

Are we just going to
stand and watch this?

Barbara Weissberger





Are we just going to stand and watch this?
Barbara Weissberger

Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center
Buffalo, NY, April 19–May 30, 2008



#986, 2007, watercolor on paper, 25" x 25"



This spread, from top:

Are we just going to stand and watch this?, 2008, archival inkjet prints adhered directly to wall, approximate dimensions 10' x 40'

Detail of *Are we just going to stand and watch this?*

Next spread:

#978, 2007, watercolor on paper, 25" x 25"

Even In Consumer Glut

Consumer culture, in all its hobbled glory, is well-targeted fodder for contemporary artists. They, like the rest of us, revel in the wonders of the newest gleaming widget while remaining cognizant of the pitfalls within the systemic mechanisms that give us the widget. It remains persistently ambiguous whether the work of Barbara Weissberger is critiquing or relishing garish overabundance. Weissberger's work slyly occupies a space between these two possibilities. While icons of consumerism are often acutely and brashly depicted in her works—not only displayed, but *splayed* before us—they mingle effortlessly with icons of the natural world, perpetually collapsing into new, beautiful hybrids.

Part of the intrigue in Weissberger's work is how it blatantly eschews subtlety yet nonetheless ends up being immensely subtle. Among the broad panoply of images she uses, no effort is made to veil or disguise them. They are configured and reconfigured endlessly, but Weissberger makes use of these images directly and bluntly, aiming to transform them without alterations so radical as to make them unrecognizable. It's a tricky maneuver, to be obvious and subtle, but it's a duality that Weissberger smoothly navigates.

In the large wall piece that anchors the exhibition and gives it its title, she uses a blatant Rorschach vibe—rendered in super-sized proportion—to underscore that meaning here is mutable and not reliant on

any single perspective. It has no more singular meaning than an inkblot. Weissberger's imagery is unapologetically manipulated by the cheapest of cheap tricks—collage in all the works and mirrored imagery in the wall piece. With all the parts remaining essentially recognizable, the effect of the work comes through its cumulative whomp.

What is immediately obvious is that a concise application of cheap trick methodology can create an enormous effect and concoct a transformation that cannot be anticipated. *Are we just going to stand and watch this?*, the wall piece that dominates the exhibition, reflects itself along horizontal and vertical planes, reminiscent of a verdant landscape reflected in a body of water. Except for the middle of the work—where the imagery is elongated into an unrecognizable expanse—all the images are equally front and center and obvious. Meat appears as meat, flowers as flowers, trucks and tires as trucks and tires, and buff bods as buff bods. The cumulative effect of the work collapses all this direct imagery into a baroque abstraction. Lush and decorative at a distance, the work reveals itself to be of equal visual allure—and increasing comic zing—in detail, as separate sections define their own abstracted island within the whole.

The modular commingling of parts suggests a connection between all the things represented. There are accomplishments of consumerism, end products of a technological and material-based

culture, as well as representing the dross and effluvia of that culture.

They also point to an amalgam of the natural and the man-made world and Weissberger does not give one more weight than the other. (Though Weissberger's use of flowers also directs us to the commodification of the natural world.) Both become equally resilient components of an expansive and alluring whole. Slabs of raw meat—red, happy and full of blood, excitement, and life—are no less seductive than a line of flowers. Both have an emphatic and irresistible punch to them.

Weissberger is continually playing with notions of attraction and revulsion in very complex ways. Her endless cuts of meat are undeniably beautiful—both by the cumulative effect of their new arrangement and in and of themselves. It is a peculiar, and peculiarly funny, aspect to the work—it's not that the meat ever looks like anything else, but it's as bright and attractive as big gobs of candy. While showing the work to a class of grade school children, one little girl asked, "Can we taste it?"

Weissberger is fairly specific about the sets of images she is drawing from and, apart from the organic emblems of flowers and mushrooms and the occasional patch of blue sky, much of her imagery is beefy and masculine. Piles of tires and big, tough trucks reside alongside hamburgers and she dilutes their implicit machismo by transforming them into excessively floral and decora-

tive frills. She underscores the implicit absurdity in these icons while simultaneously juicing up their sex appeal.

