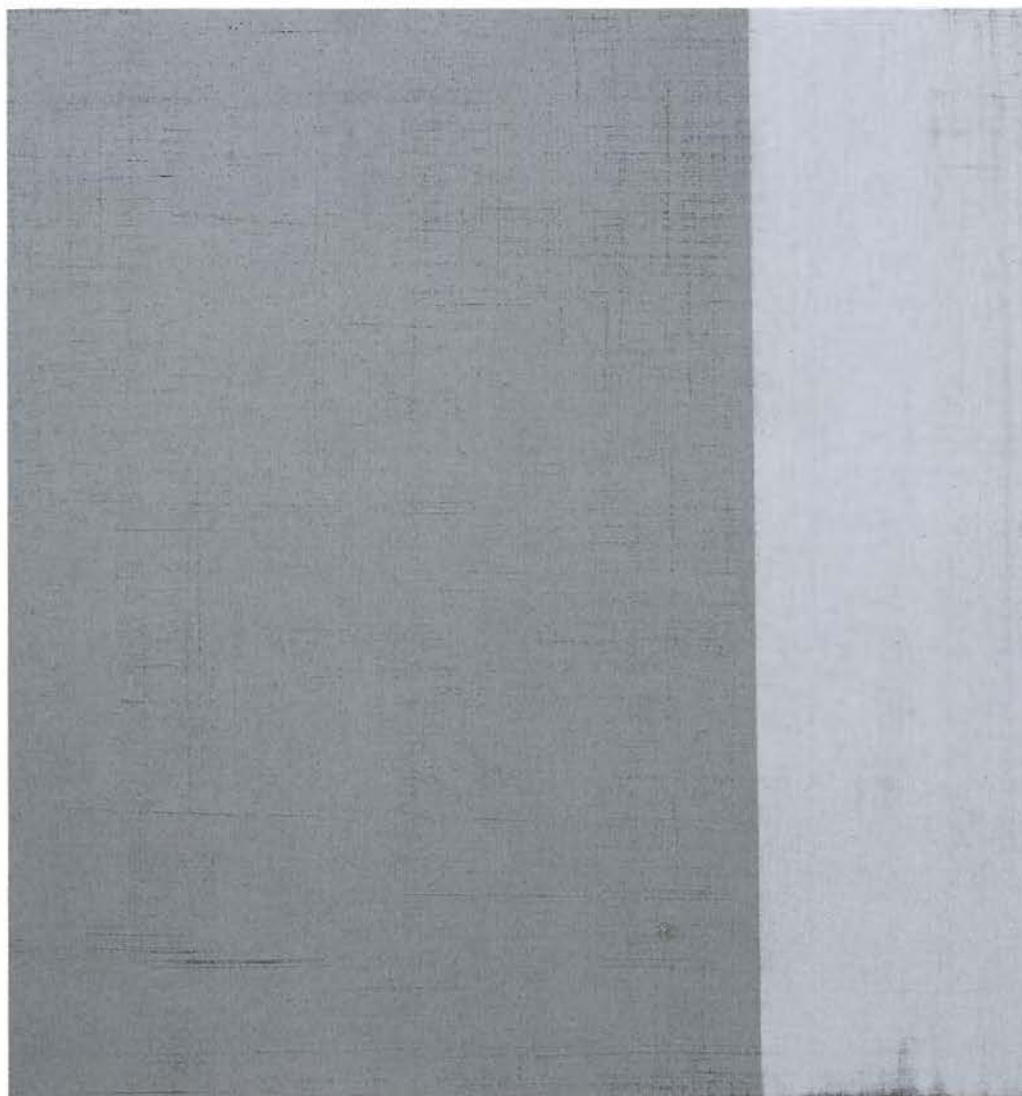
- 1995 M.F.A., Painting, University of Texas at Austin.  
1992 B.F.A., Painting, Cum Laude, University of Texas at Austin.  
1983 B.J., Journalism, University of Texas at Austin.

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 *Parallels, Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX  
1998 *Paintings from Marfa*, Rudolph-Poissant Gallery, Houston, TX  
1997 *Locker Plant Paintings*, Chinati Foundation, Marfa, TX  
1995 *Paintings and Work on Paper*, Niendorff Gallery, Austin, TX  
1994 *New Paintings*, The New Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin

## INVITATIONAL & JURIED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 Gallery Lombardi, Austin, TX  
*Five by Seven by X*, The Jones Center for Contemporary Art, Texas Fine Arts Association, Austin, TX  
*Gallery Artists*, Rudolph-Poissant Gallery, Houston, TX  
1999 *Juror's Choice, The 1999 Members Show, Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX  
*Definientia II*, Gallery Lombardi, Austin  
1998 *It's About Design, Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX  
1997 *Red Dot Show, Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX  
1996 *Abstract Ideas of Painting*, Slover McCutcheon Gallery, Houston, TX  
1995 *Faculty Exhibition*, Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin  
*The Red Hot Show*, Texas Fine Arts Association 8th Annual Invitational Exhibition, Austin, TX  
*MFA Thesis Exhibition*, Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin  
*GoodBuyHello Invitational Exhibit and Benefit, Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX  
*Large Work/Small Work*, Gallery Six, The University of Texas at Austin



*Untitled*, 2000. Acrylic on birch ply., 18" w. x 19" h. x 2 1/4" d.

