

Jessica Halonen

SCATTERED



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

MAY 13 JUNE 19, 2004

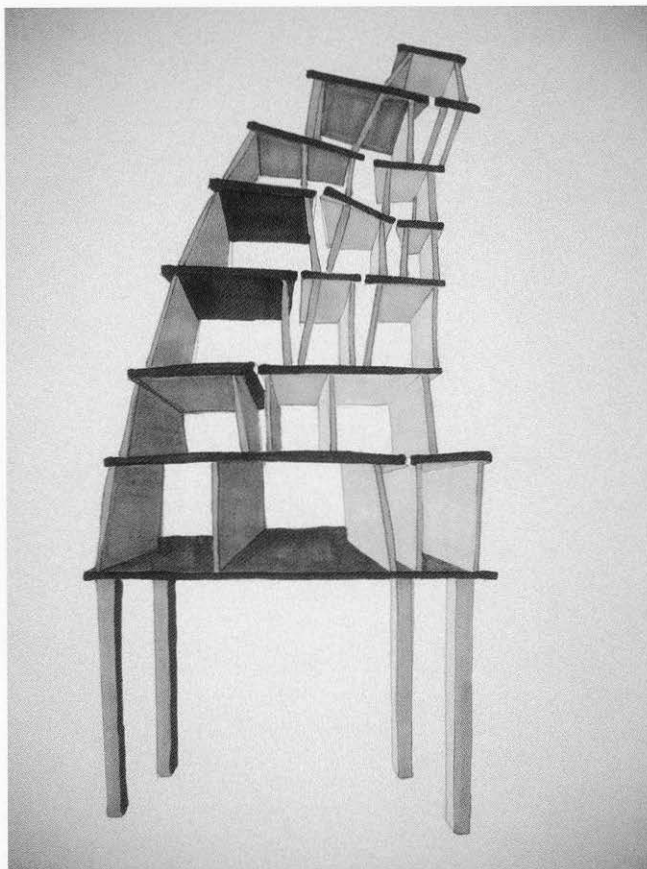
AUSTIN, TEXAS

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The most prominent volume to be found on Jessica Halonen's studio bookshelf is the monumental cloth-covered case of Josef Albers' *Interaction of Color* (1963), a work familiar to generations of artists and graphic designers. Albers, a teacher at the Bauhaus, envisioned an extensive set of folding sheets, serigraphed in various colors and pierced with die-cut geometric openings, which would allow the isolation and analysis of certain perceptual effects arising from color juxtapositions. As one disassembles and manipulates Albers' tall stack of pages, revealing a more or less engaging sequence of encounters between color and form, the exercise takes on the character of something dry, scientific, objective. Yet the real aim of the book, which its rigorously methodical organization tends to obscure, is in fact something much more right-brained than might at first be guessed: it constitutes an investigation into the roots of aesthetic emotion. Albers' treatise represents an ambitious attempt, typical of a certain stream of modernism, to standardize and rationalize the means of art, containing its basic techniques within the parameters of a pseudo-scientific system in order to bring visual creativity into congruence with the supposed demands of an impersonal and technological age. Like Mondrian, Malevich or even Kandinsky, Albers aspired to tame the legacy of Romanticism, to bind the sublime and unruly egotism of early modernism within a system of fixed rules, bringing one's own feelings and means of expression within the compass of absolute self-control while hypothetically (and paradoxically) opening up a route to universal relevance.