Weissberger has made certain that formal properties of contrast, brightness, and color remain consistent between the images. It's all a little hyperreal and this also plays into the work's overall effect. It blossoms that much more aggressively because all its component parts share a similar intensity. And it suggests something about the artifacts of cultural production—when considered for their formal properties and free from moral implications (and obligations), they can prove to be stunningly satisfying and of equal beauty. If we're just going to stand and watch this, it might as well knock us out.

None of which dilutes a critical layer from the objects highlighted. By sheer volume, we are continually reminded of heedless consumption, while simultaneously holding the emblems of that consumption in rapt adoration. Here as well, we see an additional duality—a sense of volume, quantity and overkill within a form that is, all things considered, fairly lean. Weissberger's use of negative space prevents this dense mass of imagery from becoming onerous or didactic—it remains visually and figuratively airy. Her treatment of negative space around the work punctuates particular details in the work, teasing all the end points—meat turning to mushrooms turning to flowers—into sharper relief. Weissberger could

have rendered the wall piece as ridiculously overwrought, teeming thickly with fatuous cultural products. Instead, her arrangement is almost skeletal, consumerism as a luxuriant fossil.

As effectively as the larger wall piece hybridizes representational imagery into a new abstraction, the same maneuver appears even more organic in many of Weissberger's watercolor pieces. Drawing from the same sets of images, the watercolors often cluster disparate images into a new, chunky googob within which we can still see the individual images, but almost at a point where they are about to become permanently congealed. Representation again veers toward abstraction but in a manner wholly unique from the photo-collaged wall piece.

And if the wall piece evokes the sensation of overblown, ornate jewelry, the watercolors read like quixotic brooches. If negative space around the wall piece tweaks its ends into sharper relief, negative space in the watercolors contributes something closer to a contemplative mood, as the huddled groupings are suspended in off-center positions or enter from the edge of the paper. With the added subtle touch of the occasional wash of blue in the background, we experience the sensation of something that is slightly askew, but still eloquent.

Even when the watercolors do not cluster the images together, their intuitive connections are clear. A detail of a tire on one side, a detail of a hamburger on the other, and a hand gently

holding a tire and hovering above both—different, meaty circles wrought by the hand of man. Both are useful in their own way, attractive in their own right, and loaded as symbols of cultural excess. But again, Weissberger applies no particular judgment. Highlighting their complicated realities does not imply obscuring whatever potential poetry may be lurking.

In one watercolor, a magpie (with the wing of a blue jay superimposed upon it) is arrayed in front of a section of muscleman, all brawny hip and flexing arm. Far off on the other side of the work we see a quiet speech bubble: "...WONDERFUL." It's a simple juxtaposition that reiterates a notion common throughout Weissberger's work. At some level, the things that attract us and the things that repulse us share a similar strange, dreamy beauty.

