

SERENA LIN BUSH

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PAUSE



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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MAY 17 - JUNE 23, 2001

AUSTIN, TEXAS





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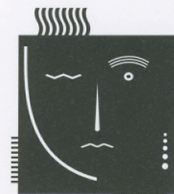
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Now celebrating its 23rd anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,633 artists in 201 visual art exhibitions, 100 music, dance, and theater events, 12 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 190 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.



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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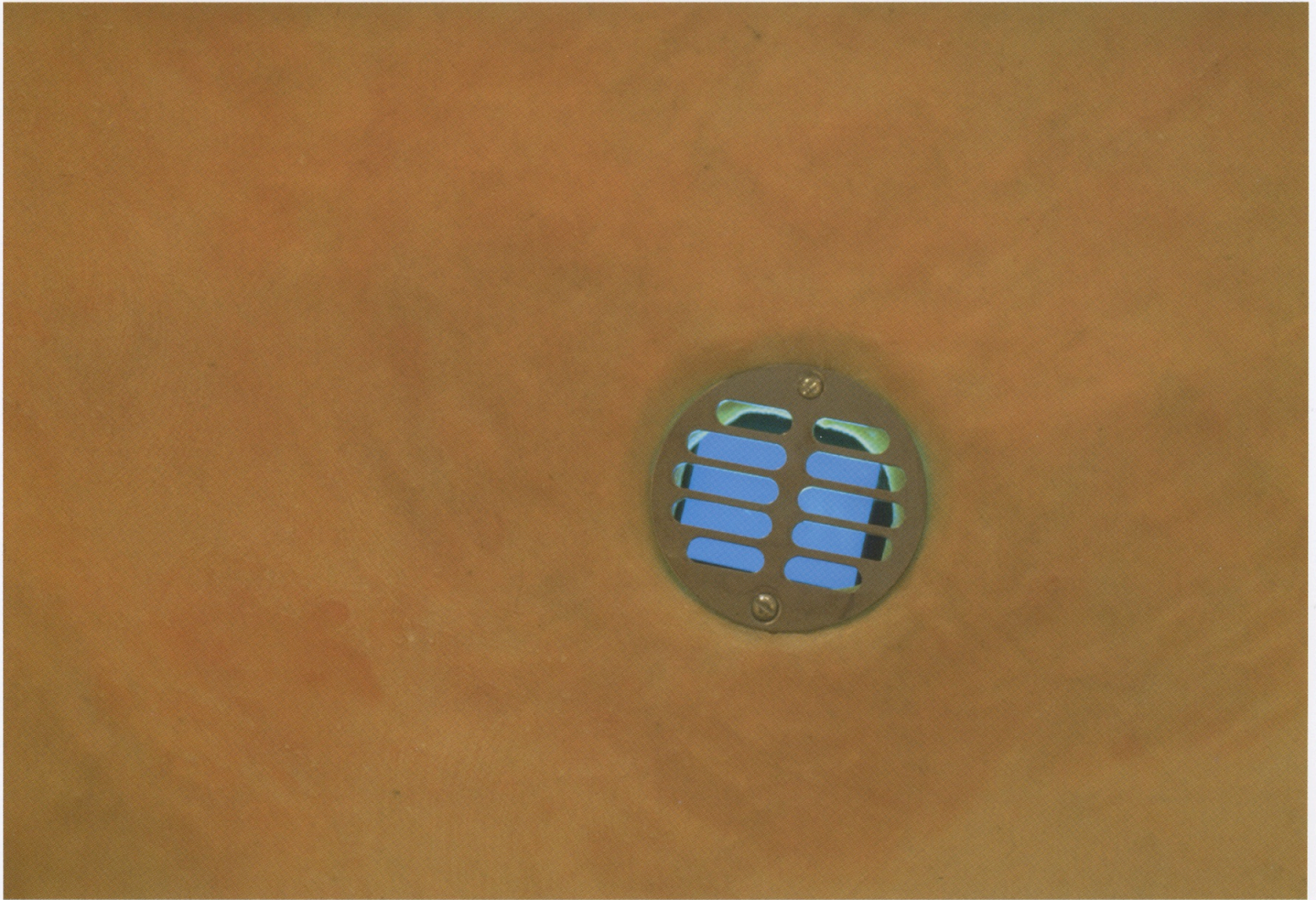
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Cover Panel: *underpinnings*, 2000. Video installation. Polyurethane foam, plaster, video projection. 3' x 12' x 2'  
This Panel: *lingering doubt*, 1998. Video still detail. Video installation. Plaster, latex, steel drain cover, video monitor, speakers. 6" x 30' x 30"  
Back Panel: *lingering doubt*, 1998. Video still detail. Video installation. Plaster, latex, steel drain cover, video monitor, speakers. 6" x 30' x 30"



## SERENA LIN BUSH

pause

My work is all about the in-between places. I am trying to locate a universal experience.<sup>1</sup>

In nineteenth-century America, people paid as much as twenty-five cents to enter a tent and sit on bleachers to view monumental landscape paintings by artists such as Albert Bierstadt and Frederick Church. Surrounded by elaborate framing devices, these paintings presented symbolic windows to nature, enabling city audiences to step outside their familiar surroundings and observe frontier or foreign landscapes. This interaction, with the members of the audience sharing the same experience in a social setting, can be seen as an early precursor to cinema. And just as nineteenth-century painters sought to adapt their media in the service of new content, contemporary artists now employ video, often within full-scale installations, to press their point. Like Bierstadt and Church, Serena Lin Bush is seeking to establish a link between quotidian experience and the transcendent or sublime. But instead of a monumental landscape, what Bush seeks to explore is the landscape of the intellect and the psyche.

