

PICTURESQUE EVACUATION PLOY

FEATURING NEW WORK BY LIZ MILLER



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Picturesque Evacuation Ploy
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Forward: Emily Smith
Design: Nate Phelps
Photography: Shannon Di
Interview: Janie Askew and Derrin Compton

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CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER

Redux Contemporary Art Center
136 St. Philips Street
Charleston, SC 29403
www.reduxstudios.org



I had the pleasure of working with Liz Miller this past summer when she installed her exhibition *Illusive Insurgency* at 1708 Gallery in Richmond, Virginia. Miller transformed 1708 into a dense jungle of lush pink, bright red and burnt gold hand-cut felt forms. At first arranged in an orderly fashion, Miller's compositions devolved into a tangled cascade as they moved along the gallery walls.

To our audience, the forms elicited multiple readings, from homemade Valentines to hanging carcasses. In reality, Miller's forms referenced guns, an interest that stemmed from earlier explorations of invasive plant species and the idea that a plant, something associated with beauty, could also be a destructive force. Inspired by the related but reversed question of whether destructive forces might than possess beauty, Miller began to research weaponry, focusing particularly on the intricate, hand-wrought scrollwork of antique guns.

For 1708, Miller focused primarily on the abstract patterns that had been pulled from gun designs. That they elicited such a range of interpretations underscored the ambiguity implicit in the initial premise that if beautiful things can be dangerous, so than can dangerous things be beautiful, and allowed these designs to exist on their own right, divorced from function.

One of the first things that struck me about Miller's installation at Redux was the prominence and specificity of the gun imagery, from the larger and more clearly articulated gun imagery to starburst forms of orange paint on the wall and floor and felt pieces in blue and red that read like comic-book gun bursts. In addition, Miller's palette of

browns and reds (maroon, brick red) suggested the physical material of guns as well as blood.

Miller appeared to be closing the distance between form and content that marked *Illusive Insurgency*. Why push the imagery in this direction? The ambiguity of not immediately knowing that the forms were guns, or designs pulled from guns, spoke to the complexity of Miller's initial question - if beautiful things can be dangerous, can dangerous things be beautiful. Was she also closing the distance between form and function and offering more of a commentary on her selected content?

In some sense the exaggerated scale and hand-rendered aesthetic rendered null any implications of violence, or at least distanced them. In turn the uniformity of her compositions, which recall an interest in the aesthetics and order of military formations, fell away into a jumbled mass of felt as if to imply a breakdown.

But Miller is not offering a morality lesson. Instead, as she mentions in the interview included in this catalogue, she is interested in ideas of perception, in how we experience and understand things. Miller addresses multiple modes of perception. With the installation at 1708, one asked what am I looking at? There is also often the question: what is the material? There is a sense of not knowing where one form starts and the other begins. And there is the perception of being enveloped by the work, surrounded by it, that is so crucial to Miller's installation.

There are also the subtle ways in which Miller underscores these more immediate

levels of perception, particularly her use of mirror imagery that allows her to duplicate, multiple and mutate her forms. This Rorschach-ian mirroring remarks upon ways in which one mind differs (or is exactly the same) from the next in its reading of forms.

With Miller's work, we are meant to be a little unsettled. The lushness and sensuality of the felt forms that gracefully suspend from walls and ceilings are disquieting. They literally overwhelm through their physicality and their arrangement in space. We are meant to be somewhat taken aback as our eyes (and perceptions) settle and we recognize Miller's imagery.

In the end, I believe that Miller is commenting on one's inability to fully know any one thing, that there is always another side, another meaning, another understanding, whether in regards to an abstract form or as loaded a subject as guns. Miller is not passing judgment but is letting us, the viewer, in on her thought processes and her consideration of her own attraction to objects and images with violent associations. That the world is not black and white is nothing new and Miller's bright and varied palette is a very straightforward metaphor of this fact. But such ambiguity also implies a richness and depth in the experience of one's life and Miller's dense layers of associations and meanings demonstrates this fullness of being.

