

THE  
BASS

THE BASS MUSEUM OF ART  
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DECEPTION  
&  
DIVERSION:

THE LUDIC ENVIRONMENTS OF KAREN RIFAS

Text by Patricia Ortega-Miranda

Expanding through a more than thirty-year career, the artistic practice of Miami-based artist Karen Rifas has transformed and evolved following a nonlinear trajectory. Her solo exhibition at The Bass, *Deceptive Constructions* (2018), consolidates a lifelong exploration of space and perception through the use of geometric forms and primary structures.

In this exhibition, sculptural, architectural and two-dimensional works form part of a whole, where each piece appears to be linked through an invisible thread that weaves in the apparently extraneous and distant to reveal the interconnectivity of all things.



The works are carefully placed in relation to one another, incorporating and modifying built-in elements as active participants in the physical environment. Speaking about this exhibition she states: "The work here is site-specific, meaning I find things in the space that are appealing to me. It's meant so that when you walk into the space things start to line up. The arrangement of form lines up with the L-shape behind it, and the paintings on the wall reflect back into the space."<sup>1</sup>

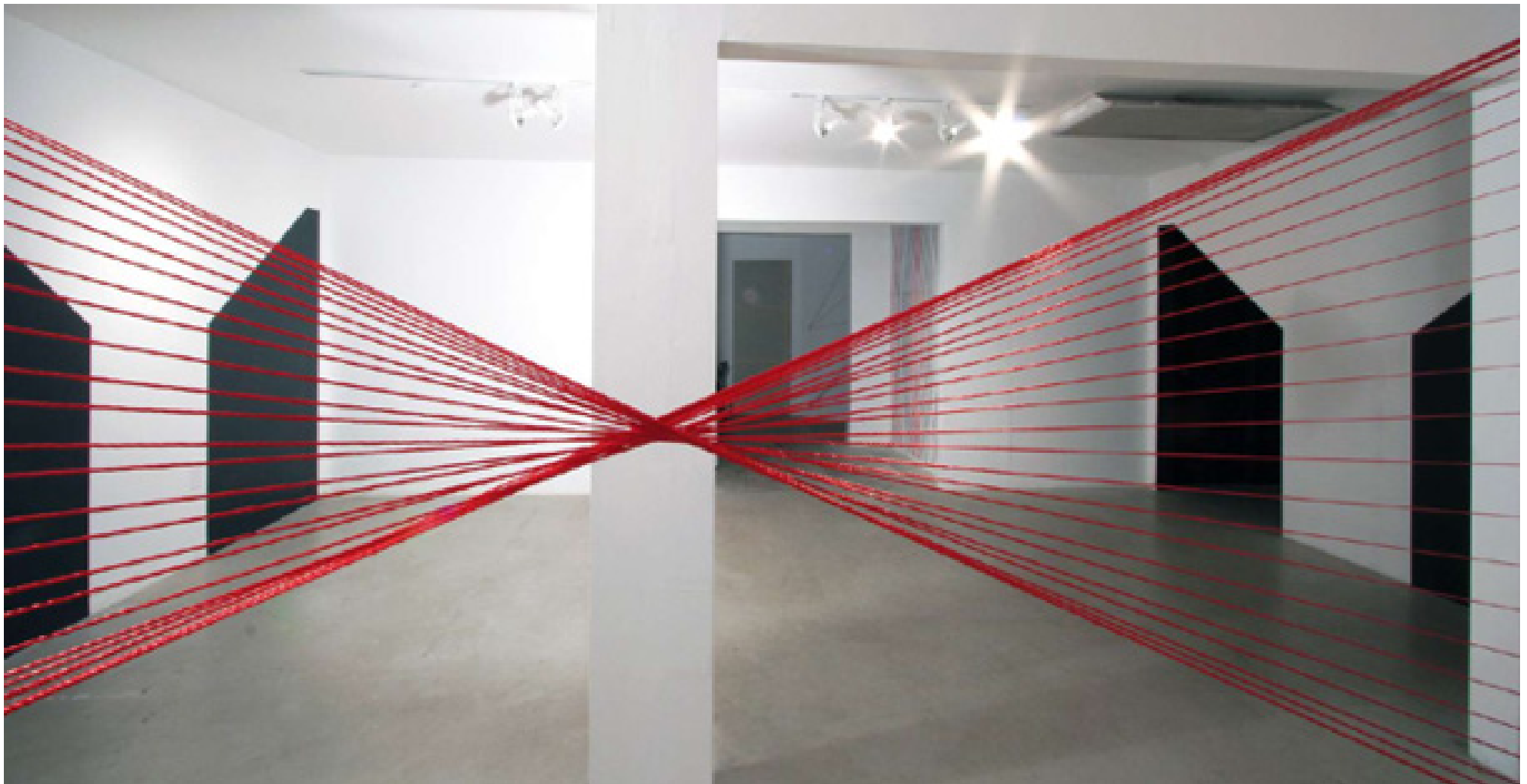
<sup>1</sup> Extracted from the video component Karen Rifas: Deceptive Constructions. <https://vimeo.com/302946346>



