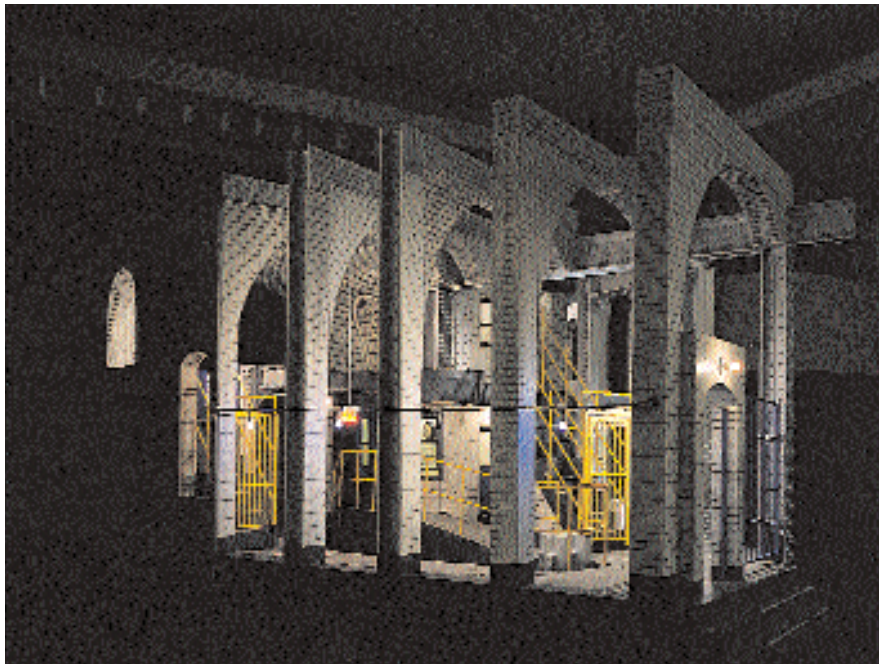
Donna Dennis

PETER MAUSS/ESTO

Home Away from Home

BY DEBORAH EVERETT



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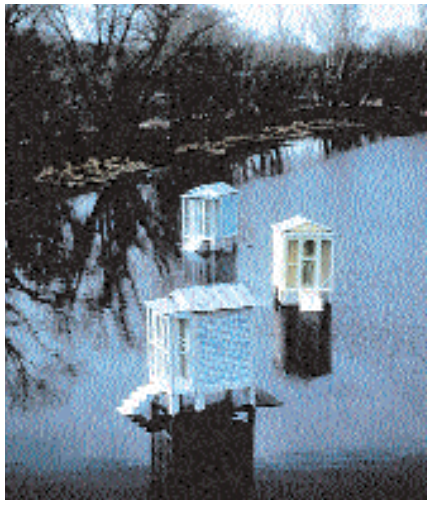
Opposite and this page: *Deep Station*, 1981–85. Mixed media with sound, 135 x 240 x 288 in.

When Donna Dennis created her earnest, plain-spoken "Tourist Cabins" at the outset of her career, they had the impact of cultural icons. She was one of a number of sculptors fresh on the '70s scene—including Alice Aycock and Jackie Ferrara—who pushed sculpture toward the domain of architecture. Almost all of the artists in this group dealt with structures relating to human shelter, but Dennis actually made architecture—American vernacular architecture—and transformed it into sculpture. Her groundbreaking work appeared in the Whitney Biennial, at the Tate Gallery, and other important spaces for the better part of two decades; she was represented by Holly Solomon for much of that period. However, during the 1990s, Dennis began to focus almost exclusively on teaching and public art projects. Now, she has returned more vigorously to her work, exhibiting at national and international venues—including a piece at the Genoa Biennale, a permanent installation in Miami, and a solo show in New York at five myles. The resurgence of Dennis's work—with its piercing insights into our national character—comes at a curious point in world events, when America's international presence speaks more to our collective temperament than our professed beliefs.

Dennis's large, early works, which resemble stage sets and heavy fortress walls, reveal her roots in painting. After receiving a BFA from Carleton College in 1964, she went to Paris, where flaking, centuries-old buildings fed her imagination. One year later, she moved to New York City and attended classes at the Art Students' League, while gradually becoming attracted to the symbolism and physicality of doorways. At the same time, she was deeply affected by the small habitats in Joseph Cornell's boxes—and their evocations of "being elsewhere." She soon began to shift her shaped canvases in the direction of façades and exotic structures. In 1972, she created *Hotel Pacifico*, one of the first of these flat edifices, which led her to develop more three-dimensional and complex configurations.