The events I depict are common enough but are monumental choices; monumental, but not recognized as such because they are so mundane. The quick flash of fear is one experience that we all share. I am trying to isolate that kind of moment and widen the experience by slowing it down.

Serena Bush's theatrical installations meld the physical and virtual worlds. For her, the camera is a conduit for the reinterpretation of real-time images. Viewers enter into her *mises-en-scène* literally rather than figuratively: we are no longer sitting in the bleachers watching a



*underpinnings*, 2000.

*Video installation, video still. Polyurethane foam, plaster, video projection. 3' x 12' x 2'.*

landscape. While still indirectly engaged, we make our commitment to her reality on a more basic, experiential level. In *underpinnings* (2000), for example, Bush presents a sleekly theatrical, dramatically lit environment. A simple diving board juts from the wall like a minimalist plinth, below which lies a video projection in the form of a circle, like a small pool of water into which someone could dive. The looped video sequence is mysterious and only metaphorically associated with the diving board. The surrounding space is permeated with Bush's accompanying soundtrack, and it is this element that provides the installation's overarching theme. Mesmerizing, rhythmic sounds—the squeaking chain of a backyard swing, the sound of rain or rushing water, heavy breathing—all radicalize the seemingly unthreatening images presented in the pool. Reminiscent of playground interaction, Bush's images are imbued with a poignancy that belies their quotidian qualities. In *underpinnings* Bush successfully evokes childhood memories—of swinging too high and becoming scared, of being in the suspended state of

balance on a diving board before taking the plunge—and deftly places us on the cusp between watching and doing, between excitement and fear.

I am working with objectness and time-based media at the sametime. I am fusing the media: video validates itself within the temporal image—and that is unique to the media. I don't want the viewer to experience my work as if simply watching television; I want the reception of information to be more experiential. The encounter with the video image is more incidental when couched within an installation.

*lingering doubt* (1998) also seems, at first glance, to allude to minimalist sculpture. A squat, fleshy looking rectangular form sits on the floor. The viewer must crouch down in order to gain access to the heart of the object, to see what beckons beneath the innocent looking disk in the center of the low box. The box construction echoes a shower platform; the circle a drain.



The miniscule images projected beneath the grill of the drain recall childhood fears of invisible monsters, but as the soundtrack reveals, the work emphatically addresses more adult, but no less frightening psychological state.

Accompanying the vaguely recognizable animated images is a disturbingly disjointed audio component. Structured as a symphonic, multitrack musical composition with a baseline of menacingly dripping water, sinister creaking sounds, a finger squeaking down a misted mirror, and captured snatches of tense conversation between a man and a woman, this soundtrack insinuates itself into our consciousness and sets us on edge. Straining to catch the drift of the conversation, we hear the woman murmur "what's he doing," and "go away." In a call-and-response, her counterpart answers, "please don't go, are you alright." Suddenly the tiny scene shifts: a female mouth silently mouths, "I love you" as water pours into her mouth; then the image shifts to that of the mouth of a mustached man. Finally, the two are superimposed to form one image. As the images shift, we experience a dislocation between concrete reality and netherworld imaginings. *lingering doubt* deliberately places viewers in the position of voyeurs into an unnamed drama.

I want to insert creative, virtual environments measured by emotion, not by the physical.

In *queue* (2001) Bush posits a contemporary take on the existential dilemma of anxiety-filled waiting. Alluding to the desolate spaces in Ingmar Bergman films or the wry ironies of playwright Samuel Beckett's scenarios, Bush here creates two identical but disconnected spaces. One we experience and activate in real time, the other is a doppelganger we can

observe only via the video monitors. Both spaces are strangely empty, isolated from any of the contextual markers that normally provide the viewer with situational cues. Through the monitor, we observe a woman waiting, but where, and for what? As she becomes more and more aware of her isolation, the waiting woman becomes increasingly unselfconscious about her own body's movements. We become focused, fixated on her sequence of everyday gestures, as they teeter on the border between what one tends to actually do while waiting, and what one might like to do in the same situation. Unlike the earlier works in this exhibition, where the soundtrack takes the lead in triggering our emotional responses, *queue's* soundtrack is more ambiguous. Combining recognizable, intimate sounds with more abstract ones, Bush creates an ambience that is at once concrete and noncorporeal. Our primary focus is on the movements and attitudes of the central character, and our stance is of the omniscient observer. This position finds its roots in the surveillance ideas of Les Levine, Bruce Nauman, and Julia Shere, but Bush's construction here is more immediate. What we are watching is an actor pretending to wait. Within this highly theatrical magnifying glass, we experience the power of even the smallest gesture. Like the video tableaux artist Bill Viola, Bush creates the spectacular from close-up inspection of what we normally only see incidentally, or as a distant view. Even though we might have an extremely visceral reaction to the actor's movements, we are removed, kept at arm's length.

