

# LIZZY WETZEL

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*THE MEDICINE SHOW*



## WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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JUNE 5 - AUGUST 29, 2009

AUSTIN, TEXAS

LIZZY WETZEL

*The Medicine Show*

In the beginning, void. Total absence. Out of this nothing came One. No why or how. Bang. There it is. Logos. One thought. A word.

Out of One came Two. From Two came Three, and from the Three, Infinite Cosmos. More galaxies in our universe than stars in our galaxy, more universes beyond this one than galaxies in it.

What was the phrase that *shaped itself* from this nothing (no creator needed, separate from the creation)? The one Word that begat the symphonic infinite holographic encyclopedia of being, all of it reducible to that first utterance; which is still just *now*, and always?

Why, "Love," of course.

Well, apologies to you hard-nosed art worlders, but we can't talk about the artwork of Lizzy Wetzel and not confront the obvious. You can't *not* use the word "psychedelic." You can't *not* get a little cosmic for a minute. You have to use the "L-word." After all, she does.

In the ritual that initiated her exhibition at *Women & Their Work*, individuals were selected from the crowd by a male "gatekeeper" dressed in nothing more than a hawk-wing codpiece, ornately embellished plastic Halloween wolf mask, and white body paint. They were ushered by two more masked, dark-costumed functionaries into a black-light illumined bamboo dome. There Wetzel, in hooded white druid's dress, her stated intention to "massage" each person with amplified drum beats and chanting, whispered a healing mantra: "*I love you.*" Each participant was given an initiatory mark as they exited, an orange stripe painted down their forehead and nose.

Love chants, glitter hot glue, fluorescent shiny puff paint, black lights, animal parts: this work is nothing less than a challenge to every last vestige of high-art respectability, and really, the new academy.

By the 1990's, after the thorough decades-long "deconstruction" of any authoritative aesthetic or material criteria, art-world clout had finally come to more or less be measured by a perceived level of analytical critique; a

predominance of a sort of masculine, reductionist, passive-aggressive, hyper-intellectual gamesmanship and tactical maneuvering, symptomized by a lack of any sort of emotional/physical expansiveness, in favor of endless small tight turns in the brain. Feeling was allowed, as long as it was moderated by a wink/nudge irony, political agitation, or was observably negative (ennui, angst, self-loathing, disgust preferred, thank you.) Sincerity was really only to be believed if what was expressed was unpleasant.

The last few years have seen an overwhelming push-back against this sort of discrimination, toward glee, joy, casualness, collaboration, hilarity, friendship, care,entheogens, make-up, and generally having a good time in the art experience.

Wetzel is a member of a creative generation emerging naturally in this moment, reacting spontaneously with their cultural products and intrusions; I would argue she happens to do it better than most. The world clearly needs a new approach. Things are a mess. We are out of balance. We need some healing. A Medicine Show, even.

Art as medicine; of course. What else should it be?

What needs healing? God, what doesn't?

At root, we greatly suffer the loss of functional myth and meaning structures. Disconnection from Earth (physical and metaphysical), each other. War, within the self, and by extension, everything else.

We are sick, unto the possible death of our species. To the death of many others, that is already certain.

We don't have the luxury to be purely negative anymore, to wallow in the impulse to critique and intellectually unravel the mechanisms of our immanent demise. We need healing. We need vision.



*Masks (for Charon and The Lover)*, 2009.

Plastic wolf mask, opossum skull, leather, fur, acrylic paint, rat skull.

Art can act as medicine. Illness, of all sorts, is about separation; even just from the notion of health itself. We lose felt connection to the trunk of the sources of being, and find ourselves driven out into strangled branches and twigs. Lost in the weeds.

Indigenous people everywhere lived and developed slow, sustainable cultures over dozens of millennia, building myth-ritual-social structures in harmony with human and natural patterns, staying connected to the roots, not losing site of the obvious. They ate, grateful, sustained by the gifts of the flowering world, and in turn they were eaten, by the earth, by its gods.