—JOHN MASSIER
VISUAL ARTS CURATOR, HALLWALLS



Ripped and Stacked: When art meets muscle in the work of Barbara Weissberger

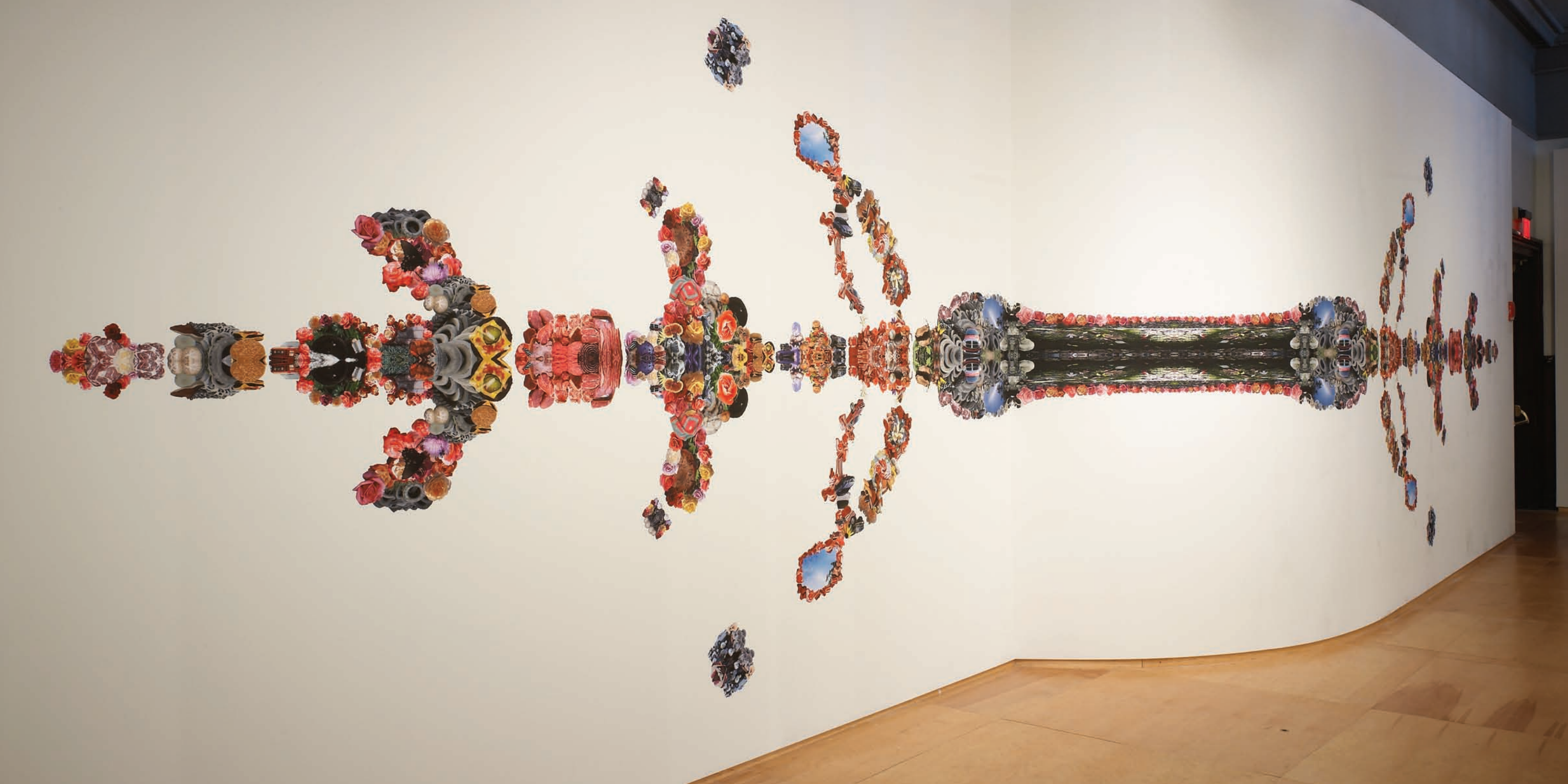
It is rare when the incongruous worlds of art and muscle overlap, yet in advance preparations for the 2008 Carnegie International, this strange intersection presented itself firsthand. Months away from the opening of the exhibition, attempts by the museum's Contemporary Art department to colonize the nearest hotel for artists on opening weekend were thwarted by the reservationist's rebuttal that a majority of rooms were reserved for a bodybuilding event that same weekend. My mind couldn't help but wander to any number of hypothetical meetings in the hotel bar between artists and deeply-tanned bodybuilders. Suddenly, words such as "stacked" and "ripped," so often used in bodybuilding lingo, could denote not only a set of perfectly-formed pectorals but Mario Merz's stacked-newspaper sculptures or Mark Bradford's torn-poster collage "paintings". The juxtaposition of a bodybuilder with an artist articulates a perfect metaphor for Barbara Weissberger's unique body of work. Namely, the intersection of the artificial and the natural both within and between these entities parallels her own complicated ambivalence towards competing factions of our world. Her practice reflects an ongoing attempt to decipher and engage with specific symbolic imagery from the manmade and natural and a desire to recombine this iconography into a new aesthetic.

