



Our Bodice, Our Selves

DEBORAH SMALL

May 16 – June 29, 1991 • Artists Space

Our Bodice, Our Selves

An essay by MADELEINE GRYSZTEJN

Deborah Small's work is a lesson in lesser known histories—those that have been silenced under the pressure of the History to which we commonly subscribe. As a rummager of ideas and images, both pictorial and literary, Small has an ingenious knack for bringing together disparate cultural elements which, when placed side by side, let intellectual sparks fly. Small's works generally present themselves as a network of material scavenged from existing sources and transferred, by xeroxing, to wall panels often of equal size and arranged together in large grids. This systematic, graphlike deployment of images lends each installation a rational, even scientific air, and thus a veneer of truth: it anchors the artist's revisionist examination not only of history, but also of history as fiction, in a format traditionally assigned to proven quantifiable facts.

Small's first large-scale installation, titled *Half a Still Life/Still a Half-Life* (1983), set the stage for installations that followed. In this early piece, composed of 106 identically sized wall panels based on the periodic table of the elements, Small investigated the shared etymology of "bikini," the 1946 innovation in women's swimwear, and Bikini Atoll, the Pacific island site of twenty-three U.S. nuclear bomb tests conducted between 1946 and 1958. A book, made by Small for the exhibition, and mimicking in its language the deceptively naive parlance of a "Dick and Jane" primer, disclosed how the term "bikini"

conflates the psychosexual effects stimulated by a scantily clad "bombshell" with the climax of a prodigious chemical explosion. In this book there also appears the following sentence: "male domination and imperialism are not flip sides of the same coin but one continuous ugly face that manifests itself in different guises." Here we perceive what are to become Small's abiding concerns: a conscientious investigation of language, by turns playful and pointed, and a sharp awareness of how our discourse, and the history this discourse fashions and perverts even as it records, points to the intersection of sexism, patriarchy, imperialist imperative, and even racist postures.

Small's recent installation, *New World [Women]* (1989), attempts to expose the ways in which the Spanish *conquistadores*' sexual mores and fantasies colored both their vision and their representation of the "New World" and its female inhabitants. By casting, from the outset, native women as lewd and lascivious, these unsympathetic "arrivistes" could rationalize acts of extreme cruelty, humiliation, rape. Again, Small has here made language both the central impetus behind and the critical focus of her installation: she uncovers for the viewer/reader a narrative by Michele de Cuneo, a fellow voyager with Columbus, that unwittingly constitutes the first documentation of rape in the New World:

While I was in the boat, I captured a very beautiful Carib woman, whom the aforesaid

Lord Admiral [Columbus] gave to me, and with whom, having brought her into my cabin, and she being naked as is their custom, I conceived the desire to take my pleasure. I wanted to put my desire to execution, but she was unwilling for me to do so, and treated me with her nails in such wise that I would have preferred never to have begun. But seeing this (in order to tell you the whole even to the end), I took a rope and thrashed her well, following which she produced such screaming and wailing as would cause you not to believe your ears. Finally we reached an agreement such that, I can tell you, she seemed to have been raised in a veritable school of harlots.

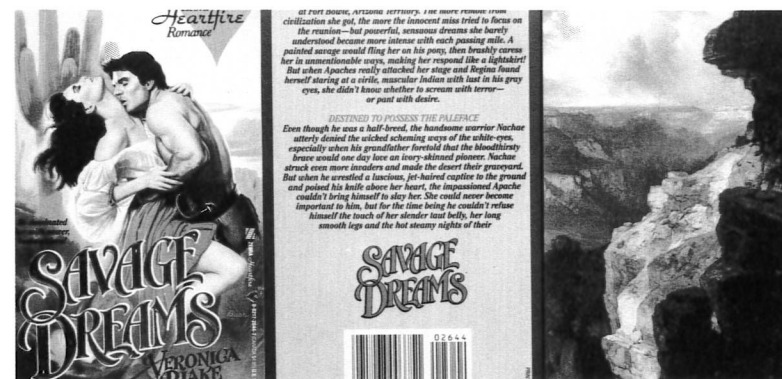
Much of this installation's resonance derives from its clear articulation of the way in which women have had roles thrust upon them by society's arbiters; and how subsequently these roles, or forced positions, are used to perpetuate further subordination. What Small reveals in fractured but potent doses of archival material is the invisible—the unacknowledged—yet pervasive tenets of our culture, tenets by which society unconsciously defines itself, justifies its actions, and propels itself forward, tenets so ingrained they surreptitiously mold our very identities, more often than not tragically. By probing these unstated assumptions as they are bedded in literature (including history) and art, Small shows them to be constructs—*man-made*, fictitious, fallible, and thus capable of being debunked. For her inquest, Small's method of choice is the collage, which by definition breaks up, wrenches open and disrupts the familiar. Seem-

