

HELEN ALTMAN

TRAILHEAD



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JANUARY 13 - FEBRUARY 17, 2001

AUSTIN, TEXAS

HELEN ALTMAN'S
TRAILHEAD

Like the stage settings in an elementary school Thanksgiving pageant, Helen Altman's show, *Trailhead*, is clearly divided into scenery and actors. On the walls, quilted hangings catalog various natural environments; on the gallery floor, droopy fake birch trees extend the forest image into three-dimensional space. These elements set the stage for the tragicomic turkey-hunting scene in which the timid Pilgrim and the humbling Tom Turkey perform a forest ballet. Glossing over just exactly how the live turkey in the woods becomes the roasted turkey on the dinner table, the scene retains the spice of a hidden dark side to the story.

Trailhead mixes the fun and anxiety of a fairytale forest. A classic story prop, the cuckoo clock, is the focus of the show's anxiety. The regular tick-tock of its pendulum is a constant reminder of time passing. The frantic, silly cry of the cuckoo as it pops out of its hidden door is frightening, then funny: an abrupt explosion of absurdity. Absurd fakery is everywhere. A foam turkey, branchless birch logs and inkjet printed collages re-create elements of a natural environment on a realistic scale, but without fooling anybody. The obviousness of the fakery adds to the sideshow pathos of the drama.

Like the pieces in *Trailhead*, many of Altman's works are black comedies with a wry self-deprecating humor. Altman's pieces seem to be poking fun at themselves, even as they carry the



Target, (detail) 2000.
Turkey target, birch trees, 32" x 26" x 26".

burden of heavy ideas about incubation, protection, nurturing, and sacrifice. *Seed Skulls* from 1996 was a series of life-sized human skulls molded from birdseed and hung outdoors for hungry birds to pick clean. In another early work entitled *Snow Head*, a snowman's severed head lies preserved at the bottom of an old chest freezer wearing a patient smile as it slowly shrinks away to nothing. In *Phoenix* a frozen turkey waits naked in a pan, thawing on the shelf of an open refrigerator, as if grandma just stepped out, leaving the door open. As in this show, low-tech manufacture and hokey illusionism add pathos.

Fake nature is a constant theme in Altman's work. Her well-known sculptures made from artificial fireplace logs contain simple mechanisms of rotating foil and orange lightbulbs that create a realistic flamelike effect, outdoorsy and homey at the same time. She uses similar logs to create the leafless birch trees, loitering around the gallery in *Trailhead*. About the size of human figures, the trees bend and sway unsteadily on rickety legs like skid-row Christmas trees in January. Among these ersatz trees wanders an equally fake turkey, a ready-made archery target, proudly puffing up his feathers and fanning his

tail in full display, just aching to be shot. If the goal were simple accuracy, the idea of making a practice target resembling a turkey would be irrational; a simple set of concentric circles would do. Here however the main concern is emotional satisfaction—a re-creation of the hunt that any Neolithic cave artist would have fully understood. Altman has always used familiar materials, as metaphors for larger ideas, making the commonplace seem strange with a Surrealist flair and for exposing webs of unconscious, irrational associations, which inhabit our dreams. In this show, she juxtaposes packing blankets, fireplace logs, and a cuckoo clock to evoke a whole complex of related images revolving around domesticity and outdoors, two themes constantly recurring in Altman's work. The camouflage-patterned fabrics suggest hunting in the temperate, southeastern woodlands where Altman grew up: the familiar backyard wilderness, the site of weekend recreation and childhood adventure rather than an exotic rain-forest or the Canadian Rockies. The blanket piece which gives its title to the show, *Trailhead*, invites one to walk forward into the picture space by showing the beginning of a woodland pathway: a vertical bar of deep green camouflage fabric stands like a tree trunk in the foreground. Beyond it, across an inviting carpet of pink and white flowers, looms a panorama of misty gray forest. What we may find in that forest is hidden, enticing us with the allure of mystery.

Like *Trailhead*, Altman's other blanket pieces provide distant views of natural

environments. In *Ocean Blanket*, a photograph of stormy whitecaps is held securely in the background by a heavy vertical bar of gray-green fabric, as if seen through a window or from the deck of a ship. *Marsh Blanket* is lonely and sparse; few thin stalks of reeds barely scratch the unbroken surface of the water. Each reed is reflected exactly in the still water of the marsh, framed by equally neutral swatches of beige and dull olive fabric. A patch of desert camouflage in the upper right hints at a distant, forested shoreline. In both *Ocean Blanket* and *Marsh Blanket*, the illusionistic space of the photographs is sharply denied by the sculptural presence of the heavily textured and unframed blanket hanging from the gallery wall, making it seem as if one is looking through the blanket, as through a rippled window pane, at something outside. Perceived through the mediation of photography and the stylization of camouflage, the imagery of trees, forests, and marsh, evokes a nostalgic yearning for a natural world from which we feel estranged.

