

# GAYLEN GERBER



# HELEN MIRRA

Eröffnung am Sonntag, 10. November, 19.00 Uhr bis 14. Dezember 2002

Öffnungszeiten: Mittwoch–Freitag 12–18 Uhr, Samstag 12–15 Uhr

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# GALERIE MICHAEL HALL

# "A painting support which acts as the support for other artist's"

a conversation between Gaylen Gerber and Michael Hall

Hall: Since the late 1980's you've worked primarily with the colour grey in your paintings, photographs, and installations. Why grey and only grey?

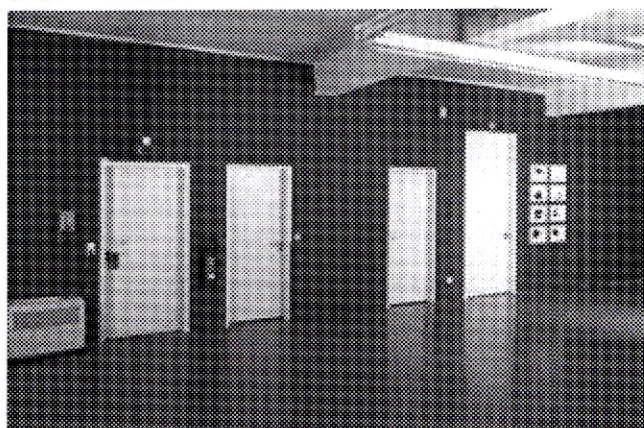
Gerber: I tend to use grey to help visualise the relationships that let us make meaning. Grey represents the thing we tend not to see, or see but tend not to focus on. In my work grey represents a visual norm, an agreed upon middle ground against which difference can easily be seen. Norms, by their very nature, are more static or less animated than the expressions that diverge from them and so the greys that I use to represent these norms tend to remain fairly consistent too.

Hall: Your earlier wall-sized paintings and paper-works were always shown in relation to other artists works exhibited in a given show or in relation to other artists in which you have either chosen or been positioned with by a curator. If I remember correctly the concept of the 'Backdrop' and/or background has been an ongoing theme since 1994 when you first placed one of your grey monochrome paintings in relation to a pile of dirt (potting soil) by Joe Scanlan at Nicole Klagsburn Gallery in New York. I am wondering whether this was maybe by accident that the dirt jumped into the foreground, therefore pushing your Grey monochrome painting even further into the background, or was there a conscious decision between you and Joe to do this. Did you initially think of it as a stage for other objects or acts to simultaneously be activated and framed by your own work. Regardless, if your work is seen as foreground or background or totally invisible to the viewer.

Gerber: I think of my work as making a series of less seen relationships more apparent rather than invisible. I draw attention to the underlying elements in a situation and their relationship to our interpretation of things. I do exchange my own exposure for my use of another artists' images and in doing so my work acts as the support for the other artist's image or object. Sometimes it's difficult to perceive the support as a discrete element but I'd argue that it can be seen as discrete and that it's the relationships between my support and the work on top of my support that gives my work its interest and meaning.

In all my work, from the early still life genre paintings to the more recent backdrop and support works, the works were always a uniform grey before a second image was applied to them. Because the image of the still life in the earlier work was painted in the same colour grey and very close in value to the original monochromatic surface it's not always apparent that the two elements existed separately but in all the works the meaning is consistently found not only in the relationships between canvases but in the relationships between the grey monochromatic ground and the more figurative image that sits on top of it. In the early works both the monochrome and the genre images were archetypes, and of course, in the more recent work the still life genre image has been replaced by the images of other artists but the underlying relationships that structure the meaning of the work remain the same.