Very few of us still live consciously connected in this way today, and we exist embedded in conditions that make it seemingly almost impossible to do, like soul-caught bugs in media amber.

Indigenous societies had certain technicians whose function it was to specialize in this sort of harmonizing: of the human with human, and of the human with the seen and unseen realms beyond the boundaries of flesh and conscious psyche. We now generally use the Turko-Mongolian term “shaman” to label these doctors of the sacred.

If religions, as most now generally understand them, arose with the development of settled agricultural civilizations 5,000 years ago, these free-agent visionary technicians, men and women, have been acting in much the same manner for closer to perhaps 100,000 years. This is not a heritage that we simply shrug off, or technologically “evolve” beyond. We are actually much less “advanced” than we think, functioning with essentially the same physio/psychological equipment as our great-to-the-1,000th grandmother.

Many “civilized” human societies are deeply alienated from their original holistic human cultural systems. The “why” of it is (perhaps) a long discussion. But what is clear is that in the development of what has come to be considered

contemporary art praxis, numbers of its significant recent practitioners have embraced the shamanic function quite consciously, engaged in what some consider an *archaic revival*, a revolution on par with the European Renaissance. Joseph Beuys would of course be foremost among these artists.

He is one of Wetzel’s art lineage ancestors. But like a reactionary shamanic art granddaughter, she’s painted his tools fluorescent pink and covered them with glitter and butterfly wings. Instead of aesthetically reclaiming the dark rusted iron and fat/felt of a resurrected Luftwaffe martyr, she re-positions her summer day-camp kids’ Hobby Lobby materials, and her DJ friend’s post-rave-culture club gear.

Wetzel is from the Southwestern US. She *feels* it too. She likes the desert; cacti and bones. Her material language emerges out of the dusty red soil and Hill Country caliche, and while she’s temporarily taken her alchemical laboratory to NYC, she doesn’t leave the region for long at a time. Certainly never in spirit.

The curtained, black-lit, sacred shrouded dome zone in the exhibition is balanced by a desert evocation outside it, symbolized by bright lights and a triangular installation of San Pedro cacti. The San Pedro is a source of many traditional medicines used for thousands of years in Americas north and south, famously including psychoactive mescaline alkaloids. Shamans know that plants have communicating spirits, and power beyond their mere chemical components – no different than you or I. She’s adorned these cacti with gold glitter and artificial painted blooms, and planted in hand-built clay chalices.

Circles symbolically relate to water, and triangles to fire. Balancing oppositions, male and female. On the walls are enshrined the ritual masks and garb worn at the opening. I pointed out to the artist that she’d intuitively arranged them as cross-adorned (4) pentagrams (5) inside triangles of light (3).

There is sacred geometry at work. Each whole number by nature has associated energies and archetypal references. I’ll leave interpretation at that. Find in them what you will. I hope viewers will be drawn to spend time with the installation, and feel their way toward the messages Wetzel embeds and embodies in it, having happily struggled to midwife it into the world, in laughter, in tears. It was hard work, physical and spiritual.

The final element is a trinity of horse-hides stretched on the walls, with mirrored rainbow star-bursts tied across their surfaces. As I spent time gazing at them they began to resemble gateways opening into deep space, like images shot from the Hubble space telescope of black holes and nebulae. I like that rather than try to pretend to depict something cosmic using high-tech or illusionary means, a horse hide, a few strands of plastic craft cord, some octagonal *feng shui* mirrors, some goopy paints, and the context do the trick, perhaps more evocatively.

The whole thing is actually surprisingly discreet. Too often lately this kind of approach can feel like a big adolescent neon dump pile; trying too hard with the more-is-more, lamely forcing the glam tacky anti-art factor. Wetzel takes some lessons from the desert, from the indigenous, and maybe Don Judd and Dan Flavin. There’s a surprising kind of sophistication, tastefulness believe it or not, that you can’t really pretend. I call it “visual intelligence.”

