

This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways "Step Up" competition in 2004, which requested proposals from emerging artists, living in New York or New England. "Step Up" was juried by, Joe Amrhein, Owner/Director of Pierogi 2000, Ellen Driscoll, an artist, and Tumelo Mosaka, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the Brooklyn Museum.

The exhibition was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.



REAL ART WAYS founded in 1975 is a nationally recognized, alternative multi-disciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work, and creatively engages and informs audiences and communities. Real Art Ways is an active presenter of different art forms, including music, performance, spoken word, film, video and visual arts. Real Art Ways has a particular commitment to supporting the work of emerging artists.

On the cover: Faded Glory Mix & Match Reversible Hat (\$3.23) (detail)

Zoë Sheehan Saldaña



Jordache Sheer Camp Shirt (Lucky Lime) (\$9.97)

Zoë Sheehan Saldaña Shopdropping at Wal-Mart

By Andrea Miller-Keller

Zoë Sheehan Saldaña's *Shopdropping at Wal-Mart* features six works, each composed of an actual article of Wal-Mart clothing hanging on the gallery wall, juxtaposed with a large, life-size color photograph of the artist's proficiently handmade duplicate of the same item. Full information about the artist's processes (more on this below) is supplied in a handout in the gallery. Consequently, these six pairs together offer up a lively narrative that includes search, travel, industry, stealth transgressions and unsolved mystery. Underlying it all is the drama of an impish David and a sleepy Goliath.

In preparation for her September, 2005 installation at Real Art Ways, Sheehan Saldaña went shopping for women's wear at the local Wal-Mart store in Hartford. There in May, 2005 she purchased six items in her own size: *George Warm Linen Crop Pants (Khaki)* (original purchase price: \$14.57); *Jordache Sheer Camp Shirt (Lucky Lime)* (\$9.97); *Levi Strauss Signature Stretch Bootcut Jeans* (\$19.69); *Jordache Woven Camisole (Arctic White)* (\$8.87); *Faded Glory Mix & Match Reversible Hat* (\$3.23); *No Boundaries Sail Canvas Tote (Orange/Yellow)* (\$7.84).

Sheehan Saldaña took this gear to her home base in Brooklyn, New York where she would make hand-made replicas of these mass-produced imports. She shopped for fabrics, buttons, zippers and trimmings that were a close match, and with meticulous care, she spent many hours fabricating a copy of each item. She then removed all Wal-Mart labels and price tags from her purchases, and sewed the original labels into her "homemade" garments and attached to each the corresponding price tag.

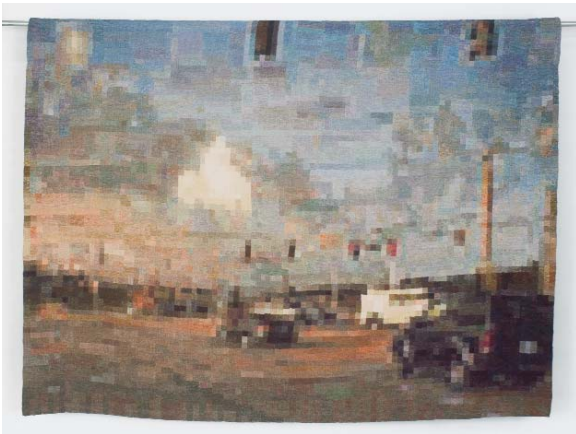
Zoë Sheehan Saldaña was born in Massachusetts in 1973 and currently lives and works in New York City. She studied at Oberlin College (B.A., 1994), the Rochester Institute of Technology (M.F.A., 1998), and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2000). Her work has been shown in solo exhibitions at Real Art Ways (Hartford, CT) and Light Work (Syracuse, NY) as well as group exhibitions at Exit Art (Manhattan, NY), the Society for Contemporary Photography (Kansas City, MO), Momenta Art (Brooklyn, NY), Rotunda Gallery (Brooklyn, NY), and the Museum of Fine Arts (Tallahassee, FL). Sheehan is an Assistant Professor at Baruch College in New York City. www.zoesheehan.com

Next she digitally scanned each of the newly tagged items individually, against a white background. Life-size color photographs from these scans—reproductions of reproductions—would later be hung adjacent to the original Wal-Mart purchases in the Real Art Ways gallery. In early August, having documented her own handiwork, Sheehan Saldaña returned to the Hartford Wal-Mart with her six skillfully crafted duplicates and quietly placed them back on their racks, each tagged for sale at the original price. "I simply walked into the store, placed my items with similar stock...and left."¹

There are now likely six lucky owners of handmade fashions walking around Hartford, unaware of their good fortune. Says Sheehan Saldaña, "I think the mystery of the whole transaction is more interesting than knowing. A conceptual piece comes alive in the thinking and talking about it."²

Sheehan Saldaña's education and orientation is that of a photographer. She values "the questions that the photographic object poses – about the contingent nature of 'reality'... about the way the photograph requires the viewer's imagination to play out, about the interplay between the machine-made and the handmade...." Above all, she is intrigued with transposing found information from one medium to another. Her works over the past decade have explored a range of mediums, from digital images and traditional photography to computerized sewing machines and needle and thread, but all have this exploration in common. "I have been interested in what shifts in the transfer and what stays the same, and how the specific medium and the act of transfer heighten awareness of the image/object." Sheehan Saldaña thinks of these more as "'duplications' than 'reproductions', with a fair amount of 'mutation' built in, too...a kind of approximation, overall. The work seems to start there and then spin its way out into different places." In her *Shoptopping* series, she

Faded Glory Mix & Match Reversible Hat (\$3.23)



America's Most Dangerous Intersection (Flamingo Road and Pines Boulevard, Pembroke Pines, Florida), 2001

translates a machine-made object into a handmade object, and that handmade object into a flat, photographic image.

