



2011

Lisa Blas: Meet Me at the Mason Dixon

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Recommended Citation

Egan, Shannon and de Baca, Miguel, "Lisa Blas: Meet Me at the Mason Dixon" (2011). *Schmucker Art Catalogs*. 8.

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Lisa Blas: Meet Me at the Mason Dixon

Description

The Schmucker Art Gallery at Gettysburg College is extremely pleased to mount the remarkable series of paintings, photographs, and mixed-media installation by contemporary artist Lisa Blas entitled *Meet Me at the Mason Dixon*. This exhibition is an official part of Gettysburg area's 150th Commemoration of the American Civil War as well as Gettysburg College's Kick-Off event for this significant anniversary. Gettysburg provides an especially appropriate backdrop for the exhibition, as the artist took the history of this "hallowed ground" and its current resonances as the subject of her work. Blas traveled the Gettysburg National Military Park, as well as to the Antietam National Battlefield, the Smithsonian Institution, the National Archives and the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia, among many other sites, to investigate how national identity and cultural myths are shaped in response to this momentous period of American history.

The title of this exhibition, *Meet Me at the Mason Dixon*, invokes an encounter at a historical boundary line known for centuries of conflict. The Mason-Dixon Line originally was intended to solve a British colonial dispute. Later, it divided the northern from the southern United States based on the legality of slavery, and as such, symbolizes the massive fracturing of the country during the American Civil War. To contemporary artist Lisa Blas, however, the Mason-Dixon emblemizes the tensions implicit in the concept of historical memory. How are traumas witnessed and remembered? What becomes codified as history, and what other narratives are thereby repressed? What age-old divisions haunt us in the present? Blas comprehends such questions as open-ended, visualizing the past as fundamentally, and persistently, conflicted. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Lisa Blas, Mason-Dixon Line, 150th Commemoration of the American Civil War, Battle of Gettysburg, historical memory, Civil War and memory

Disciplines

Art and Design | History | United States History

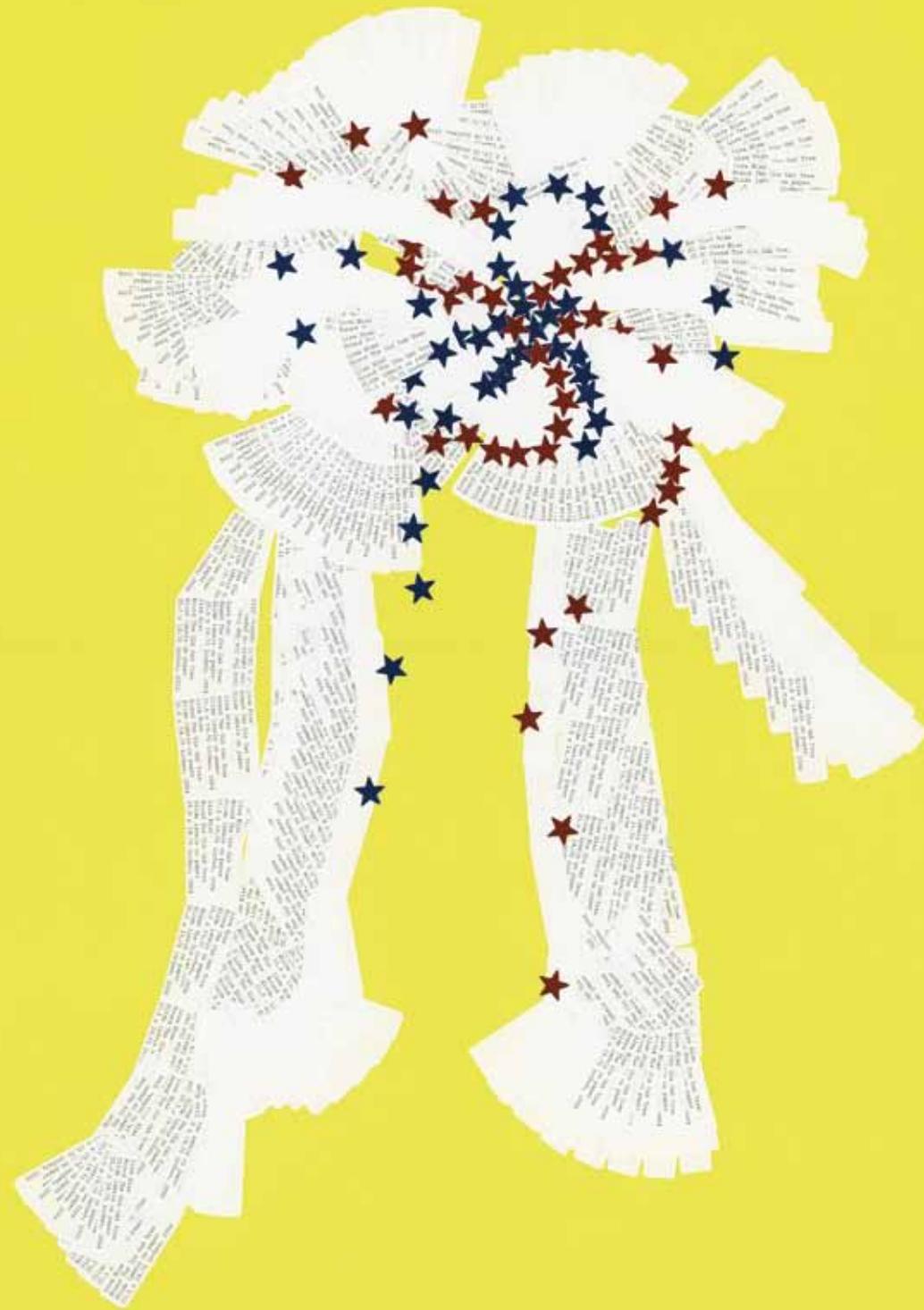
Publisher

Schmucker Art Gallery, Gettysburg College



Lisa Blas: Meet Me at the Mason Dixon

Lisa Blas: Meet Me at the Mason Dixon



Yellow Ribbon

Chromogenic print,
mounted on Sintra
and framed,
26.75 x 20.75 inches,
2004

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When Blas came to Gettysburg in preparation for *Meet Me at the Mason Dixon*, she, like many visitors, was prompted to imagine the three hot days in July of 1863, when the Union and Confederate armies met in this small Pennsylvania town. While it is almost impossible to put oneself in the midst of the Battle of Gettysburg, the arduousness of the American Civil War and the staggering numbers of dead and wounded must never be forgotten. As we see in the installation of *Meet Me at the Mason Dixon*, this concept of historical memory is ingrained in these battlefields, monuments, roadside markers and museums in various ways. Blas in a sense transforms Schmucker Art Gallery into one of these venerated sites and reminds the viewer that the Battle of Gettysburg swept over the campus. Gettysburg College's administrative building Pennsylvania Hall, situated next to Schmucker Hall, served as a hospital for both the North and South. Additionally, it was an 1851 graduate of the College, David Wills, who invited President Abraham Lincoln to deliver "a few appropriate remarks" five months after the Battle. On November 19, 1863 townspeople, students and faculty gathered to hear Lincoln dedicate the National Cemetery with his immortalized Gettysburg Address. Each year, students and faculty of Gettysburg College recreate the procession to hear an honored guest read the Address. The Battle of Gettysburg served as a defining moment in the War, but the contemporary commemoration of it is also significant for understanding how we honor the dead, retrace our forebears' steps and remember history.