Two tiny birdhouses stand apart and above the arena of nature created by the other works in the show. These tiny houses symbolize safety, the archetypal woodcutter's cottage deep in the forest, which one hopes to find after being lost. Each birdhouse is placed high on the wall, overlooking the forest scene created by the blankets and trees. Atop the cuckoo clock stands an alert robin, tail cocked as if listening, and refereeing the drama below. In the quilt *Patch of Blue* a distant birdhouse stands silhouetted against a "sky" of

tan desert camouflage. The image of the gingerbread house in the dark forest is inescapable, given the Germanic associations of fairytales and cuckoo clocks.

The fake trees are bare, the still marsh is empty, and the ocean is wild and cold. The tiny birdhouse stands alone against an idyllic blue sky as a sanctuary, a symbol of hope. The viewer is placed in the forest with the turkey, appropriately titled *Target*, cast as another potential victim wandering in the woods as time ticks by, waiting for the cuckoo's eruption. The packing blankets form a padded cell with walls of quilted fabric through which can be glimpsed the bleak forest, ocean, and marsh. Nothing bad has happened yet—the *Target* is still unscathed, but the cuckoo clock is ticking.

Bill Davenport,
Artist and Writer, Houston, Texas
January 2001

HELEN ALTMAN

Born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama
Lives in Forth Worth, Texas

EDUCATION

- 1989 M.F.A., University of North Texas,
Denton, Texas
- 1986 M.A., University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa,
Alabama
- 1981 B.F.A., University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa,
Alabama

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

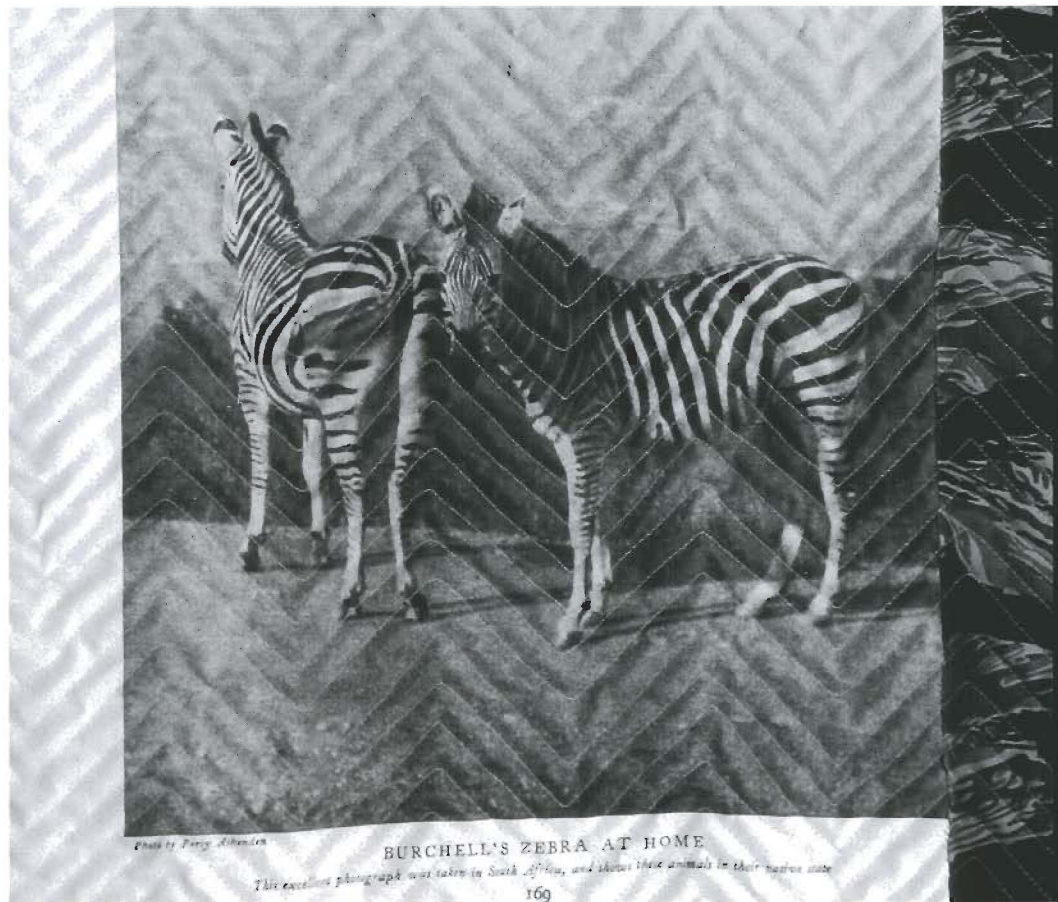
- 2000 *Trailhead, Women & Their Work*,
Austin, TX
- 1999 *Ever Green*, John Michael Kohler Arts
Center, Sheboygan, WI
Running Rabbit, Barry Whistler Gallery,
Dallas, TX
- 1998 *Nature Depicted*, Hiram Butler Gallery,
Houston, TX
- 1997 *Just Ahead*, Museum of Southeast Texas,
Beaumont, TX; traveled to Galveston Arts
Center
- 1995 *Ark*, Barry Whistler Gallery, Dallas, TX
Out of the Woods, Hiram Butler Gallery,
Houston, TX
- 1992 *Burning Down the House*, Hiram Butler
Gallery, Houston, TX; Barry Whistler
Gallery, Dallas, TX
Watching Pots, Ida Green Gallery, Austin
College, Sherman, TX

