

**PRESSBOOK**

**KATE ERICSON & MEL ZIEGLER**

*Art In America*

*October 2014*

## KATE ERICSON AND MEL ZIEGLER

### Perrotin

According to the U.S. Department of the Interior's National Register of Historic Places, almost every county in the United States has registered at least one locale as a "historic place worthy of preservation." Producing a body of work that often investigated the aesthetic ordinances applied to historic districts, American artists Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler's collaborative practice lasted for nearly two decades, until Ericson's death in 1995. A recent exhibition at Perrotin comprised a two-floor mini-retrospective of sorts—offering what could be culled from their often temporary, site-specific projects. Alongside such objects as a caravan of toy trucks carrying marble shards and a pile of plywood scraps, the most gallery-friendly works were sculptures featuring the artists' signature sandblasted jars and large-scale drawings that often prefigure or document their public projects.

*The Authentic Colors of Historic Philadelphia* (1993) presents 10 small paint-filled jars lined up on a wooden bench.



Kate Ericson and  
Mel Ziegler: *Give  
and Take*, 1986,  
wood, metal,  
polyurethane  
resin, dimensions  
variable; at  
Perrotin.

## Art in America

The name of each color appears on its jar, and, according to the gallery's wall text, all were "certified to have been used on the interiors and exteriors of public and private buildings in colonial Philadelphia." The work deftly made this viewer wonder, why do we continue to paint colonial America as a golden age? The piece relates to the couples' seminal project, *Camouflaged History*, commissioned for the 1991 Spoleto Festival USA's exhibition "Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art in Charleston." The artists painted the exterior of a house—which bordered the city's historic district—in a camouflage pattern custom-made by military specialists for the project. The colors were derived from a paint chart of 72 hues that are officially authorized for structures in historic Charleston. Another gallery housed a 13½-foot-long latex-on-paper piece documenting the placement of the colors on the house, noting some of the names, such as Confederate Uniform Gray.

*Dark on That Whiteness* (1988) presents 173 wall-mounted jars containing paint that matches the colors found on federal structures surrounding the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The title references sculptor Horatio Greenough's description of the Smithsonian Castle as viewed against the Capitol building. Originally shown in the 1989 Whitney Biennial, the work was skewered by critic Kay Larson in a review for *New York* magazine: "The arid habits of the Western mind, clocking facts but missing the heart of things, are duplicated in this desiccated coding of systems and identities." Intriguingly, the artists' original biennial proposal was to grow and harvest corn, park the harvesting equipment outside the museum and serve the corn (as cornbread) in the museum's restaurant. Après Relational Aesthetics, this idea seems reasonable but, according to Ziegler, was deemed "too complicated" at the time. This story elucidates how conceptual artists can be cajoled into making "museum-quality" work that ends up being dreary, since *Dark on That Whiteness* lacks the immediate seduction found in the couple's public endeavors.

A particularly poignant piece was *Give and Take* (1986), in which a selection of broken tools collected from a Central Park maintenance crew hung on the wall. If the work is sold, proceeds will go to the park. Including a rake with missing and broken teeth, a castrated shovel and a pruning shear that lost its other half, the tools were allowed the dignity to fall apart, and the opportunity to become something new.

—Aimee Walleston