

# ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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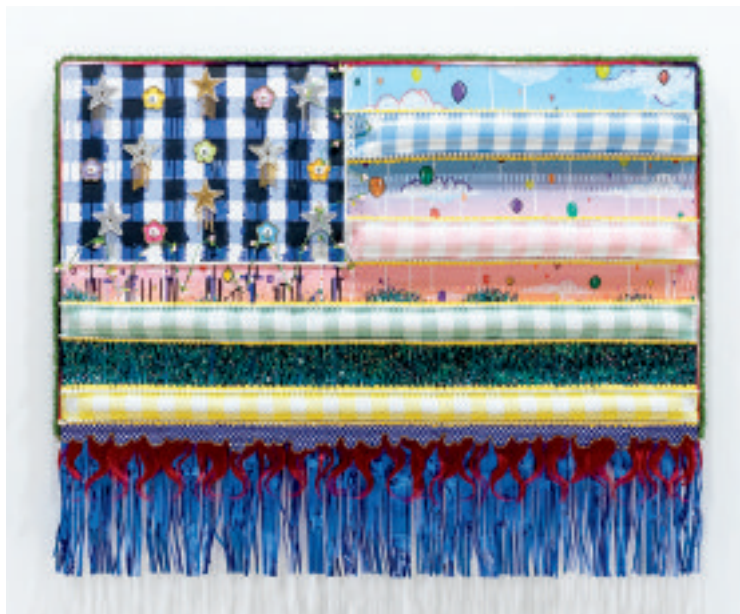
Ecoformalism

BY HARMON SIEGEL

Culture Wars

ROUNDTABLE





Victoria Dugger,  
*Freak Flag I*, 2025,  
gouache, barbed wire,  
fabric, streamers,  
fake hair, plastic  
eyeballs, and glitter on  
panel, 36 × 60 × 4".

of cis, het, white, rich, and able-bodied masculinity—from intruding upon someone else's fantasy of suburban prosperity and autonomy. Victoria Dugger's solo exhibition at the Lyndon House Arts Center, "Peach Fuzz," perverted this already perverse idea of "normalcy" to reveal the violence and dysfunction underpinning it.

Consider Dugger's assemblage-style painting *Red Flesh* (all works 2025), a landscape whose top half depicted a verdant lawn and a sky choking with spun-sugar clouds, made from artificial turf and acrylic paint, respectively. Arching across the center of the composition is your white picket fence. Beneath this dividing line are two bedazzled watermelon slices, an antique silver key, and a braided segment of dark hair that appears to have been viciously ripped off somebody's head. All of these items are set against a black, white, and red gingham picnic blanket. However, what should be an idyllic scene of outdoor leisure is anything but. (Un)naturally, the grass is cheap plastic, while the fence feels like a spiky battlement trying to keep the wilderness at bay. The watermelon is glossy and encrusted with rhinestones, and thus dangerous to the digestive tract. The overlapping stripes of the gingham spread are smeary, as though moistened by a flood of tears. The comforting image one sees from afar becomes utterly corrupt close-up—indeed, this is not a tableau of solace or joy. Needless to say, this picture repulsed me. It made me feel as though I were getting approached for a kiss by a handsy, sweaty aunt with grotesquely caked-on makeup at a family reunion.

À la Jasper Johns, *Freak Flag I* utilized the design of an American flag for another landscape. Its red and white stripes have been swapped out with alternating strips of gingham in pink, azure, mint green, and lemon yellow, which partially obscure an image of a sunset sky filled with floating, multicolored party balloons. Fringed stars and ersatz blossoms, each one affixed with a little plastic eyeball, have been appliquéd to the banner's upper-left quadrant. They hover over a section of bleeding, crisscrossed bands in black, white, and cobalt, calling to mind the pro-police-state "thin blue line" flags that racists and right-wingers just love to display in their front yards—they simply scream, "GET OFF MY PROPERTY!" Here, Dugger has flamboyantly decathected Old Glory. She brings to the fore the types of surveillance, barbarity, and xenophobia that symbols and images of American "freedom," especially today, hysterically fail at concealing. The artist's version of suburbia is terrifyingly accurate; it is rendered in a frilly rainbow palette rife with treachery and poison.