While operating on more postmodern premises, Halonen's own work shares this essential strategy of sublimating the nebulous subjectivity and biological contingency which form the primordial basis of our lived experience under the rule of visual order: simple geometries, the right angle, the grid, fixed sets of colors and spatial relationships. In her earlier work, color has been used symbolically to reference the fluctuating levels of sugar in her bloodstream—powder blue standing for a safe and optimum amount, pink and black for less desirable situations, and so on. Tracked and measured over hours and days, this mundane but critical information regulates the life of a diabetic with inflexible regularity. Out of necessity, but with characteristic good humor and whimsy, Halonen evidently made the decision to

make the best out of the tyrannical situation in which she found herself—turning the meticulous routines of metabolic self-analysis into a game of playful visual wit and formal elegance. The distinctive shapes and colors of Halonen's previous work clearly reference the synthetic and impersonal world of the clinic—pills and medications, hospital rooms, medical charts and diagrams—while her frequent use of cast sugar and chocolate as primary media at the same time suggest the sinister implications of sugary treats in a diabetic context. But just as importantly, her art has always called up shared memories of childhood, tapping into a broad nostalgia for such things as multicolored building blocks, wax crayons, novelty candies, exercise mats, picnics and playgrounds. And at an even more basic level—addressing those viewers necessarily unfamiliar with Halonen's essentially private medical symbolism—color and pattern now become the basis of a purely formal invention, and as in all good art offer us the simple and visceral pleasure of effective color harmonies and crisp formal interplay. Halonen's art, which might in theory come across as a regressive or therapeutic activity of merely personal significance, thus uses the affirmative power of its formal attraction as well as its ludic associations to reassert the encouraging notion that the presence of imposed order in our lives need not be coercive or disempowering, but can be strategized to take on the unexpected attributes of the comforting, the amusing and the aesthetic.



Wobble 2003. Marker on paper. 11 1/2" x 14 1/2"

One of Halonen's most recent works, *Still*, takes Albers' modernist strategies in a different direction. The installation

consists of around 150 small rectangles in various pastel colors but of uniform size—sheets of writing paper, it would appear, which have been scattered randomly across a given interior landscape. Here again, perhaps, is another of Halonen's homages to the mundane but evocative relics of a collective childhood: the lined paper on which we formed our first letters in kindergarten and on which we pretended to make class notes through high school and college, their present disarray (and complete absence of written text) now hinting nostalgically at puerile notions of permanence which have been erased by the passing years. Some of the sheets seem frozen in time, inexplicably caught in an instant of curling and flapping under the influence of a passing breeze. On closer inspection, it turns out that each leaf is in fact not a piece of paper at all: the back of each page reveals itself as a sheet of thin plywood with the grain left visible, while the ruled lines on the other side have been applied by hand—simulating the impersonal appearance of a machine-made product through an archaic and labor-intensive system of mark-making. This paradox is further referenced by the occasional presence of a hand-painted flower on a few of the sheets, again contrasting the irregular forms of nature with the uniform output of mass-production. The vulgar patterning of the plywood, on the other hand, again points us back to the world of childhood: vacation cottages, rumpus rooms and the like, everyday middle-class spaces with wall-to-wall carpeting, horrendous sofas, bar stools and cabinets of creepy collectibles that our aesthetically more mature selves would regard with that typically postmodern mixture of queasiness, ironic appreciation and



Bioscape. 2003 Acrylic on paper. 12" x 16"

genuine nostalgia that tends to color all our reflections on the places familiar to us before we acquired a self-protective veneer of good taste at art school or at college.

Most immediately, the metaphor of scattered sheets of paper represents the reconquest of artifice by the brute force of nature, showing up the semblance of uniformity and predictability which gives order to our lives as a provisional phenomenon, subject to the inevitable return to a chthonic baseline. For Americans, of course, this truism was most tragically manifested in recent times by the events of September 11, 2001, when the sudden annihilation of the archetypal gridded geometries of the Twin Towers was followed by the surreal and unexpectedly affecting spectacle of tons of sheets of paper blowing around the streets of lower Manhattan. The trope of discarded papers, each seeming to speak of individual human interests rendered void by the implacable course of events, serves as a

powerful *momento mori*—a metaphor for the transient nature of subjective experience. The pathetically fragile record of our lives is reduced to urban garbage, swept up to disappear forever into that unseen hypothetical landfill that we hope or fear must exist somewhere out there, containing all the discarded but half-remembered paper trails of our past lives in a moldering stasis—childhood drawings, old love letters, bills, taxes, everything. In this light, *Still* would seem to signal the arrival of a more tragic mode in Halonen's work. The certainty and order of Albers' carefully organized color sheets have been violently disrupted, and the viewer is left to survey the aftermath. The self-control so carefully established and documented in her earlier pieces has given way to uncertainty and pathos, as underlined by the pitiful presence of the few flowers which cling to the scattered sheets like the faded reminders of a summer gone by.

