

OF MUDDLARKERS
AND MEASURERS

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*Antoni Abad, Maria Fernanda Cardoso,
Gwen MacGregor, Lyndal Osborne
and Regina Silveira*



CURATED BY
SARINDAR DHALIWAL

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OF MUDLARKERS AND MEASURERS

SARINDAR DHALIWAL

The title of this exhibition refers to method; each artist's practice is marked by traits of obsession. The actions of digging, collecting, and measuring result in works, rich in matter, which demarcate the time and geography of their production. The significance of daily or seasonal routines, the effects of tides and the systems used for the gathering and classification of material leave traces of history on the object. How this history, private or public, intersects with the accumulation, in these works, of birds' nests, corn cobs, dissolving buttons, ruled lines, and hand spans is the essence of the connection between these five artists. An analogy for this link is the invisible extension from the heart to the product of the mind and the hand of the artist, the bond between object and maker. It is this nourishment of life blood, this pulsing beat, that gives the work its transformative power.

The archaic *Of* in front of *Mudlarkers and Measurers* indicates the ability to expand and retract our communities by will. This grouping can be delimited to the artists in this show, or widened to include the band of professional mudlarkers who provide a genial camaraderie for Gwen MacGregor during her sojourns in London. Travelling back in time, an invitation is possible to all perspectivists from Mannerists to geometers whose exactitude constitutes the wall of precedents upon which Regina Silveira's elaborations of perception are cast. Perhaps included in this count is every prairie farmer who sowed grids of wheat into the patterns that inspire Lyndal Osborne's juxtapositions of order and chaos.



Minor Measures

ANTONI ABAD

The distance covered in waking up, getting up, peeing, having a shower, brushing my teeth, getting dressed, going into the kitchen, making the coffee, raising the coffee to my lips, going out to the news kiosk, bending down to pick up a newspaper, paying for it, reading the headlines on the way back home, putting the key in the lock, opening the door, walking over to the armchair, sitting down to read the printed word, turning a page, turning another, lighting a cigarette, crossing my legs, being startled by the phone, picking it up, hearing a very wide-awake voice, making up a reply, hanging up, sitting down at the typewriter, inserting a sheet of A-4 into the roller, losing myself in the blank page, deciding on a beginning, typing the first idea, lighting a cigarette, hitting the space bar, typing continuously, taking out the sheet, reading the fragment, getting up from the chair, pacing up, pacing down, re-reading the fragment, sitting down again to write, inserting another sheet, writing another fragment, lighting a cigarette, forgetting it in the ashtray, writing further paragraphs, taking out the sheet, going over to the armchair, sitting down, reading the fragment, picking up a pencil, crossing out some words, adding ones, leaving the sheet on the table, getting up, going to the kitchen, turning on the tap, filling the glass, raising it to my lips, swallowing the water, leaving the glass in the sink, returning to the armchair, re-reading the text, deciding that now is not the time for writing, going back to the drawing board, staring at the things piled up on it, choosing the aluminium hand spans, placing them on the ruler, measuring the exact length, hearing the phone again, answering it, arranging to meet for dinner tomorrow, returning to the studio, picking up the hand spans, considering the possibility of fixing them on the wall, deciding to try it, extending the tape measure, marking the positions, fixing the bit in the Black and Decker, drilling holes in the wall, rummaging around in the tool box, discovering that there aren't any #6 rawlplugs left, going to the ironmongers, scanning the shelves, reaching out for the Fisher #6, queuing at the till, handing over a 1000 peseta note, putting the change in my pocket, walking to the bakery, asking for a bag, putting into it the rawlplugs, the bread and the apples, paying the shop assistant, going back home, putting the bag on the table, taking out the bread, cutting two slices, opening the door of the fridge, putting the apples inside, opening a beer, taking a sip, cutting some cheese, sitting down to eat, putting on the coffee, looking through the paper, lighting a cigarette, savouring the coffee, going into the bathroom, peeing, washing my hands, brushing my teeth, going back to the studio, inserting the rawlplugs into the holes, screwing in the hand spans again, deciding to change their position, opening the sketchbook, noting down the correction, sketching another possibility, drilling new holes, unscrewing the hand spans, fixing them in the new position, stepping back two paces, weighing up the results, approving it, sitting down, switching on the calculator, calculating the number of hand spans per metre, noting the result, sketching possible variations, noticing that it is already gone 7, thinking about taking a walk, taking the photo of the hand spans with me to photocopy, walking to the door,

