

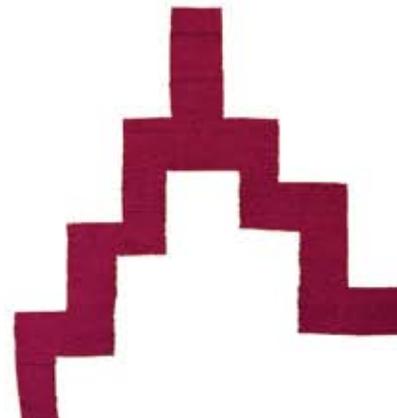
New Geometries

Martha Clippinger
Gianna Commito
Diena Georgetti
Jeffrey Gibson
Eamon Ore-Giron
Clare Rojas

Essay by Alex Baker



Fleisher/Ollman





Clare Rojas, *Broken Sunrise*, 2013, oil on canvas, 51 x 40½ inches

New Geometries

Over the past several years, abstract painting has become, once again, a buzz phrase within contemporary art. Much of the buzz has been backlash: painters accused of zombie formalism, sleepwalking through hackneyed styles and gimmicks that speak to market desires. *New Geometries* proposes another take on contemporary artists engaging with abstraction: an abstraction that is of the world, not just of the market. The work is geometric in nature and takes its cue from Constructivism, Suprematism, and Latin American Modernism—art movements that came to being in order to address the radical changes of the modern era, be they political, social, visual, or otherwise. *New Geometries* presents artists who use the idioms of historical modernism to speak to ideas of the present including the parallel modernisms of indigenous and non-Western cultures; art and utility; and modernism as folk art. Featured artists ask us to consider what role geometric abstraction might serve in our current non-utopian times, just over one hundred years after Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin’s watershed exhibition, *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10.*, which featured Malevich’s iconic *Black Square* and Tatlin’s architectural relief sculptures—works that cast long shadows on the history of art, and still resonate today.

At the risk of merciless generalization, geometric abstraction is based on expansive forms and monochromatic, non-representational surfaces.¹ It is distinct from biomorphic abstraction and depictions of interior/mental landscapes often associated with Surrealism. Geometric abstraction is also distinct from the gestural painting strategies and existential philosophy of Abstract Expressionism. Geometric abstraction originated from Russian Constructivism and Suprematism, which evolved in tandem with the optimism of early Communism and the sweeping technological progress foisted upon a feudal, agrarian society. Constructivism

and Suprematism are identified with two important artist figures: Tatlin, a sculptor, and Malevich, a painter, respectively. Influenced by Cubism, Tatlin believed successful art must reveal to the world the status of having been made; he subscribed to a machine aesthetic in which the materials of modernity spoke for themselves. Taking Picasso's Cubist still-life sculptures a step further (Tatlin had visited Picasso's studio in 1913), Tatlin used industrial materials like cables and metal sheeting, but also paper and wood, in his breakout abstract relief sculptures of 1915. As Constructivism was adopted more widely after the formation of the USSR in 1922, it became increasingly politically engaged and took on the forms of graphic design, public spectacles like elaborate parade floats celebrating the Russian Revolution, and architecture (Tatlin's never-realized proposal for the *Monument to the Third International*, a building housing the Communist Party headquarters, is considered the epitome of Constructivism). Various permutations of Constructivism eventually spread to the rest of Europe, the United States, and Latin America, influencing the artists of the Bauhaus and beyond. While Malevich's Suprematism focused on painting, it shared some aspects of Constructivism, such as an affinity for fragmented, planar forms and an emphasis on the material properties of a given medium—an art work's *faktura* (as Malevich termed it) or material surface. Just as Tatlin believed art objects needed to reveal the manner in which they were constructed, Malevich believed that the "supremacy of painting" meant the importance of the paint itself as surface. Malevich's Suprematist paintings are richly textured and the outlines of geometric forms are painstakingly painted by hand and never perfectly symmetrical.² While sharing these basic tenets, Tatlin and Malevich's opinions diverged regarding the social role of art—Tatlin believed in art's service to the state and society while Malevich believed art should be non-utilitarian and aspire to absolute non-objectivity. They espoused irreconcilable points of view, but both believed that abstraction made for a better world.