– Emily Smith
Executive Director, 1708 Gallery Inc.





Janie Askew, Redux's Executive Director and Derrin Compton, sat down with Liz Miller to discuss her work and career as an artist and, more specifically, her exhibition at Redux, "Picturesque Evacuation Ploy."

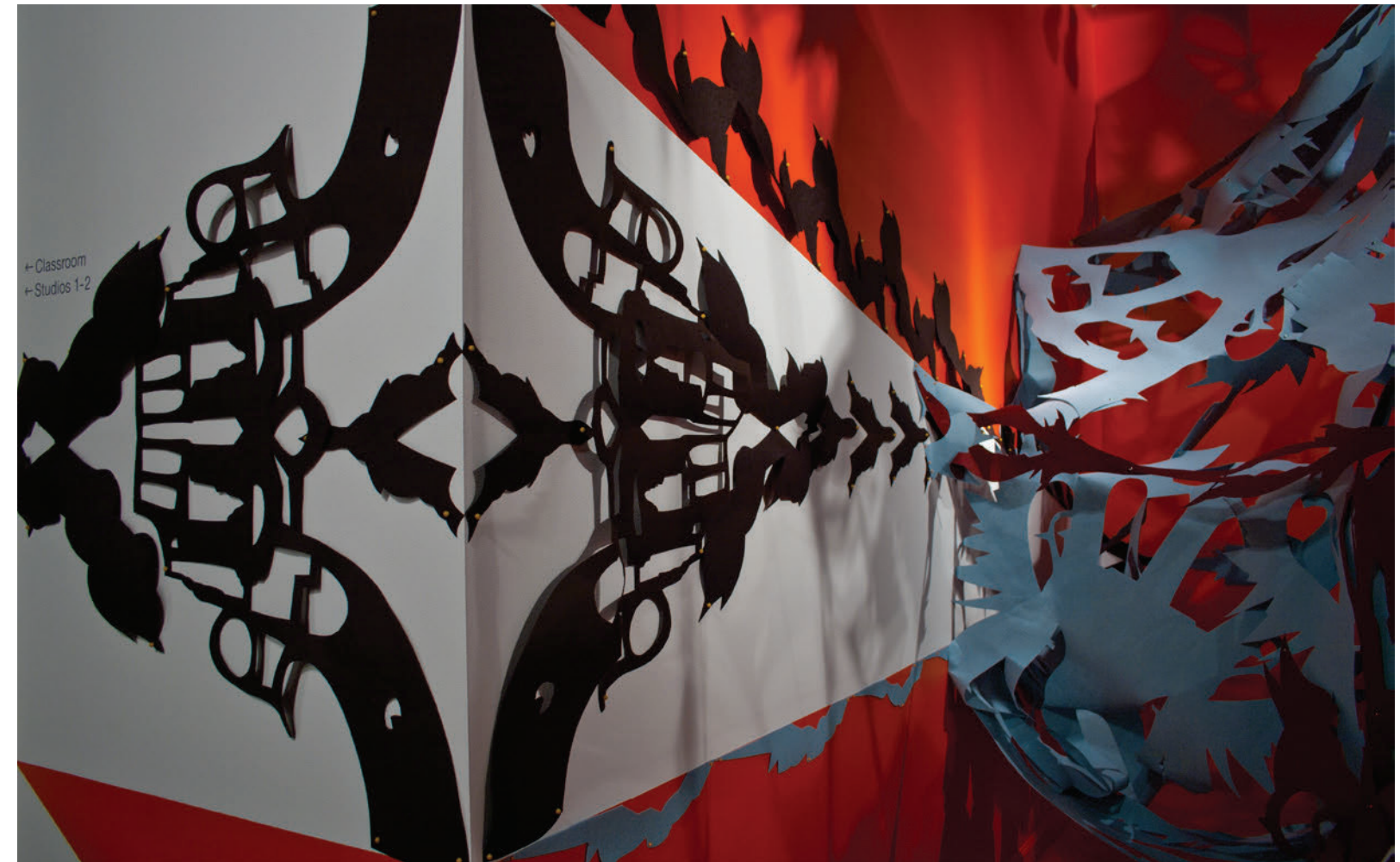
Liz, your recent installation, "Picturesque Evacuation Ploy," features colorful forms made of cut felt suspended from ceilings and extending from walls, completely transforming Redux's gallery. Can you tell me about the work's title and the general meaning behind the piece?

