



# Re-Fabricating Fashion



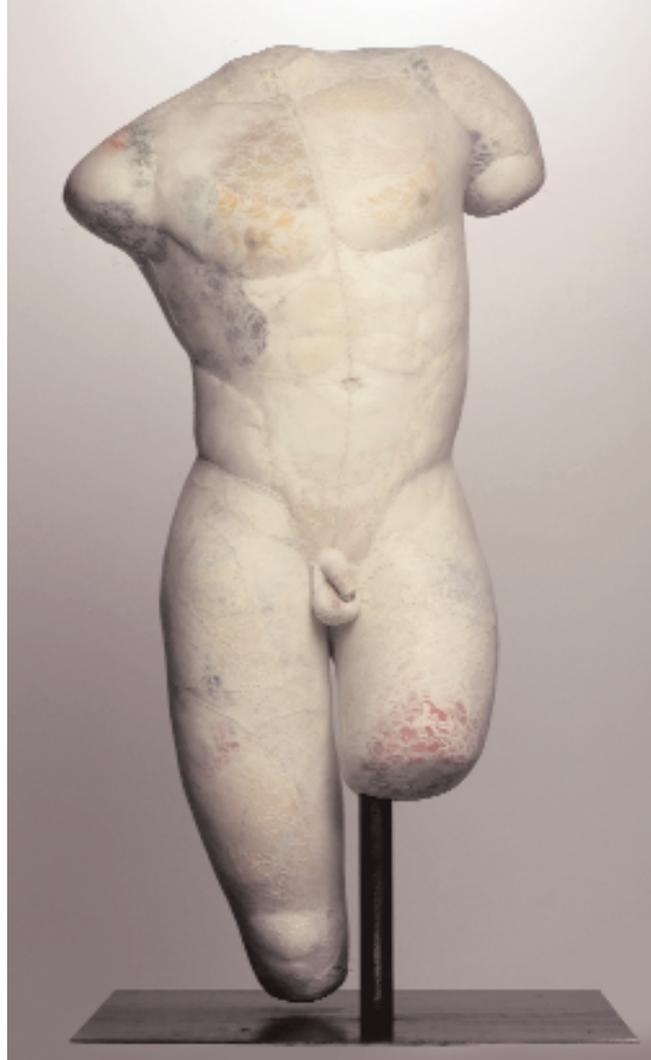
## GUERRA DE LA PAZ

BY REBECCA DIMLING COCHRAN

The two artists collectively known as Guerra de la Paz both began their careers as painters. Known today as sculptors who also create installations, they still maintain a connection with their history. While form and composition are important elements of their pieces, color takes precedence above all else. Vibrant and powerful, it is the linchpin that inspires and energizes the work. Surprisingly, the robust reds, pulsating yellows, and intense blues do not come from some kind of pigment but from discarded clothing. Over the past decade, Guerra de la Paz have developed a unique practice in which they assemble fabrics of various shades and textures to produce striking constructions whose conceptual and formal results are greater than the sum of their parts.

Many of the sculptures employ an unusual form of optical mixing that Guerra de la Paz discovered early in their collaborative process. Both émigrés from Cuba, Alain Guerra (born in Havana, 1968) and Neraldo de la Paz (born in Matanzas, 1955) began to share a studio in the Miami neighborhood of Little Haiti in 1996.

Opposite: *Nine*, 2007. Found garments, shoes, wood, and hardware, 114 x 96 x 96 in. Above: *Tribute*, 2002–ongoing. Found garments, dimensions variable.



Left: *Canopy*, 2006. Found garments, 16 x 30 x 25 ft. Below left: *Oasis*, 2006. Found garments, paint, wire, safety pins, and custom ceiling brackets, 15 x 2 x 35 ft. Above: *Male Torso 1*, 2009–10. Found shoulder pads, pillows, deconstructed garments, rope, thread, and steel, 46 x 24 x 24 in.

They developed a close working relationship, often commenting on and even working on each other's canvases. Eventually, they began to collaborate on single pieces under a pseudonym derived from the combination of their last names. Their earliest works were paintings, but after a gift of several thousand old magazines, they began to build multi-layered collages with sections scraped away in a process they call "decollage." The effect was not unlike the weathered billboards that they saw throughout their neighborhood. The first works in the series focused on shared imagery, but by 1998, the emphasis had shifted to a common color. These collages, which still hang on the walls of their studio, emanate a monochromatic presence even though they are made up of numerous individual swatches.

Little Haiti has long been a headquarters for warehouses gathering and storing *pepe*, discarded clothing shipped by the bundle to Haiti (and around the world) and resold in the markets. After an introduction from a mutual friend, a warehouse owner gave Guerra de la Paz permission to sift through the piles of clothes and take the pieces that interested them. Soon the two artists found themselves shifting their raw material from magazines to clothing. "Fabric holds color much more strongly than paper,"



Above: *Drop*, 2004–05. Safety pins, fabric, wire, glass, chandelier drops, and steel cable, 48 x 60 x 86 in. Right and detail: *Mort*, 2010. Found garments and shoes, fold-out bed, fabric, and wood, 6 x 5 x 10 ft.