GRANTS AND AWARDS

- 1999 Otis and Velma David Dozier Travel Grant,
Dallas Museum of Art
- 1993 National Endowment for the Arts,
Mid-American Arts Alliance
- 1991 Engelhard Award, The Institute of
Contemporary Art, Boston, MA

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 *Natural Deceits*, Modern Art Museum of
Fort Worth, Fort Worth, TX
Burn It! Next Text, Arlington Museum of
Art, Arlington, TX
Artistic Centers in Texas: Dallas/Fort
Worth, The Texas Fine Arts Association,
The Jones Center for Contemporary Art,
Austin, TX
- 1999 *Helen Altman, Matthew Sontheimer,
Liz Ward*, Dunn and Brown Contemporary,
Dallas, TX
*THRESHOLD: Invoking the Domestic
in Contemporary Art*, John Michael
Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI
Texas Draws, Contemporary Arts
Museum, Houston, TX



Native State, (detail) 2000.
Inkjet on canvas, quilted fabric, 79" x 72"

- 1998 *ARS BOTANICA*, Ida Green Gallery,
Austin College, Sherman, TX
Visions, Barry Whistler Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 1997 *Serial Imagery*, Barry Whistler Gallery,
Dallas, TX
Surface Tensions, Blue Star Art Space,
San Antonio, TX
Schemata: Drawings by Sculptors, The
Glassell School of Art, Houston, TX
- 1996 *Transformers: A Moving Experience*,
Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, New
Zealand; Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston, TX
- 1995 *The Home Show*, University of San
Antonio Art Gallery, TX
Das Pop, Donna Beam Fine Art Gallery,
University of Nevada, Las Vegas; traveled to
Museum of Agenda and Transgression
Dallas, TX; Betty Moody Gallery, Houston,
TX
*Helen Altman, Kay Rosen, and Madhvi
Subrahmanian*, Barry Whistler Gallery,
Dallas, TX
*New Works Fellowships: Northern
Telecom*, Arlington Museum of Art,
Arlington, TX
The Light Fantastic, Laguna Gloria Art
Museum, Austin, TX

- 1993 *Texas: Between Two Worlds*,
Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston,
TX; traveled to Modern Art Museum of
Fort Worth, TX; Art Museum of South
Texas, Corpus Christi, TX

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2000 Goad, Kimberly. "Emerging Artists," *Arts
& Antiques*, Feb, p. 52.
- 1999 Tyson, Janet. "Helen Altman, Matthew
Sontheimer, and Liz Ward." *Art News*, Feb.
- Rees, Christina. "Post Time." *Dallas Observer*, Nov
11-17, p.77.
- Texas Draws*. Exhibition catalogue. Houston:
Contemporary Arts Museum.
- Akhtar, Suzanne. Bird Watching. *Fort Worth Star
Telegram*, Jan 31.
- 1997 Colpitt, Frances. *Just Ahead*: Installations by
Helen Altman. Exhibition catalogue Beaumont:
Museum of Southeast Texas.
- Tyson, Janet. Avery Contemporary. *Fort Worth
Star-Telegram*, Dec 15.
- 1995 Colpitt, Frances. Helen Altman at Barry
Whistler. *Art in America* (June): 110-111

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX



Cover Panel: *Trailhead*, 2000. Quilted fabric, 80" x 69"

This Panel: *Patch of Blue*, 2000. Acrylic, quilted fabric, 77" x 72"

Back Panel: *Water Hole*, 2000. Inkjet on canvas, quilted fabric, 80" x 69"



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

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Jane Lilly Schotz, *President*

Laura Bailie

Stephanie Barko

Laura Pickett Calfee

Genny Duncan

Ginger Geyer

Bobbi Graves

Francés Jones

Hypatia Kelly-Butte

Isabel Montes-Brooks

Elizabeth Salaiz

Margo Sawyer

STAFF

Chris Cowden, *Executive Director*

Kathryn Davidson, *Associate Director*

Teresa Parker, *Gallery Manager*

Kayla Chico, *Assistant Manager*

Robert Pruitt, *Preparator*

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

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 1,596 artists in 199 visual art exhibitions, 100 music, dance, and theater events, 12 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 180 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

1710 LAVACA ST.

AUSTIN, TEXAS 78701

(512) 477-1064

wtw@eden.com

www.womenandtheirwork.org