Her projects often begin with an eccentric idea followed by a search for the right found images or objects This reliance on a found image or object has been a worthy artistic strategy ever since Duchamp put a urinal on a pedestal and a moustache on a souvenir reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*, nearly a century ago. "One thing I enjoy about 'found' objects is that they come with all kinds of baggage, and so they have a built-in richness and often a certain unpredictability," says Sheehan Saldaña. "Through their replication I can push them in various directions, and while the replicas shift, and present their own conundrums, they also stay linked to their found source, and its baggage." In her *Shoptopping* series (2003–2005) the photographic images came last, and the Wal-Mart items were the original found objects.

Consistently Sheehan Saldaña pulls her found images/objects from the mainstream of popular culture, whether purchased at a local Wal-Mart or drawn from an existing America's Most Dangerous list (2001–2005). *Twelve Portrait Heads* (2001) takes the images of twelve missing children from a database on the web site, *www.missingchildren.com*. She chose the school or family photographs (from a time of innocence) that the site had subsequently "virtually aged" to up-date them as each child might look today (when, realistically, hope for their return might be fading). Sheehan Saldana transfers each child's face into cross-stitches on a small circular canvas, using a small computerized embroidery machine. Framed by brightly colored circular Formica and

wood frames (handcrafted by the artist), and removed from their original context, these embroidered faces at first glance carry not a hint of tragedy. However, trying to reconcile the category of "missing children" and the poignant passage of time with the up-beat frames, the homey cross-stitched images and the children's ready smiles, transforms the grouping into a requiem for a dozen family tragedies.

In Sheehan Saldaña's *America's Most Dangerous* series, she begins with images she has downloaded from the Internet featuring America's "most dangerous" volcano (*Mt. Rainier*), animal (*White-tailed deer*), profession (*Timber Cutter*), sport (*Bullriding*), national park (*Organ Pipe, AZ*), city (*St. Louis*), and herb (*Ephedra*). She digitally manipulated found images of these subjects, and then transposed them into ink on vellum drawings, leaving the images further diluted. She relies on their accompanying titles to reinvigorate the barely recognizable subject matter.

She has taken one of these images—*America's Most Dangerous Intersection (Flamingo Road and Pines Boulevard, Pembroke Pines, Florida)* (2001)—and dissolved it still further, by commissioning its reproduction as a 72" x 100" tapestry by the skilled craftsmen at Taller de Gobelinos in Guadalajara. Hand-woven in wool on large looms using the *haute-lisse* method, this tapestry took three months to complete. Greatly enlarged, each pixel fills one square inch. From a distance, a tenuous sense of the original image can be discerned. Up close, however, it appears to be a wholly abstract textile.

The works in this installation are part of the *Shoptopping* series begun in 2003. They invite the viewer to peel back one layer after another, only a few of which can be noted here. Colorful and brightly lit, they initially present a visually stunning presence in a gallery setting. But this encounter soon reveals that the artist has deftly intervened in the seamless practice of this country's largest employer. Surreptitiously placing her own hand crafted efforts into the Wal-Mart supply chain, Sheehan Saldaña joins the worldwide community of those whose labors remain routinely unacknowledged and undervalued. However, Sheehan Saldaña is also an acclaimed artist whose work is exhibited on gallery walls. There is an intriguing disconnect between the Wal-Mart garment intended for the masses and its partner, a glamorous, seductive C-print. When paired together by the artist, they achieve a substantial economic value in the contemporary art marketplace.

The *Shoptopping* works at RAW have been featured in numerous newspaper articles and other media venues, spinning

a narrative that has captured the public's imagination. In Connecticut and New York, many people, far beyond those art aficionados who have actually visited the RAW gallery, know of them now. Perhaps most intriguingly, there are the unidentified owners walking through the cityscape wearing garments hand sewn by the artist.

The broad scope of their reception may raise new considerations for Sheehan Saldaña's future explorations. "In so far as it takes the work beyond the confines of the art playground, I find it interesting. Artwork can become...like the protected weak little child [who] has to play with other weak little children in sanitary conditions, which can be fun in that no one bothers you...the 'intervention' aspect allows the work to test its mettle out there in the world...I think I'm still working on this aspect and finding the place(s) where it is most compelling to me."

Despite Sheehan Saldaña's beguiling devotion to craft, she is firmly based in the conceptual tradition. This she honors best with her sense of playfulness, her razor-sharp intellect, her ardent curiosity and, above all, her eagerness to wander into the unknown.

All quotes are from interviews with the artist October 18 and 21, 2005, unless otherwise indicated.

Twelve Portrait Heads



¹ Vann, Korky. "Conceptual-Art 'Shop droppers' Challenge, Spoof Consumer Behavior," The Hartford Courant, September 25, 2005.

² Ibid.