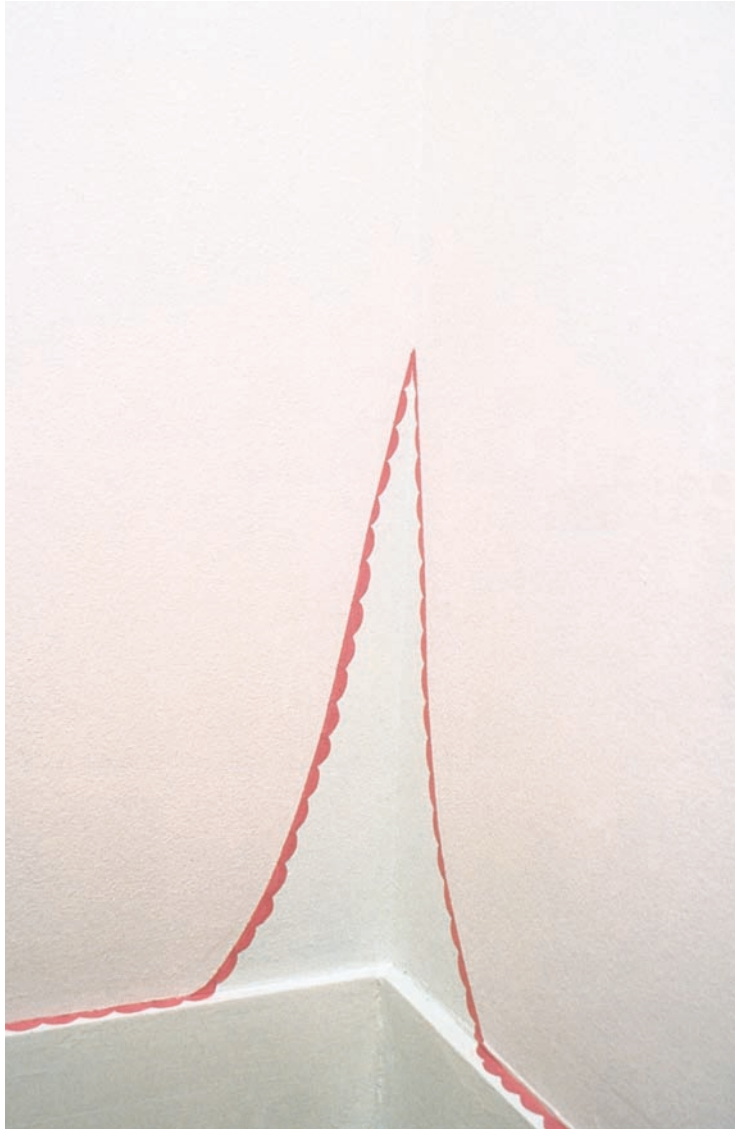


MELANIE CRADER

THE BASICS
(FLOWERS NOT INCLUDED)



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JUNE 26 - AUGUST 2, 2003

AUSTIN, TEXAS

MELANIE CRADER

THE BASICS (flowers not included)

Tom Patin: So, how should we do this? How should we write about Melanie Crader's work?

Jennifer McLerran: Let's just talk it out and see what we get from that.

TP: OK, so, what do you think?

JM: Well, I like what I see. I really like the exaggerated play with decorative form and materials.

TP: I knew you'd like that. I think I like the use—or the repetition—of modernist abstraction that is in the “background” in this work. It's there organizing the play. Or maybe Crader's playing with that, too. I'm not sure.

JM: I knew you'd go for that. It's a little scary that you're interested in the strong modernist form—so long associated with “masculinity”—while I'm fascinated by the decorative—so long associated with women and “femininity.”

TP: Are we saying that men are from Mars and women are from Venus?

JM: No, thanks! This is different. What we're dealing with here is a play with those ideas of gender that are everywhere in our culture and a parody, really, of the ways in which people come to think of men and women. The Venus and Mars thing repeats and re-entrenches those ideas, but in no way plays with them in a critical sense.

TP: I see that. Crader's work is a kind of criticism. I like that idea. I've thought for a long time that the most interesting and innovative contemporary art has switched places with criticism; criticism has become poetic—a kind of art—while visual art has become a kind of cultural criticism.