Her breakthrough *Tourist Cabin Porch (Maine)* (1976), a completely three-dimensional bungalow with a screened-in porch, recalls a time before the average American could afford hotel stays. Dennis has remarked that the piece's origin lies in her childhood memories of family vacations and the small houses that were rented out to tourists as more Americans took to the road. The work harks back to the beginning of America's appetite for diversion—especially in the form of tourism—



Left: *Tourist Cabin (Pensacola)*, 1976. Mixed media, 78 x 52.25 x 72 in. Above: *Moccasin Creek Cabins*, 1983. Mixed media, each unit 78 x 52.25 x 72 in. Temporary installation in Aberdeen, SD.

and suggests new outlets for the restless national urge to be on the move. However, while it points to the liberating possibilities of travel, it also signals the uncertainty and dislocation of being in transit.

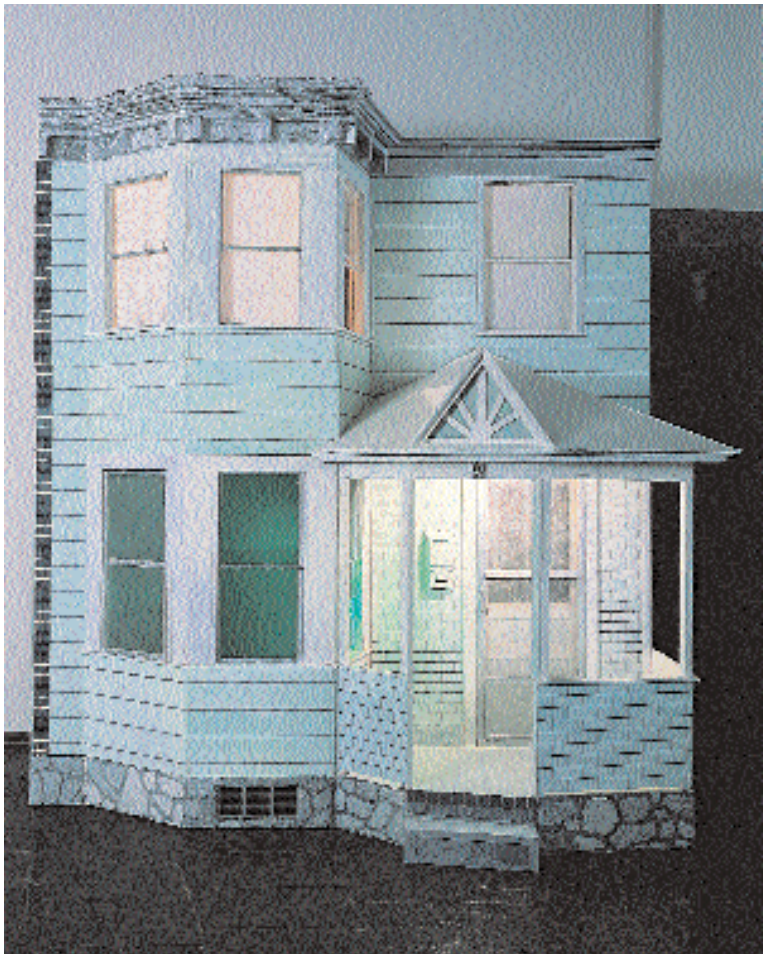
During this period, Dennis was intensely moved by Walker Evans's roadside photographs of clapboard buildings in the country's heartland. *Tourist Cabin* clearly reflects this influence: it is a masterpiece of understatement, revealing much about America's national character. Deceptively simple and unaffected, it embodies the classic qualities of the American disposition—a forthrightness linked to the common man, a sense of working-class practicality and abstention, and a solidity connoting strength and self-reliance. The other side of these traits, however, includes an almost unconscious denial of personal well-being, an individualism that often leads to isolation, and a longing for resolution of these frustrations. The cabin's pared-down style connotes pragmatism and frugality and refutes quality of life issues; stripped of decoration and comforts, it is a modern-day descendant of America's roots in Puritanism.

Tourist Cabin (Pensacola) (1976) shifts attention to another part of the country. The screened porch is full length, and its added details suggest a Southern, or perhaps rural, sensibility. Less severe and more homey, it seems intended for a lengthier habitation. Despite its title, the sense of transience has changed. Rather than the temporary displacement of a no-frills vacation, it suggests a long-term encampment—like a cook's or gardener's cottage, set back from the "big house." It is home to those who have no home—the sometimes shelter that derives from the favor of others; if conditions should change, the occupants may be asked to vacate at a moment's notice.