My recent work unites weapon-related imagery with elements of pattern, ornament, and decoration. I am interested in both the beautiful and sinister aspects of weapons. Aesthetically, swords, guns, and knives are gorgeous. Their functionality contradicts this. The elegant silhouette of weapons and their intricately embellished metalwork make them ready vehicles for exploring abstract relationships between decoration and devastation.

Picturesque Evacuation Ploy, like many of my installations, explores the duplicitous

nature of images, and how easily viewers' perceptions can be manipulated. Through simple, non-technical methods such as symmetry, folding, and rolling, synthetic forms become organic, benign forms become aggressive, and recognizable imagery is camouflaged.

In addition to specific shapes, the choreography of the work echoes the regimented configurations of battle and confrontation, particularly marches and firing squads. Upon entering the work, the viewer is forced to walk past a row of weapon-like felt forms that are pointing



directly at them. There is some absurdity at work, since the weapons are constructed of soft, pliable, tactile felt. And again, even in this militant lineup, there is a purposeful play between aggression and beauty, and between synthetic and natural forms and movements.

The title is meant to evoke some of those ideas, nudging viewers' readings of the work a bit without being overly didactic or assertive. I use both language and images within the broad parameters of abstraction: I don't want the title to dictate the work in any literal way, or vice versa.

Your background is in Drawing and Painting, and you also teach drawing and foundations at Minnesota State University. How did you make the transition from drawing to creating site-specific installations?

I never set out to be an installation artist. My arrival at this place has been a slow, gradual progression. Even as an undergraduate, I was fascinated by non-art materials and collage. I slowly transitioned from painting to collage-based works on paper. Eventually, the materials I was using (felt, foam, vinyl, flexible

plastics) migrated out into my studio in a series of architecture-dependent experiments. Those experiments later grew into full-fledged works in exhibition spaces.

The first time I created a site-specific work in 2004, I experienced a sense of complete exhilaration. I knew immediately that I would follow this path as far as it could take me. I loved the way the work could infiltrate a space, enveloping the viewer or changing their experience and movement through the space. I also loved the performative and impro-



visational part of the process. There is a huge on-site problem-solving component, a pressure to make things happen in a given time period. I have a love/hate relationship with that aspect of my practice, but I think I mostly find it challenging in a rewarding way.

I consider my recent work equal parts drawing, painting, and sculpture. I deal with flat planes, three-dimensionality, and all areas between. I “draw” with a scissors. So, while some people are surprised that my background is in painting/drawing and that I teach drawing, I think it makes perfect sense.

