



Maryland Art Place

MAPPING the Alternative

20th ANNUAL CRITICS' RESIDENCY PROGRAM

MAPPING the Alternative

by Lilly Wei

This exhibition marks the twentieth anniversary of Maryland Art Place's (MAP) Annual *Critics' Residency* Program, which is certainly an event to be celebrated. Because of the special circumstances, I felt an even greater responsibility than usual while making the selection — which I wanted to be representative of the artists who had applied — although as an outside juror and curator, I always feel greater responsibility when elsewhere, in the way that guests do when visiting. To invite an outsider to select artists and works is thought to insure a certain impartiality and objectivity, though in reality, it is merely substituting another kind of subjectivity, one conditioned by different vantage points and different foci. Mine is filtered through the lens of New York, and, because I have been traveling extensively in the past several years, with national and international overlays. That said, an outside juror *is* more independent, lacking intricate ties to the participants and with presumably no vested interests, no politics and personalities to juggle.

My process was rather straightforward and, for purposes of demystification, I would like to share some of the considerations that governed this year's choices. First, I did not search for a theme but instead chose artists whose works I found visually and conceptually compelling — although the elimination is always difficult and I always wish I could include more artists, more work — reflecting as they did an engagement with current discourse, with what was 'out there', in projects that were thoughtful, original, and well-executed.

I was also curious to see if the works, chosen by means of my un-predetermined system, would nonetheless fall within certain interconnected thematic or stylistic parameters since the selection manifested my sensibilities and that, in the end, was not so undetermined after all. (Also, while I chose the critics and the artists, the actual selection of the final works for the exhibition was more of a collaborative effort). I was also specifically interested in choosing a variety of mediums, since contemporary art is represented by so many.

While most of the submissions had something of value, I looked for those that were more experimental, with a conceptual edge and a strong narrative, even in the abstract work, and was well-disposed toward hybridizations of form and content — although painters dominated the applicant pool and therefore my choices. Of the nine artists, three are painters: Timothy App, Maggie Michael, and Zachary Thornton; two others are photographers, Andrew Cook and Elizabeth Crisman; then a sculptor, Lesley McTague, although she works in a variety of materials; and the rest, Jessie Lehson, Julia Kim Smith, and Cory Wagner, are installation/mixed media artists with a performative or interactive component to their practice.

Up to this point, the MAP project was much like other showcases for emerging, regional artists, though the *Critics' Residency* has a unique feature, at least in my experience: the curator was also asked to select writers to contribute critical essays for the exhibition. While it is often the responsibility of the curator to write the catalog text, MAP has structured the artists' residency program so that the curator mentors the critics who will write additional essays. I had never done this before in quite this way, and I was intrigued by the concept. I like the idea of other eyes looking critically at the work and, in particular, I liked the idea of peer evaluation, since most of the artists are young, and young critics might be more empathetic, with less aesthetic baggage to further open up the inquiry.

In my case, the number of writers chosen determined the number of artists in *MAPPING the Alternative*. I picked three writers and then decided to allocate three artists to each of them, for the sake of equity, although the specific assigning of artist to writer was also decided in discussions between the writers and me. The writers are all recent

graduates or still in school and also represent a range of interests. Justin Gershwin is knowledgeable in several fields, with a degree in economics as well as an MA in art history, specializing in modern art. Brooke Lampley is an art historian who has studied modern and contemporary art history and is currently working on her doctorate, focusing on abstraction in early 20th century European figurative painting. Lauren Pennell holds a BFA degree and has hands-on expertise in artistic production, but has also studied art history and critical writing. These three stood out because I thought they were articulate without relying on jargon and were able to present the work vividly to the reader. They were able to discuss art not only objectively, within a context, but also with deep personal conviction.

I don't do this consciously while looking at work or curating exhibitions, but the Guerilla Girls taught me to count in the 1980s; it is a simple but often instructive habit. So here are some demographics. I chose young artists for the most part—recent BFA or MFA graduates in their 20s, a few somewhat older and one with a long, productive career behind him. Although 'emerging artist' does not necessarily mean young artist, I think of it as a term that applies most aptly to young artists. It might also be noted that the participating artists are represented by five women and four men and the writers by two women and one man. As far as ethnicity goes, I'm not sure what the breakdown is and identity politics did not much figure in this group of work. While some of the art was political, most was based on the personal or the formal.

