

Gahlberg Gallery
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Elana Herzog: *Wallscape*

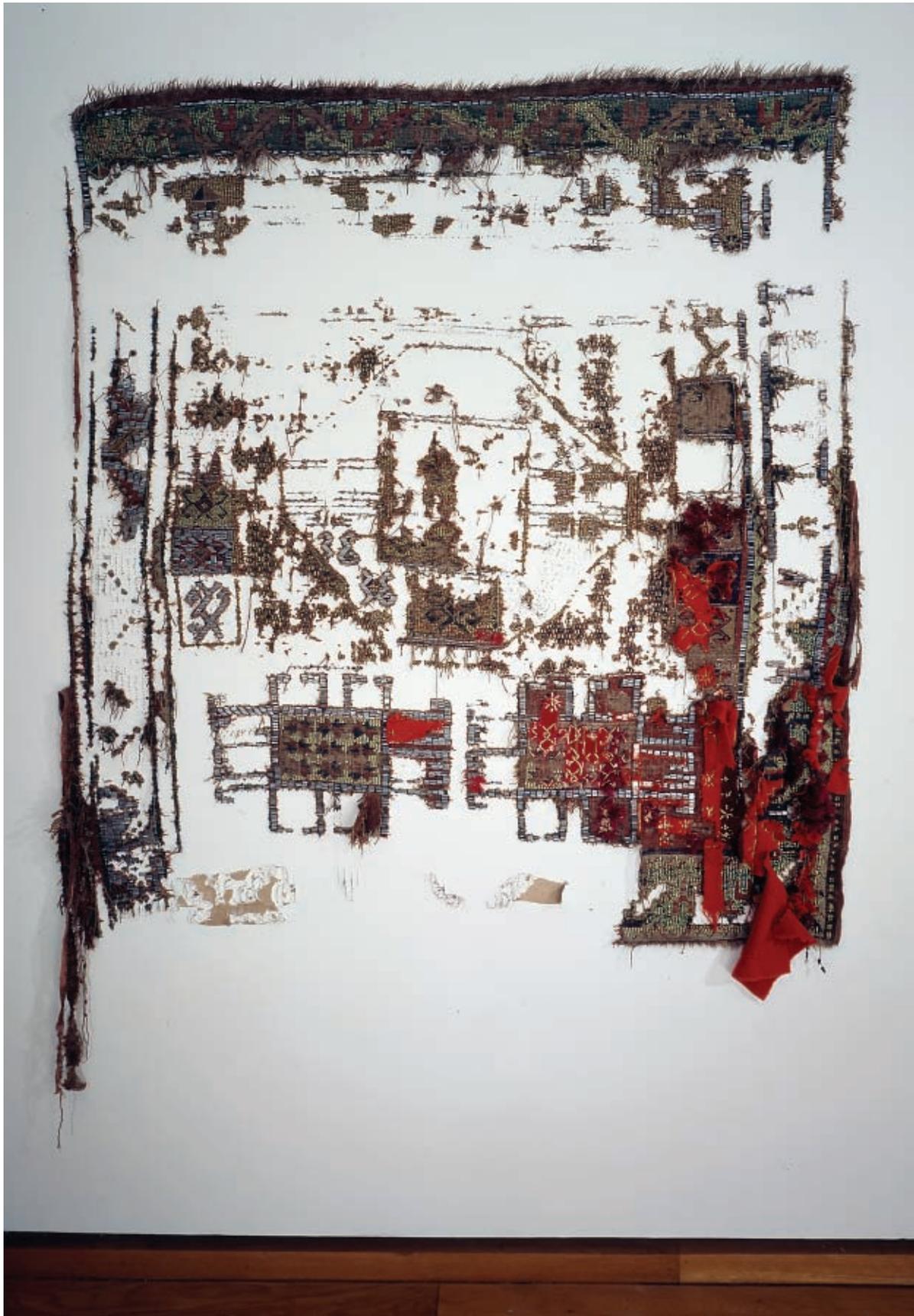


Photo by Frank DiMeo

The Aftermath of Warp and Weft

There's something mysterious about Elana Herzog's fabric works, embedded as they are, seamlessly within the gallery walls. Are they the remnants of some violent event that occurred in the room overnight, before we arrived?

Let's consider, for a moment, other forms of art that appear to us as magically, virtuosically, in-situ — Renaissance frescoes, for instance, painted quickly and expertly into wet plaster, or urban murals that appear out of nowhere, covered with portraits or Wild Style graffiti. We, as viewers, know we're expected to marvel in their construction, their poetic authorship, at how they seem to transcend the plain, resolute, impassivity of the architecture. But Herzog's fabrics have struck some sort of quiet, Faustian bargain with their support. The walls of the gallery are no longer simple, reassuring structures; and the otherwise pleasant, domestic fabrics impaled upon them are no longer a source of comfort.

In their construction and underlying structure, the pieces we see here are honest — almost to a fault. Herzog first begins with "found" fabrics she obtains either from yard sales, the Salvation Army, or simply from friends. She likes it when the fabrics appear used, vintage. "It's something about my visceral associations with tacky Americana, my feelings of both attraction and repulsion," the artist says. Nubby textures are good, monochromes even better: peach, rosy pink, baby blue, antique white. Cotton chenilles and brocades rife with raised surface patterns are favorites. Says Herzog, "I adopt that pattern. Whatever it is, I use it. I let the fabric determine the composition." And indeed, there are a host of indigenous patterns to choose from: Decorative borders rife with cheap, paisley-esque curls, geometric patterns of repeating lines, basic florals, or just the simple back-and-forth of the cloth's warp and weft.

