

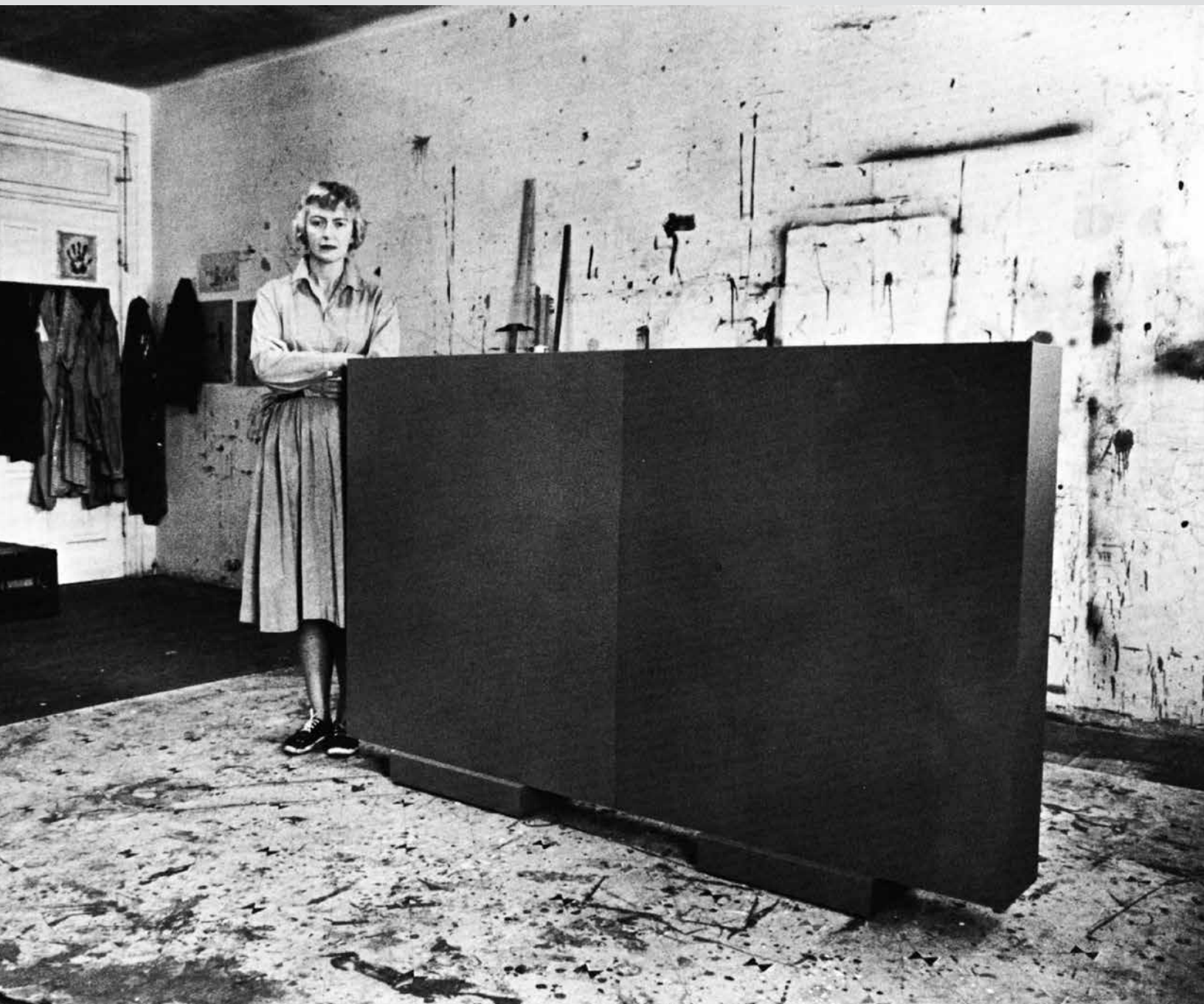
On Uncertainty and Anne Truitt

BY ALEX JEN

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ANNE TRUITT

Portrait of ANNE TRUITT in her Twining Court studio standing by her sculpture *Tor*, Washington, DC, 1962. Courtesy the artist; Bridgeman Images, New York; and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



ANNE TRUITT, *Landfall*, 1970, acrylic on wood, 186.4 × 60.7 × 61 cm. Courtesy the artist; Bridgeman Images, New York; and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

Each issue, ArtAsiaPacific presents a critical essay in collaboration with Burger Collection, a Hong Kong nonprofit that partners with many institutions to support contemporary art worldwide.