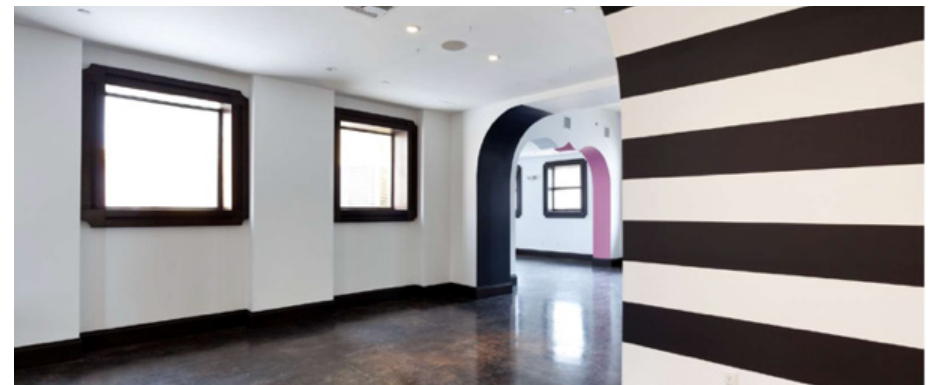
Rifas' return to drawing in the early 2000s led to the bridging of different artistic media while engaging the experimental aesthetic vocabulary of ludic architecture. The juxtaposition of flat surfaces and three-dimensional geometric structures establish a connection between ordering systems and the beguiling contingencies of play, interactivity, and improvisation. Her most recent interventions find a precedent in earlier installations, especially in the use of red and black cords to create spatial arrangements within interior spaces. An exploration into the permeable and intangible qualities of physical structures had led Rifas to collaborate with dancers, creating immersive environments that prompted audiences to consider space as a system modified and mediated by bodies in motion.<sup>2</sup>



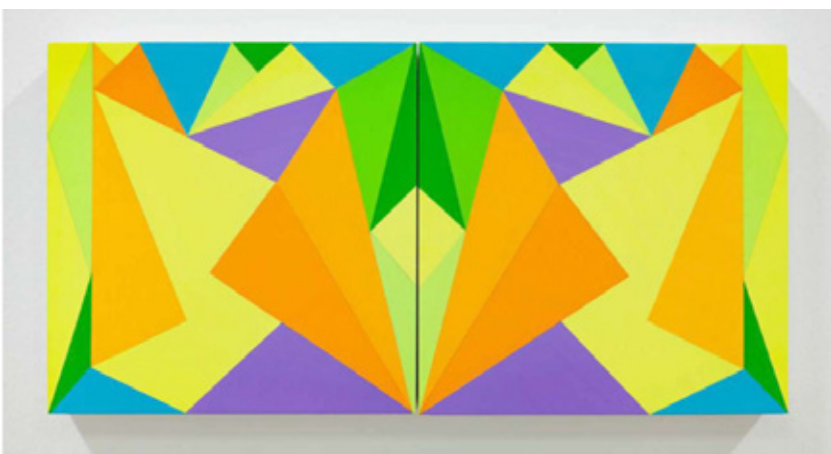
<sup>2</sup> Her connections with dance have been noted in the accompanying text for the exhibition *Karen Rifas: Per Forms* at the Emerson Dorsch Gallery (2017). "Having danced as a child and later as a mother and grandmother of dancers, Rifas worked with choreographers to dramatize how her forms are perceived as solid even though they are only suggestions of mass."