Yet to view *Still* simply as a lingering manifestation of post-9/11 despondency would be to underestimate this work's more subversive potential for creative strategizing in both art and life. Here the apparent chaos is, of course, completely artificial: Halonen has staged the triumph of entropy only to exorcise it. The chaos of blowing papers is manifestly a simulation, for Halonen determines the ostensibly artless placement of every sheet. The sense of control is no less apparent than in her more conventionally ordered works—here, the tiny canvases she has painted or stitched in linear or grid patterns, where the regular and repetitive application of formal geometries would seem to aspire to emulate the inhuman precision of the machine, but is carried out in the knowledge that slight imperfections of hand and brush will always reveal the human agency which is the real theme of the work. Again like Mondrian (but unlike Judd), Halonen does not hide behind an anonymous or vicarious process of mechanical fabrication, but takes personal responsibility for all aspects of the handicraft production—working the specific technique suggested by a given formal problem until it seems to be fully explored or played out, enacting an obsessive repetition of careful gestures, as in knitting or weaving, that is ultimately consoling and hence empowering. As suggested by the way that Halonen's lines so literally stitch things together in the face of chaos, her work represents an optimistic coming to terms with a lack of control—either in the form of unwanted order or even less desirable disorder. Her particular form of control is delicate, nuanced, hiding itself in the mundane reference and the innocuous pattern, yet no less real for all that. With a rare sense of grace and poetry, Jessica Halonen reasserts the right to create what we want out of our lives.

Christopher Pearson,
Assistant Professor, Department
of Art and Art History
Trinity University
San Antonio, TX

JESSICA HALONEN

Resides in San Antonio, TX.

EDUCATION

- 1999 M.F.A, Painting. Washington University, St. Louis, MO.
- 1994 B.A. Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, MI.
- 1991-1992 Universidad de Extremadura, Caceres, Spain

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2004 *Scattered*, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX
- 2003 *Still*, Trinity University, San Antonio, TX
- Picnic*, University of Texas San Antonio Satellite Space, San Antonio, TX
- 2000 *A Satisfying Arrangement*, Maxwell Freeman Contemporary Pictures, Houston, TX.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

