

Leigh Anne Lester

Rock

PROJECT ROOM

SAN ANTONIO

by John Ewing

Increasingly recognized for her adventurous use of eccentric materials, San Antonio artist Leigh Anne Lester makes a practice of merging contemporary art trends and homespun content. *Rock*, her recent Project Room installation, pushed an old-fashioned icon of family life through postmodern riffs on drawing, painting, and sculpture. This spare but multilayered installation marked the end of the Project Room's three-year run of "one-night-only" art experiments. True to the spirit of this alternative space, *Rock* showed Lester moving familiar themes in new conceptual directions.

Lester hung two large, wooden-backed picture frames in the small, makeshift gallery. Simple, rectangular, and white, they mimicked each other across adjoining walls. Both frames tried to contain identical images of a rocking chair, and both failed extravagantly. One was composed with hundreds of Japanese toothpicks stuck into the frame's flat interior; their beautifully spindled heads appeared as dots when viewed straight on, or as a dense field of jutting spikes when viewed at an angle. The rocking chair image crawled down the picture plane, each miniature stake in sharp, physical opposition to the two-dimensional space outlined by the frame. Defying the confines of the frame altogether, the toothpick image eventually stepped off the bottom right corner, completing the "picture" of the rocker not within the picture territory but on the wall behind.

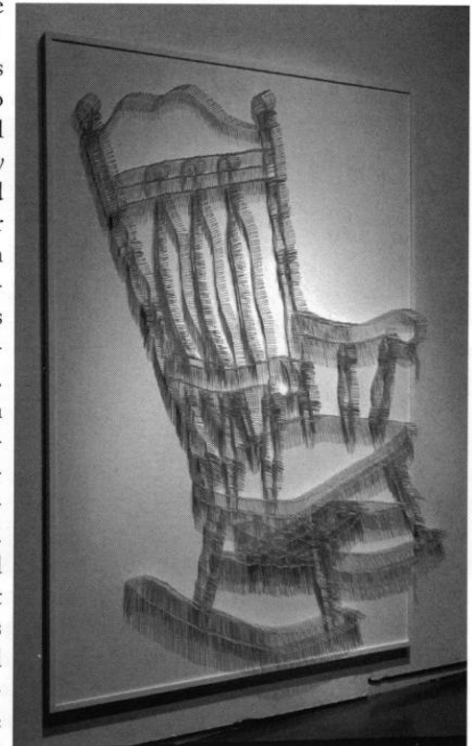
The other chair image was made from holes neatly poked into the frame's interior surface and surrounding wall area. When viewed up close, it read as a crisp design, and had the seductive suggestibility of Lichtenstein's Benday dots. At a distance, this image all but disappeared. Lester used different lighting schemes to reinforce the differences between the two works. Spotlights were timed to flash intermittently across the toothpick chair, causing the image to visually rock with complex shadows. A single, bright light shown on the poked-hole piece, optically

floating the fainter chair image across the frame's traditional boundary. While their forms mirrored each other, the position these chair images reflected existed across a divide as simple as toothpick or hole or as grandiose as positive and negative. In Lester's scheme, they could only coexist as oppositional malcontents. One image strained toward sculpture. The other was more a concept than a material reality, and at the same time somewhat less than a drawing. In both cases, an "empty" white painting area, defined by a frame, was the foundation for these antipaintings.

Recalling some of Lester's previous work helps to clarify her tendency to transcribe personal narrative onto visual and theoretical concerns. *Family Portraits*, shown earlier this year, used human organs as synecdochal stand-ins for ailing loved ones. Embroidered in brightly colored thread, images of a hemorrhaging brain and cancerous lungs were hung in a traditional manner, displayed within heirloom frames. Indicating the cultural shifts brought on by medical technology, Lester's "personal" portraits visualized a new "family history" determined less by individual character than by genetic predisposition. Similarly, the rocker is a familiar symbol intertwined with the Southern front porch, and no doubt this usage reflects Lester's Louisiana childhood. Her dual reframing of this icon splinters the symbol into a thousand fragments on the one hand, and dematerializes it into a dotted void on the other. In either case, the traditional symbol sits uneasily within a contemporary art context.

Lester's ambivalence vis à vis this image suggests various attitudinal or sociological positions regarding tradition and history. More importantly, her use of a traditional symbol as a staging area for a formal and theoretical tug-of-war suggests a Trojan Horse strategy, with Lester employing a comfortable, rather prosaic image to coax the viewer into a conceptual investigation. Seen in this light, the confrontation of genres within the tooth-

pick piece feels academic and the punning title too pat an emblem for contemporary art's ever-changing landscape. By contrast, the chair made of holes punches into ambiguous, new territory and points the artist in a potentially more interesting direction. ○



Leigh Anne Lester
Rock, 2000
Installation detail
Courtesy the artist