The exhibition at Galerie Nachst St. Stephan in Vienna which included James Welling in 1994 was the first situation directly employing the work of another artist and was the result of fortunate circumstances. I had had the idea of delegating the figurative imagery in my work to another



**Gaylen Gerber with Joseph Beuys, 'Backdrop' 2000**  
**Neues Museum Weserburg, Bremen**

Photographic Background Paper, 43ft. 3in. x 140 in., with J. Beuys in 1994 'Signs from the Brown Room' 1984, Offset Prints 21 x 29,5 cm. each

artist for some time and was actively working in this direction when the opportunity to do this exhibition presented itself. I remember asking Jim, who is a friend, if we could install the work in a specific way and he wasn't opposed to it. I think in truth it wasn't even an issue. At the time I hadn't yet considered installing works directly on top of my work so I was focused on the give and take that occurred through context and proximity. I think Jim considered the installation of his work totally in keeping with his previously stated intentions and I don't know whether he thought his work was effected by this situation or not. The exhibition with Joe Scanlan in New York later that same year was an all together different situation. I was offered a one person show and I had asked Joe to join me. My work in this exhibition was intentionally created and positioned as a contextual backdrop to his work and he was aware of this going in to the exhibition and the result was the exchange that happened between us. The potting soil you're talking about, and its relation to my formal grey canvas was definitely an important part of that exchange. The underlying ideas and initiative are consistently mine but my ideas have always been affected by the observations of friends and colleagues and in truth some of the most interesting developments have come from the observation of others and were incorporated by me.

Hall: We first worked together in 1997, in this project you were asked to design and exhibit a painting which fit the physical parameters of the gallery space for a series of events and performances to happen in front of the work. You selected a long wall which started from a small niche near the window and extended to the back wall of the gallery. The piece was quite successful because most gallery visitors didn't even notice the painting which if I remember was quite big about 10 ft x 20 ft. Therefore, we (or I) decided that it would be great if the painting could stay in place for next exhibition(s), especially since the painting wasn't really noticed so much anyway as a unique object. I just curious how this group exhibition and the proceeding shows changed your approach to the backdrop concept.

Gerber: You had suggested at some point during the group exhibition that we continue to keep the large backdrop painting in position for the next few (solo) exhibitions, the first with Helen Mirra and then with Chalie Cho. You sug-

# “Reiterating the Relationship between Craft and Math”

a conversation between Helen Mirra and Michael Hall

Hall: In your work you tend to connect things through edits, cuts and sutures, regardless if it is a sound work, fabric sculpture or a film, by using similar methodologies, histories and poetics related to structuralist film theory by breaking-down (or deconstructing) materials, texts and/or scenes to essential elements. Can you talk a little about this idea of cutting (or editing) and how it is related to your practice as an artist.

Mirra: I wouldn't call them sutures, since I am so unsurgical about it. Certainly, I relate almost always everything to film, as a very basic way of organising. My brain tends to try to make sense of the various phenomena I find interesting in cross reference to each other, the natural world, and film structure. So I find I get somewhere in my thinking if I cut and paste. I am easily overwhelmed, and therefore I need to look at things isolated, and out of their usual context. I know that is not how the world works, but it is how I can cope with subject matter.

Hall: In your first solo exhibition in 1997, you hung two seemingly banal cotton strips of fabric, one blue and one green on opposing walls at around shoulder height. If I remember correctly, one band was entitled Beckett, which simultaneously places your work into an historical framework. Since then you have investigated the works of Buckminster Fuller, Wittgenstein, Friedrich Froebel, Nicola Sacco? As a female artist, I am curious why your references are generally always patriarchal figures of 'the modern' and if this distinction is important to you?

Mirra: It was Beckett with a single 't', which is a bend in a stream. It was blue. It was 16mm high; the first work I made with this 16mm wide cotton banding, which I have continued with. I thought of it as a film because of the specific size, and I sewed the individual frames, of irregularly faded rectangles of the cloth. I seem to do that a lot, start with one thing, cut it up and put it back together. It was definitely Beckett as in Samuel as well, who is a constant reference as I think about emotive repetition. The green one was Ranger. I have always had romantic ideas about being a forest ranger.

Though the short list of my obvious influences is male dominated, that doesn't make it patriarchal. The politics of Fuller and Froebel are explicitly equitable and the original kindergarten teachers were all women. I do find it extremely interesting that (they were the (female) predecessors to the (male) Bauhaus, etc., but that isn't the reason for my investment in the subject. I am more interested in what are (to me) radical social/cultural/political models wherein the viewers/listeners/readers get to figure things out for themselves.