—Leia Genis

## HOUSTON

### Daniel Rios Rodriguez Seven Sisters

There was much to reward scrupulous viewers of Daniel Rios Rodriguez's fussed-over paintings, with their hand-built frames, graceful orchestrations of unruly color, and judiciously applied bits of canvas, semiprecious stones, gold leaf, and sculpted wire. In *Midnight Electrician*, 2025, a tiny pebble of turquoise seemed to regard itself in some nearby shards of mirror, which have been carefully set into the work's frame. With our gaze scaled to the mineral's point of view, the composition's laborious details gradually come into riveting focus. A faceless figure climbs a floating staircase past a canvas-scrap lightning bolt and involuted-wire sun toward a mountaintop home ringed in an aureole of gold. From there, a magenta river wends downward to a green form resembling a snail shell, a shape partially derived from Mesoamerican virgulas—tonguelike spirals that signify speech.

Each of Rodriguez's works is its own contained world. With talismanic charm, his abstracted landscapes depict anonymous figures and creatures who climb, fly, and float through trickily discernible portals, labyrinths, and mountains. Across multiple canvases, we saw black cats playing sentry in seated profile, emoji-like balls of fire erupting, blackbirds swooping, and a salmon-pink zigzag of mountain peaks, suggesting dimensionality and place while flattening the scene in one decisive gesture. The paintings contained all manner of material and symbolic detritus—ciphers, graphemes—gathered as much from art history as from Rodriguez's wanderings along the San Antonio River near his home. One could have dutifully catalogued the sourced items present in these works, but most of the artist's iconographic details do not readily yield their meaning. However, even as his symbolism is highly personal, it doesn't come across as calculated or imperious. There is a generous sense of humor and wonder at all that a painting can contain while still remaining mysterious—perhaps even to its maker.

Rodriguez's paintings contain frames within frames that multiply the edges of the support. In *Casa Llena* (Full House), 2012–25, and *two of cups*, 2025, gold leaf was secreted along the works' sides and back edges, spatially activating areas we could barely see—indeed, we may rightly wonder what Easter eggs are hidden behind the artist's canvases. With their complexly integrated layers, Rodriguez's imagistic works forward a logic of symbolic and material accretion that gives even the smallest paintings a large presence. At just over fourteen by ten inches,



Daniel Rios Rodriguez,  
*Midnight Electrician*,  
2025, oil, foil, copper  
coil, gold leaf, linen,  
mirrors, turquoise,  
painted wooden frame,  
13½ × 18".

*A Tender Victory*, 2012–25, depicted a green door—apparently a nod to Cézanne—that is ajar, through which escapes a flaming yellow light. Counteracting that gap is the work’s *actual* pillowy convexity. Overstuffed and bulging on its left side, the canvas itself seems to be a door about to open into the viewer’s space, a magic portal to who knows where. Punctuating this standoff between 2D and 3D space, the sharp end of a bright-red nail juts out near the door’s center and casts a true shadow, as if in riposte to the old Cubist trompe l’oeil joke in which the artist winkingly flattens his multidimensional forms with, say, a rendering of a single nail and its shadow (see, for instance, Braque’s *Still-Life with Violin and Pitcher*, 1909–10). Extending Cubism’s play with the grammar of illusionism, Rodriguez exploits the conjoined powers of visual representation and material instantiation to destabilize our perception of reality.

The largest works in the show, *Sweet Fire* and *Open this wall*, both 2024, were testaments to Rodriguez’s wide-ranging and scholarly syncretism. The paintings’ rough-hewn, graphic qualities treat 1980s neo-expressionism as something just as “ancient” and historically valuable as Mesoamerican architecture, synthetic Cubism, and Surrealism’s hallucinatory figuration. Among the works’ strongest qualities are their maximalist colors and horror vacui. These elements hearken back to the riotous work of the 1970s Los Angeles Chicano artist collective Los Four, especially the bold, illustrational work of group members Carlos Almaraz and Frank Romero. Rodriguez decolonizes art history not through overt critique but by diluting the singular force of European masters, crowding the ancestral scene with equally—if not more so—powerful and relevant sources.