Geometric abstraction has always been linked to utopian philosophies and the idea of progress. As curator Iwona Blazwick has remarked,

It's very blankness represented the exhilarating void of the unknown and a springboard for the imagining of new tomorrows. Geometric abstraction—as painting, photograph, or object—became linked to the proposal of new models of social organization.³

Originally a European phenomenon, geometric abstraction was eventually global in its reach and not limited to Western countries. In fact, its progressive and aspirational attributes became a vehicle for utopian thinking in which artists from colonized countries could cast aside oppressive baggage and reinvent national identities fusing indigenous, pre-colonial culture with what we might call an abstract universalism—a mixture of the local and the global.

While the artists presented in *New Geometries* are not standard bearers for a geometric abstraction steeped in the utopian modernism of their forebears, each, in some capacity, engages with history using modernist painting as a kind of readymade, a found object.⁴ While aware of geometric abstraction as a historical phenomenon, these artists are not card-carrying members of its hypothetical party, who believe they are refining and purifying the project of abstraction. Paraphrasing Bob Nickas' argument about the persistence of abstraction in contemporary painting, the *New Geometries* artists reanimate rather than recapitulate the histories of abstraction and the readymade—reanimation means giving new life while recapitulation (in the biological sense) means repeating the same evolutionary sequence ad infinitum.⁵ The latter is necessary for the proper development of a species, but makes for boring, doctrinaire art. Thus, *New Geometries* artists appropriate the history of abstraction while energizing it with new personal, political, and aesthetic narratives. For them, terms like "narrative" and "content" are not antithetical to the concept of abstraction.



Martha Clippinger

Martha Clippinger's works included in *New Geometries* are not actually paintings at all, but textiles that evoke aspects of painting (rectilinearity, a relationship to the wall) while also proposing abstraction's use value. According to the artist, they can just as well be utilized as rugs. Created in collaboration with Oaxacan weavers, Licha Gonzalez Ruiz and Agustin Contreras Lopez, the *tapetes* (Clippinger prefers the Spanish term for "rugs") resonate strongly with the history of geometric abstraction, which has found itself in pragmatic contexts including interior, industrial, and graphic design. Textile artists like Annie Albers and Sophie Tauber Arp, for instance, demonstrate that modernism encompassed so-called "craft" just as much as it encompassed "high art" pursuits like painting and architecture. Albers, the artist who put modern textile design in the realm of public consciousness, overcame sexist segregation (as a woman in the Bauhaus, she was only allowed to work in a medium associated with the "feminine") and made geometric abstraction accessible through the mass marketing of her designs, democratizing modernism perhaps more than any of her male peers. While Clippinger is an artist of the 21st century for whom the craft-versus-high-art and gender-equals-medium debates seem obsolete, it is difficult not to ruminate on Albers's debt to geometric abstraction and the gender politics of modernism when looking at Clippinger's daringly colorful and exuberant *tapetes*. Clippinger also makes small-scale, painted, wooden constructions with similar geometric patterns and color combinations (not included in the exhibition). Like the *tapetes*, Clippinger sees these objects as flexible in terms of their display, occupying spaces not usually designated as places for exhibiting art works, including ceiling and floor corners, window ledges, and bookcases.

Martha Clippinger, *Untitled*, 2016, hand-dyed woven wool, 61 x 30½ inches



Martha Clippinger, l-r: *Untitled*, 2015, hand-dyed, woven wool, 71 x 32 inches; *Untitled*, 2016, hand-dyed, woven wool, 58 x 37½ inches

Gianna Commito

At first glance, or from a distance, Gianna Commito's paintings seem perfectly executed. However, careful viewing rewards the viewer with Commito's layered, fractured, and scaffolded forms, a handbuilt imaginary architecture. Ledge marks, visible underpainting, and paint loss collectively conspire to give Commito's paintings an imperfect appearance, an intentional affront to the seamless geometry that confronts us when first stepping into the gallery. One may be tempted to situate Commito within a modernist lineage celebrating the machine and the city (think Italian Futurism or American Precisionism). However, Commito is more interested in entropy



Gianna Commito, *Dix*, 2014, casein and marble dust ground on panel, 30 x 24 inches

and folk architecture than paeans to progress. Taking her cue from both the chaos of urban development, where contemporary and antiquated buildings exist side-by-side, and rural, 19th-century farmhouses composed of weathered clapboard in which additions are appended onto a central house structure evolving over time, Commito's paintings relate a narrative of change—uneasy unions between colors, forms, and patterns. Commito paints with casein (a milk protein, water-based paint) on marble dust panels which further contributes to the push and pull of polished and weathered, resolved and chaotic, and vibrant and muted.