Guerra explains. Texture, pattern, sheen — even how light plays off the surface of different weaves — drew their attention.

Guerra de la Paz approach clothing in the same way that they did magazines: they find like-colored garments and use optical mixing to form three-dimensional objects. Some works, like *Tribute* (2002–ongoing), a 12-foot-tall mound of clothing layered along the color spectrum, are abstract forms whose presence is defined by color. Others are more figuratively based. For instance, *Indradhanush* (2008) takes the form of a roughly 20-foot-high arching rainbow grounded at each end by similarly colored rubber boots, and *Sunt Omnes Unum* (2008) consists of eight headless figures, each elegantly costumed in its own color. They have also created lush landscape environments like *Oasis* (2006) in which items of clothing take on representational force. Shades of brown and tan, wrapped around a wood and chicken wire armature, become the trunk and branches of a tree. Green cloth drapes like leaves. Pinks and reds become flowers, and blues scattered along the floor form a lagoon.

Rich and lush, the sculptures and environments are wonders to explore. But a much more serious undertone soon becomes apparent. The musty odor that pervades the installations, the label on a pair of pants, the outline of a sock, and other details recall the fact that these clothes once belonged to real people. Each garment



has a history, not only of the person who once owned and wore it, but also of the textile worker who made the fabric, the designer who cut the pattern, the seamstress who put it together, the salesperson who sold it, even the shop owner who laundered it.

This underlying history takes Guerra de la Paz's work beyond the merely decorative. In a subtle but poignant way, their use of these found objects poses questions about the material culture of contemporary society. The discarded clothes, many of which look familiar on close inspection, are reminders of how seasonal changes in the length of a hemline or the shape of a shoe often lead to the disposal of perfectly wearable but outmoded clothes. We have become a society all too ready to trade up to the next new gadget or the next fashion trend. The impact of this behavior on our economy and the environment underlies everything the duo creates.

When Guerra de la Paz make personal responses to current events, their pieces become even more powerful. In 2005, while working with camouflage army uniforms intended to represent groundcover in a large installation, they came across a note in a shirt pocket. This discovery altered their conception of the discarded clothing that serves as their raw material, transforming it from a source of pattern and color into something with emotional and political potential. At the time, Cindy Sheehan, who had lost her son in the Iraq war, was continually in the news for her extended anti-war protest outside George W. Bush's Texas ranch. Soon after finding the note, Guerra de la Paz began a series of camouflage works in which the discarded uniforms embody politically charged ideas. In the heart-wrenching *PIETA* (2005), a mother sits with her dead son

Left: *Witchdoctor* (detail), 2008. Found costumes, dog sweater, mannequin torso, and steel, 73 x 30 x 26 in. Below: *Ring Around the Rosy*, 2005. Found garments, footwear, plastic helmets, bowling ball, rope, hardware, custom dog tags, and mixed media, 50 x 96 in. diameter.





Above: *Monday–Friday*, 2005–09. Cable, neckties, custom aluminum wall brackets, and hardware, 5 elements, 24 x 9 x 4 in. each. Right: *Sealing the Deal*, 2009. Found garments, shoes, gloves, mannequin torsos, steel, wire, hardware, and concrete, 72 x 50 x 36 in.

draped in her lap, a pose copied from Michelangelo’s sculpture of the same name. *Martyr* (2008), which was part of an installation titled *The Green Zone*, portrays the figure of a soldier hanging from the wall like a crucified Christ. And in *Ring Around the Rosy* (2005), six children, all wearing army fatigues, dance around a bomb in the center of their circle—a deft reminder of the collateral damage inflicted by war. The absence of faces in these works removes any association of age or race: to Guerra de la Paz, war is an issue that touches everyone.

Another series, constructed with a collection of neckties donated by a supporter, responds to the collapse of the U.S. economy. In the hands of Guerra de la Paz, the silken strips become symbols of the unbridled greed behind the financial meltdown. Some of the ties are woven into nooses, giving form to the feeling of slow strangulation felt by many people affected by the downturn. Others are fitted with wires to take on a serpent-like form and inserted into salvaged suits to create standing figures who personify the slimy, dangerous, corporate dealmaker (*Sealing the Deal*, 2009, and *Snake Charmer*, 2007).

The play of humor and seriousness in this series serves as a good example of how Guerra de la Paz successfully strike a delicate balance between the aesthetically pleasing and the conceptually challenging. Their work is beautiful but emotionally charged, offering a chilling reminder of the role that we play in defining our own destiny.

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