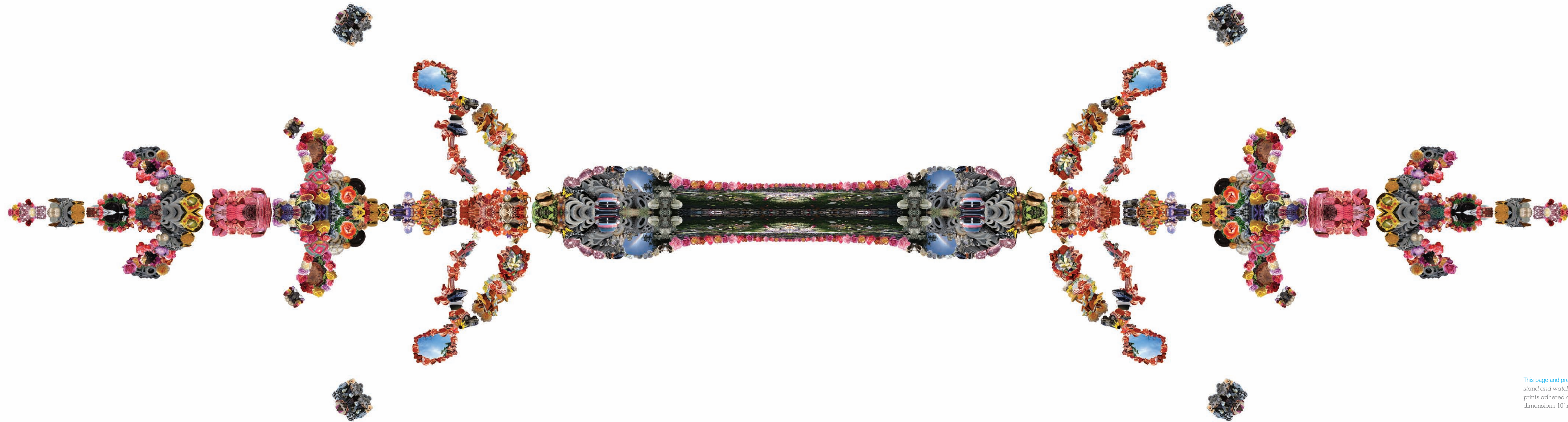
Weissberger's particular iconography—in the artist's words, "images from muscle magazines and my own photographs of hamburgers, beef, 1970's crocheted blankets, butterflies, flowers, heaps of tires, cars, mushrooms and other vivid imagery"—denotes a fascination with the opposing forces of man made and organic as well as the strange, colorful, mass culture "landscape" of good ol' America. Her early works on paper consisted of fluid, free-form, and uncomplicated watercolors, often featuring strange, grotesque animal-like figures and single hamburgers loaded with pickles. These works were deliberately uncomplicated, embracing the obvious or everyday (even mundane) in subject matter and form, riveting the viewer's gaze to their surfaces with their mild grotesquery and intriguing simplicity. Slowly these evolved into more complex watercolors or gouaches on paper in which the three-step process of creation is integral to both the artist's creative process and the final manifestation of the work. For these, Weissberger first collects found and or her own photographs; in the second step, the images are cut and pasted into a collage; third and finally, the artist paints or "recreates" this collage into a new and separate-but-related work on paper. It is this last work that constitutes the final product; the cut photographs and subsequent collage exist as a conceptual referent or residue to the work.

More recently, as seen in this exhibition, Weissberger has been working directly with her architectural surroundings, applying Rorschach-like wall drawings to the gallery walls. These site-specific works establish an entirely different rhythm both to the space and with the viewer. More fluid, decorative, and optically vexing than her works on paper, her wall drawings play optical games with the viewers' eyes, suggesting patterns and forms from a distance while revealing their hamburgers, tires, and other elements that comprise their makeup only upon close inspection.

Ultimately, an evolving aesthetic generated by the discomforting juxtaposition of disparate elements—in particular, of the natural and artificial—constitutes the heart of Weissberger's oeuvre. Here, in a world at once chaotic and controlled, images of muscle and meat, butterflies and blankets, flowers and tires, are torn and recombined into happy incongruity. Perhaps the meaning of this artistic gesture is best encapsulated by one of Merz's contemporaries: it was Allighiero Boetti (quoting Yeats) who wrote, "Nothing can be unique and complete if it has not been ripped." Perhaps today, in our post-post-post modern world, it is only through the possibility of ripping and recombining things that a semblance of the new can be achieved.