In the few photographs that exist of Anne Truitt in her studio, she is always wearing a placid, nearly inscrutable expression. She makes eye contact, but her mind is elsewhere. In 1962, perhaps she is thinking about *Tor*, the imposing poplar slab she has just bisected and layered with dark paint. In 1986, perhaps it is about the pale blue buoyancy of *Landfall* (1970), and how she will finish the two sculptures towering beside her.

Even in photographs, Truitt's forms captivate. This is due to her rigorous and intimate craftsmanship: after enlisting a cabinetmaker to make a structure to her exact specifications, she repeatedly painted and sanded the wood until completion—sometimes stripping off all the layers to start over again. For over 50 years she maintained this careful practice, making art until she passed away in 2004 at the age of 83.

Her formalism was deeply evocative, troubling the objectivity of critics and historians seeking to position her. Upon visiting her Twining Court studio in the heart of the District of Columbia in 1962, art critic Clement Greenberg proclaimed, "Now there will be three in Washington." He was offering her a place alongside Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland as the key Color Field painters in the city. Her 1963 debut at André Emmerich Gallery in New York is today cited as one of the earliest appearances of Minimalism. But these classifications are limiting.

More than material or form, color was Truitt's medium. She spoke precisely and almost mystically about varying tint, shade,

and tone to achieve a particular monochrome—and by extension, a particular feeling or memory. Her titles, drawn from nature, literature, and geography, offer clues to her intentions, as do the journals she began keeping in 1974 at the age of 53. In *Daybook* (1982), *Turn* (1986), *Prospect* (1996), and posthumously, *Yield* (2022), she wrote about her childhood in Maryland; her wartime service as a nurse's aide; her marriage to James Truitt, a prominent journalist; motherhood; moving their family to follow his career; and her desires and frustrations in the studio. More than once, she referred to her sculptures as her companions: they stood around the studio, accumulative and watchful.

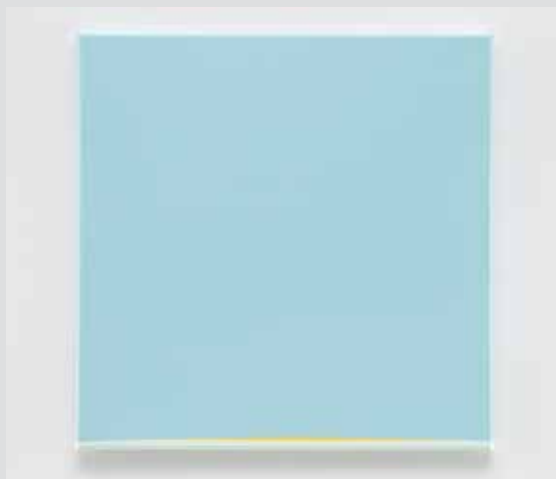
I looked at photos of Truitt and thought about writing this essay during a recent visit to Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. It was just a coincidence, I knew; nothing could connect Truitt with Cambodia. And yet, as I walked among the remaining jambs of the Bayon, whose sandstone inscriptions and flowered patterns have eroded into abstraction, I couldn't help but think of Truitt's columns. Staring up at the faces of the Buddhist king Jayavarman VII (r. 1181–1218 CE) that emerged on all four sides of every tower, I wondered how much they had seen. His almond-shaped eyes, broad nose, and upturned lips are benevolent, but his empire was not achieved peacefully. (After all, how many empires are?) There is history in these forms: the laborer's initial touch, the alterations made by later kings of different religious persuasions, and the looting and violence that occurred when the Khmer Rouge made the temple their base. I felt as if Truitt's sculpture must be similarly knowledgeable, having subsumed the details of her life and observed everything since. Indeed, she titled an early cerulean stacked sculpture *Summer Sentinel* (1963–72), and used the designation later in her career as well.

I felt small amid this history, and looking around Angkor that day at the piles of rubble that were once grand temples, I felt a numbing sadness about the state of war in our world. Powerful countries vie for hegemony—entitled to their national security, we are told. Meanwhile, the massacre of the innocents continues and the debris proliferate. Now as in the 1960s and '70s, my country, the United States, is often involved. Back in the tuk-tuk, I scrolled through the Wikipedia pages on Operation Menu and Operation Freedom Deal, the bombing of North Vietnamese military sanctuaries in Cambodia, in frustrated incredulity.