JM: Sure. Well, look at some of this work. To me, Crader seems to be examining the ways in which our individual identities are formed. In

particular, she is looking at the culturally constructed signs of femininity and their relationship to consumerism. Look at *Flowers Not Included*. It's a direct reference to fashion, design, color, and consumer culture. It looks like something we see in clothing catalogues. It raises questions on color names and design in general and on their cultural functions in particular—the production of ideas of gender, and the stabilization of patriarchy and its institutions through a repetition of gender performances. The performance of gender is easy to recognize in the realm of fashion—exterior surfaces represented to others, make up and jewelry are applied to the body. But it's more difficult to see in our everyday lives.

TP: So, then we're talking about masquerade now. I can see that plainly enough in this work. Femininity is a kind of masquerade, a performance necessary for the production of a fixed and stable idea of gendered identity. Crader is working with the idea of femininity as a masquerade and how that relates to consumerism, like you said before, and also how that ties into painting—presentation, display and decoration, for example. Bows, ruffles, scallops, and pearls have been historically categorized as signs of femininity. At the same time, still mixed in with all this “frilly stuff,” and adding an ironic twist, is a reliance on paint and the history of painting as a so-called “high art.” The overall presentation is very minimal.



Detail, *The Scallop*. From the series *The Basics*. 2003, Latex on wall & baseboards 14" x 14"

JM: I knew you'd get around to Minimalism sooner or later.

TP: What can I say? Crader seems to me to incorporate modernist practices into her work, but it's in a self-conscious and ironic way. This distances and detaches from certain traditions of abstraction, but connects directly to them at the same time. It's a parody, like we said before. Her work refers to history of both art and product design and to cultural work in general, or the work of culture in general. The "high modernist" rejection of decoration by Clement Greenberg and others, what Kant called "accessories" is the central subject matter of her work. There was a blatant denigration of femininity in the formalist theory of late modernism, but in Crader's work, the category of the feminine has returned to the rhetoric of art—and in combination with a minimal rhetoric that has been so long associated with a "rhetoric of power." I mean, look at all these grids, clean and sparse surfaces, a dependence upon the theatricality of the exhibition space for a serious encounter with these objects. *The Scallop*, for example, relies on a confrontation of the cultural institution and the visitor to the institution (viewers). Even in its sparseness, the piece's decoration and excess is important in its bodily relation to the visitor in the gallery space.

And what's even better in this work—by which I mean richer—is another layer of comment not only on art, its history, and representation, but also on sexual difference. We can't avoid it, since we have before us such a juxtaposition of masculine "high art" and feminine "craft." Look at this piece, *The Pearls*. It's like Art-schwager's work or some other minimalist, except for the rows of pearls. Pearls create a kind of striped painting. But can stripe painting be decorative? I suppose so, if made of mixed media like pearls. But they aren't supposed to be decorative. So there is both a comment on the history of art as well as on sexual difference.

JM: This raises the question for me that Mikhail Bakhtin raises when he discusses the status of the novel. Is the novel a feminine genre,

or is women's language novelized? In the case of Crader's work, are decorative crafts, the feminine masquerade, and so on truly feminine, or has all that been turned into masquerade? The novel was for so many years a non-canonical art form. It's been the same for feminine "accoutrements." They have both resisted authority and hierarchy and have refused—or subverted, really—the autonomy of modernist "high" culture, and have asserted instead the rhetoric of the accessory or excess. Sex-based gender construction in Crader's works is no longer hidden or unseen rhetoric—as it was in Minimalism—but exposed and on the surface. Use of pearls, lace, and so on, brings into opposition the seen and the hidden, the real and appearance. Fabrications are rhetorical strategies, signaling a concealment of what is contingent rather than necessary in high art. They reveal at the same time the processes of the concealment of femininity and of the production of a culture based upon that concealment.

All this reminds me of Judith Butler's idea of the performance of gender. Performativity involves parodic repetition of commonly-held cultural discourses, including the extreme limitations and painful constraints, in order to force them to resignify. This is not "freedom," but a way to work the trap that we're already in.

TP: And that's what I see in Crader's work—a repetition of certain assumptions, constraints, and techniques used in the formation of distinct oppositions: high and low, male and female, fine art and craft, and so on. But in her parody of those visual forms, there is also a destabilization of normative modes that might challenge or reconfigure the limited range of possibilities for identity that our culture offers now.

It reminds me of some of the ideas of Jacques Derrida on how consciousness is formed by language and sign systems...

