

# MARGARITA CABRERA

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## *Maquila*



## WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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OCTOBER 9 - NOVEMBER 13, 2004

AUSTIN, TEXAS

## MARGARITA CABRERA

### *Maquila*

#### HANDMADE MACHINES

Recently Margarita Cabrera purchased a Volkswagen Beetle sedan, ca 1973, in Juarez, Mexico and drove it across the border to her temporary studio in a huge corner of a transportation warehouse in El Paso, Texas. The car serves as a template for the two life-size automobiles that she is recreating, one in yellow vinyl and the other in blue. For the past three years Cabrera has been constructing soft sculptures of household appliances and the Beetles will be her largest soft sculptures to date. They will also take her out of the domestic realm and into the street.

Cabrera was born in Monterrey, Mexico and raised in Mexico City. During her teenage years she moved with her family, first to Salt Lake City and finally to El Paso, a border city located within walking distance of our southern neighbor. After spending several years on the east coast, the artist returned to El Paso in 2001 and began visiting and researching the many maquiladoras, or factories, located on the Mexican side of the border. These are, of course, the production facilities for U.S. based multi-national corporations who employ Mexican laborers for much lower wages than their U.S. counterparts demand. Cabrera discovered

that the maquiladoras are primarily assemblage plants where workers gather pre-made parts into final products. Only the appliances' plastic elements are created in the factories that she visited, and these are the most toxic to manufacture. Intending to bring attention to this border industry, Cabrera began creating sculptures from the household appliances produced there, such as waffle irons, blenders and coffee makers. She replaces the made-in-Mexico plastic parts with colorful vinyl fabric and keeps the original appliance's metal, glass, and electronic parts intact. The texture and color of the vinyl lend a sense of playfulness to each sculpture, but the underlying message is serious: U.S. consumers benefit from the labor of underpaid Mexicans.

The original VW Beetle was manufactured in its entirety in Puebla, Mexico for about thirty years, and the last one rolled off the assembly line in July, 2003. The VW plant not only created jobs for many Mexicans, it also provided them with personal and inexpensive transportation, truly a "people's car." Consequently, the Beetle has attained the status of a national symbol of mobility and liberation. For her Beetles, like her appliances, Cabrera fabricates the parts made in Mexico (in this case all of them) in brightly colored vinyl.

*Cleaning Supplies.* 2003, Mixed Media: vinyl, thread, metal. Dimensions Variable

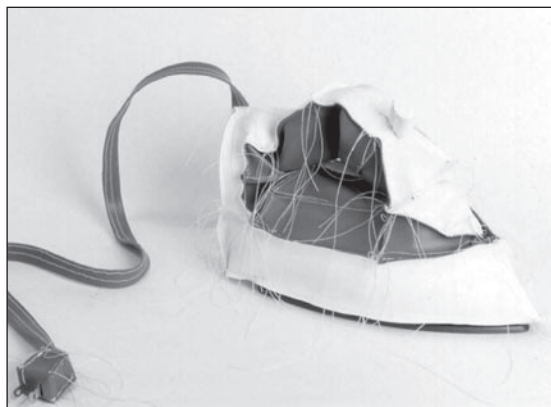
She also attaches some chrome accessories as effective accents. In this context, the primary material takes on new meaning because inexpensive automobile seats are often made of vinyl. The artist uses a fabric typically reserved for a car's interior to fashion its exterior elements, bringing the inside out and, in a sense, exposing private places. The fabric hangs from its frame, as if the structure is weak, its interior empty.

Cabrera's sculptures are simultaneously the successors of and the antitheses to Pop Art of the mid-1960s, especially Claes Oldenburg's (b. 1929) vinyl renditions of domestic machines. In form and materials, Cabrera's *Batter Mixer*, 2003, directly references Oldenburg's *Soft Dormeyer Mixer*, 1965. However, Oldenburg's collage of the same title and year obviates the differences between Cabrera's conceptual strategies and his own. The collage constructs a visual parallel between the mixer's pair of beaters and a pair of women's breasts. By anthropomorphizing and eroticizing the object, Oldenburg undermined its manufactured identity. Cabrera, on the other hand, highlights that identity by emphasizing the handmade quality of her "replica." She selects thread in a color that contrasts with that of the fabric, and deliberately leaves the ends of the thread hanging, as if forgotten. Thus, Cabrera draws attention to the stitching