Blas reflects on both this history of the Civil War and the subsequent memorials of war in her work. Blas asks her viewer to "Meet Me at the Mason Dixon," specifically to consider what it means to be part of a diverse, but ultimately unified nation. The Mason-Dixon Line, running just a few miles south of Gettysburg, symbolizes a cultural boundary between the North and the South (Dixie) and can be seen

as a crossroads for contemplation on the nation's fraught past. The exhibition provides an excellent opportunity for viewers to think about how the American Civil War and America's involvement in war more broadly has affected the national ethos. We are fortunate that Lisa Blas's *Meet Me at the Mason Dixon* offers the College and the surrounding community a fascinating and provocative lens for contemplating the nation's past and its role in influencing the present.

The Schmucker Art Gallery wishes to thank the artist Lisa Blas for her generosity, passion and insight. Art historian Miguel de Baca, Assistant Professor of Art History at Lake Forest College, provided an extraordinarily thoughtful and fascinating analysis of Blas's series in the essay that follows. Special thanks are given to President Janet Morgan Riggs for her support of this exhibition, and to Jane North, Executive Vice President, President's Office; Michael Birkner, Franklin Professor of the Liberal Arts/Professor of History; and Peter Carmichael, Director of Civil War Institute and Robert C. Fluhrer Professor of Civil War Studies, for their tremendous enthusiasm and collaboration. I am grateful to Elaine McCausland, Senior Administrative Assistant, President's Office; Kathryn Barako, Administrative Assistant, President's Office; Karen Eskildsen, Academic Administrative Assistant, Schmucker Art Gallery; and Tina Grim, Program Manager, Civil War Institute Office, for helping with the many logistical details. I am appreciative of the members of the College's 150th Commemoration Committee, especially Kay Hoke, Director of the Sunderman Conservatory, and the Schmucker Art Gallery Advisory Committee. Finally, I would like to thank Ayumi Yasuda for her beautiful design of the catalogue. This exhibition is funded in part by the Events Planning and Coordinating Committee (EPACC), Gettysburg College.

Shannon Egan, Ph.D.
Director, Schmucker Art Gallery

FRAMES OF REFERENCE:
LISA BLAS'S
MEET ME AT THE MASON DIXON

Miguel de Baca



I. Meet Me There

The title of this exhibition, *Meet Me at the Mason Dixon*, invokes an encounter at a historical boundary line known for centuries of conflict. The Mason-Dixon Line originally was intended to solve a British colonial dispute. Later, it divided the northern from the southern United States based on the legality of slavery, and as such, symbolizes the massive fracturing of the country during the American Civil War. To contemporary artist Lisa Blas, however, the Mason-Dixon emblemizes the tensions implicit in the concept of historical memory. How are traumas witnessed and remembered? What becomes codified as history, and what other narratives are thereby repressed? What age-old divisions haunt us in the present? Blas comprehends such questions as open-ended, visualizing the past as fundamentally, and persistently, conflicted.¹

Even though she hails from California, Blas originated this series of artworks in Washington, D.C., a city of meeting points, which left its indelible mark on the ideas presented here. Like the

nearby Mason-Dixon Line, Washington was a midpoint between the North and South. Washington also serves as a kind of temporal intersection between the past and a future yet unwritten. The city's planner Pierre Charles L'Enfant laid a radial street plan atop an urban grid, creating dozens of chunky intersections along the wide boulevards. His intent was aspirational; these intersections were once open spaces anticipating monuments to an illustrious history yet in the making and are now filled with equestrian statues and memorial plaques.² Monuments oftentimes envision national solidarity, leaving little room for countervailing interpretations. And yet, a nostalgic notion of shared heritage seems at odds with urban modernity, which trades on its diversity and its intellectual distance from the past.

If historical crossroads—the Mason-Dixon and Washington, D.C.—provide the topography of this exploration, then contemporary history provides the context. Blas began to make this body of work in the middle of the tumultuous first

¹ I wish to acknowledge Makeda Best at the University of Vermont for her thoughtful insights, Cory Stevens at Lake Forest College for her editorial suggestions, and Chris Way for his research assistance. The historical Mason-Dixon is described in Lester J. Cappon, ed., et al, *Atlas of Early American History: The Revolutionary Era, 1760-1790* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press for the Newberry Library and the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1976), 89, and Martin Gilbert, *Atlas of American History* (London: Dorset Press, 1984), 54.

² Pierre Charles L'Enfant wrote to Thomas Jefferson on April 4, 1791: "I shall in the mean while, Sir, beg for every information respecting all what may in your judgement [sic] appear of most immediate importance to attend to as well as relating to Every desirable Establishment which it will be well to foresee [sic] although delaying or perhaps leaving the Execution thereof to a natural succession of time to Effect." Saul K. Padover, ed., *Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital: 1783-1818*, with Plans and Illustrations (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1946), 57.