Through an admittedly arbitrary encounter with Angkor's great antiquity, I want to ruminate on the affective potential of Truitt's sculpture, and how we might look at her work in tragedy. Two of the artist's early epiphanies help make my case. The first was in 1950, when Truitt had a similarly jarring experience with ancient splendor, albeit in the completely different cultural context of Mexico. The second was in 1962; after encountering Barnett Newman's early zip painting *Onement VI* (1953) at the Guggenheim Museum the previous year, she created the strange, fence-like sculpture *First* (1961) and destroyed nearly all her early work. Shortly thereafter, she conceived her first column, *Lea* (1962–71).

In a 1998 lecture, Truitt recalled: "I was standing in the sunshine of our living room one morning when it suddenly came to me perfectly clearly that a sculpture stood . . . on a line of gravity that disarmed time. Stood alone as a person stands alone, bathed in the light that marks the passage of time, not *subject* to time but *illuminated* by it." But can we really disarm time? Standing amid old ruins, thinking of recently broken ceasefires, I was a bit skeptical. These remnants of the past remind us that everything will be taken away, nothing is permanent, and yet we seem to ignore history, satisfying our human ambition—expansionism—by accelerating our mutual destruction.

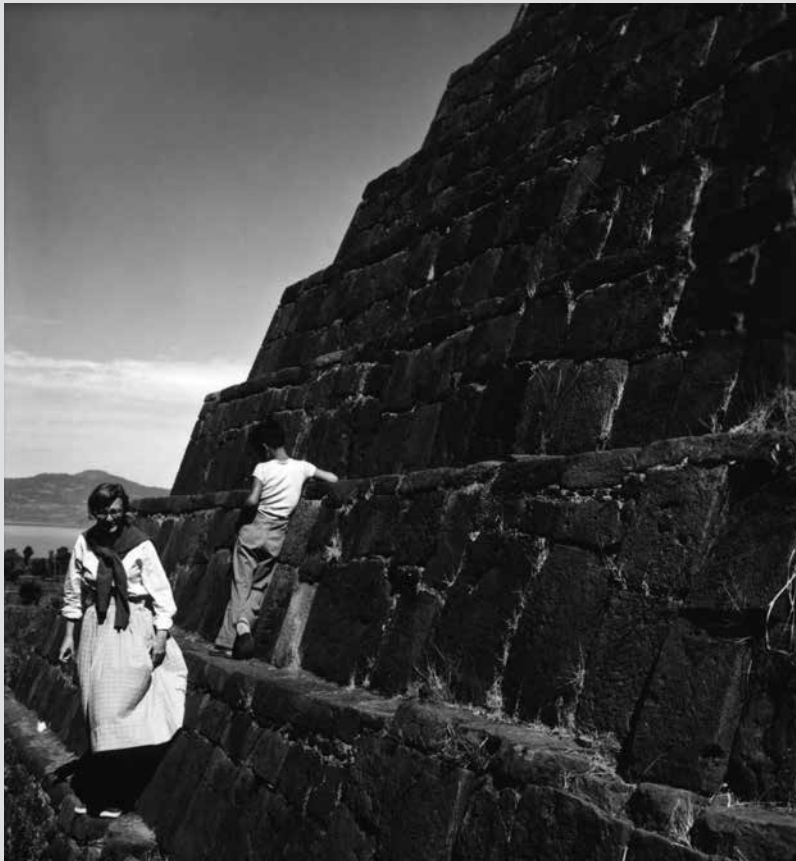
Thinking about Truitt in Angkor instilled a deep uncertainty in me. I struggled to reconcile the freedom and timelessness of Truitt's forms with the concurrent destruction endorsed by US foreign policy during the Cold War. It is a lesser-known fact that



ANNE TRUITT, *Prospect*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 122 × 122 cm. Courtesy the artist; Bridgeman Images, New York; and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



Detail of an *apsara* at the Northern entrance to the Bayon, Angkor Thom, Siem Reap. Photo by Alex Jen.