and, by extension, to the too often disregarded importance of craftsmanship and design, both in the manufactured and the handmade. Oldenburg stuffed his mixer with kapok to make it ample, exaggerated, and humorous. In contrast, Cabrera's vinyl sags, less substantially than it does on her Beetle, due primarily to its smaller scale, but the association with empty interiors remains pertinent. Oldenburg's sculpture is oversized, reaching to 32 inches high. Cabrera's is actual size and incorporates select parts of the appliance that inspired it. Ironically, Oldenburg increased the scale of his pieces in 1962, when he walked by an auto showroom and was struck by the impressive manner in which the cars commanded the space. He wanted to fill a gallery space in the same way, so he enlarged his objects, from hamburgers to mixers to pieces of cake, to the size of automobiles. Cabrera springs from this precedent, but, with the Beetles, recreates a car to its original scale. Whereas Oldenburg's works toy with the surreal, Cabrera's sculptures are firmly rooted in today's realities.

If Cabrera's sculptures nod to Oldenburg, her vinyl quilts allude to Andy Warhol (1928-1987). By employing several of Warhol's aesthetic strategies, Cabrera seduces viewers into drawing parallels between her and her predecessor, and her art draws strength from this association. But Cabrera's ideas are antithetical to Warhol's. Warhol immortalized brand name products (Coke, Campbell's Soup, Brillo) and well-know people (Marilyn, Jackie, Elvis, Liz) by reproducing and repeating their image. Cabrera's icons are, instead, ubiquitous machines created by anonymous people. Warhol sanctioned stardom. Cabrera acknowledges unknown laborers. Warhol commented on how the temporary fame of a few products and people define our popu-



*Iron.* 2004, Mixed Media: vinyl, thread, metal and electrical wiring. Dimensions Variable

lar culture and public character. Cabrera observes that an underpaid and unacknowledged workforce creates the objects that characterize our domestic spaces and, by extension, our private lives. Warhol's aim was to achieve a machine-made look in art created by humans. Cabrera, on the other hand, remakes machine-made objects by hand. She also engages the format of a quilt and pays tribute to this popular form of folk art. Warhol demonstrated the omnipresence of mass media; Cabrera acknowledges the pervasiveness of mass production. In spite of the differences in the conceptual intentions of these two artists, they share a bright palette, an interest in serial forms, a critical eye towards consumer culture, and a need to comment on the sociological and economic conditions of the United States of their time.

Though Cabrera's palette is similar to Warhol's, its source is the exuberant colors of Mexico. The artist is currently engaged not only in creating vinyl Beetles, but also in painting her own version of Mexican retablos. Historical retablos are small paintings of Christian subjects, usually on tin-coated iron, and were produced and sold

in great number in the 19th century at pilgrimage sites along the Camino Real, or the royal road, that stretched from Mexico City, through Juarez and El Paso, to Santa Fe. Created primarily by untrained artists, they were intended to supplement home worship and spiritual and physical healing. In her version of retablos, Cabrera replaces the Christian icon with an image of an appliance, the new object of adoration in a culture that cannot seem to carry on without modern conveniences. The artist, once again, acknowledges the anonymous workers, both the painters of the retablos and the makers of the appliances. This is the intention that underlies her entire oeuvre: to venerate the anonymous Mexicans that make our lives in the U.S. more comfortable.

Kate Bonansinga  
 Director of the Stanlee and Gerald Rubin  
 Center for the Visual Arts  
 University of Texas at El Paso

MARGARITA CABRERA

*Born in Mexico*

*Resides in El Paso, TX*

#### EDUCATION

- 2001 MFA, Combined Media  
Hunter College of the City University of New York, NY
- 1997 BFA, Sculpture  
Hunter College of the City University of New York, NY  
Maryland Institute College of Art, Maryland

#### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2004 *Maquila*, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX
- 2003 *appliance: all tools must be kept ready for instant use*  
Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York, NY
- 2002 *Dynamic Peripheries*, Plan b Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Fe, NM
- 1999 *Cazanovia*, Cazanovia College, NY
- 1998 *RKS* (two-person show), Groningen, Holland

#### GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2004 *Domestic Odesy*, Curated by JoAnne Northrup, San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA  
*Borderlands*, El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, TX
- 2003-4 *Blanc*, Curated by Odalis Valdivieso, Mexican Institute of Culture, Washington D.C.; Design District, Miami FL
- 2003 *Piece of Work: Fiber and Multiples*, Dallas Center for Contemporary Art, Dallas, TX  
*CORPORAL: Contemporary Women Artists from Latin America*, Curated by Giannina Dwin Schmidt Gallery, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL  
*Critical Consumption*, Curated by Jonathan Allen, Rotunda Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2002-3 *The S-Files*, El Museo Del Barrio, New York, NY
- 2002 *It's a Glamorous Life*, The Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, TX  
*Mix Series Wall Power*, The Dallas Center for Contemporary Art, Dallas, TX

