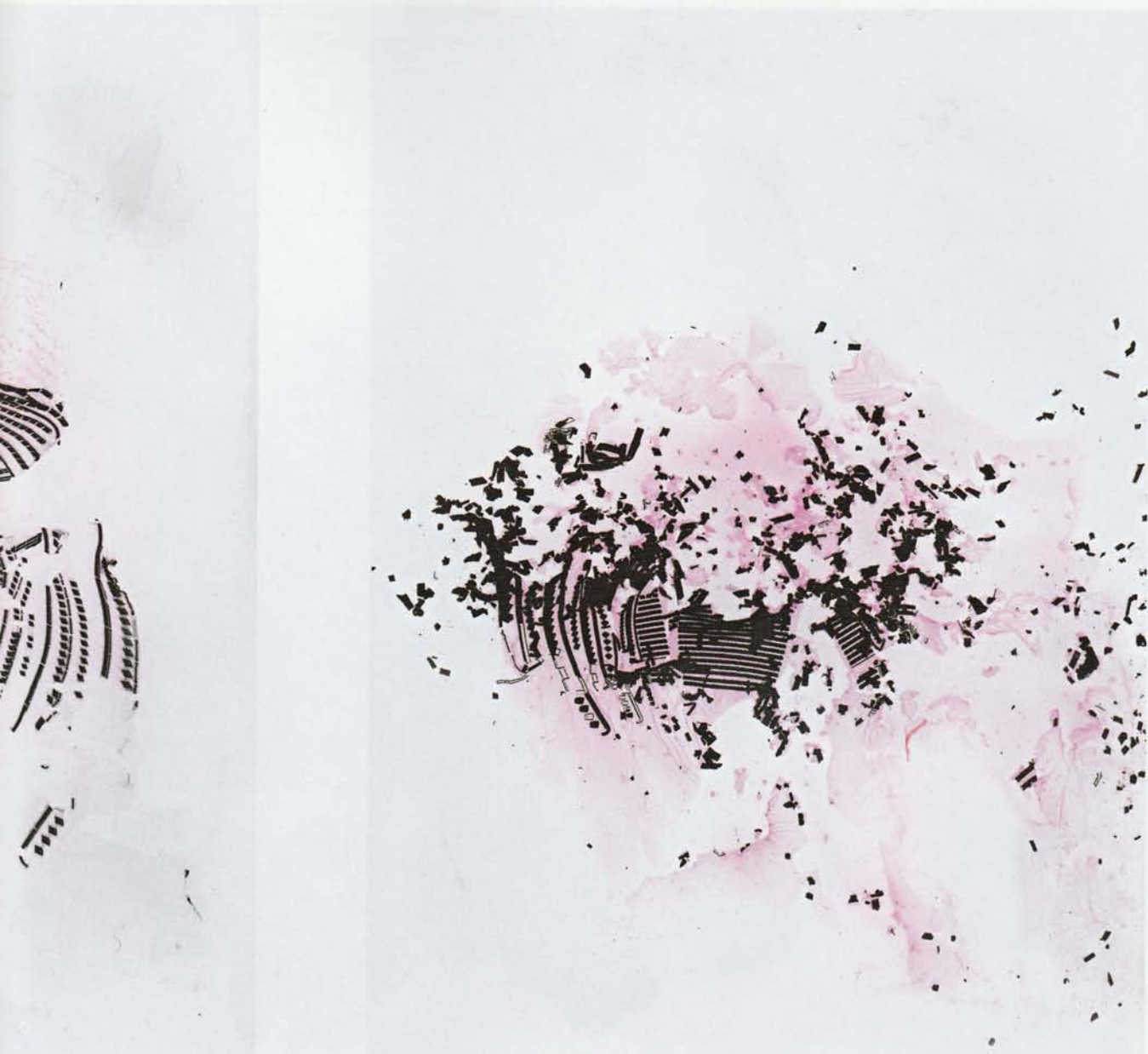




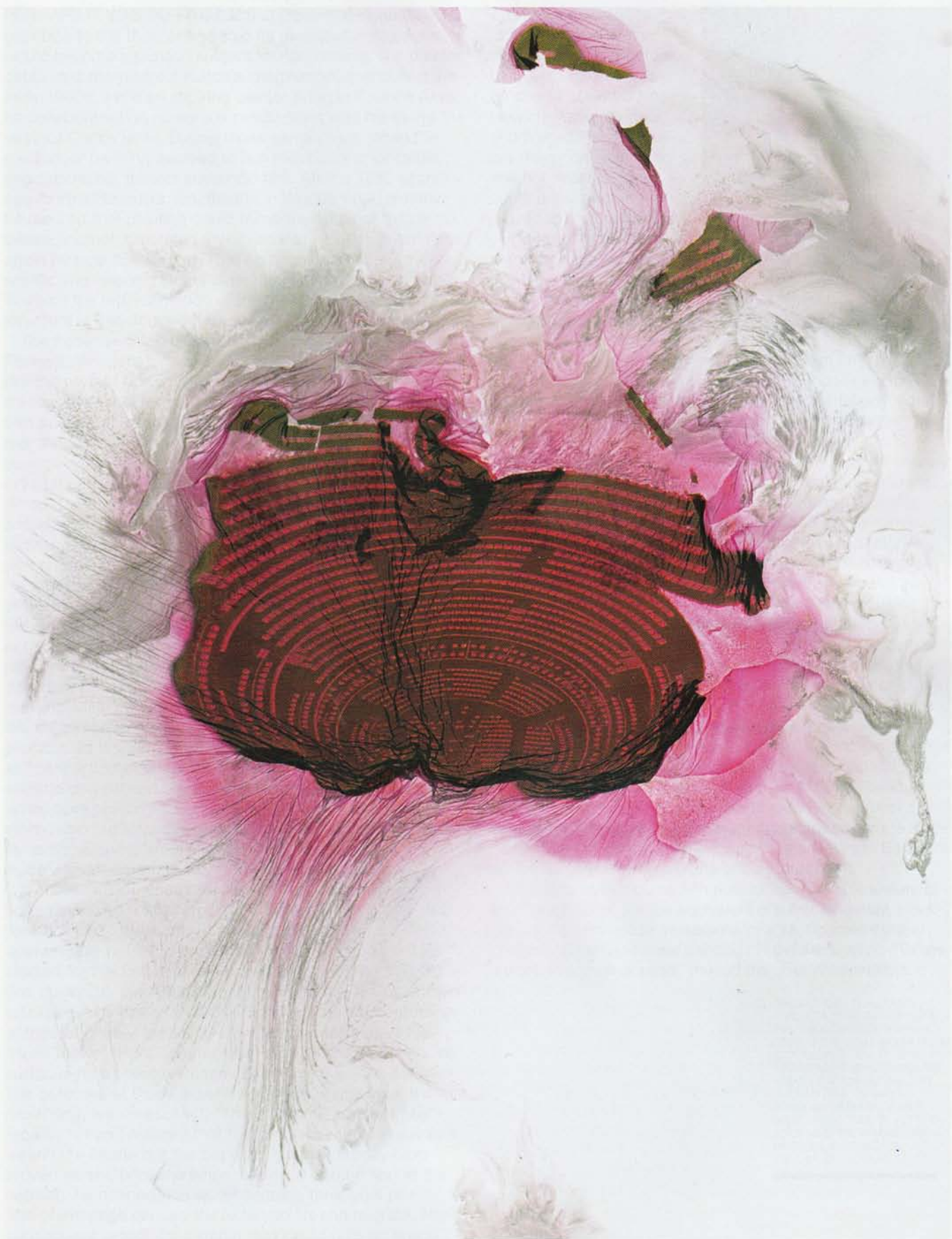
PORTFOLIO: GUILLERMO KUITCA  
DRAWING THE CURTAIN  
ESSAY BY DOUGLAS DREISHPOON



WORKS THIS ARTICLE FROM GUILLERMO KUITCA'S "DALLAS SUITE," 2008, MIXED MEDIUMS ON PAPER, 16 PARTS, EACH 11 BY 8 1/2 INCHES. COURTESY SPERONE WESTWATER GALLERY, NEW YORK.

*When the Margot and Bill Winspear Opera House at the Dallas Center for the Performing Arts opens its doors on Oct. 12, 2009, the 2,200-seat hall, designed by Foster + Partners of London, will feature a permanent house curtain by Guillermo Kuitca. The artist's design for the massive two-panel curtain, which will span 67 feet when closed and soar to a height of 40 feet, began with a series of intimate, ruminative drawings on commercial printer paper, most of the sheets letter-size, the largest just 19 by 13 inches. Selections from the informally titled "Dallas Suite" are reproduced here for the first time. We've asked Douglas Dreishpoon, chief curator at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and the organizer of Kuitca's forthcoming retrospective (which also debuts next October, at the Miami Art Museum) to set the stage.*







PERHAPS IT WAS INEVITABLE that Guillermo Kuitca would gravitate to the theater and that its architectural spaces would become a protean subject for his painting. The theater captivated the youthful Kuitca's imagination, and during the early 1980s, while an aspiring painter living in Buenos Aires, he collaborated on numerous productions with his friend the director Carlos Ianni. During those same years, when the medium of painting seemed to him moribund, impossible and frustrating, theater sustained him. After a 1980 pilgrimage to Pina Bausch's Tanztheater in Wuppertal, Germany, he realized that painting could mime the arena of theater to create another, simulated arena, so that painting might once again be possible for him. That epiphany has inspired a prolific and ongoing series of paintings and works on paper in which the representation of the theater as space and structure is transformed through gesture and process.