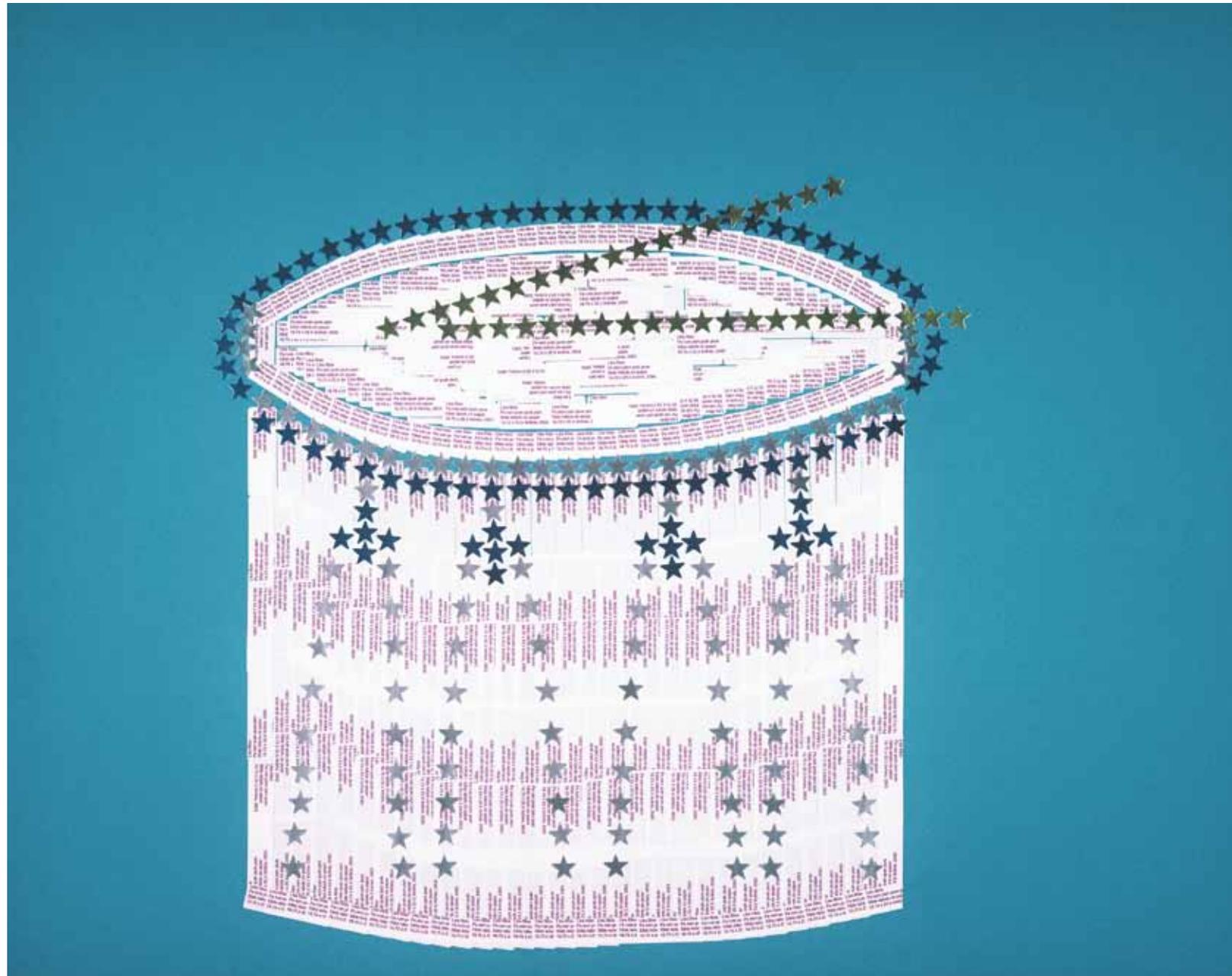
decade of the current century. The beginning of the 2000s brought forth the neologism “post-9/11,” a term encompassing both the warnings of American decline and the violence of military response. These strident anxieties had waned somewhat by the end of the decade and yielded to the marvels of pushbutton social connectivity through the Internet. Rather than claiming that Blas’s practice explicitly forges an interface between these two modes, I suggest that there is a significant effort on her part to question something as nebulous as historical consciousness in an era increasingly obsessed with its own instantaneity.

The invitation to “meet me at the Mason Dixon” is one that necessarily examines history’s conflicts, differences, and potential reconciliations. Blas’s collages, paintings, and photographs range from the obsessively archival to the unremittingly personal. By pictorializing storied battlegrounds, folk myths, and monuments, the artist threads familiar histories through varied patterns of recrudescence in contemporary culture. Her search for a personally affective response to ephemera from the past ruminates on how a single representation was mediated in its period of origin and redeployed in new economies of signs, symbols, and significances over time.

(previous page)
Meet Me at the Mason Dixon
mixed-media installation, 7 feet 4 inches x 12 feet 6 inches, latex paint, newspaper articles, flags, brochures, maps, photographs, (*Shades of Grey*) acrylic paint on canvas paintings, horseshoes (shredded military documents of a personal and sensitive nature, Celluclay, glue, gold dust and ceramic pigment), ribbons, business cards, patches, postcards, matches, plastic bags, US Postal Service notices, one dollar bill signed by Howard Dean, (*Raked Over the Coals*) acrylic paint on watercolor paper, napkins, Delta Airlines meal card, ticket stubs, pins, paper, pinwheel, (*New Mason-Dixon Line*) pigment ink on Canson paper, plastic bags, book covers, pinwheel, receipt from Faulkner House Books/New Orleans, Hallmark cards, call slips from the Library of Congress, stickers, paper bags, and Post-It notes.
2003 - 2008

(right)
Shades of Grey, after Emily Perez, #3
Acrylic and pigment ink on canvas, 21 x 14 inches, 2006-2007
Private Collection





II. History is What You Make (of It)

After Johnny Shiloh, then Lincoln (Parumpumpum) (2005) illustrates Blas's approach to this particular history: a photograph of a mixed media collage depicting a snare drum and drumsticks on a ground of teal drawing paper. The artist suggests the drum's batter head and shell through meticulously overlaid white slide labels; each label contains magenta text announcing the artist's name and the title, date and proportions of the artwork. Small metallic foil stickers shaped like five-pointed stars draw out the rim, tension rods, casings, and drumsticks. The batter head tilts awkwardly into the picture plane, yielding a fuller space for us to see the foil star drumsticks resting at an angle on its surface. Stars double up at the points of intersection along the rim.

The metallic foil stars seem to reflect our ambient light, and in this, Blas introduces a key deception. *After Johnny Shiloh* is not a collage, but rather a photograph of a collage. As a photograph, it has an emulsified, uniform surface. The light we see reflected on the edges of these small stars in fact belongs to a flash of light from the past, simultaneously instantiated and recorded by the artist's camera. The silvery foil—the vehicle of reflected light, and our reminder of its past state—brings to mind a correlated, symbolic contradic-

tion. Interestingly enough, it is the real element of metallic silver that is chemically blunted during the final stages of chromogenic processing.³ Thus Blas insinuates that the past is at once physically lost and pictorially regained, and the photograph acts for us as a type of monument: a present reconstruction of the past.