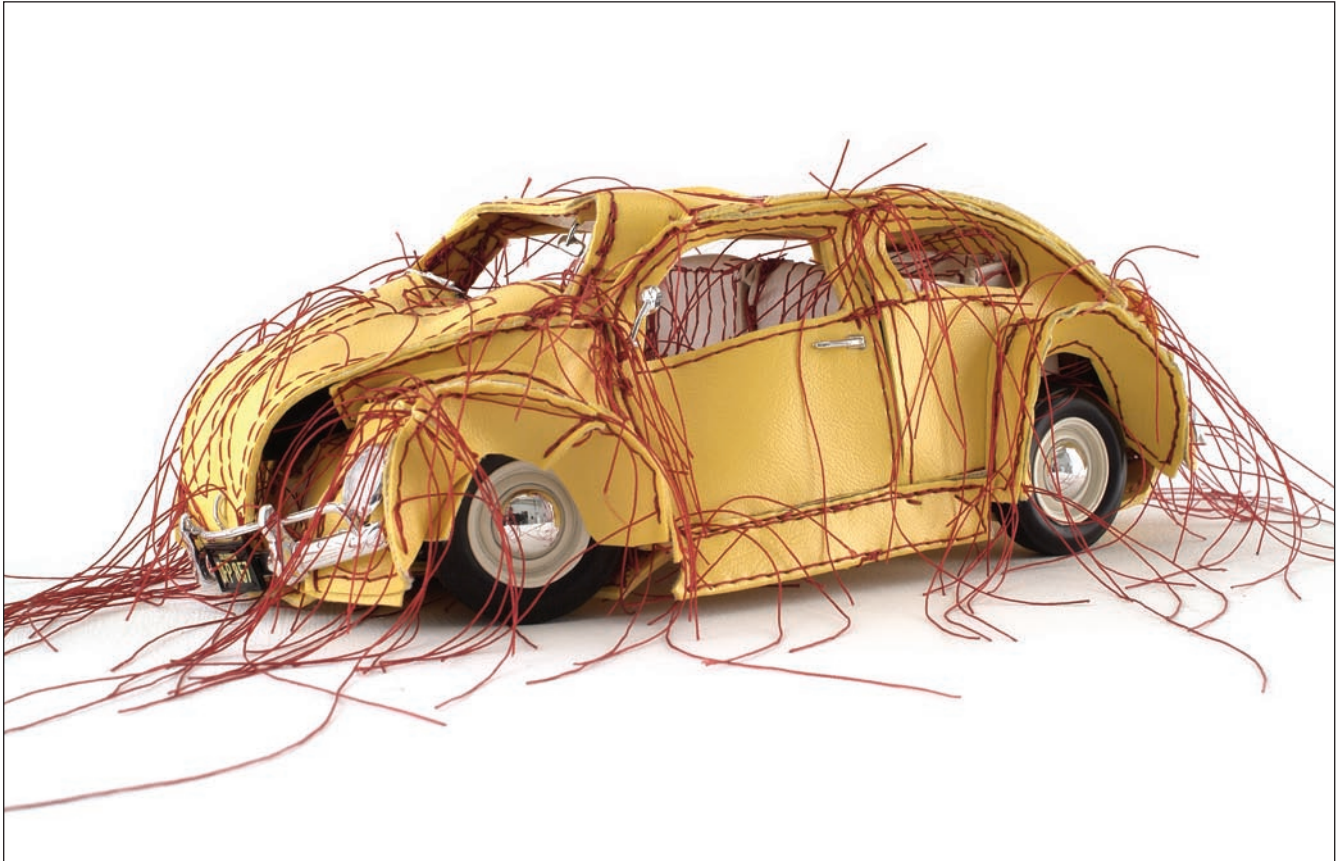
- 2001 *Two to Tango*, Times Square Gallery, NY
- 2000 *Paperveins Biennial 2000*, HERE Art, New York, NY  
*Weight as Real*, House Gallery, Long Island City, NY
- 1999 *War*, Artist Bulletin Board, Postmasters, New York, NY  
*Staff Show*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
- 1998 *Par Avion*, Hunter College, New York, NY
- 1997 *BFA Exhibition*, Hunter College, New York, NY  
*Young Artists Exhibition*, New World Art Center, New York, NY

#### RESIDENCIES

- Border Art Residency, La Union, NM  
International Exchange Residency, Academia of Minerva, Groningen, Holland