In *Interventions*, a site-specific installation from 2012, crisscrossed rows of red cord connect opposite sides of an entryway, while cut-out geometric shapes on the walls rearrange the interior architectural structure, suggesting passages and openings through a play between positive and negative space. Another intervention in a gallery space—meetinghouse in 2016, titled *Meetinghouse 8* for the gallery where it was installed—temporarily modifies architectural and decorative features of the exhibition rooms such as arches and windows. Geometric shapes and patterns of solid colors inserted onto walls, corners and entryways distort the visitor's sense of spatial order, compelling them to experience interior architectural structures through perceptual effects and optical illusions.

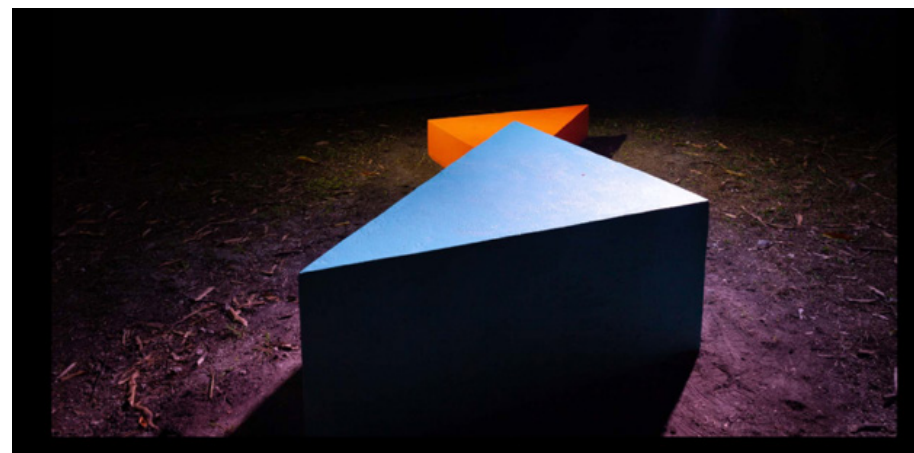


Emerging out of the artistic, cultural, and social zeitgeist of the sixties and seventies, during the 1980s artists reinterpreted and remixed minimalism, land, conceptual, and performance art to transform exhibition practices and alter the ways in which audiences engaged with art as a critical and aesthetic experience.<sup>3</sup> Belonging to this generation, Rifas' latest body of work is both a continuation and a departure from earlier explorations of the tensions between man-made and natural environments through the use of organic materials and found objects. The drawings, paintings and installations exhibited at The Bass portend a spirit of zest, exuding a generative force that exceeds the rational economy of language traditionally associated with geometric abstraction. For example, the diptych *1696* (2020) alludes to parallel space through mirror images, staging a return to the futuristic and psychedelic aesthetics that had informed minimalism.



The improvisational, choreographic, and kinetic elements characteristic of Rifas' earlier works find continuity in these new minimal forms. Here, geometric structures and flat colors are no longer the exclusive realm of hard-edge painting and functional architecture devoid of ornamentation and decoration. Her compositions are *mise-en-scènes* conveying texture and emotion. The drama of works such as *Tension in 3 Dimensions* recalls baroque theatricality with its penchant for pathos and optical illusion.

This is particularly relevant in *Fragment*, where a green squared block fit into a corner appears to be connected to two vinyl green squares on the wall. The reflective surfaces and perfect alignment of shapes create the illusion of expanded space. Interaction with the work leads to *deception*, a gesture that subverts the scientific positivism heralded by Op art in the fifties through the satirical language of Pop.



Rifas' whimsical allusions to visual deceit go beyond a mere interest in optics to conjure the "delicate balance between man and nature."<sup>4</sup> Her work weaves the interconnected histories of human labor and technology by tracing an alternative route to geometric abstraction. Rooted in the decorative and craft traditions that influenced modern art, Rifas' controlled lines and evenly laid out colors on paper and gesso board speak of a mastery of technique sustained by tireless hours of physical labor. This dedication to manual work puts her in alignment with abstract female artists Carmen Herrera and Zilia Sanchez, two important figures within the minimalist and geometric abstraction movements, who resisted the use of industrial processes to create their art and were excluded from the male dominated canon.