slamming it shut, heading towards Eivissa square, entering the bookshop, awaiting my turn, taking a look at the books on display, choosing Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, asking for 20 photocopies, examining the copies, paying for everything, going out to the square, sitting at the terrace of a bar, catching the waiter's eye, ordering a beer, lighting a cigarette, taking the first sip, looking through the new book, taking another sip, watching the people, day-dreaming, pouring the rest of the bottle, lighting a cigarette, emptying the glass, calling the waiter over, giving him the money, heading off home, going through the front door, switching on the light, noticing the flashing light on the answering machine, pressing the playback button, listening to the messages, returning one of the calls, going to the studio, picking up the scissors, trimming the photocopies, sticking them to the wall in sequence, looking at the results, lighting a cigarette, putting on a cassette, going into the kitchen, putting some salted water on to boil, adding the noodles, frying garlic and mushrooms, mixing it all together, opening a beer, sitting down to eat, choosing an apple, biting into it, going to the studio, lighting a cigarette, re-reading the morning's writing, pacing up and down, realizing that it is already late, turning off the music, going to the bathroom, peeing, washing my hands, washing my face, brushing my teeth, getting undressed, sitting up in bed, arranging the pillow behind my back, turning on the television, zapping between channels, turning it off, reading some Vasari, setting alarm, turning off the light, going to sleep, the 11th of August 1994.

Text: Antoni Abad, *Minor Measures*, Galeria Antoni Estrany, 1994.



In terse, short bursts of fact, Antoni Abad recounts his day, measuring his existence by the footsteps it takes to accomplish, and thus triumph over, the banality of the quotidian.



Every action is merely a consequence of the preceding action; thus every action is a prescription for involvement in the world. But at the same time each action telescopes back into the preceding one. Compounding actions that require more actions, you can invest a world, or you can collapse the existing world back down to a single point. So in detailing how you maintain yourself you are also suggesting how you could be obliterated. Like a retractable ruler. Like a collapsible cup.

Laura U. Marks, "Retraction," *De Fuerza Mayor: Antoni Abad*,
Teruel, Spain: Museo de Teruel, 1995.



Silveira describes the process of producing her drawings as a feverish searching for the right combination of lines. She makes dozens of drawings, inventing and changing rules until she discovers the blueprint for forcing the planes of flatness to coalesce. A piece may require dozens of drawings or only a few.

Silveira's use of linear perspective, a method created in the Renaissance to represent space, is the scientific cartography that overlays the liberties she takes with the laws of geometry and mathematics. The artist sees herself as an excavator — digging deep to extract the "moment" when, through a combination of stretching of perspective and interference with or disdain of the rules of the theorems, a point of view is established or discovered — a point at which the image loses its flatness, and the meaningless lines on a two-dimensional surface fuse into three-dimensional form. Stereoscopic viewers function in the same manner when double images of Disneyland or the Florida swamps slide into focus, creating a third thing. Ranging from highbrow icons of modernism to the lowbrow ordinariness of domestic objects, Silveira's visual vocabulary includes the ubiquitous spaces of institutional architecture: stairwells, offices and the multi-paned banks of industrial sized windows. These are the corporate structures of our contemporary world, which speak of standardization and indifference. This bleakness is further emphasized by the source material the artist uses as a starting point for the drawings: images from the media that stress the unappealing and the depersonalized.

In *Nomad (Office 3)*, all these allusions are compacted into a narrow, needle-thin layer of vinyl that depicts the visual banality of the space of the office. Though the work has little substance — just the volume and weight of a shadow — it is the master plan for the marriage of the idiosyncratic and the universal.

I imagine Silveira as a Lady of Shalott, seated not at a loom but a drafting table weaving the mundane into a magic cloth of graph paper. Much like the mental picture I have of Maria Fernanda Cardoso spinning roomfuls of straw into gold.

Maria Fernanda Cardoso's sculptural installations are seductive reworkings of animal remains, indigenous materials, and the kitsch supplied by the tourist industry. For *Cemetery*, a work from 1992, Cardoso threaded artificial flowers into holes in the walls so they appeared to be growing horizontally from the pristineness of the gallery space.

I am reminded of the plastic flowers my mother would get free with packets of detergent. She would arrange them in cheap glass vases and these oddly coloured dahlias and daffodils would slowly gather dust. The flowers bespoke the cultural paucity in the family and my parents' lack of taste. In retrospect, I realize that I was being offered two models of cultural authenticity: the English and the Punjabi.

It is in that gap between two cultures that Cardoso's work is located. Through her decontextualization of matter, she renders what is utilitarian or discarded in one country into something that is considered exotic and validated as art in another.