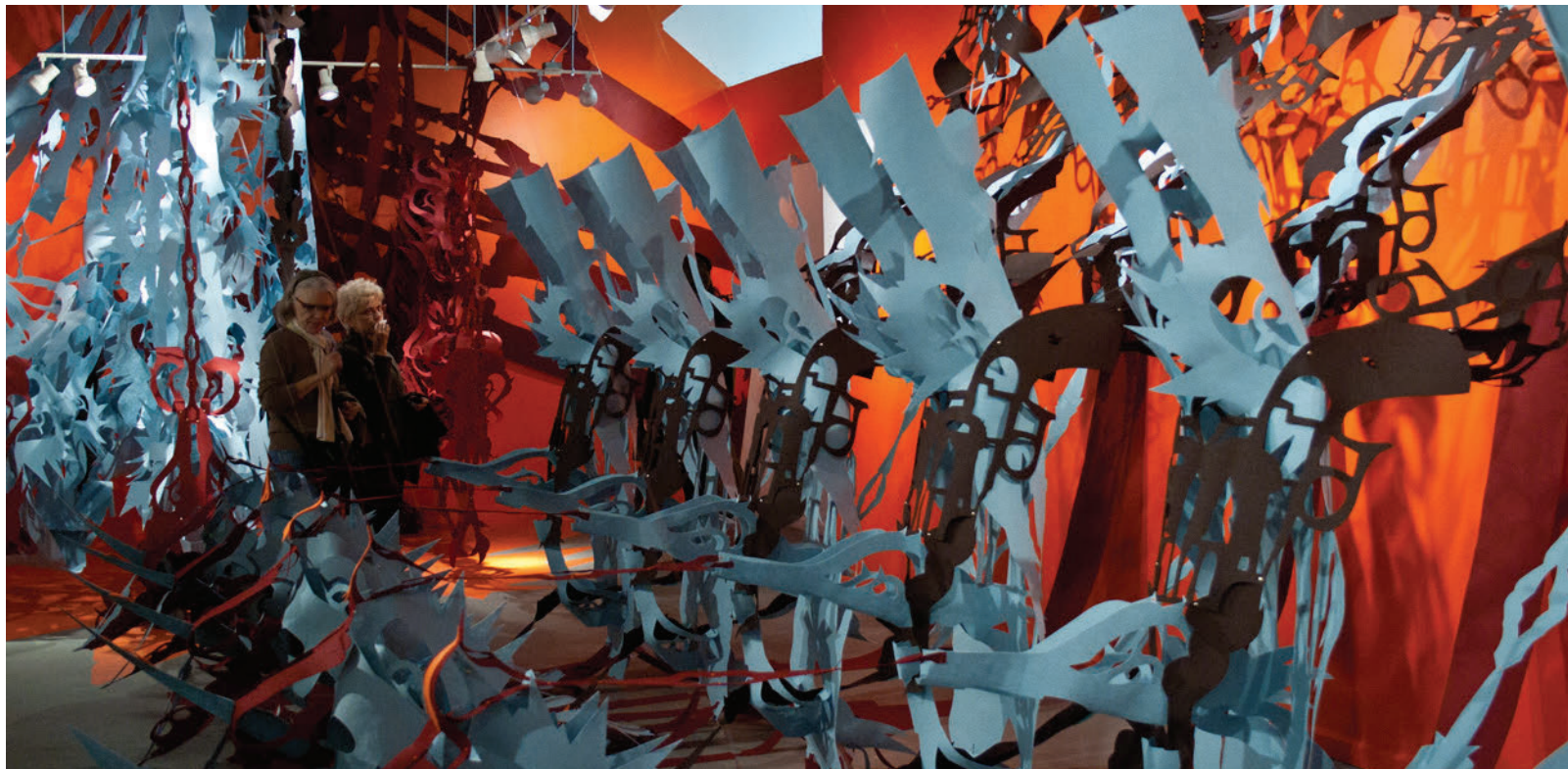
Your transformation of felt, a two-dimensional material, into large three-dimensional structure that fill the gallery was fascinating to watch. Do you visualize the finished piece beforehand or is it a spontaneous process that gradually takes shape as you create it?

My work involves both precise planning and improvisation on-site. When I first started creating site-specific installations, I planned, and planned, and planned. There was no room for spontaneity. Eventually, I realized that part of what I found exciting about doing this work were the possibilities that happened in the process of making, and that I was not

entertaining those possibilities. The work was too planned.

I now try to plan, but also to allow room for new ideas to coalesce on-site. I often joke that my work is 75% planning and 25% improvisation...and that the improvisation is the most important part. For me, it's when the magic happens.