The important thing is to know that it’s possible to generate these kinds of crazy/sane visions, intrusions, happenings, *detournement*, these kind of ancient/futuristic lineages and communities today. Wetzel’s effort is a *challenge* to you to create a medicine show in your own world.

And by the way: she loves you.

Titus O’Brien  
Chicago-based artist and writer



*Cloak and Wings*, 2009.

Burlap, felted wool, red tail hawk wings, thread, fluorescent lights, neon spray paint

## LIZZY WETZEL

*Born in Austin, TX 1980. Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY and Dallas, TX.*

### EDUCATION

2003 BFA, School of Visual Art, University of North Texas,  
Denton, TX

### UPCOMING

2009 Central Track Artist in Residence, Dallas, TX

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2009 The Medicine Show, *Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2009 More Than This, CADD Art Lab, Dallas, TX

2008 Secret Museum of Mankind (performance and installation  
collaboration with Donna Huanca & Owleyes),  
*Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX

2007 Agent on the Road, Art Palace, Austin, TX  
The Audience is Listening, Road Agent Gallery, Dallas, TX  
Cherry Picked, Survey of Texas Artists and Art,  
Wichita Falls Museum of Art, Wichita Falls, TX

2006 I Can Only Give You Everything, Road Agent Gallery,  
Dallas, TX

2005 Artists' Peripherals, Salon Mijangos, San Antonio, TX  
Home and Garden, FotoFest, Houston, TX

2004 Hatch, 500X Gallery, Dallas, TX  
Expo 2004, 500X Gallery, Dallas, TX

2003 Not Without My Girdle, Crooked Space, Denton, TX

The 40th Hour Show, Fort Worth Community Arts Center,  
Fort Worth, TX

Bent, Photographs Do Not Bend Gallery, Dallas, TX

The 39 Hour Show, Fort Worth Community Arts Center,  
Fort Worth, TX

43rd Annual Voertman's Student Competition,  
University of North Texas Art Gallery, Denton, TX

2002 Senior Exhibition, Cora Stafford Gallery, Denton, TX

2001 41st Annual Voertman's Student Competition,  
University of North Texas Art Gallery, Denton, TX

### AWARDS

2007 Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant, Shortlist Nominee  
Kimbrough Fund Award, Dallas Museum of Art

2004 Juror's Award, Expo2004

2003 Juror's Award, Annual Voertman's Student Competition

2002 Juror's Award, Union Student Competition

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

2008 Charissa Terranova, "Creative Spaces," Dallas Morning  
News, Guide Live, March 9, 2008, p.1.

2007 Salvador Castillo, The Austin Chronicle, AC Pick,  
June 1, 2007, p.82.

2004 Janet Kutner, art critic, "New Bohemians,"  
Dallas Morning News, Arts Sunday, June 13, 2004, p.1.

Jackie Bolin, "A Trendy Teacher," Dallas Morning News,  
Texas Living, Stylemakers, July 18, 2004, p. 2.

2003 A.M. Helber, "Photos Already Bent, The Kids Are Alright,"  
Dallas Observer, July 18, 2003, p.49.





Above:

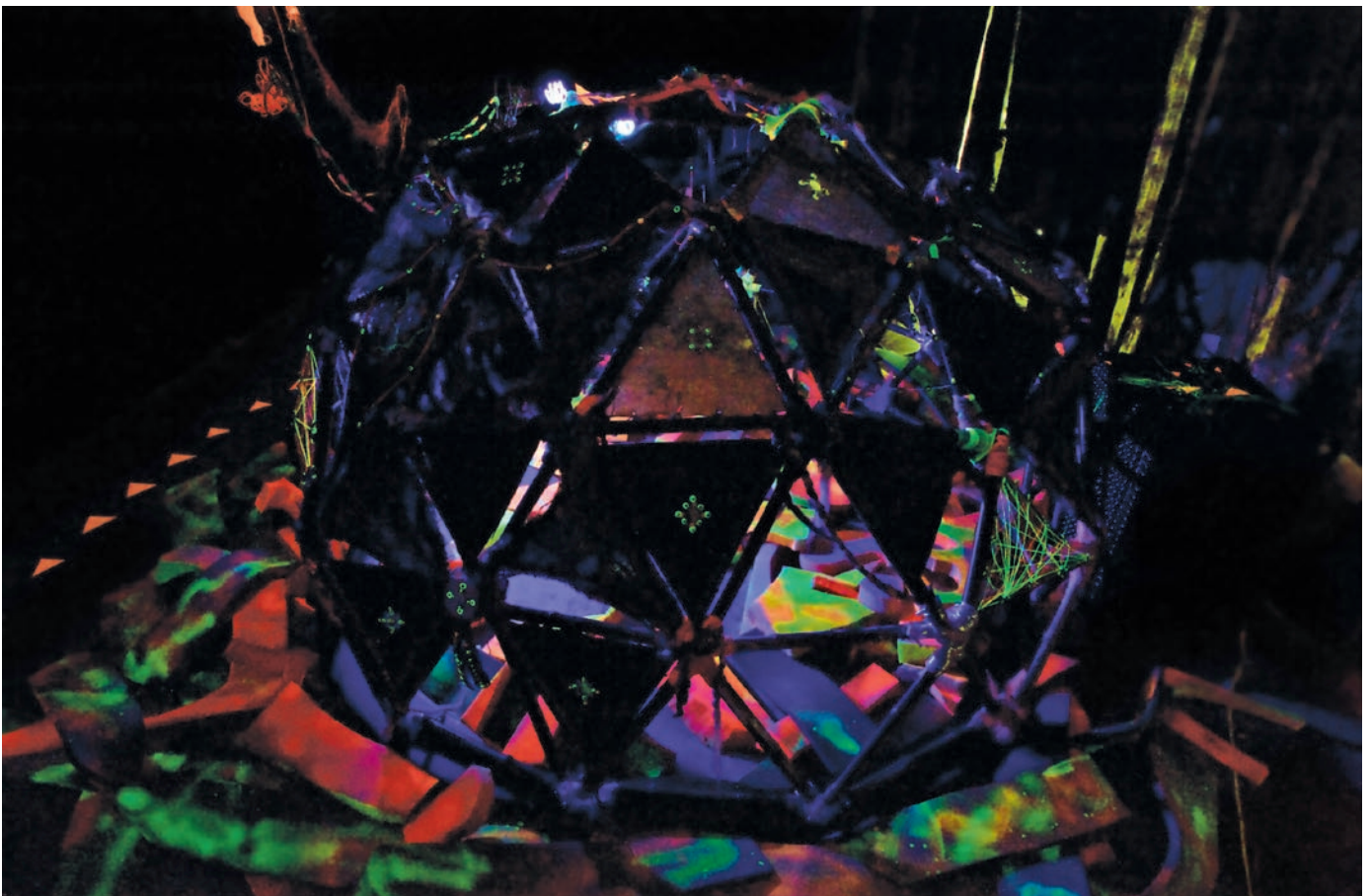
*Blinding White Desert*, 2009. Installation view.

Horse hides, mirrors, leather, plastic lanyard, acrylic paint,  
San Pedro cactus, terra cotta, rock salt, glitter.

Cover Panel:

*Revival Tent*, 2009. Installation view.

Found fabric, paper, cardboard, wool, beeswax, felt, beaver teeth, plastic eyes,  
acrylic paint, San Pedro cactus, terra cotta, rock salt glitter.



*in The Spiral of Black Black Water, 2009. Drum Dome.*  
Black bamboo, handmade wool felt, rawhide, found fabric, paper, string, foam, acrylic paint, UV lights.

## Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 31st anniversary. Presenting 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 1,838 artists in 259 visual art exhibitions, 111 music, dance, and theater events, 13 film festivals, 21 literary readings, and 384 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on 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 1,800 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 and  
their work

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