Gianna Commito, *Nepp*, 2014, casein and marble dust ground on panel, 30 x 24 inches



Gianna Commito, *Epping*, 2014, casein and marble dust ground on panel, 34 x 28 inches

Diana Georgetti

The three paintings by Diana Georgetti included in *New Geometries* are from her *Folk Modern* series. The phrase “Folk Modern” suggests a juxtaposition of terms that seem diametrically opposed. However, Georgetti synthesises these supposed opposites by combining the utilitarian and decorative tendencies that underpin the generic conception of the word “folk” with the non-representational and non-functional attributes that we often associate with “modern” by painting geometric abstractions with use value. Identifying herself as a painter, curator, and collector all at once, Georgetti sees these paintings as having a particular purpose within a domestic setting. Incorporating a range of touchstones in her work, from



Diana Georgetti, *Folk Modern/Voltage*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 41 inches

Frank Stella, to Brazilian Concrete Art, to children’s Naef play blocks, to Bauhaus decorative art, to symbols such as energy arrows, Georgetti believes that the *Folk Modern* series emanates powers that directly affect viewers: one painting acts as a protector, one as a motivator, and one as a mood enhancer. Since the late 1990s, Georgetti has been channeling modernism in its myriad forms (from painting and sculpture to interior design and fashion), creating paintings for imaginary, domestic contexts inhabited by phantom aesthetes. Georgetti’s paintings also resonate with the early history of abstraction, in which Spiritualist theories on the metaphysical possibilities of symbolic form could help human beings navigate the uncharted waters of technological progress, urbanism, industrialization, and mechanized warfare—in short, the alienating experience of modernity.⁶



Diana Georgetti, *Folk Modern/Talon*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 52 x 19 inches



Diena Georgetti, *Folk Modern/Naef*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 27 inches