This idea of play and adaptability with materials also fuels my time in the studio. What can the materials do? How can the shapes interact with each other? I try not to start out by setting limits, but by exploring possibilities. Once I've explored, then I can set limits.



“In addition to specific shapes, the choreography of the work echoes the regimented configurations of battle and confrontation, particularly marches and firing squads. Upon entering the work, the viewer is forced to walk past a row of weapon-like felt forms that are pointing directly at them.”

— Liz Miller, 2011







I've realized that I'll probably never be the artist who arrives at the exhibition space with an architectural drawing of the finished work...although I do admire that artist!

Can you describe the process of preparing and cutting the shapes and assembling the larger forms in the gallery?

Most of the shapes are cut prior to my arrival at a given exhibition space. I create stencils in my studio from projected images. The stencils are simple cardboard forms. I then trace around those forms

onto the material, and finally cut them with a hand-held electric scissors.

Hand cutting is an important part of my process. The slowness of the cutting time represents my thinking time, and the inevitable variances in the forms reward the viewer who ventures closer to the work. From a distance, the work appears pristine and precise. On closer inspection, it reveals my hand and has a very human quality that I enjoy. I hope viewers also appreciate this aspect.

Picturesque Evacuation Ploy represent-

ed a unique opportunity in that I had the luxury of being at Redux for three weeks. The generous install period allowed for more on-site cutting than I typically have. I would say that approximately 1/3 of the forms for this project were cut in the space.

The work gains its shape (literally and metaphorically) through the way the forms are connected, pulled, suspended, pinned, and otherwise attached to one another and to the space. I utilize low-tech methods to create complex sculptural configurations. For example,



the forms in this installation were attached to one another with tiny scrap-booking brads. I love the idea of making something complex through very simple, straightforward, non-technical processes. I often describe the folding of forms as 'wonky origami'.

This installation involved several structured linear sequences as well as a more organic explosive element. The structured linear elements involve a kind of precision that is hard to achieve with such a pliable material. I enjoy this challenge, and the effect it garners.

Your installations mask recognizable imagery. Why do you choose to imbed these images within your work, and how do those images affect the way your audience interprets the piece?

I don't really want the work to be "about" weapons or other specific imagery. Instead, I prefer to frame my work around the precariousness of perception and the possibilities for new forms, meanings, and narratives within that precariousness. The forms I reference in my work have innate meaning, but also become vehicles for manipulation.

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— Liz Miller, 2011



I am certainly interested in the beautiful, intricate formal qualities of weapons, as well as their use and their history. However, once they become part of my work they tend to take on new lives. Simple manipulation of the shapes through bending and folding and their recombination with other shapes allows for alternate meanings.

Still, I don't think the alternative readings would be as interesting if I were starting with forms that were more complacent. Taking something ripe with meanings and associations and transforming it

allows for a narrative that rolls all the potential meanings into a new, unexpected story.

What are some of the most interesting observations and interpretations viewers have had your work?

I'm interested in every observation. One of my favorite remarks about this project was related to the viewer's role. Someone commented that they were "forced" to proceed through the first series of structured shapes in a way that made them uncomfortable, and that I should have

left more space for them to walk around.

This actually made me happy, because it confirmed that I am actively altering the way people proceed through the space, and that the path I'm creating isn't always the most comfortable. I utilized this soft material in a way that makes it confrontational. Some viewers thought Picturesque Evacuation Ploy was made of metal! The idea that I can transcend expectations and associations for a given material is exciting.

Lastly, I like the narrative potential the



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work can evoke. It's fun to hear viewers create their own fictions as they walk through the work. Many picked up on the combative forms in this project, and many also commented on the collision of synthetic and organic forms.

What is it like to create a site-specific work over the course of three weeks where your audience can see the work as it takes shape and interact with you from the very beginning? Did being in Charleston and working at Redux bring any additional elements to your work?

