

IN REVIEW | SANTA FE

# IN REVIEW: A major China Marks survey at Zane Bennett, a lot to take in but worth it

Gallery dedicates its entire 5,000-square-foot space to 'Lucid Perturbations'



e Bennett Contemporary Art.



"Ripe for the Picking," China Marks, 2017, fabric, lace, thread Logan Royce Beitmen/Journal

[Logan Royce Beitmen](#)

JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

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“Lucid Perturbations” at Zane Bennett Contemporary Art is a focused survey exploring the last two decades or so of China Marks’ career, from the time she started working with sewn fabric until now. According to the press release, it is also the first time the gallery has ever devoted both floors of its 5,000-square-foot space to the work of a single artist. So, it’s a pretty big deal.

All the works in the show — over 200 wall pieces and books — are made from sewn fabric, along with other fun, mixed-media elements, such as googly eyes and sequins. Marks had worked for decades in other media before picking up a sewing machine in December of 2000 in her late 50s, diving headlong into a mode of art-making that’s proved exceptionally fertile and generative ever since. Marks calls this body of work “sewn drawings,” as opposed to “sewn paintings” or “quilts,” evidently to underscore her intuitive, unplanned approach, which she has described as a “great, shaggy, seemingly interminable process.”

These visually exuberant works are full of clashing patterns, snippets of wry text and culturally diverse art-historical references — all part and parcel of the turn-of-the-millennium art-world zeitgeist from whence it sprang. My memories of that era are vivid, because I was in art school then.

After decades of dry conceptualism dominating the art world, visual pleasure was all the rage. Maximalist artists such as Philip Taaffe and Fred Tomaselli were in high demand. The line between art and craft was starting to blur, with serious attention being paid to fiber arts and quilting. The artist Nancy Crow, who had been quilting since the 1970s, developed freeform cutting techniques in the 1990s that felt fresh and

## LOGAN ROYCE BEITMEN



In Review

## ‘Lucid Perturbations’

By China Marks

**WHEN:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
Tuesday–Saturday; through  
July 11; closed Sunday,

exciting. And in 2002, the first major survey of Gee's Bend "crazy quilts" traveled to 11 cities, including a stop at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, influencing untold artists.

What accounted for the ascendancy of craft, decoration and maximalist aesthetics in that millennial moment? Partly, it was a cultural shift. Many of my professors had rebelled against the stultifying language of formalism they'd been taught in favor of feminist, postmodern and multicultural perspectives. As teachers, they encouraged us to look beyond the Western canon and to approach art-making in a spirit of play.

I remember when I visited the Museum of Modern Art in 1999 with my fellow art students, we all hated the Jackson Pollock retrospective — boring, repetitive, excessively macho — but loved Sigmar Pölke's sarcastic, cartoony drawings and weird, psychedelic collages. Colorful patterns and subversive humor resonated with us, while the "purity" of Pollock's approach — no stories, no images, just paint as paint — felt practically fundamentalist.

Marks' art abounds in subversive, postmodern humor. She appropriates from the entire history of human material culture — new and old, East and West, high and low. Chinese embroidery, Liz Claiborne scarf patterns, prehistoric cave art, crucifixion scenes, superhero comics, ukiyo-e woodblock geishas, Vincent van Gogh's self-portraits, the 1980s cartoon character Strawberry Shortcake, tapestry copies of pre-Raphaelite paintings, op art-inspired fabrics, Victorian bric-a-brac — anything is fair game, it seems, for Marks to churn and repurpose. She stitches together faces and body parts from disparate stylistic and cultural contexts to create creepy-cute, neo-Dadaist monsters. She gives these characters speech bubbles and has them say things like, "You are not wanted here," "Please don't pity me! Really!" or "We have our own problems, an important dinner party tonight."

Don't let the visual density and narrative complexity of the works overwhelm you. Remember that Marks' process is playful and spontaneous. She rarely preplans. As viewers, of course, we have the

Monday and holidays

**WHERE:** Zane Bennett Contemporary Art, 435 S. Guadalupe St., Santa Fe

**HOW MUCH:** Free, [zanebennettgallery.com](http://zanebennettgallery.com)

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option to try to decode all her art-historical references and figure out what they mean in combination. But it may be just as fruitful to imagine a child with a toy box full of antique figurines from around the world. Whatever meanings those figurines had within their respective cultural and historical contexts are obliterated by the child, who gives them new names and invites them to a tea party.

Such radical decontextualization would have felt progressive to me in the early 2000s. Many influential artists at that time, including Iona Rozeal Brown (now known as Rozeal), Kara Walker and Nikki S. Lee, were making art that playfully subverted racist stereotypes. Marks' insertion of ukiyo-e geisha figures into culturally and historically ambiguous narratives is not dissimilar from Rozeal's contemporaneous depictions of ukiyo-e geishas in blackface. It seems naïve in retrospect, but at the time, some of us really believed that racism could be defeated through humor.

A 2004 New York Times review by Grace Glueck praised Marks' "bravura," and Marks' approach to history and culture is definitely daring. By taking absolutely everything out of context, Marks creates her own "floating world" (the literal meaning of "ukiyo"), where characters from anywhere and everywhere embark on new adventures, unencumbered by their previous cultural identities. Together, perhaps, they can extricate themselves from what the postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard called "the religion of history." Or maybe not. But they seem to be trying.

Marks, incidentally, is the artist's actual surname, but she adopted the first name, "China," as a punning allusion to china marking pencils, also known as grease pencils, which are used for writing on porcelain. As a *nom d'artiste*, "China" recalls mark-making, but also Chinese civilization. The idea of a white artist calling herself "China" while making art that incorporates Asian motifs may seem a bit cringe today, but a quarter century ago, when "post-racial" ideas were being batted around, it probably would have seemed self-deprecating — a lighthearted way of poking fun at her own cultural porousness. Simpler times, I suppose.

There is much in “Lucid Perturbations” for contemporary, culturally sensitive audiences to wrinkle their noses at, but there is also much to admire. We can argue endlessly about the ethics of cultural appropriation — particularly in Marks’ case, where decontextualization is her *modus operandi*. But the longer I spend with the work, the more enthralled I become. Her characters are so jumbled, in space and in time, that many don’t seem to know where they are — or who they are. They are lost. Their identities are fragmented. Sometimes they look like cultural stereotypes. Sometimes they look like Frankensteinian monsters, cobbled together from the detritus of empires. But do their appearances reflect how the artist herself sees them, how they see each other, or how they see themselves?

I think there are two main paths to becoming a great artist: reduction and expansion. In the reductive approach, you pare your art down until it’s almost nothing. In the expansionist approach, you keep throwing more and more stuff into the soup pot until it encompasses practically everything. The reductive approach is elegant but safe. The expansionist approach is messy, but it usually yields more interesting results.

I will always favor an ambitious artist who takes risks over one who’s cautious and reserved, and Marks is an inveterate risk-taker. She says she wants her art to reflect the world “in all its glory, horror and absurdity.” It might unsettle or perturb us. But in this crazy, mixed-up world, I think we need more crazy, mixed-up art, not less.

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