JM: Oh, oh!

TP: I'll ignore that.

JM: Do we have to go there?

TP: Well, we are at our word limit.

Tom Patin
Associate Professor, Ohio University,
Athens, OH.
Teaches Contemporary Theory and
Criticism at Ohio University.

Jennifer McLerran
Curator, Kennedy Museum of Art,
Ohio University, Athens, OH.

They are co-authors of *Artwords:
A Glossary of Contemporary Art Theory*, New
York: Greenwood Press, 1997.



Detail, *The Pearls*. From the series *The Basics*. 2003, Latex paint, custom dyed costume pearls & flocking on wood 10 1/2" x 16" x 8 3/4"

MELANIE CRADER

Born in Baton Rouge, LA. Resides in Houston, TX.

EDUCATION

2000 M.F.A., Ohio University, Athens, OH.

1995 B.A, McNeese State University, Lake Charles, LA.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2003 **The Basics (flowers not included)**

Solo Exhibition, Women & Their Work, Austin TX.

junctions, Gallery Sonja Roesch, Houston, TX.

16th Annual McNeese National Works on Paper Exhibition, Lake Charles, LA. Juror: Frances Colpitt (catalogue)

2002 **Surface Tensions**, Galveston Arts Center, Galveston TX. Curator: Clint Willour

Pink Perspectives, Studio 107 Gallery, Austin, TX. Curator: Catherine Dossin (catalogue)

New American Talent 17, TFAA, Jones Center for Contemporary Art, Austin, TX. Juror: Kathryn Kanjo (catalogue)

Round One: an invitational exhibition, Hooks-Epstein Gallery, Houston, TX.

2001 **Fully Cornered**, petite L.G., Houston, TX. Curator: Patricia Hernandez

Fashionistas, Poissant Gallery, Houston, TX. Curator: Catherine D. Ansporn

New Tenants, Group Exhibition, Denise Ramos Gallery, Houston, TX.

2000 **Rounding the Edge**, Purse Building Studios, Houston, TX. Curator: Judy Moon Kwon

McNeese Alumni Show, Abercrombie Gallery, McNeese State University, Lake Charles, LA.

MFA Thesis Exhibition - Solo Exhibition, Seigfred Art Gallery, Ohio University, Athens, OH.

1999 **Formal Distortions**, Bunte Gallery, Franklin University, Columbus, OH.

Multiple Perspectives, Ester Allen Greer Museum, Rio Grande, OH. Juror: Abner Jonas

Notations, Collaboration w/Phyllis McGibbon, Trisolini Gallery, Ohio University, Athens, OH.

1998 **Printmaking at OU**, Ester Allen Greer Museum, Rio Grande, OH.

Ohio University Graduate Printmakers, Southern Graphics Council Conference Seigfred Hall, Athens, OH.

Exquisite Corpse, Mid American Print Council 1998 Conference, Art Academy of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH.

1995 **Galveston Art League 22-Annual Exhibition**, Galveston, TX. Juror: Barbara Dixon Drewa

Bachelor of Arts Exhibition, Abercrombie Gallery, McNeese State University, Lake Charles, LA.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