It's thrilling to create the actual components of a work for a specific space, in that space! The physical architecture of Redux certainly influenced the work, as did the geography and history of Charleston. When thinking about war, a city like Charleston has a huge amount of history to consider. For example, The Charleston Museum's collection of Civil War weap-

ons, particularly rifles, was utilized to create new stencils on-site.

As a Midwesterner, I was also interested in the fact that Charleston is on the ocean: not just in relation to how that shaped the battles fought there, but also on terms of the aquatic species of the region and the character of the landscape. I thought of how I might utilize some of the weapon-forms to create an organic quality in portions of the finished installation.

Your work draws in the viewer with its beauty and then captivates them with its ambiguous messages. Do you consciously place more emphasis on narration or decoration in your work?

I feel that the form and content of the work are inextricably linked. I don't think of decoration as something slapped on top of the work, but rather something

that is manifested through my process.

In what direction is your work headed from here? Any new processes or methods you have been working on for future projects?

I continue to experiment with new strategies for dimensionality in my work, exploring how I can utilize tension between the walls, floor, and ceiling to give the work a sense of structure that belies its materiality. While I'd like to continue to utilize soft, pliable materials, I am open to exploring possibilities that have not previously been part of my material palette.

I am starting to do some additional research related to specific weapons, including a trip to the Smithsonian in Washington, DC to research weapons and military uniforms.

I bring back all of these materials, and

images, and ideas and let them come together in the studio, and then respond. I am very much a studio artist: My studio is where new ideas happen. I am good at playing with materials.

Since I've just completed quite a few large-scale projects, I am enjoying doing a new round of works on paper. Unlike previous works on paper, these are "pop-up" works, coming off the page significantly. Even though the scale of these works is miniscule in comparison to my installations (about 14" x 10"), I feel that they are suggesting many new possibilities for my large projects.

What is something that you have always wanted to do with your art but have not yet done?

There are so many things I haven't done!

I'm interested in working on some auton-

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— Liz Miller, 2011

omous sculptural works that could function independent of a specific architecture or exhibition space. At the other end of the spectrum, I'm investigating new possibilities for my installations. These include more dramatic use of light and shadow, changes in materials, and other ways to create even more immersive environments.

What artists, living or dead, do you admire, and what artists inspire you to make art?

I admire the work of a variety of artists, for a variety of reasons. When I was young, Polly Apfelbaum and Jessica Stockholder were very influential to me. Their work situates itself somewhere between painting, drawing and sculpture. They made me see painting in an entirely new way! I loved the fact that they were women making big, bold, ambitious works that didn't seem completely preoccupied with

power tools and machismo attitudes.

Of course, now I see that there are a plethora of male and female artists engaging in practices that straddle the disciplines of painting, drawing, and sculpture and use materials in unexpected and innovative ways.

I appreciate the research element in many contemporary works, but am most drawn to works that combine fact and fiction--that use the imagination, as well as works that blur disciplinary boundaries. I love the aggressive, sculptural paintings of Katharina Grosse, the biomorphic, soft sculpture landscapes of Ernesto Neto, and the fusion of art and design sensibilities in the work of Jorge Pardo and Jim Isermann, to name just a few.