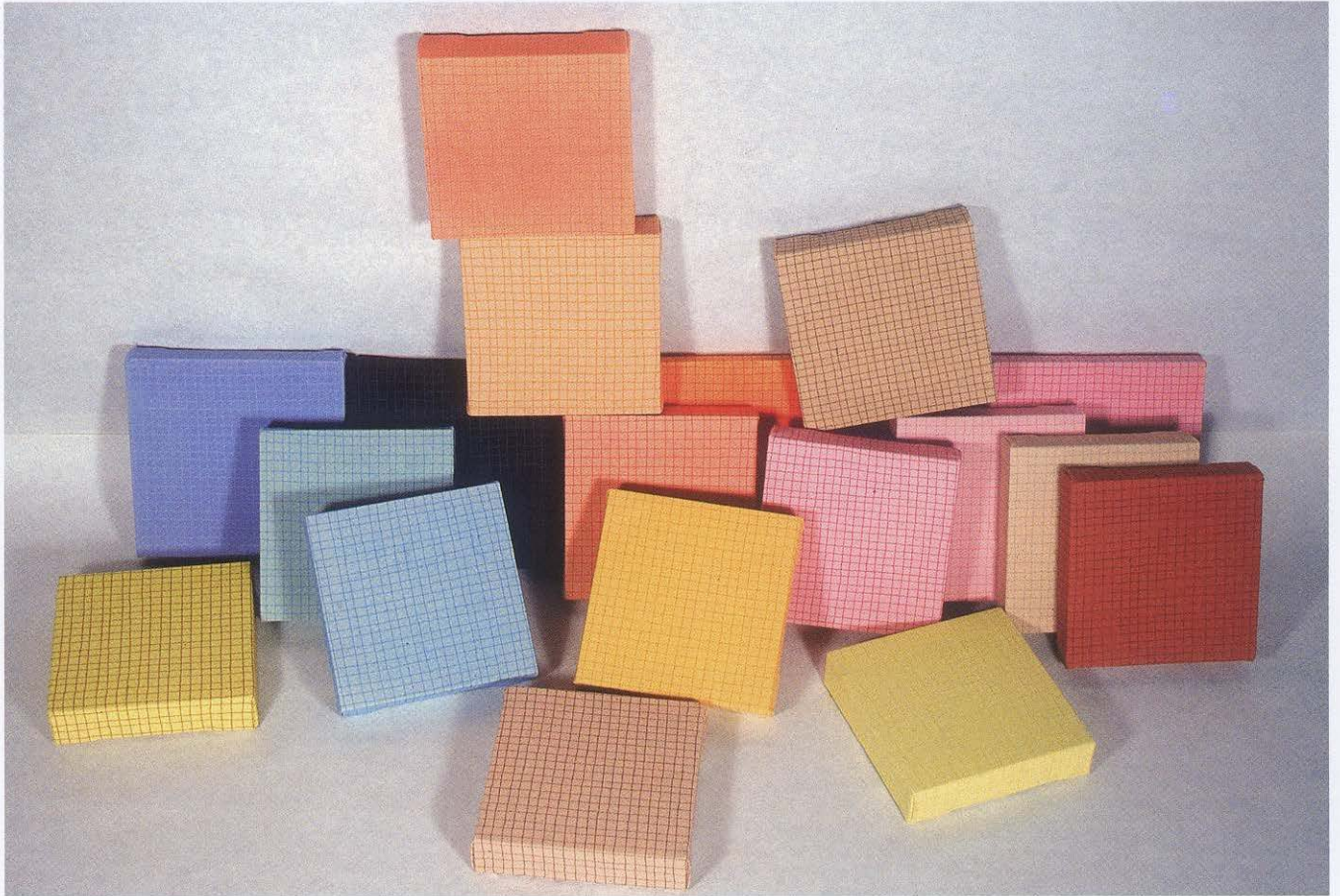
- 2004 *Twang*, Art Museum of Southeast Texas, Beaumont, TX
- 2002 *Building Blocks*, Dallas Center for Contemporary Art, Dallas, TX.
- 2001 *Floored*, University of Texas at Dallas & University of Dallas, TX.
- Colorfast*, Houston Community College, Houston, TX.
- Black Air*: New Video Work from Houston, Aurora Picture Show, Houston, TX
- Core Exhibition 2001*, Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, TX
- COLORFORMS*, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX
- Daze*, University of Texas, Dallas, TX
- 2000 *The Big Show*, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX
- Sculpture 2000*: Site/Works, Chenevert Green, Houston, TX.
- Core Exhibition 2000*, Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, TX.
- 1999 *Merged Realities*, Central Arts Coalition, Tucson, AZ