We all met for the first time this past autumn, in Baltimore, hosted by MAP's invaluable and indefatigable Director of Programs, Lisa Lewenz. It was much more of a collaborative venture than I had anticipated, and as such, rewarding. Artists and writers often complain that they spend so much time alone, a state that is addressed by the current flourishing of creative cooperatives and collaborations.

Our collaborative venture began by visiting all of the selected artists' studios together, with Lisa as cicerone: a gang of five. It was, however, hopefully more of an exchange than an interrogation, as we asked questions of the artists and discussed the work from multiple points of view, which faceted the work in unexpected ways as each of us offered different observations and criticisms, expanded on each other's comments, and listened to explanations about methods and intentions.

From these visits, I conditionally selected the work with the understanding that the critics would work with the artists and could change the specific work if necessary. Some of the artists' projects were still in proposal form, yet to be begun, so the exhibition will have its surprises for everyone. It is exactly this kind of flexibility that organizations like MAP are capable of, without commercial pressure so that the work can grow in a more organic, spontaneous manner. There is always a vital need in our culture for places like MAP which gives artists a venue for exhibitions they might not otherwise have, and to showcase the depth and breadth of art in areas away from the so-called centers.

It is fortunate that Baltimore has such a place as MAP, and that MAP in turn has so many good artists both to support and to support it, many of whom are associated with the Maryland Institute College of Art, as well as the many other area schools which are producing their share of new, young talent. The last twenty years, I am sure, are just the prologue to a future of continuing excellence. I congratulate MAP, its staff, Lisa Lewenz and, in particular, the artists and writers of this anniversary show for doing such an exemplary job; it was both illuminating and an immense pleasure to have worked with all of you.

Memory and Disintegration: On Zachary Thornton, Jessie Lehson, and Julia Kim Smith

by Justin Gershwin

Painter Zachary Thornton sits beneath a stained-glass window and stares at his painting *A Mid-Suburban Night's Dream*. His eyes gleam. A certain rapture takes place. And suddenly—it makes perfect sense: Thornton's studio is here, inside an old church, because his paintings are not portraits so much as the preserved relics of a private religion.

It's a religion whose pantheon and list of holy objects he paints with almost obsessive detail. Thornton is trying to recapture certain memories already bleached by time, and to restore them to their original colors and meanings. It's a difficult task. In walking the tight-rope that separates past from future, now from then, Thornton could lose balance at any moment and tumble, head-over-shoes, into the quicksand that swallows bad poets. But he doesn't lose balance.

In *A Mid-Suburban Night's Dream*, Thornton grabs hold of two memories and brings them together in a swift, poetic collision. A girl in a pink nightgown sits in a turbulent darkness, gazing out at the viewer. Her eyes are dark and intense. She sags beneath the weight of an incredible sadness, and brings a hand to her mouth, almost nervously. She is beautiful in a way that only lovesickness can bring: isolated and yet filled to overflowing with sensuality; she is helpless, she is confused, and she appears almost by magic—as a kind of dream image that will presently fade.

Just beyond her shoulder is a white suburban house, lit up at night. It has been painted from an old photograph Thornton once took—in the neighborhood where his girlfriend used to live, where they met and fell in love. Like many young romantics, Thornton finds a special beauty in the salad days of relationships. The viewer from suburbia will imagine smelling the trimmed grass in this picture, recall the soaring trees, feel the sticky hand of a teenage lover.

The girl in pink has also been painted from an old photograph. She is an ex-girlfriend, and Thornton took the photograph while dating her. Her presence here is captivating. The neighborhood that will one day replace her has been “collaged” into what would otherwise be an ordinary portrait. This complicates the work with a very wonderful, profound, and dramatic sense of nostalgia.

“My work deals with nostalgia and the unknown,” Thornton says. The unknown: it's a lovely idea—almost a religious idea—and Thornton has found and explored it again and again in his work. He encourages the unknown by allowing chance to play a role in his painting. Every one of his paintings is based on forgotten photographs he

rediscovers, at random, “under piles of old junk.” If the photograph resonates with certain memories he has—of love, in particular—he will “preserve” it through realistic, narrative portraiture.