LIZ MILLER

liz@lizmiller.com

www.lizmiller.com

ARTIST STATEMENT

My mixed media installations and drawings recontextualize simplified shapes, signs and symbols from disparate historical and contemporary imagery to create abstract fictions. Existing forms from a multitude of sources are co-opted, altered, and spliced to adopt hybrid identities. Through the process of appropriation and subsequent recombination, shapes lose their real-world connotations and take on fictitious roles. Forged relationships between benign and malignant forms confuse the original implications of each while revealing the precariousness of perception and how easily it can be tampered with. Recent projects pit Baroque and Gothic pattern and ornament against forms derived from armor and weaponry. Seemingly oppositional pairings create duplicitous environments where conflicting messages are conveyed. The use of felt, foam, and other tactile materials further complicates questions of source, masking the identity of forms while allowing them to inhabit both sculptural and two-dimensional space.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Nefarious Hybrid*, Plains Art Museum, Fargo, ND
- Capricious Eradication Prototype*, Louisiana Tech, Ruston, LA
- Picturesque Evacuation Ploy*, Redux Contemporary Art Center, Charleston, SC
- Shaping Space*, Coe College, Cedar Rapids, IA
- Illusive Insurgency*, 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA
- Ornamental Invasion*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN
- Repetitive Deception Scheme*, Haas Gallery of Art, Bloomsburg University, Bloomsburg, PA
- 2010 *Exponential Growth*, Sister Rosaire Gallery, St. Mary's College, South Bend, IN
- 2009 *Cataclysmic Rescue Mission*, Harcourt House Arts Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, CAN
- 2008 *Self-Sustaining Debacle*, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA
- Techno Deluge*, Mercer Union, Toronto, Ontario, CAN
- Resplendent Reconnaissance*, Sioux City Art Center, Sioux City, IA
- 2006 *Ostentatious Onslaught*, Fort Collins Museum of Contemporary Art, Fort Collins, CO
- Impudent Instant Message*, Gould Library, Carleton College, Northfield, MN

- 2005 *Home-Grown Invasion*, Bloomington Art Center, Bloomington, MN
- Systemic Attack*, Franklin Art Works, Project Space, Minneapolis, MN
- Systemic Detour*, MFA Thesis Exhibition, Katherine Nash Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
- 2004 *Serendipitous Hybrid*, Rochester Art Center, Rochester, MN
- The Failure of an Eloquent Defense*, Christensen Center Gallery, Minneapolis, MN

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2010 *Systematizing*, Gallery of Contemporary Art, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, CO
- Systematics*, Soo Visual Arts Center, Minneapolis, MN
- Vertical Currency: Five Years of Emerging Artists*, RAC, Rochester, MN
- Constant Sorting*, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, Oshkosh, WI
- Off the Wall, Form + Content*, Minneapolis, MN
- 2009 *ArtsMN: The Precious Object*, Cargill Gallery, Minneapolis Public Library, Minneapolis, MN
- Miller/Roby/Ullanderson*, Sellout Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
- 2008 *Jerome Fellows 2007–08*, MCAD Gallery, Minneapolis, MN

- Latitude*, NYCAMS Gallery, New York, NY
- 2007 *Urban Fabric*, Traffic Zone Center for Visual Art, Minneapolis, MN
- Artist Initiative Grant Exhibition*, Minnesota State Arts Board, St. Paul, MN
- Latitude*, Fieldgate Gallery, London, UK
- Mary Day, Susan Knight, and Liz Miller*, BC Projects, Omaha, NE
- Environments of Invention*, Minnesota Museum of American Art, Minneapolis, MN
- 2006 *8x8x8: LON/MSP/NYC*, The Soap Factory, Minneapolis, MN
- Perform/Install*, South Bend Regional Museum of Art, South Bend, IN
- 2004 *Trickle Down*, Firehouse Gallery, Burlington, VT
- Proliferate: Drawing in Space, Accumulating in Time*, Foster Gallery, Eau Claire, WI
- Box Fresh*, The Soap Factory, Minneapolis, MN
- Untitled III*, Soo Visual Arts Center, Minneapolis, MN
- 1999 *1999 BFA Thesis Exhibition*,

AWARDS AND HONORS

- 2011 *Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant*
- 2011-2012 *McKnight Artist Fellowship for Visual Artists*
- 2009 *Artist Initiative Grant, Minnesota State Arts Board*
- 2007-2008 *MCAD/Jerome Foundation Fellowship for Emerging Artists*
- 2007 *Artist Initiative Grant, Minnesota State Arts Board*

RESIDENCIES

- 2007 Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha, NE

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