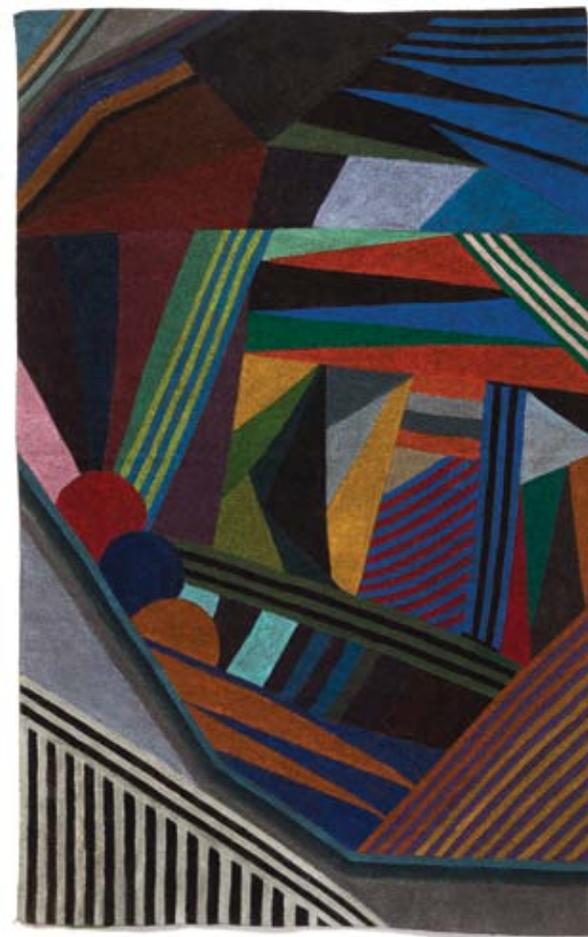
Jeffrey Gibson

Both colorful and incorporating materials that may signal domesticity, Jeffrey Gibson's paintings are also dense with personal and cultural significance, with the specter of modernism always looming nearby. Included here are geometric paintings on army surplus blankets and one on rawhide over an antique ironing board that impart Native American and modern narratives simultaneously. The blanket has a rich history and present-day significance for Gibson, who is Native American, as blankets have been exchanged as gifts celebrating major life events for multiple generations. From self-created designs, to blankets made specifically by companies like Pendleton for Native American consumers, to the disturbing historical narratives regarding the US government allegedly giving smallpox-infected surplus blankets to Native Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries, the blanket has long been a symbol of cultural identity and exchange. The blanket continues to maintain strong cultural significance for Native Americans to this day despite being designed and marketed by whites to Native peoples and despite the blanket's association as a symbol of genocide.⁷ For several years, Gibson has created shaped canvas paintings incorporating rawhide as support material. These works evoke the actual use of hide in a range of Native American aesthetic practices (such as clothing, drums, and shelters) and the history of the shaped canvas in modern and contemporary art. In *New Geometries*, one of Gibson's



Jeffrey Gibson, *Shield No. 15*, 2014, acrylic and graphite on elk hide over antique ironing board, 66 x 14 x 2 inches

shaped canvas paintings uses the armature of an old ironing board multivalent in meaning: a readymade, shaped canvas; an homage to his grandmother who was a meticulous housekeeper; and the transformation of a domestic object into a power object—a shield. Gibson synthesizes form and content by using culturally and personally meaningful materials (blankets, rawhide) as the surfaces for abstract paintings. Here “content-less” abstraction is imbued with meaning not usually associated with geometric abstraction.



Jeffrey Gibson, opposite page: *Painted Blanket 1*, 2011, acrylic on recycled wool army blanket, 62³/₄ x 37 inches; this page: *Painted Blanket 2*, 2011, acrylic on recycled wool army blanket, 62¹/₂ x 40¹/₄ inches

Eamon Ore-Giron

Eamon Ore-Giron originally worked in figuration before developing his signature abstract style. His paintings resonate with artists and movements of the past and present, including Suprematism, Latin American Concrete Art, the geometric minimalism of Cuban-American painter, Carmen Herrera, and the modernist-influenced paintings of Mexican contemporary artist Gabriel Orozco. Ore-Giron uses CDs and dubplates from the music he once made as templates to create structures for his paintings. The bright colors and designs on expanses of raw linen bring to mind Moholy-Nagy's paintings of the 1920s, which prominently featured similar, unpainted grounds, but these might just as well originate from Ore-Giron's coming-of-age in Tucson, Arizona—an arid environment in which color always pops in the brown landscape. Recently, Ore-Giron has been integrating gold into his color palette, evoking the great traditions of gold artistry in countries like Peru—his father's birthplace, and a place Ore-Giron continues to strongly identify with. Ore-Giron's paintings also bring to mind the indigenous futurism of the Bolivian architect, Freddy Mamani Sylvestre, whose chromatically intense, space-age buildings reference motifs and colors popular in Aymara culture, as well as sci-fi themes appropriated from *Transformer* movies. Interestingly, Ore-Giron also shares an indigenous heritage and wonders if

there is something in our background that pulls us toward bold, bright colors and stacked circular forms—it could be a cultural approach to color we both share. I love the concept of indigenous futurism because it's so easy for people to place indigenous people in the idealized past, but in places like Peru and Bolivia where 60% of the population is indigenous, they engage technology just like people in the developed world, they use 808 drum machines to make their music, they do their banking on smart phones.⁸