ingly rational, airtight codes weighted with a received History and Meaning are scrambled and overturned, in the effort to erode extant meanings and to invoke new histories, new maps of significance.

Small's most recent project explores an aspect of history and literature in which female

phenomenally successful *contemporary* genre, the historical romance—a.k.a. the bodice-ripper—which, conventionally, throws a white captive/heroine and an Indian abductor/hero together. Historical romances, none other than the drugstore paperbacks boasting embossed covers depicting a couple in

and ruthlessly uprooted by "devils incarnate"³ who submit her to physical and spiritual afflictions, arduous journeys through the wilderness and pagan temptations which she is able to withstand only through her faith in God and her perpetual invocations of biblical passages. Humbled by her ex-



sexuality, sexism, and patriarchy blatantly cross. In *Our Bodice, Our Selves* (1991), Small illuminates a singular but popular literary phenomenon: the captivity narrative. The first literary form unique to European settlers and peculiarly inspired by the "New World" and its hazards, the captivity narrative was originally a first-person account of events, often hair-raising, experienced by the abductee of an "Indian-demon."¹ From its Puritan inception in 1682, the captivity narrative was immensely popular; and it continued to fuel the American imagination as it underwent successive incarnations—from diaristic document and religious parable to frontier adventure to sentimental romance—reflecting the colonial community's character and expansionist impulses. In Small's installation, the illustrations that accompany early examples of this literary form are juxtaposed with images taken from a

the heat of a near-kiss, are the fodder of our age's female fantasies. In Small's installation, captivity narrative and bodice-ripper images are placed side by side to shape one continuous ineluctable story of gender and race relations, that underlines status quo values: the images, although created hundreds of years apart, possess strikingly similar formulaic features, their contents mirroring the unchanged demands of the dominant ideology.

In 1682, with *A Narrative of the Captivity, Sufferings, and Removes of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, Who was taken Prisoner by the INDIANS with several others, and treated in the most barbarous and cruel Manner by those vile Savages: With many other remarkable Events during her Travels*, begins "the public record of the white woman's encounter with the wilderness" and its native inhabitants.² Here, a single female's complacent life in Puritan New England is suddenly

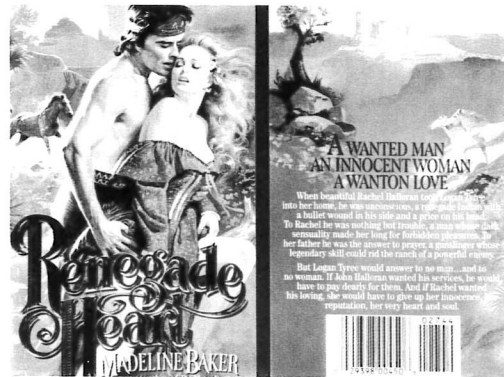
periences, she is finally delivered by Providence (in the form of an earthly ransom) from this "lively resemblance of hell."⁴ This captivity narrative successfully distilled and codified the Puritan situation in the New World. Fearful of the deep woods and the native population, Puritans turned them both to holy ends—into scourges of pride and embodiments of evil, from which white men and women were to emerge chastened and purified. The early captivity narrative, highlighting the contrast between Puritan (English "civilization") and Indian ("barbarism"), was the figurative location where the choice between "nature" and "culture" was exercised over and over again. Its distinctly religious framework of suffering and deliverance, together with its high drama and prescribed stock characters, was to permanently influence the vision of America's "errand into the wilderness."