Blas's allusive title performs additional mnemonic work. *After Johnny Shiloh, then Lincoln (Parumpumpum)* references a legendary persona based on the real historical figure of John Lincoln Clem. Clem (born John Joseph Klem) was a drummer boy in the 22nd Michigan Infantry during the American Civil War. At the Battle of Chickamauga in 1863, the twelve-year-old boy shot and injured the Confederate soldier who had demanded his surrender. Clem's commanding officer promoted him to the rank of sergeant, and the young boy became a nationally known figure. Amidst such glory, Clem adopted the middle name "Lincoln." Later in 1863, William Shakespeare Hays penned the patriotic tune "The Drummer Boy of Shiloh" for the readers of *Harp-er's Weekly*. Hays's song invoked Clem's courage in staring down the enemy, even though the boy did not serve at Shiloh. The magnitude of Clem's fame, coupled with the popularity of Hays's song,

³ This process is known colloquially as "desilvering" and is familiar to practitioners of dye-destruction color techniques. For a technical description of color photographic systems, see Grant Haist, *Modern Photographic Processing, Volume 2* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1979), 450-463.

resulted in the composite name “Johnny Shiloh” trenchant in historical memory. Readers may also recognize the name from the Walt Disney-produced television miniseries *Johnny Shiloh* (1963), itself an invocation of national heritage anticipating the centennial anniversary of the Civil War. Disney’s substantially fictionalized homage to John Lincoln Clem fittingly appropriates a life’s story already familiar to adaptation.⁴

If the reference to Johnny Shiloh bespeaks of the slippages and excesses of mediated historical memory, then the parenthetical title, *Parumpumpumpum*, suggests yet another resemblance. The onomatopoeia derives from the refrain of the popular Christmas tune “The Carol of the Drum,” (later titled “The Little Drummer Boy”) written by the American songwriter Katherine Davis in 1941.⁵ Davis’s song recounts the story of a poor child whom the newborn Christ smiled upon for offering a gift of drum taps to lull him to sleep in the manger. The carol’s lyrics fuse the suggestion of the drummer boy’s “parum pum pum pum” to the notion of Christian sacrifice central to the gospel narrative. Blas’s title focuses our attention on the cultural adjacency of each drummer boy, Johnny Shiloh and the one in Bethlehem, as a myth invented and sentimentalized by adults to allegorize heroic selflessness—and here we note that Davis penned the carol during the Second World War, when such narratives of heroism were especially relevant. Returning to Blas’s image, it now seems fitting that the artist constructed her collage with sticker stars of the type commonly given to children in elementary school for model

citizenship; Blas visually analogizes Shiloh’s drum to the larger concept of childhood obedience, even to the point of self-sacrifice.

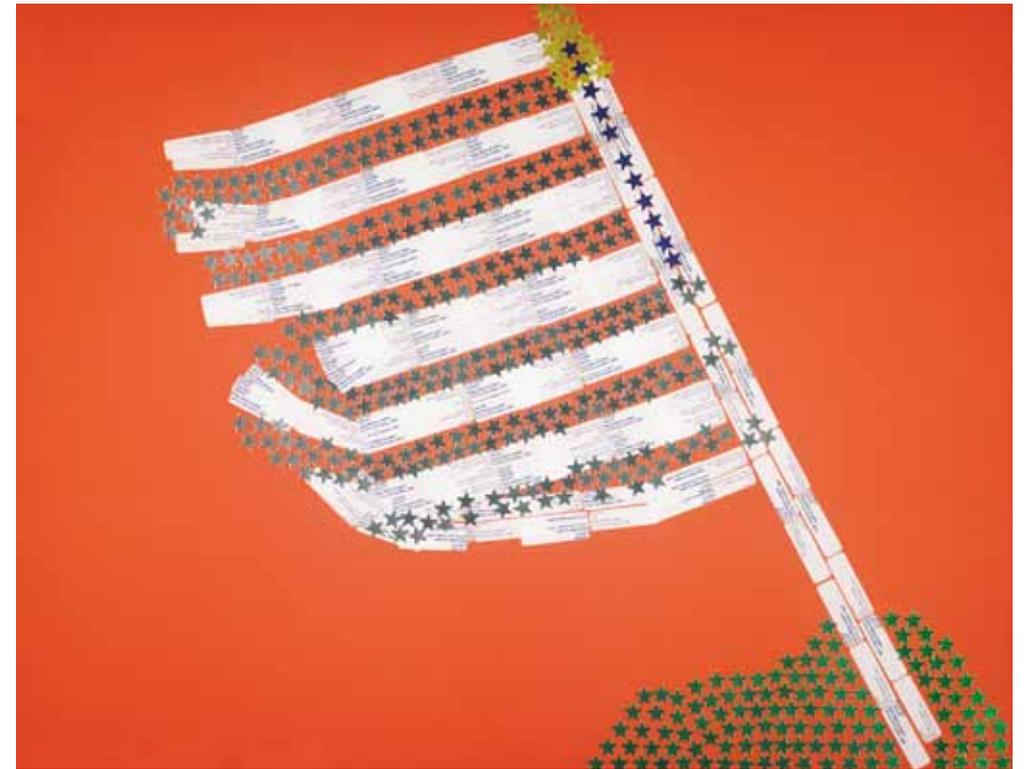
Whereas the metallic stars connote the highly allusive historical past, the slide labels feel comparatively objective, printed with tangible truths about the artist’s name and the work’s dimensions, and date. These data refer to the entire object itself, reminding the viewer that we are looking at a representation (or, more accurately, a representation of a representation, and the fact that these are slide labels alludes to yet another layer of reproduction in celluloid).⁶ Moreover, the labels identify the artist as yet another subject of the composition; Blas’s name repeats as a string of text along the outside edge of the batter head and dispersed throughout the collage. By insisting on the represented nature of the object and to her own assertive presence as the conjoiner of arbitrated histories, Blas comments precisely upon the pre-mediated nature of how information from the past is publicly received. We are left to make sense of *After Johnny Shiloh* as a complex of tenuous fragments drawn equally from public history and private memory.

Blas’s photography of collage establishes a pictorial language of allegory that we see elsewhere in this suite of photographs, and indeed, in the rest of her artistic practice. *Feather in His Cap, after Jeb Stuart and Richard Prince* (2005) references Yankee Doodle, the ragamuffin Patriot who would eventually succeed against British forces in the Revolution. *General Checkmate* (2005) represents the half-unfurled Stars and

⁴ “Last Veteran of ‘61 to Leave the Army,” *The New York Times*, August 8, 1915, 18; William S. Hays, “The Drummer Boy of Shiloh,” in Richard Crawford, ed., *The Civil War Songbook: Complete Original Sheet Music for 37 Songs* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977), 82–86.