Eamon Ore-Giron, *Infinite Regress VII*, 2016, flashe on linen, 84 x 60 inches

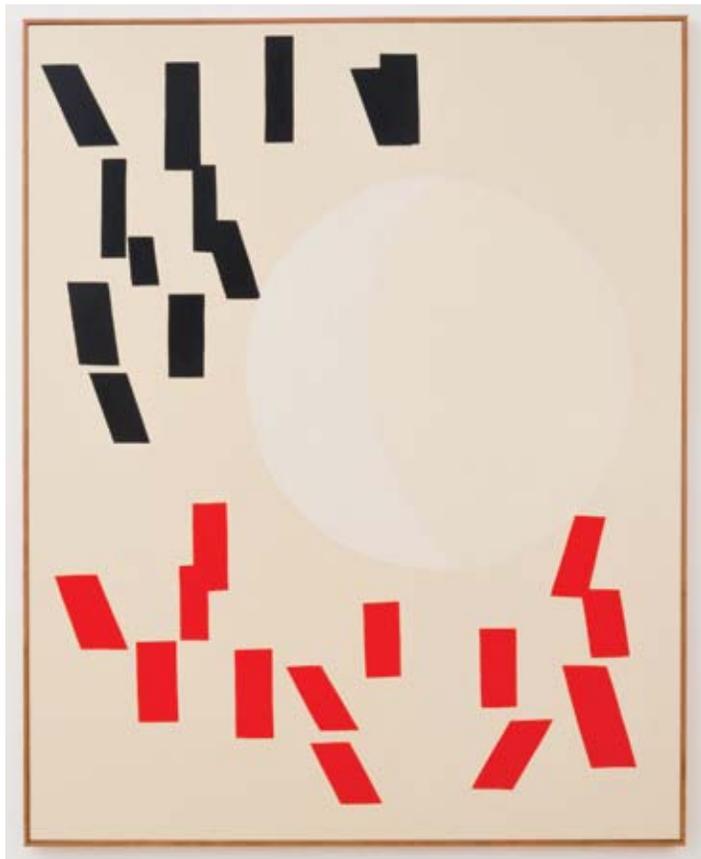


Clare Rojas

Between 2000 and 2010, Clare Rojas was renowned for her folk art-inspired figurative paintings exploring gender relations. In a radical shift, she began abstract painting in 2011, jettisoning all narrative references. Still, there is a strong relationship between the patterns that served as the settings for figures in her previous work and her recent abstractions. Often painted on stark grounds, her new compositions evoke Malevich's Suprematist painting, in which sharply delineated shapes float on expansive fields. Echoing Malevich's notion of *faktura*—that paintings must present themselves as having been made by the topographic materiality of their surfaces—Rojas leaves visible brushstrokes and traces of her hand in her work. Interestingly, both Malevich and Rojas' earlier work is steeped in an appreciation of folk art. Malevich painted Russian peasant scenes in a Cubist manner before taking up non-representational painting, and Rojas painted matryoshka-like doll figures alongside hex-sign and Amish quilt-inspired patterns and borders. For the installation of Suprematist paintings in the seminal exhibition *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10*, Malevich honored the Russian peasant tradition of hanging a Christian icon high up in the corner of a room, by displaying a black, square, monochrome abstraction in this revered location. As a contemporary artist working in geometric abstraction nearly a century after Malevich, Rojas never takes up Malevich's firebrand polemics which sought the Truth through abstraction. To do so today would be naive and historically redundant. However, Rojas seems to share with her visionary ancestor a belief that abstraction can be a utopian practice. Before her shift to abstraction, Rojas explored gender politics where women and men uneasily coexisted in vaguely sinister, fairy-tale environments. Feeling that she had painted herself and her female protagonists into a corner, Rojas turned to abstraction to create a refuge. Rationalizing her decision, she relates a Buddhist

Eamon Ore-Giron, top: *Night Bloom*, 2015, flashe on linen, 17 x 12 inches; bottom: *Roman Blues I*, 2015, flashe on linen, 66 x 56 inches

parable with utopian overtones—perhaps Rojas’ more modest, personal variation on Truth in abstraction—in which a woman who is surrounded by vicious tigers stops to eat a delicious strawberry, choosing to savor the present moment instead of worrying about the past or future suffering.⁹



Clare Rojas, opposite: *New Moon Rise*, 2013, oil on canvas, 51 x 40½ inches; this page: *New Silhouette 1*, 2013, oil on canvas, 51 x 40½ inches