It is surprising to learn how profoundly the captivity narrative helped drive the frontier mythology and continues to permeate our literature, history, and art. Well into the nineteenth century, as American colonists pushed westward, the ever-popular captivity narrative followed the receding frontier from New York, to Ohio, to the Far West. As the native population increasingly became an obstruction to coveted land, the captivity narratives were adjusted to suit new generations of frontierspeople who wished to see the Indian as an unindividuated, "merciless savage."⁵ The expropriation of Indian lands and the eventual extermination of Indian tribes were thus rationalized. The captivity accounts became increasingly standardized, sensationalized and outrageously propagandistic, recounting "the gory details of violent physical abuse willfully inflicted" ⁶ by this arch-villain upon "helpless virgin"—captives who, "if not already murdered, are perhaps reserved for a more cruel and savage fate."⁷

The fiction was frequently given a sexually titillating spin, adapted into a kind of "folk pornography," the offshoots of which still run deep in American thinking, even shaping female fantasies. Nothing either entranced nor roused the colonists more into abominating—even into killing—the Indian population than the tales of endangerment to "white womanhood," and her protection became the excuse for horrific massacres.

The female captive became, in the visual arts, an icon of American westward expansion, a symbol of the imperiled Christian community in a hostile land. Appearing first as

pamphlet illustrations, captivity images have spanned the gamut of visual art expression, from cartoon to fine academic painting and sculpture. No one story has magnetized artists' interest more, however, than that of Jemima Boone, Daniel Boone's daughter, who in 1776, at the age of fourteen, was captured with two other young women by Shawnee and Cherokee Indians and held for three days before being rescued by Boone's party. Collapsing a large number of visual renderings of this one narrative into a single wall piece, Small demonstrates their formal or super-

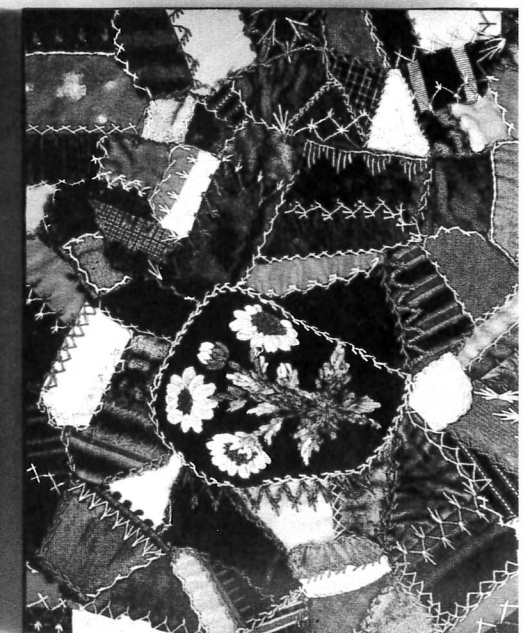
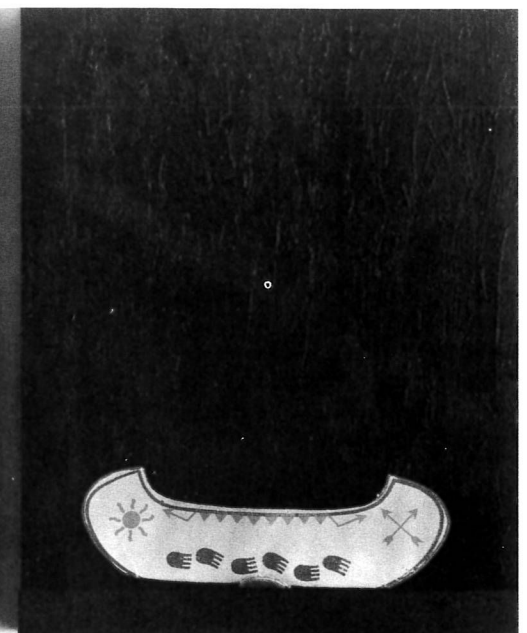


ficial elasticity as they adjust over time to the local color and topical trappings of various American "communities." The piece, however—which Small breaks up by way of its panels into a file of repetitious details—recapitulates the inescapable roles perennially spelled out for woman, Indian, and white man in the captivity narrative's space of rhetoric and representation.

Through her reproduction process, Small has lent the majority of her images a yellowish complexion suggestive of obsolescence and exhaustion. Of these, the Charles Wimar paintings of Jemima Boone could be neither more historically inaccurate nor more re-

vealing: Jemima is either on horseback, a prisoner to a rude landscape, head down bent and hands tied across her in the pose of a mocked Christ; or she's a glowing Madonna on a raft, irradiating her swarthy captors and the grim woods around her. Perhaps the most telling image is that of an 1851 lithograph by the French artist Jean-François Millet. An anomaly among Millet's usual depictions of gentle shepherdesses and reapers, this print exhibits Indians more ogre-like than human and girls with round bonnets luminous as haloes. Small's repertoire con-

tinues with images from children's readers from the 1940s and '50s which rewrite Jemima Boone's story as a cautionary fable carrying the message: "stay home." More recently a 1988 Spanish-language adventure comic book depicts the three victims as tall platinum blondes sighing that "at least they haven't attempted anything against our honor." Damaging racist stereotypes of the lustful Indian continue to be promulgated in the form of illustrations from a 1990 children's compendium of United States' history. In this text the girls are shown with hair disheveled and clothes torn from their shoulders: one of



Front cover photo:
Jemima Boone and captor, from a painting by Charles Wimar,
detail from *Our Bodice, Our Selves*, 1991

All other photos:
details from *Our Bodice, Our Selves*, 1991

Photos courtesy of Philipp Scholz Rittermann

them is actually tethered at the neck to an Indian. The potential defilement which titillated viewers of earlier captivity images here gives way to a blatantly salacious and utterly false vision of a "fate worse than death." Significantly, Small sets these images within a visual matrix of events relating to the life of Daniel Boone, the avatar—white, male, empowered and enprivileged—of westward expansion. In this way Small shows the captive to be the object less of Indian "depredations" than of the white man's far larger design of a complete dominance over nature and "savage" native peoples.

The unkempt hair, the ripped décolletage—these are visual cues also found on the covers of bodice-rippers; and it is a strange but apt meeting of imagery when Small juxtaposes the captivity narrative with the pulp romance. With as little literary pretension as visibility (because it is mostly a mail-order phenomenon), the bodice-ripper is the hugely popular descendant of the captivity narrative. Remarkably unchanged in structure from its progenitor, the typical bodice-ripper removes a beautiful, innocent, and helpless female from familiar surroundings and throws her, unwilling, into the hands of a "coppery captor." She is, like Mary Rowlandson, brought into "a vast and desolate Wilderness, I know not whither,"⁸ and made to face grave dangers which allow her ample opportunity to demonstrate how virtuous, plucky, and resourceful she is. Her maidenhead is constantly threatened but stealthfully defended, until she is united with the hero in marriage and (socially sanctioned) wild, wanton sex. But, in *these* romances, it is

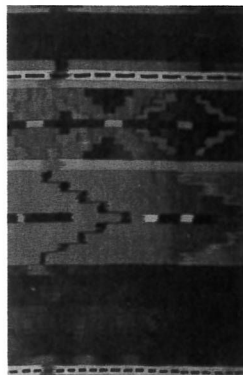


the brooding, sometimes brutal Indian who is elevated to the stature of hero. No longer a threat to society's order or an obstacle to its expansion, he is revealed in as the forbidden, exotic Other. Lifted bodily from the captivity narrative, the wicked Indian has become the libidinous lover; and, though preserved largely intact from earlier fiction, he has been tamed and humanized by the heroine's nurturing powers.

Small's "bodice-ripper" polyptic, derived from this genre's book art, is awash in soft and sensuous shades of purple, blue and yellow. Repeatedly we see a couple in period (or very little) costume embracing in a quintessentially "Western" setting half-curtailed by hothouse flowers and dotted in the distance with a tepee, canoe, or lone butte. The same clues to racial and cultural differences appear in panel after panel: the woman is fair, with full rounded breasts, her bodice unlaced, uncorseted, or exposed; the man is buffed, bronzed (rarely really dark-skinned), generically handsome, and is dressed in buckskin and bandana. A sinuous typeface is often used for the cover title, which announces in passionate word couplings either the nature of the relationship or one of the protagon-

