

## Eugenio Dittborn: La cuisine et la guerre

Blaffer Gallery

Reviewed by John Ewing

When Marshall McLuhan proclaimed “the medium is the message” in 1967, he wasn’t talking about the mail. Then again, who wouldn’t overlook mail when compared to the alluring, invasive monolith of television? McLuhan could not have anticipated Chilean artist Eugenio Dittborn, whose *Airmail Paintings* would revisit the Canadian theorist’s dictum, twenty years later and from another hemisphere. In essence, Dittborn’s picto-letters recapture the grandeur and mystery of global communication that today’s high-tech media so efficiently minimize. Tossed time and again into the tumult of international mail, Dittborn’s messages transmit directly and continuously, and in the personal voice of a letter that is always one to one. From the myriad hands that receive and relay his art, to the viewer who receives his message, Dittborn’s audience is anywhere and everywhere.



Eugenio Dittborn, *La Cuisine et la Guerre*, (detail) 1994. *Airmail Painting #112*. Courtesy of the Blaffer Gallery, The Art Museum of The University of Houston



*Airmail Paintings* are immense collections of text, photosilkscreen images, and painted marks applied to durable fabric and organized by a grid of folds. The seven in the exhibition “La cuisine et la guerre” were originally post-marked years ago in Santiago, the artist’s home. Crisscrossing the globe, the works arrived in sturdy envelopes carefully inscribed with handwritten descriptions, illuminating quotations, and an itinerary. At each destination, the paintings are unfolded and installed with the envelopes beside them. In order to decode the messages, viewers must rely on their wits and a hands-on encounter with the envelopes.

In *Pietà* (*The Bed, The House, The Madison Square Garden*) Dittborn constructs a visual pun from children’s drawings of beds and houses and a television image of the fatally injured Cuban boxer Beny Kid Paret, lying martyred in the ring. The juxtaposition fuses domestic, commercial, and sacred domains with a wry, three-way play on the word “garden.” *Dust Clouds* repeats the image of the collapsed boxer next to photographs of Incan and Druid sacrificial remains; the accompanying envelope contains the quotation from Roberto Merino, “Whenever the body is at rest, the situation is a tragic one....”

*The 6th History of the Human Face* (*Black and Red Camino*) is another jarring juxtaposition that gains both humor and pathos as it progresses, roadlike, across the gallery wall. Photographs of robbers, indigenous persons, police drawings and doodles are matched face-for-face with a lower row of bright red

Eugenio Dittborn, *La Cuisine et la Guerre*, (detail) 1994. *Airmail Painting #112*. Courtesy of the Blaffer Gallery, The Art Museum of The University of Houston

cartoons drawn by Dittborn’s daughter. Any attempt to methodically sort the faces is quickly abandoned as superficial characteristics take over. Shape and contrast prevail over issues of history, class or even pictorial accuracy. The physiognomic authority of the face is questioned, recalling Andy Warhol’s controversial *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* series.

This indexical collection of faces also suggests a more puzzling origin for Dittborn’s global missives. They seem rooted in the cultural landscape of Santiago, a city the size of Houston that is home to nearly half of Chile’s population. From a stone monolith in the General Cemetery listing the thousands murdered in the 1973 military coup, to the wildly popular open-air chess boards in city parks, Santiago is the sort of place that inspires “chance operations” à la John Cage or a game of *Exquisite Corpse*. In any event, Dittborn’s *Airmail Paintings* refuse to explicitly define themselves, even as they ask to be handled and invite intimacy.

Fundamentally, the artist’s messages are meant to travel. For them, any single home (or meaning) is provisional. Though we know that Dittborn’s resistance to institutional hierarchies is chiefly symbolic, the paintings seem to exist outside the system. So genuine is the gesture that we are reminded how art can be an unmediated communiqué directly from the artist. Dittborn operates on good faith, like a message in a bottle, imagining an audience and then speaking to it with the basic communicative tools of image and word. Everything about the *Airmail Paintings*—their letterlike correspondence, long-distance itinerary, and cryptically juxtaposed information—is a direct appeal to the viewer to not only receive the message but assume an equal role in constructing it.