Hall: Recently at the Whitney exhibition you exhibited a series of patchwork floor sculptures composed of small rectangles of army blankets, looking much like American quilting. In the way that you connect traditional (so-called women's) hand-work to a referenced geometry, does craft equal linguistics? I also see this happening in your music/sound work by mixing vernacular acoustic music, which was recently described as a minimalist Americana meditation sounding like a super-slowed down John Fahey, with the philosophical ingredients of Friedrich Froebel's kindergarten lessons. (so here, Fahey = Froebel).

Mirra: I don't know about an equivalence (=), but I am

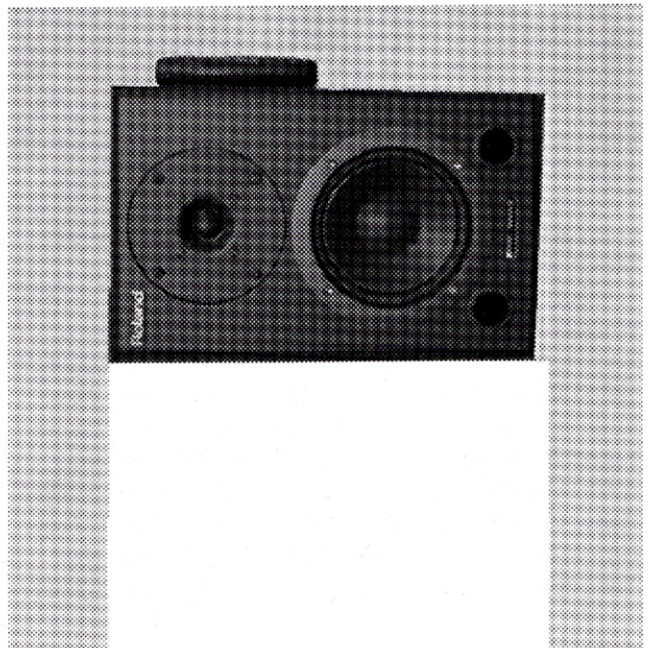
reiterating the relationship between craft and math, better known as art and science. So Linguistics, as far as being systems of making sense, organising and communicating. Aside, I don't make sense of what I do in relation to 'women's work' at all. When I started weaving, I did it because I was thinking about the industrial revolution and manual labor, not in relation to craft. I see my practice as androgynous, in the straightforwardness, basicness of the craft, palette and material choice. Relatedly, I think part of the reason I work in different media is to avoid prioritising a particular approach.

Hall: I am curious about your use of sound and fabric, because fabric generally muffles or dampens sound and doesn't reflect it in anyway - so I am interested in the juxtaposition and why have chosen to work pretty consistently with these materials.

Mirra: When we are working on a sound project, Ernst is often trying to 'brighten' the sound while I am trying to dull it. And I'll keep saying 'it's too loud' and he'll keep saying 'we can't mix it if we can't hear it'. Though clarity is generally valued, I prefer 'low-visibility'; it is a coping mechanism I think. It is also why I work with colour within a very limited palette; low contrast.

Hall: Travel has also been an ongoing theme for your use of sound and film to transport viewers/listeners to another time and space, along with your ability to induce Nostalgia, or romanticism of early conceptual art, or for me maybe Post-Land Art is a better description, to describe your interest in the relationship between land (green) and sky (blue). So, why green & blue other than the obvious ground & sky?

Mirra: Why is it 'post'? Unless we say 'post-map'; that I would agree with. Blue and green and a little brown because I am making the [map] works in relation to previous maps, not by circumnavigating the globe myself.



Helen Mirra, concept sketch for 'Map of 48°N...'; 2002 Audio Installation, CD with CD Player, Monitor Speaker and Chart

Gaylen Gerber continues...

gested this partly because you thought it was a shame to put so much work into something and then have it up for such a short time. But I understood immediately that it was right for my work and let the backdrop be perceived as slightly more stable than the art around it. In the end I've used this solution in a number of situations. Your intuitive gesture, while intending one thing, opened my eyes to another expression of the work that I hadn't considered and that's proven incredibly valuable.