nists appearance and character (e.g., *Silken Savage*, *Comanche Bride*, *Autumn Fury*, *Savage Heat*). Small also makes use of the book's cover copy, lifting into her installation verbal descriptions like "voluptuous," "sensual," "fiery," "forbidden," "delicious," and "scorching." Apart from the erotic scenes, much of the bodice-ripper's plot revolves upon the heroine's being broken—domesticated—into the lay of her abductor-seducer's land: her learning to build a tepee, to cook ground mescal cakes, to gather maple sap. Indeed, these stories implicitly restate and reendorse one of the central social myths in which romance readers, as members of a patriarchal society, are necessarily embedded: that of an exclusive and permanent union between man and woman in which the sexual division of labor charges her with domestic and nurturing tasks.⁹ Again and again the reader visits this union *in potentia*, confirming its inevitability and escaping the injustices and dissatisfactions borne out by such an arrangement in the real world.

Small's polyptichs reiterate visual clichés in order to underscore the narrow and inexorable margin accorded to female representation and behavior in the realms of both history and fantasy. Visual rep-



etition, and subsequently visual attenuation, is further accompanied by Small's incorporating lists of words gathered from captivity narratives and bodice-rippers that define women solely in terms of "innocent purity," "vulnerability," and "chaste beauty," in contrast to the white man's "heroicism," "solitude," and "stoicism," or the Indian's "savagery" and "heathenism." The words, like the images they complement, build a "palisade of language"¹⁰ around the woman, the Indian, and the frontiersman that inhibits the reader/viewer's transcending the prescribed norm. The poverty and constraint of image, language, and choice is reflected in Small's very technique: not only is her material, both visual and verbal, scavenged from existing sources, it is also depleted through color xerox reproduction, i.e., through a removal upon removal of an already mediated image which leads to an exhaustion of the *meaning* behind the form. Small cuts at received conventions from within, emptying them out by means of sheer redundancy and excess, forcing them to speak in their own tongue to their hollowness and thoughtlessness. Repetition itself becomes emblematic of the synthetic, formulaic nature of our cultural scripts, scripts as commonplace and artificial as the low-brow accoutrements with which Small ornaments her installation—fake cacti, toy canoes, "Daniel Boone" paper cups, mass-manufactured Navajo-style fabrics. To reproduce captivity-narrative images without reproducing their ideology, Small carefully contextualizes each element of her work, identifying sources, specifying dates, and naming artists and/or authors.

Threading, finally, between the images, word-lists, and objects Small has assembled, is a patchwork quilt design borrowed from wrapping paper—a disembodied trace of female presence possibly more generous and open in its significance than the narrative and the roles it laces (i.e., roles for women confined to playing the "captive," or the excuse for retaliatory violence, or the sexy maiden, or the selfless nurturer).¹¹ In juxtaposing diverse materials and sources, in proceeding by imagery incrementally pieced together, and in gradually shaping a vast, colorful, renegade history all its own, Small's installation both literally and figuratively recalls a lively crazy quilt—a medley of texts and images rearranged to illumine covert connections between our society's seemingly distinct attitudes toward gender, race, nature (vs. culture), otherness—attitudes which promote and maintain a "frontier psychology"¹² even today. Whether the subject is Indian or infidel, the fictive terrain of America's "Old West" or of the recent Middle Eastern "Desert Storm," the same narrative structures and cultural archetypes govern our readings of events, of history: the patriarch cum righteous protector, the barbarous and swarthy villain, the innocent women and children in a foreign, inhospitable terrain, the stock characters are all in place. Small, in trafficking—in deftly stitching—between past and present images and representations, exposes their likeness. She employs the cliché only to challenge our continuing complacency before it, urging us toward a more discursive, unprogrammed, individual way of thinking. Her installa-

tions encourage us to set ideas and images loose from their received narrative prison so that, by perceiving the world much more richly, we may actually make it so. ■

NOTES

The title of this essay was suggested by Robert McDonell. Many thanks to Prudence Carlson for her illuminating editorial insights, and, of course, to Deborah Small for giving unstinting of her time, generosity, humor, and thought-provoking observations.

1. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 136.

2. Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 17.