Dennis has said in her journals that she is interested in "a home that is not a home. A home on a journey. A home, a shelter, but without warmth or comfort or security. A 'place to stay' just for one night before moving on and on, never staying long anywhere, never belonging anywhere." These lines could be a national epigraph, since Americans define themselves as individualists, even loners, striving to stand out from the crowd and never quite at ease (or at home) in any one place. Crossing the prairie or cruising in our cars, we seek the freedom of open spaces, while yearning for the refuge of home. All the while, we know these goals to be incompatible, since home implies community and limits on personal freedom to support the common good.

Moccasin Creek Cabins (1983) marks a further development of this theme. Modeled after the Pensacola cabin, this group of three buildings takes a startling leap into an outdoor setting. They were, in fact, sited on the surface of Moccasin Creek in Aberdeen, South Dakota. Their mysterious location—afloat on a body of water—was both enigmatic and unsettling. Were they houseboats? Or fugitives from a natural disaster? How long could they stay afloat, and where would they end up? Perhaps they had simply let go of their moorings. Adrift, cast-off, and unreachable, they brought a new level of meaning to Dennis's vagabond shelters.

LEFT: BEVAN DAVIES



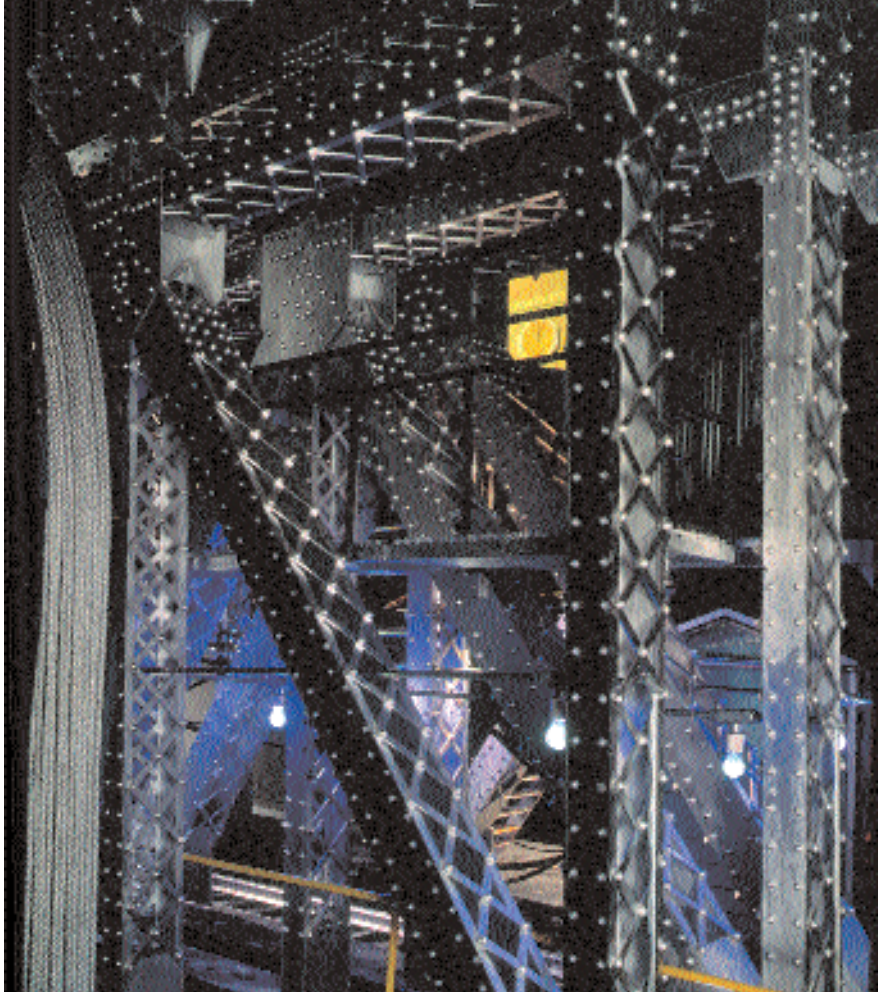
Left: *Two Stories with Porch (for Robert Cobuzio)*, 1977–79. Mixed media, 126 x 120.5 x 85 in. Right: *Cataract Cabin*, 1993–94. Mixed media with water pump, 144 x 144 x 144 in.

Perhaps the most atypical of Dennis's homes is *Two Stories with Porch (for Robert Cobuzio)* (1977–79). Unlike her cabins, this house, as its title implies, is large and suggests the domicile of a settled, middle-class family. Yet the sense of loneliness and desertion remains. On closer examination, we find that it advertises for a traveler or tenant by posting the one word that echoes its condition: "Vacancy." Clearly, even a family dwelling can be an empty shell.