⁵ William E. Studwell, *Christmas Carols: A Reference Guide* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985), 130.

⁶ The artist notes that carousel slides are additionally symbolic of the recent past, citing that digital representation superseded celluloid at around the same time as these photographs were produced.



(previous page)
***After Johnny Shiloh,
Then Lincoln***
Chromogenic print,
mounted on Sintra and
framed, 20.75 x 26.75
inches, 2005

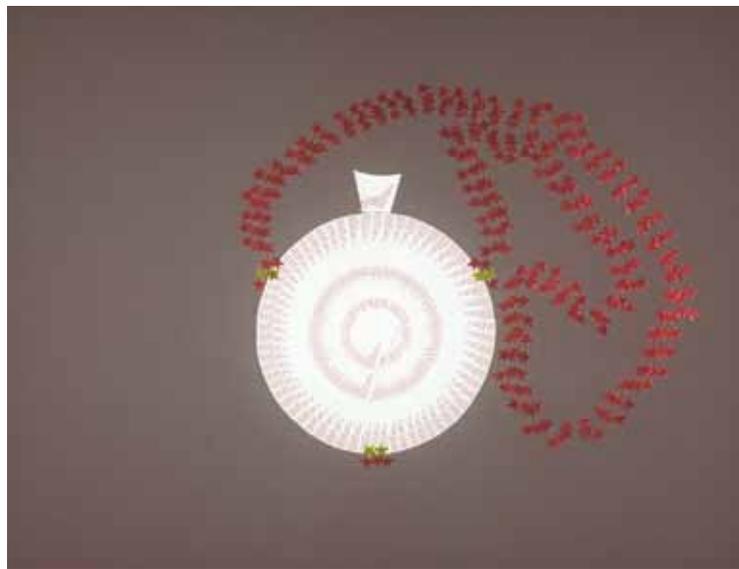
(right)
General Checkmate
Chromogenic print,
mounted on Sintra and
framed, 20.75 x 26.75
inches, 2005



(left)
***Feather in His Cap,
after Jeb Stuart and
Richard Prince***
Chromogenic print,
mounted on Sintra and
framed, 20.75 x 26.75
inches, 2005

Stripes reminiscent of such seminal visuals as Emanuel Leutze’s antebellum painting *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851) and Joe Rosenthal’s Second World War-era photograph *Raising the Flag at Iwo Jima* (1945). Even if such images are not in the conscious forefront of our

cognition, the traces of their having been seen in history books and on greeting cards are almost certainly a part of our visual framework. Blas impresses upon the viewer that we live in a world inundated by—and, indeed, reliant upon—images of past battles.



(from top, clockwise)
Oh! Be Joyful
 Chromogenic print,
 mounted on Sintra
 and framed, 20.75 x 26.75
 inches, 2005

All's Fair In Love And War
 Chromogenic print,
 mounted on Sintra and
 framed, 20.75 x 26.75
 inches, 2005

***With Deepest Sympathy,
 after Hallmark***
 Chromogenic print,
 mounted on Sintra and
 framed, 26.75 x 20.75
 inches, 2005





III. The Legacy of Ghosts

Richmond (2006) is another key example of the tendency in Blas's work to creatively reinterpret historical experience, a painting taking as its subject two of Alexander Gardner's stereograph negatives of the ruins of Richmond, Virginia, dating from 1865. Blas divides *Richmond* into upper and lower registers. On the left hand side of the lower register, Blas pictures the architectural remnants original to Gardner's *View of Ruins, Richmond, from Main Street, Looking Down 14th Street, April 8, 1865*, and on the right hand side, to his *Ruins of Gallego Flour Mills, Richmond, April 10, 1865*, rendering the fragmented buildings in black, brown, white, and bright coral pink. In the upper register, Blas paints a large, gossamer bluish grey cloud, stretching from the left margin to the right, with ragged splashes of iridescent pigment. The entire painting is set against a background of drab mauve, which, against the coral pink, forces a jarring optical sensation accenting the unnerving quality of the overall picture.

Photography of the vanquished Confederate capital naturally served as evidence of Union

victory, but was not as widely reproduced as one might imagine. Despite its interpretation by storied documentarians of the war, comparatively few photographs of Richmond appeared to the public when compared to the ubiquitous engravings of celebrations marking the end of war and distinguished portraits of victorious Union generals.⁷ The pictures of the ruins of Richmond are truly melancholy, and Gardner's seem especially so: skeletons of buildings figure prominently, ghostly against stark daylight, with slurries of debris in the wide-open foreground.⁸ Unlike the photographic representation of battlefield scenes, which were so often decontextualized geographically, the images of Richmond focus on urban devastation, making them all the more tangible and eerie. The destruction was not a Union punishment, but rather a startling Confederate defense. Retreating Southern troops burned down Richmond's arsenals and bridges to prevent Northern spoils. The cursing of the capital at the hands of its own people bespeaks of the desperation of a collapsing government in the final days of conflict.⁹

⁷ Mark E. Neely, Jr. and Harold Holzer, *The Union Image: Popular Prints of the Civil War North* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 161-197.

⁸ Gardner's style of photographically envisioning architecture and its ruin is best evidenced by the plates in his tome, *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War*, published in 1865 and 1866. Because it was cumbersome and expensive, the original book was a financial failure. However, a popular reprint is available in Alexander Gardner, *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War* (New York: Dover Publications, 1959).

⁹ For further reading on the surrender of Richmond, see: Noah Andre Trudeau, *Out of the Storm: The End of the Civil War, April-June 1865* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1994).

Blas's *Richmond* amplifies the physical and cultural disarray implicit in Gardner's photographs and dissolves the rhetoric of victory these images might otherwise proclaim. With human figuration removed, the painting focuses on the motif of disorganized wreckage. Although the term "ruins" was synonymous with postwar Richmond, it also (and perhaps more frequently) conjures the antiquities of some long gone civilization. One of the shocks of seeing the ruins of Richmond photographically is realizing that warfare laid waste to a contemporary, inhabited city that the course of centuries or millennia would otherwise ruin. Blas is interested in this disorienting contraction of time, and her deletion of human action renders the image applicable to disasters across modern history. Blas pictorializes what historian Drew Gilpin Faust suggests is the ultimate legacy of the American Civil War, namely its awful proximity to death and violence in warfare.¹⁰ Indeed the devastated ruins of Richmond resonate with other visuals of urban wastelands: Europe in 1918, Hiroshima in 1945, Ground Zero in 2001.