In previous works, she stacked rough "country" bars of laundry soap into tidy formations and impaled desiccated frogs on hoops of wire in rigid-limbed formations reminiscent of South American motifs. She placed bite-size pieces of guava candy, originating in one particular little Colombian village, into a reconfiguration of the national flag. The inherent meaning embodied in these sweetmeats, familiar to almost all Colombians (as maple sugar candy is to us), is lost on the American public. Inversely, North Americans inured to art that is made from virtually anything will accept the candy flag as sculpture, whereas for Colombians the edible and nationalistic

connotations associated with it deny that possibility. It is this invisible narrative and cultural encoding that gives Cardoso's work its alchemical potency.

Nuevas Voces is fabricated from corn cobs strung together and coiled into two barrel-shaped heaps. This spiralling gracefully arcs into elegant loops that lean against the wall. The corn can be read as a unit of universal currency. It and its byproducts affect every aspect of human existence, from its uses in the petroleum industry to its presence as a socializing lubricant for peasant women, who grind corn by hand as they gossip with neighbours. It is the staple diet of much of the world, and is a material used to build shelters, feed cattle, make pipes, and stuff mattresses. The hybridization of corn revolutionized the face of America, changing it from a rural to an urban nation. The desire for uniformity and high yields overshadowed the agricultural sagacity of the Amerindians, resulting in the extinction of many varieties that were previously cultivated.

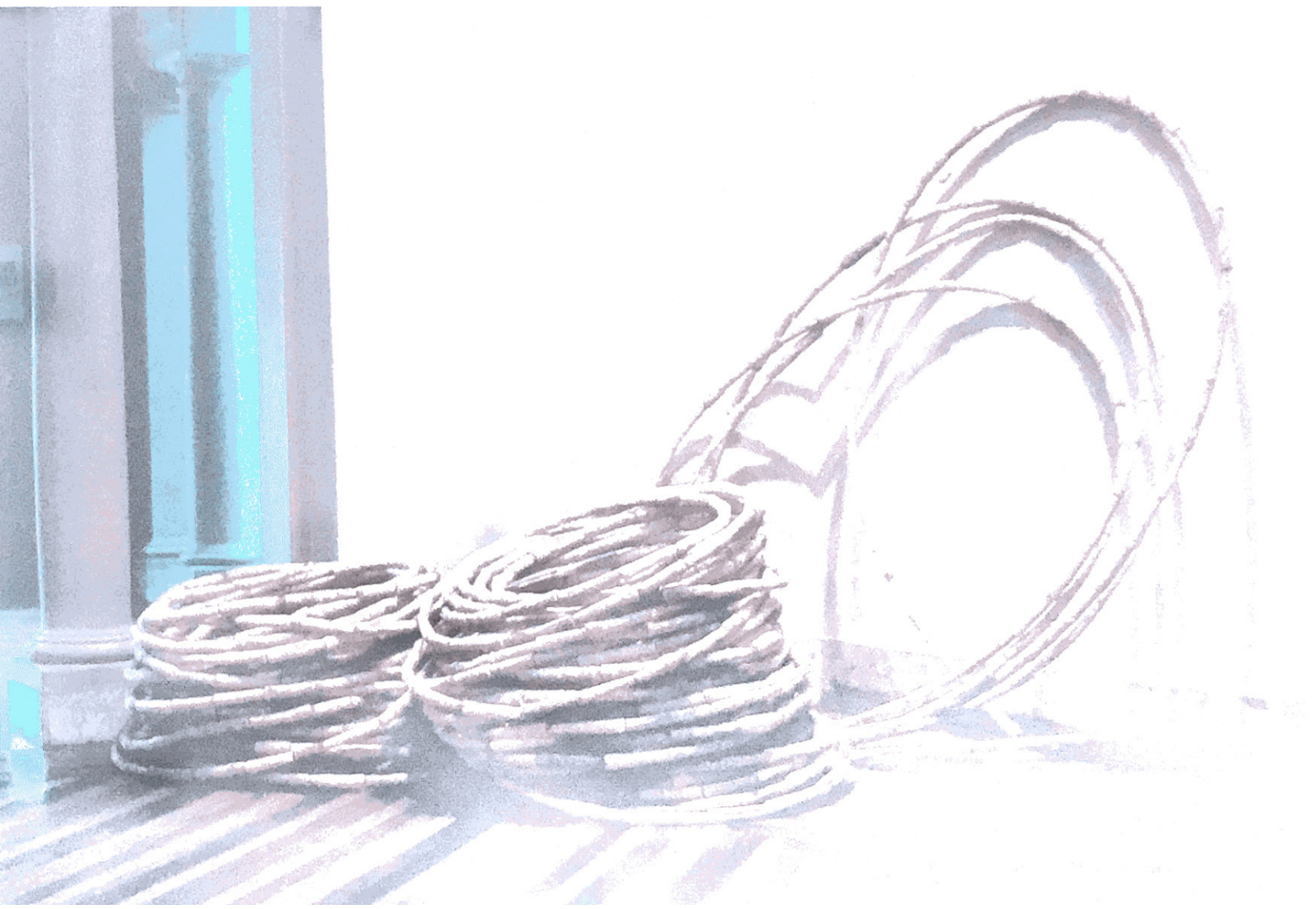
Nuevas Voces is a pivotal work in this exhibition, reflecting and reiterating many facets of the other pieces. One grain of corn, in a few short months, will multiply itself hundreds of times, comparable to MacGregor's reproduction of buttons. The impact of the commodification of corn on society shares resonances with Silveira's allegories of the human condition. And in a world that relies heavily on mass communication, the methodology of both Cardoso and Osborne can be considered anachronistic, driven by nostalgia and intuition rather than the forces of technology.