But the actual narratives implied by Thornton's portraiture are less time-based narratives than cinematic stills from a secret, memory-driven film. *The Letter* is a powerful example of this quality. Here a slim, pretty girl with bobbed hair stands looking down at an unseen letter she is holding. It is unclear if the letter brings good or bad news: she could smile or burst into tears at any second. But certainly the letter will change her life. Her surroundings are blurred, because the world is reeling around her.

In the end, Thornton's work becomes a kind of snapshot literature, and he himself, a poet who paints. As with all unique poets, one wonders how long he can support the delicacy of his own solitude. Love-memories are like thin, wet sheets of Japanese rice paper, disintegrating even as you handle them.

The delicate balance of memory and disintegration also provides a theme for sculptor and installation artist Jessie Lehson, whose medium of choice is dirt. Lehson collects dirt. She has a “dirt room” where she stores buckets and buckets of the dirt she has received or “stolen” from around the world.

Lehson's fascination with dirt began one day at age eighteen, when she was sitting outside in the town where she grew up. She was upset. She understood that she needed to escape, and she did, but not before grabbing a handful of Maryland dirt: a collection she labels “Home” and returns to again and again in her work, like a rare, favorite shade of paint.

And so the dirt-based art Lehson creates relies on and explores the notion of memory. In an earlier installation piece, *Dirt Floor II*, dirt taken from “Home” and from the yards or places where two friends and one ex-lover lived was organized into four neat squares on the floor. Each person's dirt filled one square, and every square bordered two others. “Dirt is a tangible expression of place,” Lehson says.

And *places*, she might have added, belong to certain people. Here Lehson used that quality to tease the boundary between absence and presence. *Dirt Floor II* is both a coming together of different people by way of memory, and a cemetery-plot-like memorial to them. One can imagine a dead body buried under every dirt square.

There is, then, an undeniably morbid character to Lehson's dirt-based art. It comes through in her allegiance



Jessie Lehson
Fill, 2006
wood, Mylar sifted
soil from Meg,
Robert, Heidi, Justin
72" x 144"



Zachary Thornton
A Winter Evening
2006, oil on canvas
28" x 56"



Julia Kim Smith
Anonymous
Rage: Baltimore
(detail), 2005
found signs, stretcher
bar, plexiglass
approximately
144" x 144"

to earthwork sculpture: Lehson is interested in nature. Her use of dirt, she says, brings nature and its often overlooked beauty into physical confrontation with the viewer. This is true. But her use of dirt as an example of that beauty, in neat, un-natural squares, goes one step beyond that. It confronts the viewer with nature's ultimate and unbiased role. All living creatures turn to dust. Lehson is careful to sift her dirt into a fine powder when she installs, and in this way seems to affirm that base, floor-level reality. Finally her viewer confronts not only nature, but death, and total physical disintegration.

Lehson collects dirt, and not, say, grass or tree limbs or rainwater, because she suffers from a disease that will slowly eat away at her insides unless her body can produce a sufficient amount of iron—a mineral found only in certain kinds of soil.

In her currently installed piece, *Fill* (2006), Lehson studies this personal and unseen relationship. She has collected four different types of iron-rich dirt, has created four square depressions in the floor to contain them, and has tested each dirt square for its iron content, which appears as wall text.

Here, again, Lehson explores the balance of memory and disintegration. But now she does so using her own mortality. She includes four types of iron-rich dirt because four is the number of blood transfusions she has received. And so *Fill* describes a kind of self-portrait, containing in its very medium the one element Lehson needs to survive. All four squares lie beneath the floor like burial plots, filled with dirt so red it resembles blood. Lehson gives her portrait a sense of tragedy by including the wall text, where posted iron content reminds the viewer that, ultimately, the difference between life and death can depend on something as arbitrary as a number.

The conceptual artist Julia Kim Smith expands on the theme of memory and disintegration with *Anonymous Rage: Baltimore*, an installation of cardboard signage she has collected from homeless people in Baltimore.

"Anonymous rage" is a phrase that was first coined in my master's thesis, at the University of Oregon. It refers to graffiti, and, in particular, to the ultimate purpose of every graffiti writer: the assertion of presence and self-identity in an impersonal and anonymous space.