—HEATHER PESANTI
ASSISTANT CURATOR OF
CONTEMPORARY ART,
CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART





[This page and previous:](#) *Are we just going to stand and watch this?*, 2008, archival inkjet prints adhered directly to wall, approximate dimensions 10' x 40'



#996, 2007, watercolor on paper, 25" x 25"



This page:
#997 - ...Wonderful, 2008, watercolor on
paper, 25" x 25"

Opposite:
#983, 2007, watercolor on paper, 25" x 25"





#995 - *Not T' Mention*, 2007, watercolor on paper, 25" x 25"

Cover image: Detail of #980 - *Avalanche*, 2007, watercolor on paper, 25" x 25"

Endpapers: Detail of *Are we just going to stand and watch this?*, 2008, archival inkjet prints adhered directly to wall, approximate dimensions 10' x 40'

Barbara Weissberger works in watercolor and gouache on paper, wall drawing and collage and has exhibited her work in New York at PS1, White Columns, Dean Project, Capsule Gallery, the DUMBO Art Center, and Schroeder Romero; the Mattress Factory Museum, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts and Artist Image Resource in Pittsburgh; Hallwalls, Buffalo; and the Holter Museum, Helena, MT. Her work is included in the Pittsburgh Biennial 2008. Her work toured throughout the US with the traveling exhibition *Figures of Thinking*, for which there is an accompanying catalog. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship for 2007. She was recently interviewed for *Meatpaper* magazine, Winter 2007 Issue. Residency fellowships include the MacDowell Colony; Yaddo (Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation Fellow); VCCA (Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation Fellow and Vera I. Heinz Fellow); and Montana Artists Refuge. She is currently on the faculty of the University of Pittsburgh and divides her time between New York and Pittsburgh.

John Massier is the Visual Arts Curator at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo, NY.

Heather Pesanti is assistant curator of contemporary art at Carnegie Museum of Art. In addition to her involvement in the 2008 *Carnegie International*, she participated in the reinstallation of the museum's permanent collection and organized Forum Gallery exhibitions on artists Jonathan Borofsky and Rivane Neuenschwander. In 2008, Pesanti was guest curator for *Illustrations of Catastrophe and Remote Times* at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh; she has also been adjunct professor at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Art. Pesanti came to Pittsburgh from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, where she was the 2005 Marjorie Susman Curatorial Fellow and was responsible for organizing two installments in the museum's ongoing emerging artists series, *12x12: New Artists, New Work*. A 1997 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Pesanti earned masters degrees in cultural anthropology at the University of Oxford, England, and in modern/contemporary art history at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. She has held positions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Jeanne Collins & Associates (JCA), an arts-and-cultural communications firm for nonprofit organizations where her projects included the World Monuments Fund, New York, and the launch of Dia:Beacon for the Dia Art Foundation.

Acknowledgements: My thanks to the Montana Artists Refuge - the whole idea of a large Rorschach-like piece came about while catching my breath and studying the reflections in high mountain Montana lakes. Also thanks to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts where several of the watercolors were made, and in whose woods many strange and wonderful mushrooms were photographed for these works. Thank you to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for their generous support during the year of preparation for this exhibition. My gratitude to Shelly Smith, Delanie Jenkins, Heather Pesanti, and Elana Schlenker. Many thanks to Hallwalls, and especially to John Massier.

Credits: This catalog was funded in part by the University of Pittsburgh School of Arts and Sciences and the Department of Studio Arts. The wall collage was printed at New York University, Advanced Media Studio.

Installation photographs of the wall collage by Biff Henrich. Photographs of all watercolors on paper by Tom Warren. Catalog design by Elana Schlenker.





HALLWALLS

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

341 DELAWARE AVENUE, BUFFALO, NY 14202 WWW.HALLWALLS.ORG

Hallwalls' visual arts program is supported by generous grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.



The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

