

**REAL
ART WAYS**

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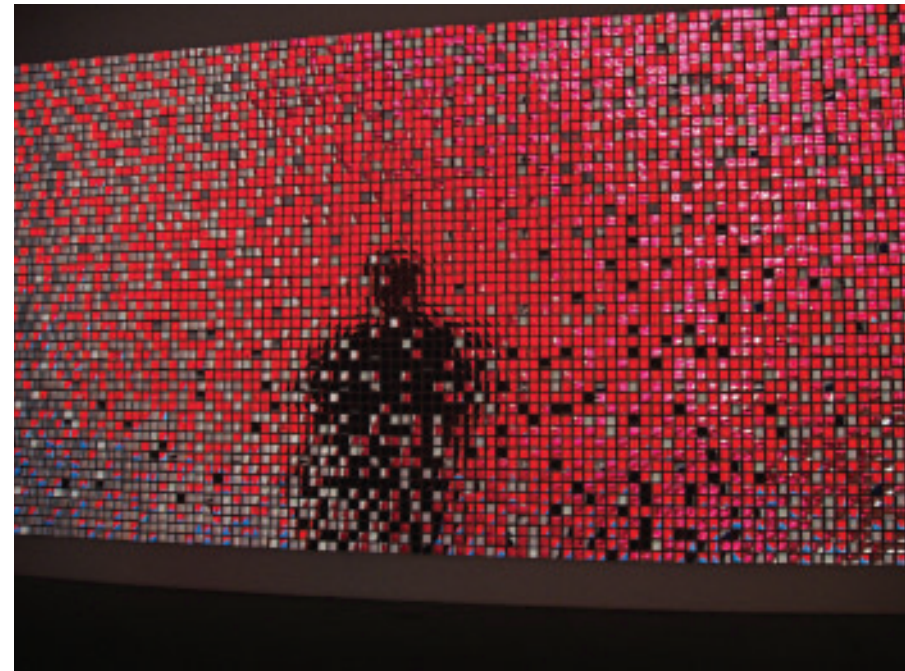
This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Next" competition in 2005, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Next" was juried by Nicholas Baume, Chief Curator, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and Holly Block, Executive Director, Art in General, New York City.

The exhibition was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.



Real Art Ways is a multidisciplinary contemporary space, with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community. Programs include music, performance, spoken word, film and video, and visual arts, including exhibitions and public art projects, and creative social events designed to connect people with each other. Founded in 1975, Real Art Ways is an alternative to mainstream museums and commercial culture; its programs are made possible by a diverse and growing audience and support from a wide range of enlightened funders.

Mike Womack



Heat is Not Made of Tiny Hot Things, 2006, partial installation view.

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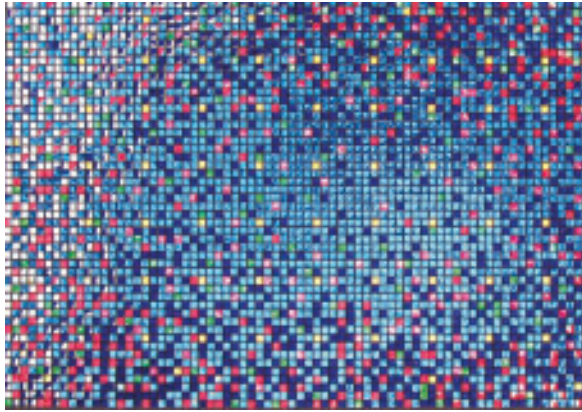
By Michael Brennan

Mike Womack reminds me of the men I grew up around. Men in my neighborhood, who in order to understand how something worked, like say, a carburetor, would insist on taking it apart and then reassembling it by hand. It was the only knowledge that they truly trusted. A similar attitude provokes Womack's practice as an artist. He's constantly breaking down conventions—both physical and philosophical—choosing instead to begin again from scratch, with an open mind and an unprejudiced outlook toward the materials at hand. Womack begins again in order to discover something simple and profound through a personal process of reconstruction—rebuilding from the ground up.

This kind of inquiry is often denigrated within the art world at large, which is often more preoccupied with style than with actual discovery. The style-over-discovery bias reminds me of the cliché about the straight-A student who takes a shop class under the mistaken assumption that it will be easy. As if invention were just an *idea*, something to be learned, rather than an *act*, that is, something to be done.

Mike Womack was born in Houston, Texas, in 1976. He graduated with a BFA in painting from the University of Georgia in 1999 and went on to receive an MFA from Pratt Institute in 2005. He currently lives in Brooklyn and works at Pratt Institute as a teacher and administrator.