Portrait of **ANNE TRUITT** in Mexico, 1950.
Courtesy the artist; Bridgeman Images, New York; and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

Truitt was among Washington's notables, counting as close friends the painter Mary Pinchot Meyer and poet Cicely Angleton, whose husbands, Cord Meyer and James Jesus Angleton, were senior CIA officials during the Vietnam War. But it would be irrational to indict Truitt or slide into conspiracy. I simply wish to view her formalism within another dimension, to refuse the purity of American "postwar" expression, and to ask how and why we look at abstraction amid continuing turmoil. I recognize the distance between everything I am trying to connect, but I am emboldened by Truitt's journals, in which she reminded us that how we perceive art is clearly affected by how we perceive, indeed how we love and lament, life.

In 1950, Truitt traveled with James to Mexico to visit several ancient sites: the Mesoamerican city of Teotihuacán (c. 100 BCE–800 CE); Tula, the capital of the Toltec Empire (c. 850–1150 CE); and the Mayan ruins at Tulum. She wrote of the "intense and instant terror" of the visit, struck by the pyramids' astrological function and their embodiment of "life and death, creation and destruction." These forms haunted her, arguably for the rest of her career. In the decade after her trip, Truitt learned to sculpt in a self-described "apprenticeship," seeking out elder artists wherever she moved the family: in Dallas she studied with Octavio Medellin for several months, and in New York she took classes in life drawing and wood carving from Peter Lipman-Wulf. Working with clay, wire, wood, and stone, Truitt made figurative and Cubist-inspired sculptures—women emerging out of raw material, "expressionistic, declamatory, rhetorical," as she herself reminisced in 1991. In function they recall the spore-ringed *apsaras* guarding the Bayon. Truitt worked figuratively in this vein for a few years, sculpting "gothic" busts and over-life-size figures.

ANNE TRUITT, *Ink Drawing '59 [10]*, 1959,
ink on paper, 60 × 45 cm. Courtesy the artist;
Burger Collection; Bridgeman Images, New York; and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



By the late 1950s, her memories of Mesoamerica returned in full force. Using ink, she traced and retraced the ruins' block-like shapes on newsprint, her gestures lost in melded stains. *Ink Drawing '59 [10]* (1959) is a top-heavy mass comprised of latticed brushwork; except in a few splintering dashes, its black is solid, ominous. For her sculptures, Truitt used grogged clay to build up coarse, compact, and repetitive forms resembling temples. *Untitled* (1959) looks like a compressed ziggurat, heavily scored; another untitled work, made that year in clay bisque, is a lopsided, trapezoidal thing—perhaps a stair step?—incised across its faces with a broken line.

Truitt's early work displayed an intensity of feeling that becomes less evident as she tempered her gestures after 1961. But her mode of expression remained consistent. After seeing Newman's *Onement VI*, she wrote that "'Enough' was my radiant feeling—for once in my life enough space, enough color. It seemed to me that I had never before been free." This is an earnest, familiar reaction to Newman, though what she said next is concerning: "I staggered out into the street, intoxicated with freedom. . . . I was completely taken by surprise, the more so as I had only earlier that day been thinking how I felt like a plowed field, my children all born, my life laid out; I saw myself stretched like brown earth in furrows, open to the sky, well planted, my life as a human being complete." There is both satisfaction and loneliness in this statement. I am tempted to reconsider "freedom," both Truitt's newfound freedom and America's "gift of freedom" narrative which was used to justify its war against Communism in Southeast Asia. Is it not odd how the same word can be used to describe an experience of a Color Field painting, a break from the duties of motherhood, and the 2.8 million tons of bombs dropped on Cambodia between 1965 and 1973? How can liberation be as intense and violent as the thing one is being freed from?

My Cold War contextualization of Truitt is not new. Curator James Meyer poked fun at such readings in a 2002 interview with the artist. Responding to his suggestion that she socialized with members of the CIA, Truitt said: "I've always thought it was peculiar, too. I was floating around in that world. . . . I didn't pay attention to what was going on. And remember, much was secret. People were covert. . . . [M]y private feelings about it were that it was just very strange. I don't understand why fate led me to be in such a situation." Or as Jacqueline Kennedy's social secretary, Letitia Baldrige, said of being a political wife, "your husband would not talk to you." Can we then further understand Truitt's work as alienated, made in a repressed society?