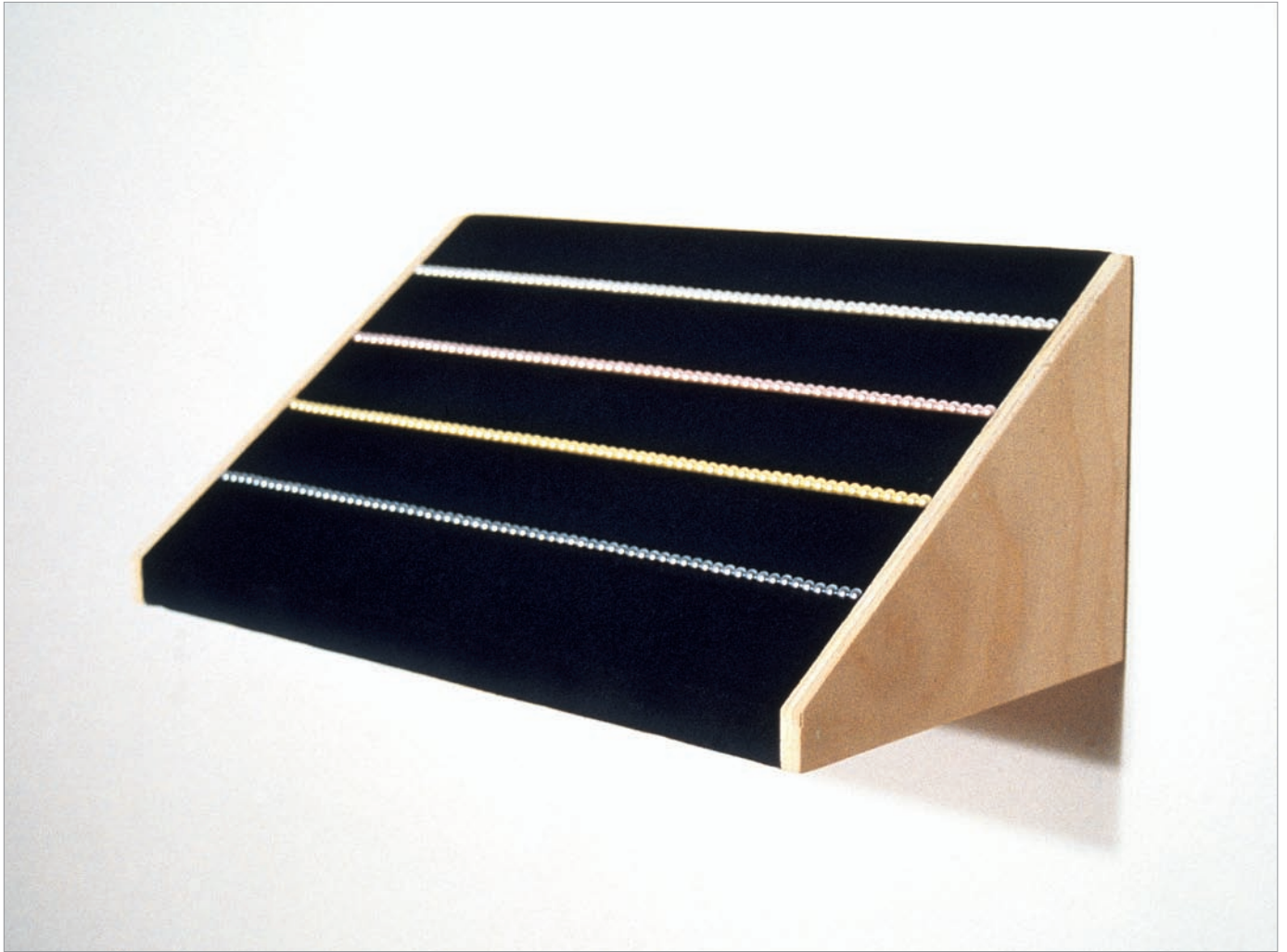
2001 Kelly Klaasmeyer, **Fashion Forward: Which came first - the artist or the designer?** *Houston Press*, November 1-7, 2001, p. 62.

Review, Catherine D. Ansporn, **Movements: Art and Fashion - Fashionistas exhibition preview Exposition: Houston's Digital Magazine for the Fine Arts**, Vol. 4 No. 3, August 2001.

Hot Local Artists: A Guide, *Exposition: Houston's Digital Magazine for the Fine Arts*, Vol. 4, No. 2, May 2001.

2000 **New American Paintings: The MFA Annual**. Volume 5. Juror: Klaus Kertess. Cover Image and pp. 7, 38-41. June 2000.