- 1994 *Contemporary Painting*, Cheekwood Museum of Art, Nashville, Tennessee, Juror Kenneth Noland.  
*Faculty Exhibition*, Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin  
*Drawing Into the 90s*, touring exhibition for Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, TX  
1993 *Drawing Into the 90s*, Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin. Juror Neal Benezra, Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C. Work selected for traveling exhibition.
- ## AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS
- 1999 *Ucross Foundation Residency Fellowship*, Ucross, Wyoming  
1997 *Chinati Foundation Residency*, Marfa, TX  
1992 *Merit Award for Painting*, Department of Fine Arts, The University of Texas at Austin

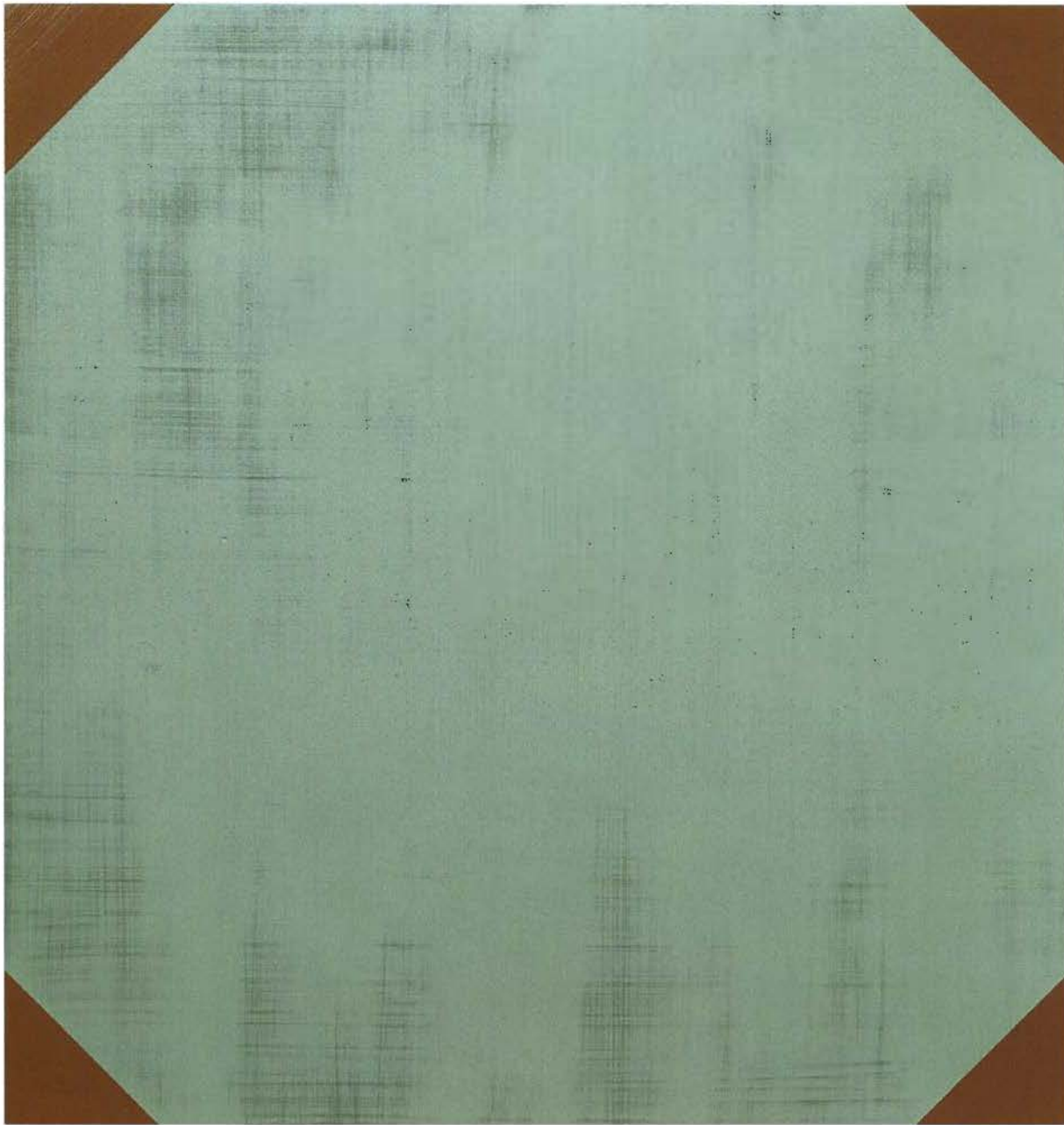
- 1988 *Vermont Studio School Residency*, Johnson, Vermont