Truitt moved forward by striving to make sculpture that was adamantly alive. Often she returned to nature, observing its seeming obliviousness amid human disorder. Between 1971 and 1975, she made four sculptures with identical dimensions: *Summer Dryad* (1971), *Winter Dryad* (1973), *Autumn Dryad* (1975) and *Spring Dryad* (1975). The first is bright green and bisected unevenly along the front—a blade of grass, flattened; the second, surprisingly (given its title), is dark and hard to read.

In a journal entry from February 26, 1975, Truitt began, "The newspaper this morning prominently displayed a photograph of a Cambodian man holding the naked, spraddled body of his just killed daughter." She went on to prepare breakfast for Sam, her youngest, and to give the dog a bone-shaped treat. Only a "logic of madness" can explain such disparity, Truitt wrote. But she does not expand, diverting instead to a memory of an industrious tailor she remembered from childhood. She herself struggled with the tragic image of that dead Cambodian child, and tried to find solace in the belief that everyone makes do with their given circumstances. But the entry ends unconvincingly. Later that year Truitt finished *Autumn Dryad*, a burnt orange elegy inspired by a fox hunt, and *Spring Dryad*, a rebloom in powder pink, crowned

by a green band whose shade we see in *Summer Dryad*. We often talk about the gap between art and life, about how the world's turmoil and violence depress us; we also argue endlessly about whether art has any true social impact. Maybe it doesn't. I find this resignation in Truitt, and yet she offers us a possibility of looking and living under the political machinations that are outside our control. I do not want to say something so trite as "art can heal." Rather, Truitt's sculptures counter our world's disorder with an invitation to consider color first, then time and space.

Walking toward the Eastern gopura of Preah Khan, a temple built by Jayavarman VII in honor of his father, one first passes a processional entryway lined with stone posts. Each is carved with a mythical *Singha* in the lower section, and a roughly hewn alcove above that is curiously empty. It turns out the niches used to house seated Buddhas, all destroyed in a mass iconoclasm in the 13th century. Still, in the center of one alcove, I saw a leaf floating, suspended perfectly, perhaps hanging by a spider's web. And in the distance, a bodhi tree had grown into the temple, splitting the stone blocks and overtaking its monumental presence.

In the summer of 1991, upon retiring from teaching at the University of Maryland, Truitt wrote: "[O]n the whole this is not a society in which to grow old, or to be without resources. I feel myself a citizen in a heartless country. The United States has just 'won' a savage war in the Persian Gulf." She went on to describe the sheer technological might of "the machines with which we killed," proudly on display on the Washington Mall. She lamented the human intellect that was responsible for our advances in medicine, computers, and space exploration yet also invented this weaponry. Again, she offered no answers for this disjunction. But what I take from Truitt is that we still must observe, and critique, and understand that life does find a way to begin again. But rather than wait for the tree to grow through the ruins—which happens only after we've long gone—can we instead, with the attention she devoted to painting and sanding each sculpture, be grateful for what we've already been given? One hopes it will be "Enough."

1 All in all, Truitt moved the family no fewer than eight times, including three-year stints in San Francisco (1957–60) and Tokyo (1964–67). In every place she took the time to study with local artists and further hone her craft. See Brenda Richardson, "Anne Truitt: A Tenth of a Second to Live," in *Anne Truitt Drawings* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2012) for an in-depth consideration of Truitt's "apprenticeship."

2 See Manuel de Bacia, "Chapter One: First (1961)," in *Memory Work: Anne Truitt and Sculpture* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016) for an incisive critique of Truitt's progression to *First*.

Anne Truitt (1921–2004) was an American artist whose bold use of geometry and color, memory and feeling, signaled a new direction for modern sculpture. She was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and graduated from Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania in 1943. During World War II, she worked in a Massachusetts hospital as a psychiatric lab assistant and nurse's aide. Thereafter, she then wrote fiction and studied at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Washington, DC. In the early 1960s, her geometric paintings and painted sculptures drew the attention of major critics. She went on to show with top-tier galleries and to have solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1973), the Corcoran Gallery of Art (1974), the Baltimore Museum of Art (1992), and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (2009). Truitt also received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. She taught at the University of Maryland at College Park for 21 years and published a number of highly regarded books, including the trilogy *Daybook* (1982), *Turn* (1986), and *Prospect* (1996), all subtitled *The Journal of an Artist*.

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Installation view of "Anne Truitt: Perception and Reflection," at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, 2009. Photo by Lee Stalsworth. Courtesy the artist; Bridgeman Images, New York; and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