Herzog initially sets upon her fabrics with an industrial, air-powered staple gun, using the staples (sometimes shot out methodically, sometimes machine gun style) to affix it to the structure. But soon the staples become a tool for drawing in space. They appear in neat, silvery rows, or long, undulating curves. They follow a dainty, vegetal pattern along a border, only to scatter like buckshot beyond it and across the wall. Staples are everywhere. And when they are no longer just tracers of an original pattern, but rather something more akin to the skeleton of a drawing, Herzog starts to tear things away. She pulls long threads and lets them hang, she excises bits of woolen fabric guts and leaves only fluff, she carefully, patiently, surgically removes just enough of what she started with until the negative space sings out through the positive, and the "positive" message of domestic complacency embedded in the fabric is neutralized, appropriated into something that Herzog might call her own.

When is a carpet no longer a carpet? In a large solo show of Herzog's in 2005, carpets were called upon to comment, not only on the ills of society (war, poverty, unfair labor practices), but on the traditional function of the museum in which they were exhibited as a whole. Nearly three floors of Cornell University's Herbert F. Johnson Museum, home to a varied and well-respected collection of fine and decorative arts (spanning centuries ancient and modern) were put at Herzog's disposal. There she was able to not only construct new work, but to site little, disruptive bits of Herzog-ish business throughout the building. Several carpets — taken from her own family's home in Manhattan, and

Untitled, 2004, (installation view), polyester chenille bedspread, staples, drywall, The Sculpture Center, Long Island City, NY



others obtained through various sources, including generous donors, garbage heaps, e-bay and wholesale clubs — were put to the task. They hung conspicuously over balconies and peeked into the gift shop. They were layered in off-kilter stacks on the floor. Woolen, cotton and synthetic carpet fluff (golden yellows, rich maroons) could be found in the most unlikely places, dumped in a pile beneath one painting, “Portrait of Margaret Hughes” by Sir Peter Lely, Dutch, 1618, or unabashedly exhibited in plastic vitrines normally reserved for sculpture, such as the one placed next to “Education of the Virgin,” ca. 1650, unidentified artist, Italian, 17th Century, Italian Baroque.

Many of the carpets were affixed, as per usual, to the wall, and they were some of Herzog’s most minimal, and successful, fabric studies to date. The staples traced patterns of rows of submachine guns and helicopters in an Afghan war rug, for instance. One could also imagine railroad tracks, burned out cities in aerial view, even puffs of napalm appearing in the residue of fluff and drywall. Each was like a show in itself, densely packed with emotion, despite its skeletal, and at times minimal form. “It’s an after-image,” says Herzog, “something that’s been burned into your retina.” The title of the show: “Civilization and its Discontents.”

There’s a beauty in using a reductive, subtractive method like Herzog’s. It shows us that every object in the world has, somewhere, somehow, a deeper meaning embedded within it. It also makes us aware of just how hidden that object’s meaning must remain — if we’re to go on using it with impunity. Middle-class, mass-produced objects fill our homes with unheeded visual noise every day; and every night, blankets,



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Civilization and its Discontents, 2005,
(installation view), vitrine containing wool
carpet residue, Herbert F. Johnson
Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

Above:
Untitled, 2004, (installation view),
polyester chenille bedspread, staples,
drywall, The Sculpture Center, Long
Island City, NY

Untitled, 2004, (installation view),
polyester chenille bedspread, staples,
drywall, The Sculpture Center, Long
Island City, NY

(photos by Hermann Feldhaus)

whose patterns we can feel with our bodies as we sleep, even if we can’t see them with our eyes, are run off foreign looms in sweatshops by the thousands. If one or two of those bedspreads were to, say, fall apart, in a gallery, at night, in the name of art, would they make a sound? Not likely. But that won’t keep Elana Herzog from nailing them, assiduously, defiantly, to the wall.

Sarah Schmerler is an art critic based in Brooklyn and teaches writing at the New School in New York. She has contributed to such publications as Time Out New York, The New York Times, ArtNews and Art in America.



Untitled, 2004, (installation view), polyester chenille bedspread, staples, drywall, The Sculpture Center, Long Island City, NY, (Photo by Frank DiMeo)

Elana Herzog lives and works in New York City. She has had solo and two-person exhibitions at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University, in Ithaca, NY, PPOW Gallery, and GAGA, in New York City, the Usdan Gallery, Bennington College, Bennington, VT. and DiverseWorks in Houston, TX, the Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT. Her work has been internationally exhibited at the Reykjavik Art Museum, Reykjavik, Iceland, the Gothenberg Konsthalle, Gothenberg, Sweden, and the 1994 Chilean Biennale, Valparaiso, Chile. It has been included in shows at The Brooklyn Museum, at The Sculpture Center in Long Island City, NY, at the Anderson Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University. Herzog's work is currently on view in Riverside Park, in Manhattan, as part of "Studio in the Park" curated by Karin Bravin. She is preparing for an upcoming solo show at the Aldrich Museum in Ridgefield, CT. Herzog is the recipient of the 1999 NYFA Fellowship, 1999 Joan Mitchell Award, the 2003 Lambert Fund Fellowship and the 2004 Lillian Elliot Award.

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Thursday, Aug. 31, to
Saturday, Oct. 7, 2006

The Gahlberg Gallery/McAninch Arts Center would like to thank the writer, Sarah Schmerler, and the artist, Elana Herzog, for their generous assistance and creativity in developing this publication.

Barbara Wiesen

Director and Curator

Front Cover:

Untitled, 2006, (detail), cotton chenille bedspread with peacock, staples, drywall



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