## TEACHING

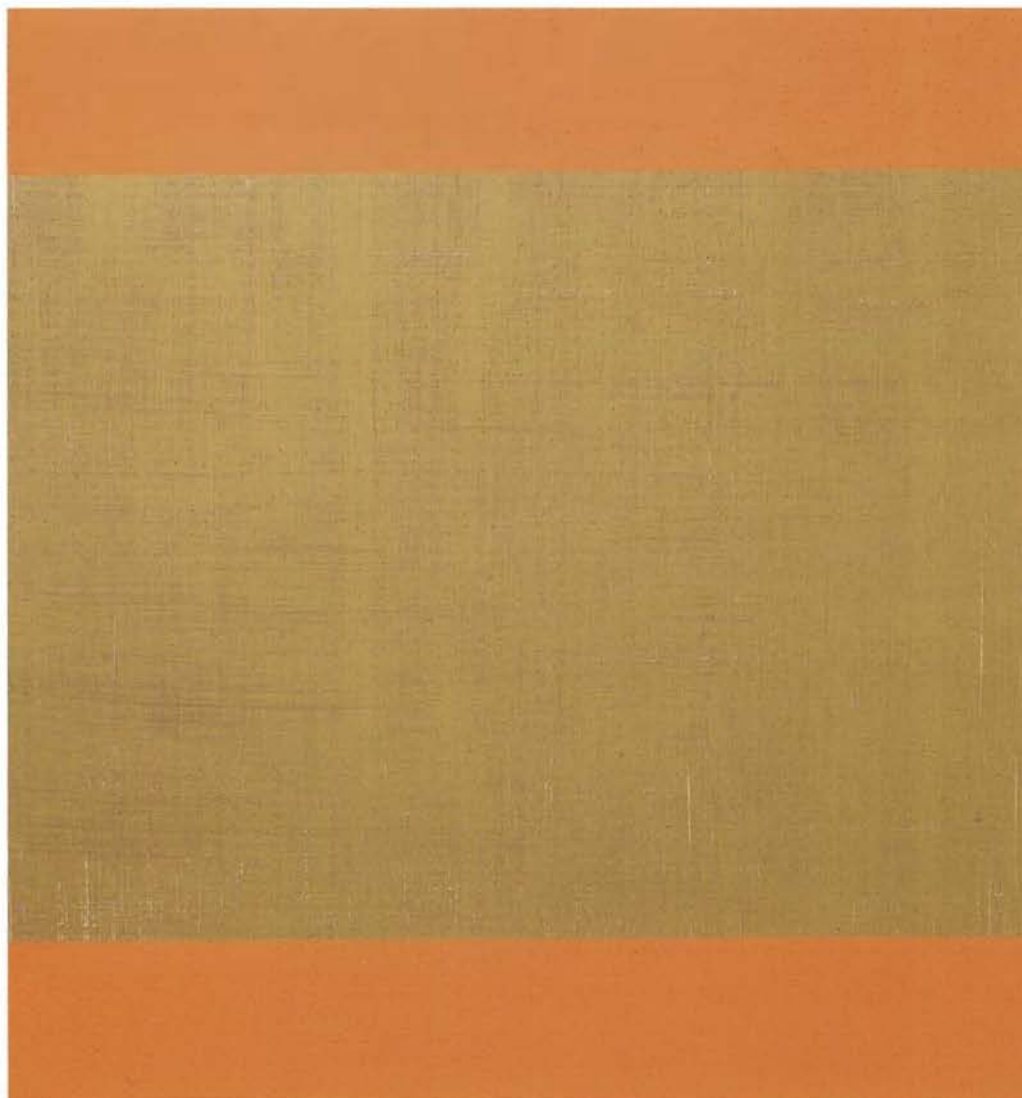
- 1995 Lecturer, beginning painting, The University of Texas at Austin  
1994 Instructor, two-dimensional design, The University of Texas at Austin

## SELECTED ARTICLES

- 1999 *Austin American-Statesman*, "8 Local Artists Share Exhibit," Jeanne Claire Van Ryzin, March  
1998 *ArtLies*, "Polly Lanning," Kate Petley, Spring  
1995 *Austin American-Statesman*, "Artists Experiment with Form," Madeline Irvine, June  
1989 *Austin American-Statesman*, "A Canvas for Artists Concerns," Mark Smith, March



This Panel: *Untitled*, 2000. Acrylic on birch ply., 18" w. x 19" h. x 2 1/4" d.  
Cover Panel: *Untitled*, 2000. Acrylic on birch ply., 19 1/4" w. x 24" h. x 2 1/4" d.  
Back Panel: *Untitled*, 2000. Acrylic on birch ply., 18" w. x 19" h. x 2 1/4" d.



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Now celebrating its 22nd 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 1592 artists in 194 visual art exhibitions, 98 music, dance, and theater events, 19 literary readings, 12 film festivals, and 152 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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