Two enduring memories from Lyndal Osborne's Australian childhood carry the seeds of her current concerns. The first is her close observation of aboriginals squatting in circles as they worked with natural materials: pounding bark, splitting fronds with fingernails, spinning fur and hair, chewing twigs to make paintbrushes, twining fibre to produce string, placing rocks in rivers for fishing pens, using clay and boiled roots for pigments. The second memory is of cycling around the neighbouring countryside and coastal towns, filling her bike basket with souvenirs from the natural world. This deep love of collecting has resulted in her Edmonton home becoming a cornucopia and storehouse for, amongst other things, thirty years worth of dried limes, spheres of every imaginable material and size, and two truckloads of sunflower heads purchased from a local farmer.

Osborne constructs objects from materials gathered during her forays into the countryside around her house. The knowledge gained through the tactile manipulation of birch branches, gourds, and other natural artifacts — that is, their pliability, brittleness, and the physical changes occurring over the drying periods — functions as a stimulating and preparatory exercise. This process is akin to the function of drawings and studies in more traditional art making.

The harvesting and gathering of organic material assumes an enormous role in the artist's schedule, from the eating of a grapefruit every morning (whose pithy shell is then subjected to a drying process and filed away for future use) to the long wintertime walks along the creek beds and hedges. Observation is paramount, and much of the conceptual aspect of the work is done outside.

During her perambulations in the woodlands, sloughs, and creeks, Osborne collects abandoned birds' nests. In *Point of Departure*, the artist places 250 of these nests on a steel table, in a repetitive pattern that suggests the ebb and flow of tides and the swirls and undulations left on the sands by the movement of the sea. Osborne is also influenced by her memory of the higgledy piggledy arbitrariness of the displays in the Cairo Museum, indifferent to Western notions of linear and canonical order.





The second component of *Point of Departure* consists of 65 boxes of weathered barn board that sit on a grid on the floor, echoing the shape and size of the table top. A tangle of copper wire twisted into a ball nestles in the red insert of each box. These man-made objects are a counterpoint to the nests, which are a product of human and avian labour — Osborne's interventions being the addition of a "lip" constructed from grasses and a papier mache "skin" that fits snugly into the hollow. The tactility of these objects entices the spectator closer, but despite this nearness and intimacy, there is a sense of looking at a panoramic vista.

The boxes recall the bales of hay that dot the prairie landscape. Mown hay shaped to resemble miniature barns. Barns, as well as nests, have been abandoned in Osborne's neighbourhood — but the very deterioration of the material gives new value to these disused structures. The wood has become a precious commodity much in demand for decorative purposes.

Osborne's is a practice tied to the land and its growing seasons. Returning to the studio with her treasures from the fields, she ties bushes, thistles, willows into bundles resembling constricted brooms, saplings, and curved horns. These new elements sometimes stand like sentinels guarding space, or they become the building bricks for metaphorical windbreaks, forged from their own terrain. The sculptures are bridges from the artist's memory of her native landscapes to her present-day collaboration with the flat lands of Alberta.



Minor Measures is Antoni Abad's response to an autumn and a winter spent in Alberta. Feeling like a stranger in his own skin, distanced by language and a continent, he became the supreme measurer, of nuance, of emotion, of anything that could be numbered or named. The ideas multiplied, taking shelter in a perpetuity of works graced by the motion of the hand span, the oldest of measures.