If there is a concept uniting the paintings in this series—*Fort Sumter* (2005), *Devil's Den* (2005), *Burnside Bridge* (2006), and *Richmond*—it is an amplified rhetoric of war's aftermath spun out of their originating images. Gardner's photographs of Richmond were precisely not photographs of a celebratory parade, for example, and thus evoke the immensity of violence

and desolation. *Devil's Den* takes as its subject Gardner's *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter* (1863), an image exemplary of the photographer's staging of a Confederate corpse and a rifle to connote the larger narrative of the Battle of Gettysburg. In the absence of any detail of Union or Confederate loss in *Devil's Den*, however, Blas redirects the viewer's attention to the topographical features of the battlefield and the rifle blocking access to the shooting blind and the terrain beyond. Like *Richmond*, the rampart in *Devil's Den* both retains its likeness to a real, occupiable place in the world, and becomes a marked site in the larger discourse of war and its disastrous legacy.

The imaginative use of color in these paintings establishes distance from their black-and-white photographic antecedents. High-keyed fluorescent colors dart through muddied tan, beige, and ochre shades, an optical contrast suggesting the urgency of Blas's painterly interpretation of key sites where meanings of the Civil War were produced and naturalized. The iridescence of the paint cannot be ignored, given the importance of the metallic elements in Blas's chromogenic prints as the vehicle through which we understand the passage of time. Unlike the foil stars, the shimmering surfaces of Blas's paintings constitute the formal quality that cannot be photographed accurately. The elusiveness of the surface implies that these places of ruin remain enigmatic and spectral, and therefore unconstrained by their depiction.

(previous page)

Richmond

Acrylic and pigment ink on canvas, 48 x 60 inches, 2006
Private Collection

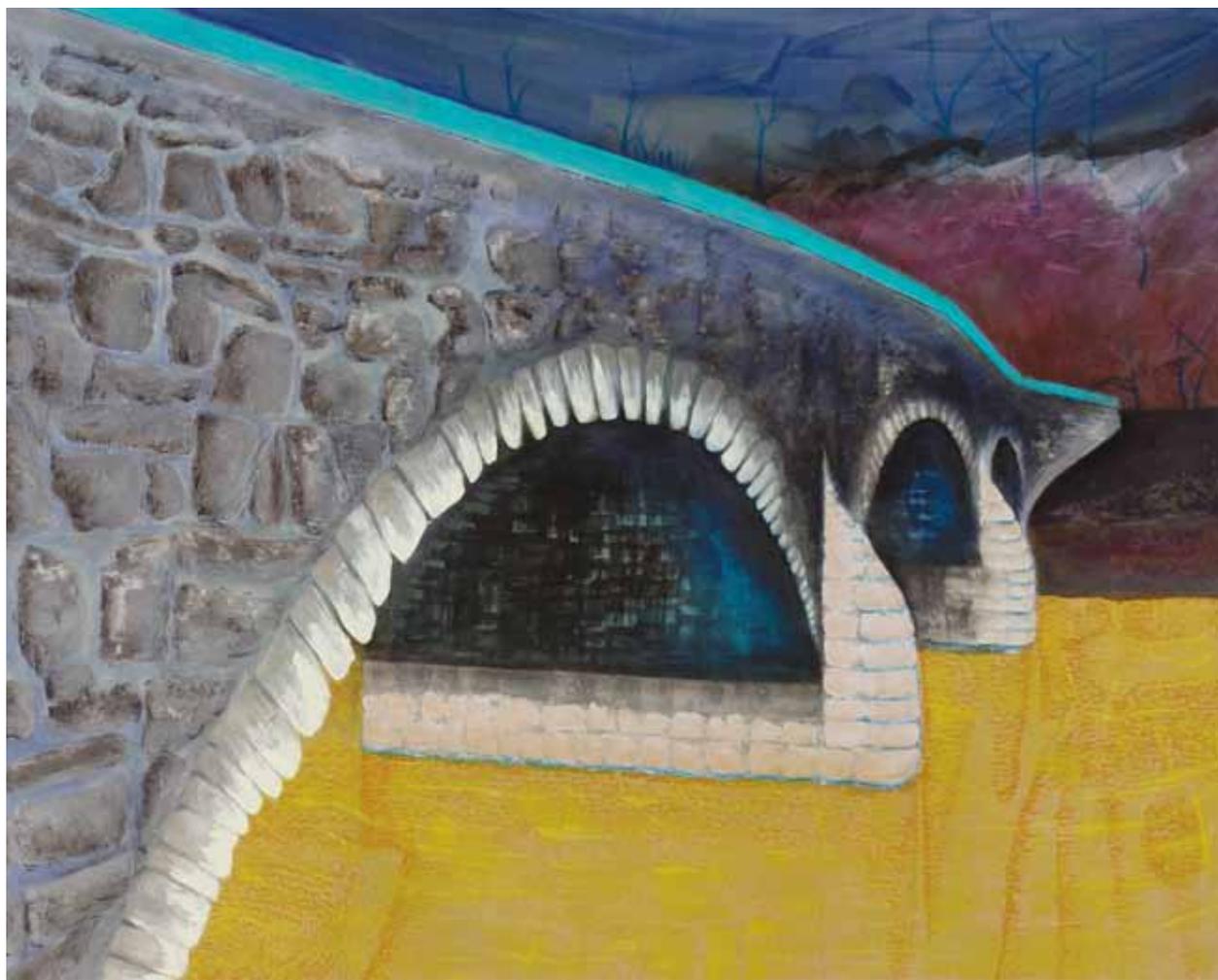
(right)