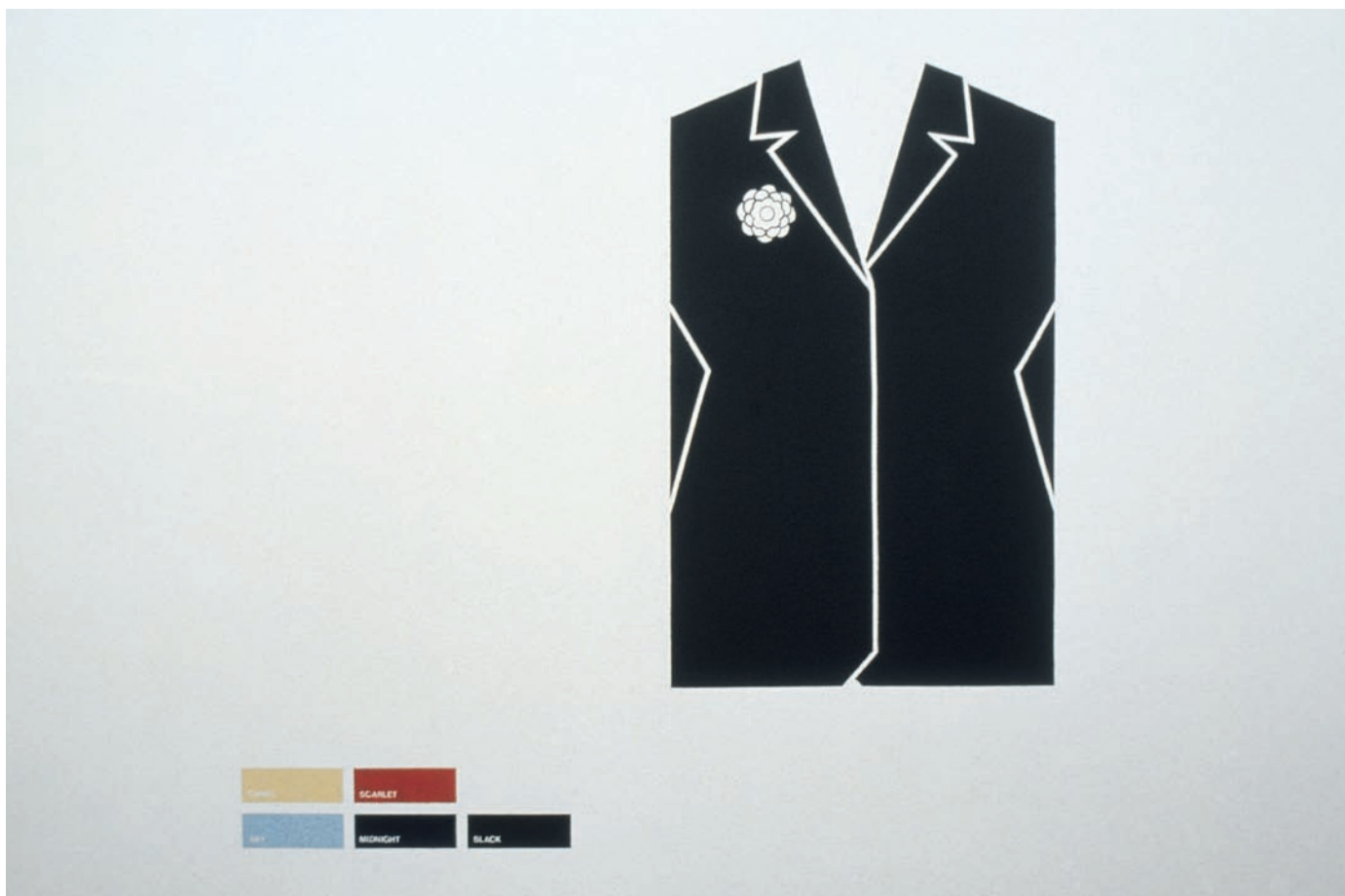
1999 Ray Kleinlein, **Formal Distortions**. *Dialogue*, July/August 1999 p. 13-14 Review



This Panel: *The Pearls*. From the series *The Basics*. 2003, Latex paint, custom dyed costume pearls & flocking on wood 10 1/2" x 16" x 8 3/4"

Color Cover Panel: *The Scallop*. Detail from the series *The Basics*. 2003, Latex on wall & baseboards 10' x 22'

Color Back Panel: *Flower not included*. From the series *The Basics*. 2003, Latex paint on wall 36" x 36"



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

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Stephanie Barko, President

Laura Bailie

Judy Birdsong

Laura Pickett Calfee

Diane Carter

Julie Churchill

Fern Santini

Jane Lilly Schotz

Patricia Shipton

Maury Sullivan

Natalie Thomas

Alexander Wettlaufer

STAFF

Chris Cowden, Executive Director

Kathryn Davidson, Associate Director

Lee Bickerstaff, Operations Manager

Katherine McQueen, Assistant

Debe Bentley, Gift Shop Manager

Chris Huron, Preparator

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

Now celebrating its 25th 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 1,705 artists in 216 visual art exhibitions, 100 music, dance, and theater events, 12 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 272 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@texas.net

www.womenandtheirwork.org