AWARDS

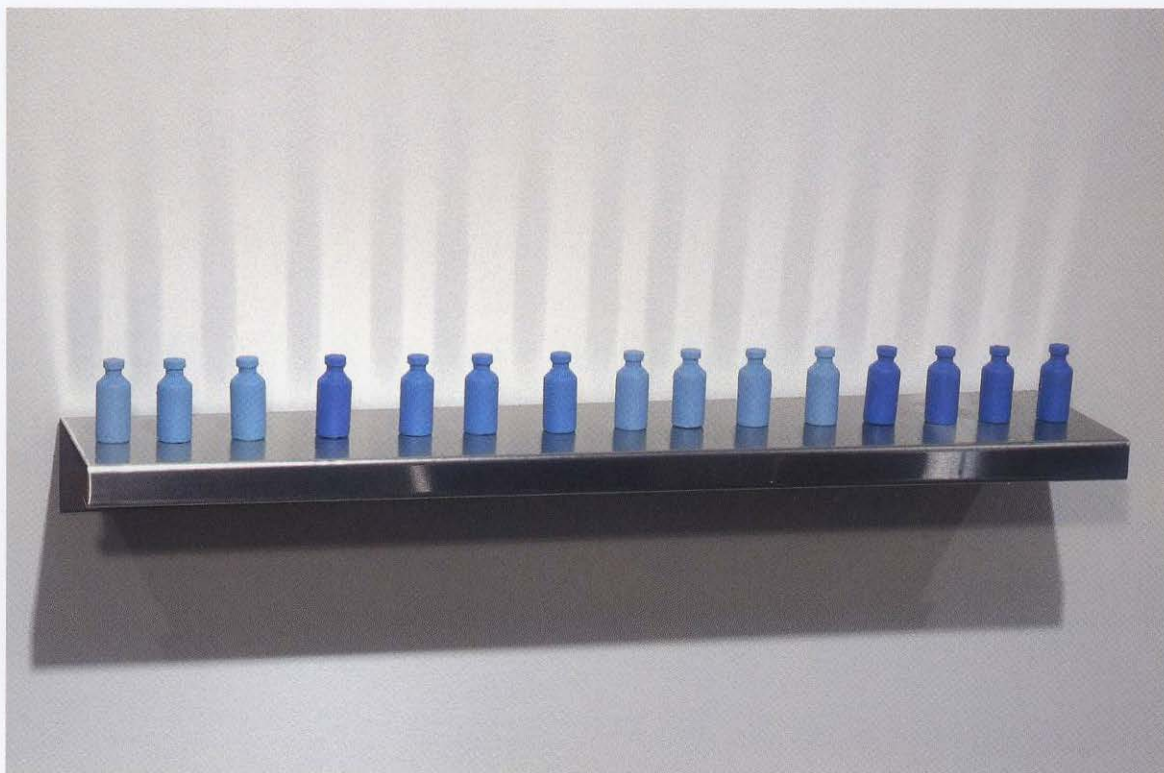
- 1999-2000 *Core Residency Program*, Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, TX.

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- Velliquette, Michael. "Jessica Halonen: Picnic." *Glass Tire: Texas Visual Arts Online*, Reviews. (www.glasstire.com)
- 2002 Tyson, Janet. "Building and Understanding." *Building Blocks*, Dallas Center for Contemporary Art, Dallas, TX (catalogue).
- 2001 Daniel, Mike. "Daze" at UT-Dallas. *The Dallas Morning News*, Jan 26, p. 48 (GUIDE).
- The Glassell School of Art, *Core 2001* (catalogue). Houston: Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts Houston.
- University of Texas at Dallas, *Floored* (catalogue). Dallas: University of Texas at Dallas.
- 2000 Colpitt, Francis. "Report from Houston: Space City Takes Off." *Art in America* (October), p. 69.
- Kalil, Susie. "2000 CORE." *Core 2000*, Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, TX, pp. 6-9 (catalogue).
- Marshall, Keith. "Coming Into Focus: Artistic Objectivity, Process and Influence." *Core 2000*, Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, TX. p. 56 (catalogue).



This Panel: *Not Quite Perfect*. 2004, Acrylic and thread on canvas. 9" x 9" each
Cover Panel: *Still*. 2003, Acrylic and ink on laminated veneer. 150 pieces, 8" x 11" each



Lilly C257H386N65O77S6

2003. Cast chocolate insulin bottles on 28" stainless steel shelves. Bottle; 2"

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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 1,734 artists in 224 visual art exhibitions, 102 music, dance, and theater events, 12 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 274 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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