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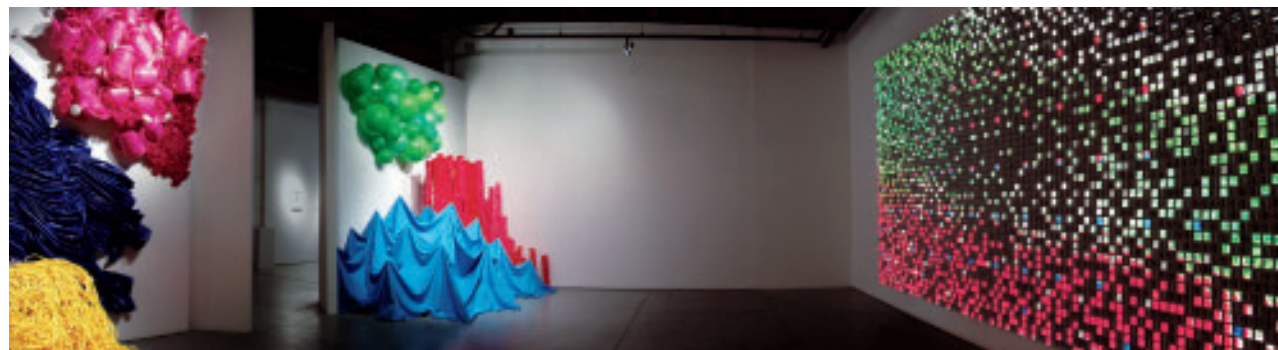


Heat is Not Made of Tiny Hot Things, 2006, partial installation view.

Philo T. Farnsworth's inspiration for inventing the television came while he was tilling a field. As the teenage farmer plowed from row to row, it occurred to him that an image could be transmitted and reassembled in a series of parallel lines. This ingenious but devastatingly simple idea led Farnsworth to create the image dissector, one of several components integral to modern television. (Unfortunately, the rest of the story is somewhat disheartening, as Farnsworth spent most of his life mired in copyright disputes with the electronics giant RCA.)

Womack's installation *Heat is Not Made of Tiny Hot Things* works something like an image dissector. Colors are dislocated from their mundane sources, which, in this instance, are everyday objects such as a pile of yellow rope and a relief of rose-colored plastic watering cans. They're then

Heat is Not Made of Tiny Hot Things, 2006, installation view.



reassembled—liberated, really—onto a mirrored matrix on the opposite wall. Each unit of the array is a mirrored tee that was built and adjusted by hand—a deceptively simple device utilized in concert to maximum color effect. Each unit functions as a pixel in the recreation of a new image that's revealed to the viewer at the threshold of the gallery space.

The goals and intentions of Womack and of Farnsworth couldn't be more different, but a parallel process remains; color as light is reconstructed as image. In this sense, Womack's art recalls Farnsworth's image dissector in a number of ways: the transmission of an image, the image's rearrangement on a rectilinear grid, and the dependence upon the independent operation of pixilated nodes. In Womack's piece, each pixel is an abstract sample, and he has recreated the bitmapping process entirely by hand. Minutely operable mirrors as opposed to a cathode-ray tube operate at the core of his impractical invention.

Instrumental in gathering light, mirrors are the basis of both the world's most powerful telescopes and the simplest everyday act of self-recognition. Womack's arrangement of mirrored plugs works like an analog version of a charge-coupled device (CCD), which lies at the core of most digital cameras. A CCD is an electronic light trap that collects light and reassembles it, albeit digitally, into a coherent image. Womack's installation extracts color from objects and represents it as light, untethered color that for the moment is reorganized along a grid and sagittally shot back at the viewer, who completes the image as the final stopping point in its triangular projection.



Heat is Not Made of Tiny Hot Things, 2006, detail.

Most color painters, with very few exceptions, belabor color, harangue it until it appears locked down. They seek to control it rather than embrace its fugitive properties. Womack avoids this altogether. In *Heat is Not Made of Tiny Hot Things*, color is dematerialized, reassembled, and redirected toward the viewer. Through its projection, the color becomes hyperactivated and appears less static than it would in another form. Nothing ever truly holds color, but mirrors contribute to this illusion even less so than other surfaces. The famous artist and renowned color theorist Josef Albers was always much more interested in colors' discord than in their harmony, and that's exactly what's so exciting about Womack's installation. The feeling of freedom is implicit in the color action.

I don't want to break down the mechanics of Womack's piece too much. They're self-evident to anyone experiencing it, which is the only way to really understand it. What essay could adequately or interestingly describe the individual declination of all 4,750 mirrored spokes? Why rob the work,

already so straightforward in its construction, of its mystique? I've often teased Womack about his predilection for smoke and mirrors. Of course, he's not interested in any old-fashioned magic, and he's kept the stagecraft and trickery to an absolute minimum. But no one can deny the wonder, the sheer pleasure, viewers draw from walking into a large physical space that's effectively been turned into a colossal camera. How can I adequately describe the astounding reward viewers feel beholding a free-floating field of projected color? Knowing from an article, as opposed to experience, that actual television sets are the primary light source in a few of James Turrell's fantastic light installations only demystifies the delight found in the experience of his art. In

some special cases, we are better off paying no attention to the man behind the curtain. I want to understand, but I want to experience first.

In closing, I want to describe the impressive flexibility of *Heat is Not Made of Tiny Hot Things*. Every time the color source changes, the image changes. Every time the viewer changes position, the image again changes. This single installation is capable of delivering myriad visual experiences. The dispersion of an individual's reflection, which is multiply fractured across the mirrored array, is shocking enough. But catching all of these numerous darts of light is tremendously exciting. The shadowed relief of the individual mirrors only adds to the literal suspense. It's like going to the movies for the first time, experiencing a camera obscura, or spotting Saturn on your own through a backyard telescope. It's all about the simple joy of receiving the gift of light.

Michael Brennan is a New York painter who writes on art.