What Bush seeks to portray or communicate in all her art is her belief that "emotion can occupy a physical space." By focusing on fleeting gestures and ethereal sounds, she creates an elaborate

choreography of memory, intuition, and corporeal responses that she calls "mental cascades." Essentially, she sets up a situation in which the linkage between highly stylized gestures and cognitive understanding bridges the "abyss which separates the actors from the audience like the dead from the living."<sup>2</sup> Working across interdisciplinary lines, Bush is free to explore the multidimensional aspects of human emotion and experience. Her directive is similar to Bertolt Brecht's epic theater. Like Brecht, Bush rejects the traditional notion of unmitigated attachment to the linear narrative, and she avoids drama's purely emotional catharsis. Instead, what she seeks to create is an activated stage that dynamically contextualizes the narrative in such a way as to encourage the audience's involvement through criticality. Bush readily recognizes the theatrical allusions she has created, and because of this, her installations bridge the gap between public and private experience. Her lens becomes the frame through which we see reality, but with a difference.

Terrie Sultan  
Director of the Blaffer Gallery  
University of Houston

1 All quotes by the artist are taken from a series of interviews conducted by the author in January and February 2001.

2 Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theater? (First Version)," *Understanding Brecht* (London/New York: Verso, 1973), 3.





*queque, 2001.*

*Video still. Video installation. Wooden chairs, video monitors, speakers. 32' x 14 1/2" x 16"*

## SERENA LIN BUSH

Born Washington, D.C.  
Resides in Houston, Texas

### EDUCATION

- 1997 M.F.A. in Imaging and Digital Arts  
University of Maryland, Baltimore  
County, Baltimore, MD
- 1992 Printmaking Studio Program, Santa  
Reparata Graphic Arts Centre,  
Florence, Italy  
B.F.A. in Painting, Washington  
University, School of Fine Arts,  
St. Louis, MO

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2001 **pause**, Women & Their Work Gallery,  
Austin, TX
- 2000 **after (taste)**, site-specific installation,  
Diverse Works Art Space, Houston, TX  
**Visible Traces**, Winter Street Art  
Center, Houston, TX

### SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 **The Perfect Figure**, ArtScan Gallery,  
Houston, TX
- 1999 **MIRAK**, multimedia performance with  
AlienNation Company; Diverse-Works  
Art Space, Houston TX
- 1998 **Blush: ArtSites 98**, Maryland Art  
Place, Baltimore, MD  
**Not Still Art Festival**, Boswell  
Museum/ Gallery 53, Cooperstown, NY  
**Art By Numbers**, Walt Whitman  
Cultural Arts Center, Camden, NJ  
**Critic's Residency Program**,  
Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD
- 1997 **Fifth Annual New York Digital Salon**,  
School of Visual Arts, New York City, NY

### ISEA '97: Eighth International

**Symposium of Electronic Arts**,  
School of the Art Institute of Chicago,  
Chicago, IL

- 1996 **Fourth Annual New York Digital  
Salon**, School of Visual Arts, New York  
City, NY
- 1994 **Point of View**, Owen-Patrick Gallery,  
Philadelphia, PA
- 1993 **Circle of Friendship**, Charles Sumner  
School Museum and Archives,  
Washington, DC

### SELECTED SCREENINGS

- 2001 Houston Composers Alliance, Shepherd  
School of Music, Rice University,  
Houston, TX
- 1998 Crosscurrent: Unquote Television,  
DUTV Cable 54, Drexel University,  
Philadelphia, PA  
THAW 98, University of Iowa, Iowa  
City, IA  
Independent Eye series, Maryland Public  
Television, Baltimore, MD  
ROSEBUD Festival, Foundry Theater,  
Washington, DC  
Independent Filmmakers' Showcase,  
Bethesda Theater Cafe, Bethesda, MD
- 1997-98 NEXTFrame, Philadelphia, PA  
(touring festival)
- 1997 Sinking Creek Film and Video Festival,  
Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN  
NO-TV '97, The Media Center at Visual  
Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY  
image | architettura in movimento,  
University of Florence, Florence, Italy  
ROSEBUD Festival, Foundry Theater,  
Washington DC

Tech-Art Slam, Arlington Arts Center,  
Arlington, VA

- 1996 THAW 96: A Festival of Film, Video  
and Digital Media, University of Iowa,  
Iowa City, IA

### GRANTS AND AWARDS

- 1998 Honorable Mention, 1998 ROSEBUD  
Awards, Washington, DC  
Individual Artist Award, New Genre,  
Maryland State Arts Council,  
Baltimore, MD
- 1997 Best Animation, Washington Film and  
Video Council Peer Awards,  
Washington, DC  
Honorable Mention, 1997 ROSEBUD  
Awards, WETA-TV Channel  
26, Washington, DC
- 1995 Visual Arts Award, Three Arts Club of  
Homeland, Inc., Baltimore, MD