Notes

- 1 This discussion partially draws from Iwona Blazwick, *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society, 1915–2015* (London: Whitechapel Gallery/Prestel), p. 9.
- 2 For a discussion of the differences between the two movements and the friction between Tatlin and Malevich, see Masha Chlenova “0.10” in *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012), pp. 207–208.
- 3 Blazwick, p. 15.
- 4 Bob Nickas, *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting* (London/New York: Phaidon, 2009), p. 5.
- 5 Nickas, p. 5.
- 6 For a comprehensive investigation of the Spiritualist and Theosophical underpinning of early abstraction and a cogent argument regarding the idea of content and meaning in abstract painting, see *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985*, ed. Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles/New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art/Abbeville Press, 1986).
- 7 For an overview of the commercial trade blanket as a commodity marketed by white industry to Native peoples, see Diane Dittmore and Nancy J. Parezo, “Artifact: Indian Trade Blankets,” Arizona State Museum, <http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/artifact/blanket.shtml>

There have been controversial theories proposed by historians regarding the intentional spreading of disease to Native Americans through the distribution of infected blankets. See Ward Churchill, *Indians are Us?: Culture and Genocide in Native North America* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press,

1994). For a critique of the genocide-by-way-of-blanket argument, see Guenter Lewy, “Were American Indians the Victims of Genocide?” September 2004, History News Network, <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/7302>.

- 8 Eamon Ore-Giron, email to the author, June 22, 2016.
- 9 Gwen Allen, “Clare Rojas: Gallery Paule Anglim,” *Artforum* (September 2014), p. 383.

Martha Clippinger (b. 1983, lives and works in Durham, North Carolina) has shown in a variety of venues including c2c Project Space, San Francisco, CA; Spectre Arts, Durham, NC; Elizabeth Harris Gallery, Hionas Gallery, Leslie Heller Work Space, and Minus Space, all in New York, NY. She has also shown at AUTOMAT, Philadelphia, PA and the Center for Contemporary Art, Bedminster, NJ, among other venues.

Gianna Commito (b. 1976, lives and works in Kent, Ohio) has exhibited her work at Rachel Uffner Gallery, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, Taxter and Spengemann, and The Drawing Center, all in New York, NY, as well as the Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH, and others.

Diana Georgetti (b. 1966, lives and works in Kooralbyn, Australia) has exhibited widely in Australia and New Zealand at commercial venues such as Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney; Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington; Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland; and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney. In 2008, Georgetti had a mid-career retrospective at Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, which traveled to the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. She was included in the 9th Biennale of Sydney in 1992, and significant group exhibitions at venues across Australia including Art Gallery of New South Wales, Art Gallery of South Australia, and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. Her work is included in public collections at all major museums in Australia and New Zealand. This is her first time showing in the United States.

Jeffrey Gibson (b. 1972, lives and works in Germantown, New York) has had solo exhibitions at venues including Savannah College of Art and Design, GA; the National Academy Museum, New York, NY; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; and the Cornell Museum of Fine Art, Winter Park, FL. He has participated in Greater New York, MoMA PS1, New York, NY; Prospect New Orleans,

LA; and Site Santa Fe, NM. Gibson's work is in the permanent collections of major art museums, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; the Smithsonian, Washington, DC; the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, ON; Crystal Bridges, Bentonville, AK; and the Denver Art Museum, CO.

Eamon Ore-Giron's (b. 1973, lives and works in New York and Los Angeles) painting, music, video, and performances have been shown at venues including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; LAXART, Los Angeles, CA; Deitch Projects, New York, NY; MUCA ROMA, Mexico City; Peres Art Museum Miami, FL; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Museo Tamayo Museum, Mexico City; Peres Projects, Los Angeles, CA; Consonni, Bilbao, Spain; the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA; and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA, among others.

Clare Rojas (b. 1976, lives and works in San Francisco) has shown in commercial venues including Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco, CA; Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago, IL; Feedback Ltd., New York, NY; Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen, Denmark; Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, UK; and Deitch Projects, New York, NY. Museum exhibition venues include IKON Gallery, Birmingham, UK; Savannah College of Art And Design, GA; Prospect New Orleans, LA; Museum of Craft and Folk Art, San Francisco, CA; the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA. Rojas' work is in notable public collections such as Berkeley Art Museum, CA; Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Jose Museum of Art, CA; and Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, Spain.

Acknowledgments

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