Devil's Den

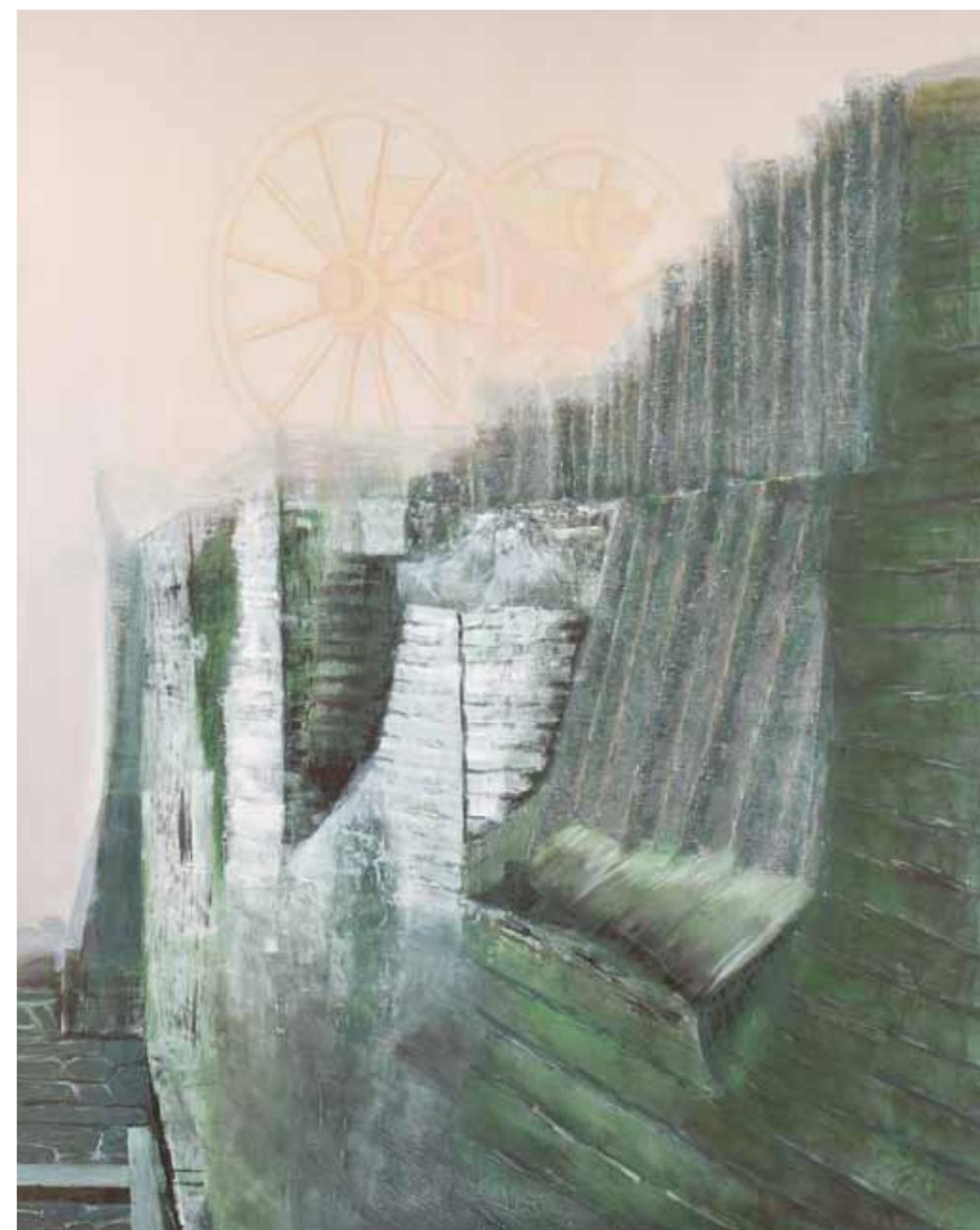
Acrylic and pigment ink on canvas, 48 x 60 inches, 2006



¹⁰ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Random House, 2008), 32–60.



(left)
Burnside Bridge
Acrylic and pigment ink
on canvas, 48 x 60 inches,
2006



(right)
Fort Sumter
Acrylic and pigment ink
on canvas, 60 x 48 inches,
2005



**SECOND LIEUTENANT
EMILY J.T. PEREZ**
Acrylic and pigment ink
on canvas, 40 x 30 inches,
2007-2008

IV. Lavender is a Verb

Blas's works consider past representations made newly disarming through dynamic frames of reference. The installation *Meet Me at the Mason Dixon* (2003-2006; ongoing), which lends its title to the entire collection, is a platform for thinking through the culturally circumscribed process of self-identity, enmeshing paintings, patriotic ribbons and flags, bric-a-brac, ephemera from guidebooks, and tourist pamphlets. In order to objectify the artwork (that is, to see it as an object for analysis), one might comprehend it as a multi-part sculpture with an enlivened surface, relationships of scale, and patterns of repetition. However, such an assumption of its solidity affords Blas's work a kind of fixity that denies its present tense as an ongoing and actively collected personal archive.

And yet, *Meet Me at the Mason Dixon* isn't quite the kind of installation that hedges on performance, either. Certainly one moves back and forth to survey the images and text, incorporating the body into the space of the installation. However, Blas's collection of objects defies a regular understanding of such room-sized work because it does not explicitly refer to the physicality of the space in which the viewer's body moves. With no clear central point of focus, the artwork asks the viewer to make decisions about where to rest and sustain the gaze. For example, what level of relative importance does the viewer assign each surveyed image? How does a picture of Lincoln shore

up to one of Washington? A pamphlet describing the Battle of Vicksburg to one describing the Battle of Antietam? Or, for that matter, images to words? The collage offers a seemingly infinite number of inter-textual dialogs to consider.

To make sense of it, I propose that we imaginatively strip the installation down to its genesis: a painted lavender wall. The color has great significance to the artist; she calls it "Hallmark lavender," assigning it the potential symbolism of sweet sentimentality. More specifically, lavender is almost always associated with humbled and ingratiated parts of culture, those that are emotionally or literally vulnerable. And yet, the color is an intermediary between powerful others. For example, it is an averaging of the red, white, and blue of Old Glory. As an admixture, lavender defies the sense of Rockwellian Americana appealed to by the collaged flags and ribbons that the artist pins onto the installation's surface. Such a muted color is implicitly skeptical of expressivity, providing a way of thinking about Blas's archival launch.

Now laid bare, I propose that we imaginatively begin adding images to this lavender surface: a postcard of Buffalo Bill Cody, a beverage napkin from JetBlue Airlines, a pamphlet from the National Park Service detailing the history of the Presidio in San Francisco. Looking at just these three seemingly dissociated objects, we get the sense of a deeply private iconography, perhaps

suggesting the artist's journey to her homeland out West. But how can the casual observer know for sure? We would have to be as privy to the origins of these images as the artist herself. What I wish to suggest is that *Meet Me at the Mason Dixon* summarizes Blas's larger process of image making. The artist identifies pre-fabricated materials that trade on another, personally affective, relevance. She adds these subjects to other such materials, and then more, until the result is so dense that it casts doubt on the surety of any one image's received meaning. Blas's collage replicates the methodology of intermediation already implicit in the lavender ground. In order to experience this installation, the viewer must retreat from all foreknowledge compellingly written into the individual pamphlets, headlines, and logos scattered about the surface, and in so doing, personally rethink the interconnectedness of them collectively.