—Natilee Harren

## DENVER

### Gretchen Marie Schaefer David B. Smith Gallery

Gravity and illusion, the cosmic and the comic—these strange metaphysical spaces, found most often within the territory of the absurd, might best describe the interplay of dichotomies that charged through Gretchen Marie Schaefer’s exhibition at David B. Smith Gallery. To step into the small room that holds her art was to feel the need to take a quick step back out. Consider *Make Gravity the Coyote’s Greatest Enemy* (all works 2025), comprising a large boulder held up by a scant single stick and protruding from the top of a south-facing wall. A loose rope net was wrapped around it, while a brass clip clasped that net to another rope, slightly frayed, that stretched in arcs across the ceiling, passed through metal hoops, and then was drawn down to another rock, much smaller, resting on the wooden floor. The knots seemed clumsy, loose—the cord was not taking its job too seriously. The whole work, in an immediately visceral way, seemed to describe (or prescribe) disaster.

But the catastrophe was delayed. I remember a quote from the philosopher Simone Weil that has haunted me for decades: “All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.” For Weil, grace isn’t what rises on wings. Grace has wings yet descends, lowers itself not because laws of nature demand it do so, but because it can and wants to. I’m almost embarrassed to say it—I kept waiting for the large boulder to grow wings. But Schaefer’s wit is wiser than my hopes. Impossibly enough, the giant stone was being held in suspension—or so the sculpture encouraged us to think—by the smaller rock on the ground.

Sometimes mystery requires distraction. Looking up in the high corner of an east-facing wall one found *Little Near Side*, a graphite drawing

of the moon, its craters dark with shadow. Suddenly the ropes felt as if they were the visible manifestation of an unseen force, one that keeps our pale satellite circling the earth—the rock that is both the moon and earth. It will sound diminutive, I fear, but I mean it as high praise: One could suspect a precocious child had been invited to install her science project in an art gallery. The lesson is gravity, but the result makes no sense—the lesser body outweighs the larger.



The childish, in a child’s wondrous way, permeates this work. The “coyote” of the title invokes Wile E. Coyote, who learns over and again, in the weird eternity loop of Saturday-morning cartoons, his never-ending lessons on desire and gravity. But that Looney Tunes memory is also archetypal—the coyote is a trickster god, telling us that things aren’t always as they seem. Or are they? Schaefer’s stones aren’t stones at all—they’re papier-mâché constructions. I kept stepping nearer and nearer to the danger, to see how the work was made, to find the moment when the illusion revealed itself. The sculpture’s coloration and pebbled surfaces felt geological enough. But trick and truth are intimately and strangely entangled, a fact art loves to remind us of.

On the wall from which the ponderous boulder precariously hung, the rope dangled down and looped up over a protruding nail. It looked as though the rope were waiting for a hand to pull it. So what would happen if you did? Would the rock crash to the ground? Would the deception be revealed? Or would some other force exert its deeper power, not gravity’s plummet, but grace’s on-invisible-wings descent?

—Dan Beachy-Quick

Gretchen Marie Schaefer, *Make Gravity the Coyote’s Greatest Enemy*, 2025, papier-mâché, rope, wood, hardware. Installation view. Photo: Wes Magyar.

## LOS ANGELES

### Nancy Buchanan The Brick

“Nancy Buchanan is a true radical. Behind her polite demeanor and contagious optimism is a barbed and critical sensibility that might best be described as punk.” So opens a statement-*cum*-guide penned by cocurators Laura Owens and Catherine Taft on the occasion of “Truthfully, Nancy Buchanan,” the artist’s first full retrospective, at the Brick. The collaboration was a long time coming: Owens was Buchanan’s