3. Slotkin, *Ibid.*, 109.

4. Mary Rowlandson, "A Narrative of the Captivity, Suffering, and Removes of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, Who was taken Prisoner by the INDIANS with several others, and treated in the most barbarous and cruel Manner by those vile Savages: With many other remarkable Events during her Travels," quoted in Alden T. Vaughan and Edward W. Clark, eds., *Puritans Among the Indians: Accounts of Captivity and Redemption, 1676-1824* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 36.

5. James Levernier and Hennig Cohen, eds., *The Indians and Their Captives* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 64.

6. Dorothy Behen, "Captivity Story," quoted in Richard Drinnon, *White Savage* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 106.

7. Levernier, *Ibid.*, 64, 83. The violation of captives was highly unlikely given the fact that tribal mores prohibited rape among Eastern Indians who were the protagonists of most of these accounts.

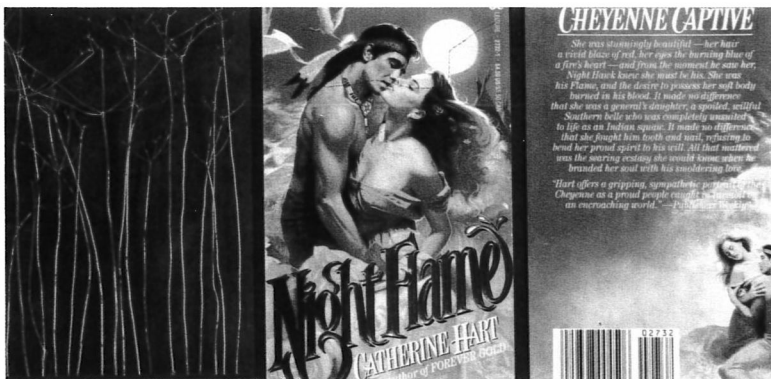
8. Mary Rowlandson, *Ibid.*, 37.

9. Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 123.

10. Slotkin, *Ibid.*, 116.

11. In this way, Small also intertwines and implicates a symbol of her own pioneer roots and family history into the larger story of westward expansion.

12. Slotkin, *Ibid.*, 5.



Deborah Small currently lives and works in San Diego, California, where she is Acting Director of the Warren College Writing Program at the University of California, San Diego. She has worked collaboratively on numerous inter-disciplinary projects, and is currently working on *1492* which will be published by the *Monthly Review Press*.

Artists Space programs are made possible by: National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, Institute of Museum Services, New York State Council on the Arts, and New York City Department of Cultural Affairs; AT&T Foundation, Inc., The David Berlant Foundation: Color, Light, Motion, The Bohen Foundation, The Cowles Charitable Trust, Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, Inc., Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, The Greenwall Foundation, Jerome Foundation, Inc., The Dorothea L. Leonhardt Foundation, Inc., The Joe and Emily Lowe Foundation, Inc., The Menemsha Fund, Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, Betty Parsons Foundation, The Reed Foundation, Inc., The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc., and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.; American Express Company, The Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A., Consolidated Edison Company of New York, Inc., Equitable Real Estate Group, Inc., General Atlantic Corporation, R.H. Macy and Company, Inc., Morgan Guaranty Trust Company of New York, Philip Morris Companies Inc., and U.S. Trust Company of New York; as well as Artwatch, Galleries in Support of Artists Space, and numerous Friends.

Artists Space is a member of the National Association of Artists Organizations (NAAO) and Media Alliance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Artists Space is pleased to present *Our Bodice, Our Selves* a new installation by Deborah Small. Small's installation is challenging and amusing in its conflation of current popular culture in the form of pulp romance novel kitsch, and early American historical folklore which together yield pointed commentary on our ingrained cultural myths. How many times in the drugstore we pass, unconscious, the ample breasted female barely yielding to her brawny native captor without questioning from where these stereotypes evolve. Small's area of investigation probes these myths and brings us new understanding.

Our thanks go to Madeleine Grynstejn for her organization and enthusiasm in curating this project, and for her insightful essay. Deborah Small was a pleasure to work with throughout and we thank her for a wonderful and provocative project.

This project is funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Susan Wyatt
Executive Director

Connie Butler
Curator