Abad, recognized as a Minimalist sculptor, is an aficionado of ironmongers and their wares. His work is dictated by material and how things fit: folding chairs bolted together with industrial hardware allow a myriad of configurations that echo the shapes of centipedes, waterwheels, or accordions. The luggage he brought with him to Banff, where he was an artist in residence, was small but flexible. He arrived with a suitcase of Stanley measuring tapes, as if he could substitute inches and centimetres for the equilibrium required between the familiarity of home and the foreignness of his new locale. The clarity that accompanies travel unleashed a voracious appetite to digest all that pointed to difference between Canada and Spain. He questioned everyone about everything: adages, maxims, the lengths of people's index fingers. In English we walk a tightrope; in Spanish that tension and implication of danger becomes translated into slackness. He wanted to own every yardstick in the province, so that the act of possessing might anchor his loneliness and discomfort to the reality of consumption. American artist Barbara Kruger, in her series of parodies on sayings, recoins Descartes' edict as *I Shop Therefore I Am*. Abad proved that he existed by pestering all those around him like a precocious nuisance of a child, who through persistent demands finds the essential wisdom that the preoccupied adult has overlooked. He forces us to examine, to time, and to speak of our instances of doubt, of certainty, of love, and of excess. To articulate and thus gauge in words and in seconds that which is abstract and unquantifiable.



In *Minor Measures*, Abad's passion for his ideas is rendered tangible in the rhythmic folding of aluminum hands and matter-of-fact chronology of his day. The elusive and the sublime are palpably present, embodied by the monumental hand that opens and closes, repeating endlessly the balletic gesture that represents the interminability of being.

Sarindar Dhaliwal is a visual artist living in Toronto. Dhaliwal was born in India and emigrated to Canada in 1968. She studied art in Cornwall, England, in the mid-'70s. Recent solo shows include *from saffron midden to ochre flats*, at the Edmonton Art Gallery, and *Heart, Home & Hearth*, at the Or Gallery, Vancouver.

Antoni Abad*Born 1956, Lleida, Spain*

Antoni Abad has had seven solo shows in various Spanish cities since 1994. His work has recently been shown in group exhibitions in Sweden, Denmark, Portugal, and Germany, including *Container '96* in Copenhagen. Abad was a visiting artist in the United States at Pennsylvania State University in 1993, and at Rochester University in 1994. He also participated in a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada, in 1993. His North American visits have driven him to pursue an interest in technology; two of his works are currently on the Internet. Abad is presently based in Barcelona.

Maria Fernanda Cardoso*Born 1963, Bogota, Colombia*

Maria Fernanda Cardoso arrived in the United States in 1987 for graduate studies at the Pratt Institute in New York and received her Master of Fine Arts degree from the Yale University School of Art. Recent solo exhibitions include *Submarine Landscape: Woven Water* in 1994 at the Capp Street Project in San Francisco. She has exhibited in group shows in Italy, Germany, Mexico, and Venezuela. In 1996, Cardoso commenced a project with the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia. She is currently in Australia developing a film project that explores her interest in the flea circus.

Gwen MacGregor*Born 1960, Calgary, Canada*

Gwen MacGregor has been actively involved in the Toronto art community, both as an artist and organizer, since 1983. In 1994 she had a solo exhibition, entitled *Murky Waters*, at Mercer Union in Toronto. She is a member of the artist collectives

Spontaneous Combustion and *Blanket*. In 1996 MacGregor was included in *Resident Memory*, a group show of Canadian artists in Prague, Czech Republic. Upcoming projects include a solo show at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge and collaboration with a newly formed collective whose members are based in London, England, and Toronto.

Lyndal Osborne*Born 1940, Newcastle, N.S.W., Australia*

Lyndal Osborne received her Master of Fine Arts in 1971 from the University of Wisconsin in Madison and chose to remain in North America upon completion of her studies. She has travelled and exhibited extensively, and her work is in numerous public collections. Recent exhibitions include a solo show at the SNAP Gallery in Edmonton, and *Site Markers*, a three-person show at the Latitude 53 Gallery in Edmonton. Osborne is actively involved in the art community in Edmonton and currently serves as a board member of the Edmonton Art Gallery. Osborne has taught at the University of Alberta since 1971.

Regina Silveira*Born 1939, Porto Alegre, Brazil*

Regina Silveira received both her Master of Fine Arts and PhD from the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, and has taught there since 1974. She was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in 1990–1991, and a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant in 1993. Silveira has been a visiting artist at various institutions in the United States and Europe. Her 1996 exhibitions include *Velox* at the Il Gabbiano Gallery in la Spezia, Italy, *Grafias* at the Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo, and *Gone Wild*, a site-specific installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego.