



## AMY ORR: *Plastic Culture*



There are a number of artists working today who utilize ordinary materials for their work and Amy Orr is one of them. Artists employ everyday items such as pipe cleaners, garbage bag ties, hair combs, swizzle sticks, small plastic vegetable baskets, silk flowers, and bits of tin to create one-of-a-kind, 'handcrafted' art objects and installations. These are not the 'found objects' of the past, those somewhat grubby, discarded items of Robert Rauschenberg or the singular combinations of Marcel Duchamp or Joseph Cornell. Rather, these are often newly made found objects of purchased items, frequently ordered in bulk through the Internet, or in the case of Orr's current body of work—plastic cards. She has used chicken bones, shattered auto glass, plastic parts, religious mementos, twist ties, and dollar store multiples, but has more recently been working with credit and other plastic cards which she collects from friends and strangers alike. She cuts them up and then rearranges the fragments into mosaic-like compositions to create wall hangings that are rooted in the quilt tradition.

Credit cards have a particular aura, especially today as Wall Street and the banking industry have earned a particularly dark character. Orr also uses other kinds of plastic cards including health insurance, supermarket, gift, hotel, club membership, special offer cards, and fake as well as real credit cards. Her works are not nihilist though; there is often a joyful enthusiasm in them.

A close examination of Orr's art reveals some fascinating insights into the nature of art materials today, the role that 'fiber' plays in contemporary art, and the ability of artists to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. While this is in some ways a 'deconstruction' of new materials and their connection to mass production, hand labor, hobby crafts, and the Internet, it is important that the poetry of Orr's work not be lost. She interweaves content with material and process to create works that address current events and politics as well as the issues of appropriation and originality, identity, commodity, and use value. In much of Orr's work the plastic is beaded onto cloth. She employs truly found materials, but organizes, bundles, and groups them into compositions that make the parts seem new. She prefers unexpected materials that provide an inherent social content. Her materials and her fascination with the everyday and the ordinary, her painstaking approach to art-making, and the often poetic and visionary work that is the product of her process and materials result in a body of work that is at once mesmerizing and ironic. Although Orr works with what might seem 'outsider' materials, she is not a folk artist. Hers is the work of the mainstream art world and reflects knowledge of design and construction techniques as well as a sophisticated worldview.

— J. Susan Isaacs, PhD  
Professor & Curator, Towson University

In incorporating a variety of materials in her artworks "including chicken bones, religious mementos, twist ties, credit cards, dollar bills, and dollar store multiples," Amy Orr states that she is "drawn to artifacts for their inherent social, political, and ecological content." For her solo exhibition, her primary material of choice comprises discarded plastic cards—both real and fake, which she has solicited from various individuals and sources including 40 gallons of plastic cards donated by a recycling service. The artist emphasizes the nature of plastic cards simultaneously having "value and no value." The plastic cards as objects in themselves have no value but, because they contain information, represent identities as well as "personal histories and hopes for the future," the access and power they yield are both valuable and vulnerable. Orr notes that plastic cards are "hard to destroy" and individuals who discard or donate their plastic cards do so with both "trust and fear."



'Quilted' into two American flags that share a compositional affinity with Jasper Johns's *Three Flags* (1958), the plastic cards take on even deeper meaning when, enmeshed with the US flags, is the map of China and the piece is titled *Made in China*. Another mosaic piece of geometric abstraction is *Magic Carpet* [see cover image], which alternates diamond-shaped bits of the mostly saturated front sides with the predominantly light back sides of credit cards, creating the illusion of a stack of cubes that resembles a traditional quilt pattern. Recognizable logos of big financial institutions and multinationals are interspersed with the names, credit card numbers, and even signatures of individuals which altogether set up an incredible visualization of the network or house of cards of corporations with which individuals and private citizens are inextricably linked. Orr also created a visually arresting mosaic appropriated from Shepard Fairey's iconic poster of President Barack Obama which has sparked controversy over Fairey's use of a photograph owned by the Associated Press. Using bold color plastic cards, Orr's piece is ambiguous in its celebration of a symbol of hope when the materials used are credit cards at a time when the news is rife with talk about credit collapse. These are veritable portraits of sociopolitical issues—contemporary fiber art that comments on the weft and warp of the fabric of society and current events.



— Carina Evangelista  
Gretchen Hupfel Curator of  
Contemporary Art, DCCA

OPPOSITE PAGE: *World Map*, 2009  
Plastic card mosaic, 20-1/2" x 32-1/2"

ABOVE: *Made in China*, 2009  
Plastic card mosaic beaded onto cloth  
23-1/2" x 23-1/2"

LEFT: *Obama: Hope in Plastic*, 2009  
Plastic card mosaic, 22" x 15"

COVER IMAGE: *Magic Carpet* (detail), 2009  
Plastic card mosaic, 72" x 48"

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