A lot of my practice has developed in this way. Another example is the project in Bremen with Joseph Beuys. Peter Friese, the curator at the Neues Museum there, had seen a large paper backdrop in Berlin and thought it would fit into the ideas he was developing concerning their collection. He sent me the proposal and a photograph of the wall he intended to use for the installation of the work. When I saw the original photograph of the wall I thought maybe I had been slighted. It was a large wall, about 15m long, but obviously it was located in the back of the museum. It's the wall where the washrooms are located and it has four doors in it, a radiator, a telephone, a fire extinguisher, etc., etc., all of which are directly on the face of this wall. It was a wall that would be unusable for most art works. It was only later, while doing the studies for the possible installation, that I realised that Peter had seen an opportunity in this situation that I hadn't at first. He understood before I did that all of the collateral information on that particular wall could work for me by positioning my work as the backdrop for not only art work but also for all the other uses of the space. This situation proved extremely helpful in broadening my conception of where my work could be installed and under what conditions.

Gaylen Gerber

**Einzelausstellungen/Solo Exhibitions:**

2002 The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL (with Stephen Prina); 2000 Neues Museum Weserburg Bremen, Bremen, Germany (with Joseph Beuys, organized by Peter Friese) (continued 2002); 1999 Chicago Project Room, Chicago, IL; 1998 Monash University Galleries, Melbourne, Australia; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, Chicago Project Room, Chicago, IL; 1997 Galerie Susanna Kulli, St. Gallen, Switzerland; Chicago Project Room, Chicago, IL; 1996 Lisson Gallery, London; 1995 American Fine Arts, Co. New York, NY (with Roy Arden); 1994 Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, NY (with Joe Scanlan); 1992 Michael Kohn Gallery, Santa Monica, CA; Wooster Gardens, New York, NY; The Renaissance Society, Chicago, IL; Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago, IL; 1990 Le Case d'Arte, Milan, Italy; Wolff Gallery, New York, NY Shedhalle, Zurich, Switzerland; 1989 Galerie Nachst St. Stephan/Rosemarie Schwarzwaldler, Vienna, Austria; Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago, IL; 1988 Wolff Gallery, New York, NY; Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago, IL; 1987 Grey Art Gallery, New York University, New York, NY.

Helen Mirra continues...

So I am measuring the width of the Volga River with my ruler in the Peter's Atlas. I am interested in travel for a few reasons, both politically and structurally (temporally).

Hall: Your sculptures attempt to map geographic landscapes which are flat but understood as full and round, but in the end your work always refer back to the floor and the wall? I am thinking specifically of the 'Sky Wreck' installation at the Renaissance Society or the piece 'Map of 48° N', here at the gallery where you take a 60 minute trip around the world starting from Vienna. Charting the trip by map- your musical composition is determined only by geographical features. Are you trying to bring mapping into the physical realm and sculptural object-making into the conceptual realm?

Mirra: The floor and wall are right here, in my studio and my apartment, always were, going to school and reading books within walls and lying under the Grundig stereo cabinet listening to records at home; they have framed the majority of my information acquisition, more familiar than sky and space and ocean.

I made the sculpture of part of the sky as a scientific proposal, albeit naive and utopic, and as a gesture of collaboration (since it was only a section of sky). I am just trying to make versions of things that already exist that are at a scale that makes them clearer for me to consider them. I have some idea that if I make things, which are analogies of subjects I am interested in, I understand them [the subjects] somehow, somewhat.

Helen Mirra

**Einzelausstellungen/Solo Exhibitions:**

2002 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Donald Young Gallery, Chicago, IL; Francesca Kaufmann, Milano; 2001 The Renaissance Society, Chicago, IL; Statements, Art Basel, CH; 2000 Galerie Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe, D; 1999 Chicago Project Room; 1997 Chicago Project Room

**Gruppenausstellungen/Group Exhibitions:**

2002 'Zusammenhänge herstellen', Kunstverein, Hamburg; 'Sudden Glory', CCAC Institute, San Francisco, CA; 'Waiting for the Ice Age', Georg Kargl, Vienna (curated by Michael Hall); 2001 'Tirana Biennale', Albania; 'Untitled [654321]', Kunsthallen Brandts Klædefabrik, DK; 2000 'The Age of Influence', MCA Chicago, IL; 1998 'Trance', Philadelphia Museum of Art; 1997 'art club berlin', Art Forum Berlin, Berlin; 'Some Kind of Heaven', Kunsthalle Nürnberg; 'Up Close', Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA; 1996 'Found Footage', Gasser & Grunert, Köln; 'Persona', The Renaissance Society, Chicago, IL & Kunsthalle Basel,