<sup>3</sup> Her affinity with Brazilian Neo-Concretism, particularly with the work of Lygia Clark, has been noted in the catalogue for the exhibition *Karen Rifas: 20/20* at the Emerson Dorsch Gallery in 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Extracted from Karen Rifas' Artist Statement. Karen Rifas, Dossier. (The Bass, Miami, 2021).





Recalling her days as an art student, Rifas reflects on the masculine aesthetics of abstract sculptural architecture.<sup>5</sup> If geometric forms and straight lines had historically been synonymous with technological precision and rationality, weight and monumentality imposed a kind of homogeneity in the sculptural and architectural works of her contemporaries, privileging construction materials along with their bare, somber colors and surfaces. It is out of this realization that Rifas turned to the pliable and versatile qualities of vinyl and adopted the fluorescent and pastel colors that now impart her works with the luminosity and vibrancy of tropical sunlight.

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<sup>5</sup> From the video component *Karen Rifas: Deceptive Constructions*. "I guess it goes back to my first sculptures, competing with men in the class, so I wanted to make really big sculptures. I made bronze and steel sculptures. Maybe this is why I am looking at this color change, this feminist point of view. It did control me the dominance of male architecture until the pure joy of discovery of paint, which I held myself back from doing for all of these years, it was just a limited palette and more towards sculpture, and now is like discovering this whole new language which I get a chance to play with." <https://vimeo.com/302946346>



The Chicago-born artist moved with her family to Miami when she was only twelve years old, but the city has been more clearly present in her latest works. The vernacular and regional geometric forms of MiMo architecture, and the brightly painted facades of historic art deco buildings with their fifties-style neon signs have inspired Rifas' formal explorations. Further, the city's lure for pleasure and leisure resonates with her own paralleling of art and play as a way to reclaim the value of "unproductive" time in the formation of culture and community.

As Rifas mobilizes the ludic aesthetics of boardgames, origami and wooden building blocks, she engages the creative process and social interactions implicated in games.<sup>6</sup> In considering art a form of play, a diversion, the artist offers a critique of, and a temporary relief from, the capitalist and unhealthy fixation with productivity.

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<sup>6</sup> The work of French intellectual Roger Caillois, especially his book *Man, Play and Games* (1961), was an important influence in the development of participatory art during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. His work is an inquiry into the creative quality of games, more specifically the play principle, in the domain of culture. Roger Caillois and Meyer Barash. *Man, Play, and Games*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

The blurring of boundaries between leisure and labor, technology and nature as activities and processes governing life traverses all of Rifas' work. An installation from 1999, titled *The Present Absent*, explores the technological economy of objects that replaces manual labor while causing environmental damage.<sup>7</sup> An installation from a year later showcased in the exhibition *Departing Perspectives* pays homage to the environmental and social aesthetics of modern art. Rifas' mounds of shredded paper parody Monet's haystacks through an incisive critique of technologies that replace manual labor and destroy natural resources. The impressionist painter's nostalgic turn to the countryside is here replaced by an absurd scene from which man and nature are already exiled.

In 2019 Karen Rifas was the recipient of the Michael Richards Award from Oolite Arts, which recognized her long career trajectory and celebrated her achievement and commitment to artistic excellence. Moving outside of the white cube, the work of Rifas now reaches a wider audience after becoming fully integrated with the public space. Commissioned by The Bass as part of their Art Outside initiative, Rifas' series of banners *Hang in There* (2020) displayed throughout the sidewalk in South Miami Beach respond to the architecture that surrounds it. Devoid of any information or message, these colorful flags function as markers of place while giving the passers-by a moment of suspension from their accustomed rituals and paths. Minimal and proliferous, reflective and humorous, Rifas' exquisite body of work engages many layers of critique and aesthetic languages that converge and diverge as they are brought into dialogue. Her immersive and ludic environments invite us to question the structures ordering our physical reality and the role perception plays in it, activating the imaginative and inventive possibilities of art as an essential part of our cultural, social, and human experience.



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<sup>7</sup> This installation was installed in Brazil and references the depletion of the rain forest. See *Karen Rifas: Deceptive Constructions*, Dossier. The Bass, 2021.

OPEN  
Wednesday — Sunday  
12 PM — 5 PM  
Closed Monday & Tuesday

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**Karen Rifas' *Hang in There* (2020) is funded with support from Oolite Arts' Michael Richards Award.**

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