The idea of anonymous rage extends beyond wall writing, to also include cultural graffiti—for instance: the first "colored" jazz musicians who stood on street corners in New Orleans, blasting music at the passersby, who ignored them. Or: early African-American sports celebrities, like boxer Jack Johnson—whose victories over white-skinned opponents were seen as cultural vandalism.

Today, in urban spaces such as Baltimore, there is perhaps no better example of anonymous rage than the

homeless people who stand on street corners holding up cardboard signs that say things like:

"HELP—NEED FOOD."

"COLD, STARVING, HOMELESS. PLEASE HELP."

Homeless signage represents a kind of graffiti—because every sign has been written with one goal in mind: to rage against the anonymous streets that entrap the writer, creating a miniature billboard which advertises financial ruin, emotional pain, utter desolation, and raw human disintegration.

Like most graffiti, the signage is often ignored. Homeless people are invisible. They exist in transparency—just as "niggers" and "colored people" did in America's social infancy. In Baltimore, a majority of the homeless are African American. This (coincidence?) raises a political question.

Smith's *Anonymous Rage: Baltimore* attempts to answer that question, with a conceptual installation that arranges dozens of collected "homeless signs" into what resembles a lean-to shanty. Each cardboard sign hovers from the ceiling at an angle, framed in two-sided glass, and every frame allows a thin transparent mat of space between it and the sign it contains. This mat of space is echoed by the larger grid-like space that isolates one frame from another. The signage fits into a plane, and as the viewer enters the room, the plane presents itself as a cardboard wall, spotted with desperate handwriting.

If a homeless person was invited to enter the gallery and live beneath Smith's elaborate shanty, the overall effect would be a notch more visceral, sadistic, and terrifying than it already is. Instead Smith allows the viewer to play the wandering role of homeless man. We enter the room expecting to see "pretty art" and find ourselves trapped in a hellish structure built from echoed pleas for help. Smith invites us into a transparent home, allowing us to "slum it" for a moment as we stand confronting the signage and shaking our heads at the reality of homelessness. We confront this reality, and just for a moment, we care.

But then we all eventually walk away—and this is when Smith succeeds. She understands that whatever concern we have about homelessness will fade and vanish upon our exit from the MAP gallery, just as all the thousands of homeless signs she didn't collect will also fade and vanish.

Anonymous Rage: Baltimore does not address homeless people alone, but the relationship they hold with society. Handmade cardboard signs that would otherwise weather-rot and disintegrate like their makers, are now preserved and displayed like memorial tablets—like epitaphs to a dead society we are unwilling to join, notice, or assist. The least we can do, Smith shouts at us, is remember.

We can try, but we won't succeed. Homeless signage belongs to the same shadowy plane where Thornton's love memories persist, and where Lehson's dirt finds definition.

Biennial at the Delaware Center for Contemporary Art in Wilmington, DE. Crisman currently lives in Baltimore, MD where she teaches at the Community College of Baltimore County and continues creating photographic assemblages.

Jessie Lehson was born during the memorable blizzard of 1979 and grew up in the Baltimore vicinity. In 2002, Lehson received a BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art, and has exhibited frequently in recent years. Her most recent exhibitions include: *Sculpture Unbound*, Edison Place Gallery, Washington, DC (2006); *1st National Juried Exhibit*, Pyramid Atlantic Art Center, Silver Spring, MD (2005); *Re:place*, Gateway Corporation, Silver Spring, MD (2005); *Cicada*, Spare Room, Baltimore, MD (2004); *Phenomenology*, Meyerhoff Gallery, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD (2004); *Walter's on the Wall*, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD (2003); *Beauty and the Mundane*, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, MD (2003); *Wildflower*, School 33 Art Center, Baltimore, MD (2001); and *Painting Exhibition*, Chioistro di S. Maria delle Grazie, Sorrento, Italy (1998). In addition, Lehson's work has been featured and reviewed in many publications, including: *The Baltimore Sun*; *The Washington Post*; *The Baltimore City Paper*; *Hand Papermaking*; *Art Source*; and *The Washington Post Metro Express*, as well as being mentioned on National Public Radio.

Lesley McTague was born in San Francisco, California in 1981 and has lived throughout the United States and in South Korea. First trained as a painter while attending high school at Carver Center for Arts and Technology in Towson, McTague switched to fibers after a year at the Maryland Institute College of Art, where she received a BFA in 2003. Subsequently, McTague was awarded a traveling fellowship from MICA and toured extensively throughout Turkey and Egypt, documenting the design and ornamentation of Islamic art and architecture. Recently, McTague exhibited at School 33 Art Center in Baltimore, received a 2004 Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Award, and held a summer apprenticeship at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, PA. She has assisted several artists in the creation and installation of their work, most notably Baltimore-based artists Annet Couwenberg and Piper Shepard, as well as internationally acclaimed artists Ann Hamilton and Do-Ho Suh. McTague currently lives and works in Baltimore, MD.

Maggie Michael was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1974. She received an MFA from American University in Washington, DC in 2002, an MA from San Francisco State University in 2000, and a BFA from the University of Wisconsin, in Milwaukee, WI in 1996. Michael's *Explosion* drawings were made in her studio at the Millennium Art Center, a short distance from the US Capitol and are constructed to mirror cycles of violence, despair, and hope. Michael has exhibited her paintings and drawings in Los Angeles, CA; Raleigh and Winston-Salem, NC; Baltimore, MD; Denver, CO; Washington, DC; New York, NY; and

Miami, FL. In 2004 Michael received a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant and a DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities Artists' Fellowship. Michael's work was acquired by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and she has been featured in *At Length* Magazine and also reviewed in *The Washington Post*, *Art Papers*, and *Art in America*.

Julia Kim Smith was born in Berkeley, California before an "Apple" meant a computer, and grew up in Murray Hill, NJ, Oak Ridge, TN; Los Alamos, NM; and West Lafayette, IN. Smith received an MFA from University of Michigan, Ann Arbor where she received a Rackham Fellowship. She has been an adjunct faculty member at the Maryland Institute College of Art, as well as a senior designer at WETA in Washington, DC. In recent years, she has exhibited at many galleries, including: the Creative Alliance at the Patterson, Baltimore, MD (2005); *Six Feet Under: Make Nice*, White Box, New York, NY (2004); *Snap to the Grid*, Los Angeles Center for Digital Art, Los Angeles, CA (2004); *National Juried Exhibition*, Long Beach Island Foundation of the Arts and Sciences, Loveladies, NJ (2001); and *School 33 National Juried Exhibition*, School 33 Art Center, Baltimore, MD (1999). Smith is presently working on *10*, a book with Francesca Danieli about a courageous group of women with breast cancer (past or present) who attempt to illustrate what they're feeling when faced with the reality of their mortality.

Zachary Thornton was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1979, and spent much of his childhood exploring the trees, backyards, and alleys of Charles Village, where he was raised. Though always possessing an interest in art, after studying painting with his mentor, Mr. Victor Janishefski at Calvert Hall College High School in Baltimore, his passion for art emerged. After graduating in 1997, Thornton began studying at the Maryland Institute College of Art, where he received a BFA in 2001. His art has appeared in exhibitions in Annapolis and Baltimore, MD as well as at Post Logic in New York, NY and at Frameworks in Santa Barbara, CA. Thornton works as a portrait and narrative painter, though he continues to explore many subjects and media, and has been reviewed often, including a recent feature by J. Bowers in the *Baltimore Citypaper* and Glenn McNatt of the *Baltimore Sun*.

Cory Wagner was born in Buffalo, Wyoming in 1977. After studying psychology at the University of Wyoming, in 2002 he received a BA in sculpture and painting from Montana State University-Billings in Billings, MT. Wagner moved to Baltimore in 2003 to attend the Maryland Institute College of Art, where he anticipates receiving an MFA this spring. Wagner has exhibited widely throughout the Northwest and Mid-Atlantic regions; recently completed a private commission in Brooklyn, NY; and later this summer will work as the Assistant Director of The MICA in Tribeca: New York Summer Intensive, a special Manhattan program of the Maryland Institute College of Art.

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cover: Zachary Thornton, *A Mid-Suburban Night's Dream* (detail), 2005, oil on canvas, 34" x 44"