The commission to design the stage curtain for Norman Foster's Winspear Opera House in Dallas must have seemed like the perfect opportunity for an artist so vested in the theater. "The theater curtain," Kuitca wrote in the statement that accompanied his proposal, "marks a physical threshold: the limit where the audience abandons the reality of the outside world and lets itself be transported into the machinery of the theater. The curtain reminds us of where we are. When it is lifted, we are no longer there." He envisioned a design that would capture what he calls the "curtain's moment," those 20 minutes before each production during which the audience settles in and the orchestra tunes up.

Extensive drawing was the catalyst and vehicle for many of the ideas leading to the curtain's design. The act of drawing, like the subject of theater, has enriched Kuitca's notion of painting in significant ways. As a young artist, he drew a great deal. After 1990 and beginning with the canvases of the breakthrough "Tablada Suite" (1991-93), drawing—fine colored lines, robust plumes of pastel and dramatic bleeds—has entered and reentered his painting process, as diagrammatic element, as accent and mark, as linear articulation and numerical notation, as a way to activate and subvert the painted image. The act of drawing, unlike pure painting, is forgiving when it comes to fits and starts, aborted attempts and outright failures. As a seedbed for ideas, drawing enables Kuitca to sustain the generative pulse without having to worry that the stakes are too high.

In the hands of a seasoned artist like Kuitca, drawing continues to be a fluid proposition. This is certainly true of the suite of 27 drawings—imagined seating plans for an opera house not yet completed—which he generated as studies for the Dallas commission. Best described as flotation drawings, the "Dallas Suite" perpetuates an experimental process he began in 1994-95 using detailed engravings of theater plans—the same plans that would inspire his "Puro Teatro" (Pure Theater) paintings of 1995-98—whose surfaces he blasted with dense pours of aqueous pigment. The outcome of those experiments with engravings, though promising, felt unresolved. "There came a moment," he recalls, "when I realized that the problem with these works wasn't the image but the paper." That insight may have arrived serendipitously: while reading a printed text in the bathtub, he noticed that water seeping through a portion of the page caused the letters to lift and migrate. His subsequent search for a paper that could take an image and sustain submersion in water eventually bore abundant fruit when he downloaded theater seating plans from

international websites, radically edited them with Photoshop, printed them with colored inks on sheets of Kodak and Hewlett-Packard paper, and floated them in shallow trays containing cool and hot water. In short, commercial printer paper proved to be the answer.

A degree of mystery surrounds the diminutive works of the "Dallas Suite" and other flotation drawings. Why do certain passages rise and travel, bleed and melt, while others remain intact? How can the process be controlled? How does Kuitca decide whether an image has succeeded or failed? What is the percentage of "hits" versus "misses"? Admittedly, many drawings are thrown away. And the affinity to Surrealist water-based techniques, such as *frottage*, is entirely fitting in light of Kuitca's early mentors, Ahuva Szlimowicz and her teacher Victor Chab, both Surrealist adherents who encouraged him to trust intuition and to improvise.

The Dallas studies emulate the spontaneity of sketches and display a kaleidoscopic range of effects depending on the water temperature, the duration of immersion and the various ways water reacts with the paper's skin, causing it to cleave, break, shrink, pulverize and fragment. Ink on paper, straight from the printer, can release a most brilliant pink or green when introduced to water. Some seating plans appear minimally morphed, their concentric footprints miraculously intact. Others, deconstructed beyond recognition, assume bizarre configurations. Some of these resemble ocean waves and diaphanous clouds of smoke. Still others explode across the paper like the aftermath of an epic battle, rows of seats fractured like irradiated strands of DNA. Residual deposits of diffused ink evoke the phantom remains of a cataclysmic disaster. It is a metaphorical space, where Robert Smithson's entropic mindscape meets Georges Bataille's notion of *informe* on the plane of pure process.

Microcosms that pulse with possibilities, the little sheets of the "Dallas Suite" are the equivalent of a first rehearsal, blocking out the conceptual framework for a vast curtain's grand design and perhaps more paintings in the same spirit. "To see a world in a grain of sand," mused the poet William Blake. ○



"EVERYTHING: GUILLERMO KUITCA," A 25-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE, LAUNCHES ITS FOUR-CITY TOUR AT THE MIAMI ART MUSEUM [OCT. 9, 2009-JAN. 17, 2010]. SUBSEQUENT VENUES ARE THE ALBRIGHT-KNOX ART GALLERY, BUFFALO [FEB. 19-MAY 30, 2010]; WALKER ART CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS [JUNE 26-SEPT. 19, 2010]; AND THE HIRSHHORN MUSEUM, WASHINGTON, D.C. [OCT. 21, 2010-JAN. 9, 2011].