The open-endedness of historical memory is an important lesson of *Meet Me at the Mason Dixon*, to be sure, but the risk of indeterminacy is its danger of sliding into cultural relativism: no principled truths, no validity. It is perforce easier to attribute literary ambiguity to historical personages if we consider them as mythological characters. No representation of a person, past or present, could be as real as what that person felt himself or herself to be; furthermore, we should not mistake the word "real" for "absolute," just as reality surely also encompasses the social fragmentation and contingency which broaden our perspective onto history.

Blas raises this point precisely in three human-scale portrait paintings that surround *Meet Me at the Mason Dixon*: *JOHN WILKES BOOTH*, *PAULINE CUSHMAN*, and *SECOND LIEUTENANT EMILY J.T. PEREZ* (all 2007-08). In each of these, we are confronted with a figure of notoriety gained because of his or her adjacency to war. Booth's notoriety derives from his assassination of

Lincoln; Cushman, for her espionage for the Union cause; and Perez, for being the highest decorated African-American and Hispanic woman to have died in the recent Iraq War. Perez is the curious figure among these three because she did not live a life of infamy, like Booth, or subterfuge, like Cushman. *The Washington Post* remembered Perez as an honest and dutiful person who embraced her professional and personal community identities, and her death is a searing reminder of our ongoing proximity to death's cruelty. Materially, the portraits of Booth and Cushman are painted on Tyvek, a modern industrial plastic impervious to decomposition. The portrait of Perez, however, is painted on traditional linen canvas. Blas's media echo the conflation of historicism and newness evident in her larger body of work. When seen together with the larger, "lavendered" installation, these painted portraits address the motifs of historical durability, individual fame, the vulnerability of identity, and loss in warfare that are quickened in commemorative practice.

In between the portraits and the lavender wall, the viewer's live body inhabits an uneasy boundary line between the superabundance of information on the one hand and ghostly presences on the other. And this is Blas's tactical gambit: what points of attention must be sacrificed to others? What identities emerge when others collapse? Which journey through history provokes a powerful reassessment of our personal place in contemporary culture? *Meet Me at the Mason Dixon*—the exhibition and the installation—is an invitation to examine the internal complexities of representations of the past. Such an envisioning beckons us to consider the persistence of important myths and symbols that provide frames of reference through which other myths and symbols are perpetuated over course. Blas's *Mason Dixon* is largely an interpretive space: hesitant to agree with received truths, skeptical but not cynical, and ready to accept the multiple outcomes of conflict.



(left)
JOHN WILKES BOOTH
Acrylic and pigment ink
on Tyvek, 8 x 3 feet,
2007-2008



(right)
PAULINE CUSHMAN
Acrylic and pigment ink
on Tyvek, 8 x 3 feet,
2007-2008

Lisa Blas Biography

Lisa Blas is a visual artist from Los Angeles, California, currently based in Brussels, Belgium. In her art, she utilizes portraiture, still life and site-specificity to reflect upon the visual culture and social history of past and present. In 2003, she moved to Washington, D.C. and began a long-term project in photography, painting and installation on various constructions of the “American experience.” Travelling extensively throughout the southern, mid-Atlantic and northeastern United States, she examined commemorative sites, historical archives and museum collections from the nineteenth and twentieth century to locate material for such projects. Since her relocation to Brussels, she has commenced working with archives within the library of the Département Arts Plastiques, Université de Lille 3, at the Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire in Brussels, at the Imperial War Museum in London, and archives circa World War I at the Mairie d’Ors, in the north of France, in conjunction with the Wilfred Owen Association, France.

Recent shows include solo exhibitions *As if pruning a tree, after Matisse* at the Musée Matisse, Cateau-Cambrésis, *Turner la page*, at the Galerie Commune, Tourcoing, France, and group exhibitions at Addison Ripley Fine Art, Washington, D.C. and Jaus, Los Angeles, California. Ms. Blas is a visiting artist/professor at the Université de Lille 3, where she created the seminar *Nomadism, site-specificity and other modes of transit*, a joint project with the University’s art department and the Ecole Régionale Supérieure d’Expression Plastique in Tourcoing. She also co-taught a curatorial seminar on photography with Thierry de Duve, and participated in the panel discussion “L’atelier en question,” organized by Nathalie Stefanov and Gilles Froger. This fall, she will conduct another seminar using the collection of the Eugène Leroy Museum (MUba) in Tourcoing.

The artist would like to thank Shannon Egan, Miguel de Baca, Gettysburg College, Fine Art Solutions, Los Angeles, Professor Lisa Lipinski and Thierry de Duve.

Miguel de Baca Biography

Miguel de Baca is Assistant Professor of Art History at Lake Forest College where he specializes in American and modern/contemporary art. He is the author of *Memory Work: Anne Truitt and Sculpture*, a manuscript reconsidering the career of the American minimalist sculptor Anne Truitt, as well as the broader issues of historical reference in postwar abstraction.

Prof. de Baca earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 2009 in the Program in the History of American Civilization. His professional distinctions include fellowships from the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, and the Mellon-Mays Graduate Initiatives. Recently, Prof. de Baca received a travel grant from the Great Lakes College Association for the study of transpacific modernism in Tokyo, Japan.

Prof. de Baca befriended the artist Lisa Blas when they coincided on the faculty of the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington, D.C. in the early 2000s. He is grateful for the opportunity to share thoughts about Blas’s practice at the special occasion of the sesquicentennial celebration of the American Civil War at Gettysburg College.

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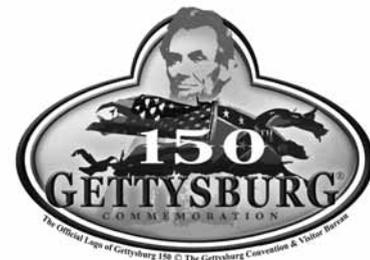
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Design by Ayumi Yasuda

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COVER:

Meet Me at the Mason Dixon, mixed-media installation, 7 feet
4 inches x 12 feet 6 inches, latex paint, newspaper articles,
flags, brochures, maps, photographs, (*Shades of Grey*) acrylic
paint on canvas paintings, horseshoes (shredded military
documents of a personal and sensitive nature, Celluclay, glue,
gold dust and ceramic pigment), ribbons, business cards,
patches, postcards, matches, plastic bags, US Postal Service
notices, one dollar bill signed by Howard Dean, (*Raked Over
the Coals*) acrylic paint on watercolor paper, napkins, Delta
Airlines meal card, ticket stubs, pins, paper, pinwheel, (*New
Mason-Dixon Line*) pigment ink on Canson paper, plastic bags,
book covers, pinwheel, receipt from Faulkner House Books/
New Orleans, Hallmark cards, call slips from the Library of
Congress, stickers, paper bags, and Post-It notes.
2003 - 2008





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