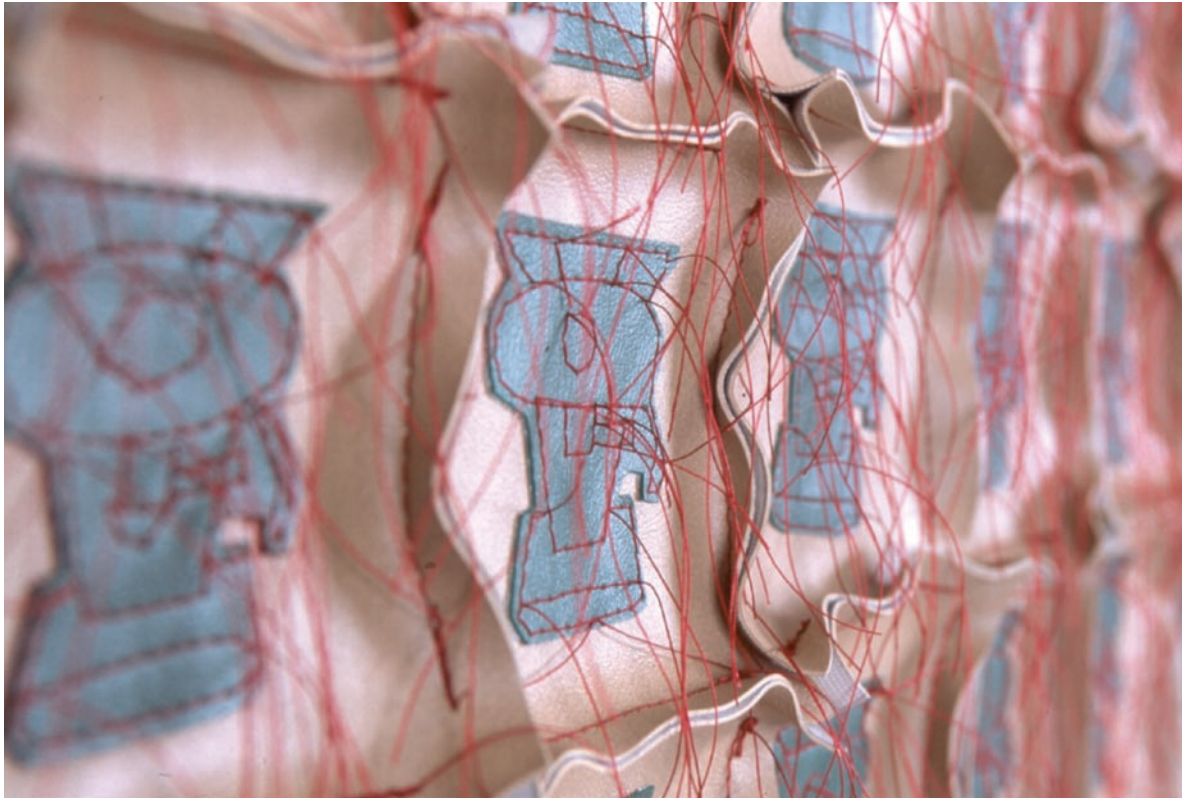
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Popeson, Pamela A. *El Museo's Bienal 2002*, NY Arts. 2002 *The S Files, the biennial of El Museo Del Barrio*, Absolutearts.  
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- Randall, Teri T., *Sculpture Elicits Look at Border Issues: Margarita Cabrera's art straddles the Rio Grande*, Pasatiempo, April 19-25.
- Rodriguez, Francesca. *North of the Border*, Santa Fe Reporter, April 17- 23.
- Rodriguez, Francesca. Interview with Margarita Cabrera, *Dynamic Peripheries*, The Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Fe, NM
- Margarita Cabrera: *Dynamic Peripheries*, THE, Magazine of the Arts, April.
- Shamly, Erica. *The Latina Experience Begets Unclassifiable Originality*, Artlies, Fall, Houston TX



This Panel: *VOCHO VW Beetle Sedan*. 2004, Mixed Media: vinyl, thread, and model parts. 3 1/4" x 9" x 4"

Cover Panel: *10 Objects*. 2001 - 2004, *Food Processor, Batter Mixer, Pink Blender, Waffle Maker, Black Toaster, Slow Cooker, Pink Sewing Machine, Coffee Maker M.I.M, "Francois Francois" Espresso Machine, Red Vacuum Cleaner*. Mixed Media: vinyl, thread, metal. Dimensions Variable



*"Francois Francois" Expresso Machine Quilt. 2004, Detail, Mixed Media: vinyl, thread. Dimensions Variable*

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Now celebrating its 26th 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 1,743 artists in 227 visual art exhibitions, 102 music, dance, and theater events, 12 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 275 work-shops 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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