Throughout her career, Dennis's work has been acclaimed for its depth and complexity. Filled with psychological content, each of her buildings has its own persona. Since home is the structural equivalent of self, each piece has an affecting sense of place. Rather than a passive backdrop for human activity, each structure expresses a definitive character (and life) of its own. Perhaps this vitality results in part from Dennis's attention to detail. Many pieces, for instance, have a single glowing light in front, infusing the work with anticipation, as though an arrival is expected at any moment.

Yet despite the realistic touches, many of the specifics cue the fantasy nature of Dennis's work. For instance, her structures are generally about three-quarters the size of actual buildings. And, as critic George Melrod pointed out, when you begin to play with scale, you leave logic for the world of imagination. Similarly, some of the construction in Dennis's buildings is more evocative than real—like theatrical backdrops. The planks, for instance, in most of her clapboard cabins are delicately drawn with graphite, placing them squarely in the realm of metaphor. Carter Ratcliff once remarked that the literal spaces occupied by Dennis's buildings are connected to fictive spaces in our minds. This simultaneous siting in both concrete and invented worlds is especially clear in her surfaces—which are both illusionistic (painterly renderings) and actual, loaded with layers of dust, dirt, and drips that record the human residue of their evolution over time.

Dennis's homes, then, embody the illusion, as well as the solitude, within American personal space—but she also found psychological meaning in public spaces. In 1974 she began making a series of mysterious subway entrances, focusing on their contained energies and often contradictory configurations. The portals beckon to the viewer despite the blockage of, or locks on, their entrances. Like Dennis's houses, they reveal the ambiguity of the American character—with seemingly open, straightforward exteriors masking a sealed and isolated core. They recall the dual nature



***Blue Bridge/red shift*, 1991–93. Mixed media with sound, 144 x 168 x 288 in.**

of a venerated national figure, the American cowboy, the silent loner who saves the town into which he can't quite fit.

In a bold move, Dennis also looked inside a public structure, only to find it as lonely within as without. *Subway with Silver Girders*, a lofty, two-story structure with colonnades made of girders created for the 1982 Venice Biennale, has the feeling of lonely city streets after nightfall. Suddenly the space inside is as openly expressive as the form defining it, since *Silver Girders* allows the viewer to see into its intricate spatial arrangement. Exhibited in semi-darkness, it evokes an oasis of human presence within the surrounding limbo. Although not a private, domestic space, it is the equivalent of home within the public sphere, representing a way station or rest stop en route. Still, its only light comes from a few stark bulbs, and it is a cold and lonely haven.

In a grander realization of urban alienation, Dennis's next work crystallized her vision of public shelter in urban America. *Deep Station* (shown at the Brooklyn Museum in 1987) is a work of remarkable spatial and architectural complexity, a maze of platforms, tracks, tunnels, entrances, staircases, control rooms, and railings within a vaulted, Piranesian space. As in *Silver Girders*, shadows—now cavernous—are punctuated by bare bulbs floating in the surrounding darkness. The space may be a public one, but its stillness and emptiness give it an odd sense of intimacy—like a grand ballroom in the small hours of the night.

Perhaps the capstone of Dennis's public structures came in 1993, when she finished *Blue Bridge/red shift* (shown that year at the SculptureCenter). Modeled after old railway drawbridges, it is a colossal (24-foot-long) openwork of diagonal girders and glittering, hand-carved bolts divided down the center by a corridor and train track. The track is mysteriously lit by a row of blue light bulbs, creating an indigo zone that anchors the piece like a painful memory. Two gigantic cable wheels are mounted at the sides, and two small control booths cling to the beams. Within the tiny house beside the track, a blood-red light smolders, filling the windows—it reads like a molten nucleus that fuels the imposing entity around it. The other booth, perched over the tracks, reveals a tiny wall clock, stopped eerily at 12:05. In the distance, a fog-horn wails on tape, tolling some dreadful loss that underlies this luminous presence. Again, Dennis has created a powerful and massive structure that stretches out before us, but she also shows its vulnerable heart—communing with resident ghosts.

After *Blue Bridge*, Dennis continued to build imaginary scenes, but in a scaled-down size. *Cataract Cabin* (1993–94), a not quite life-sized cabin perched dramatically on a boulder just broad enough to hold it, returns to personal space and more human proportions. A more whimsical work, it includes a plethora of eccentric details—from a vertical lifeboat, hanging by its own rope, to an errant drain pipe spouting water from the side of the boulder. More recently (from the late 1990s to 2005), Dennis has used small dioramas to invoke her dream-like atmospheres through curious landscapes. These works, mostly encased in small wooden boxes, allow viewers to peer into spaces that often resemble moonscapes surmounted by modest private houses. The tiny square homes, in turn, are hemmed in by myriad satellite dishes, or squeezed beneath gigantic radio towers—imprisoned by the communications network that leaves them no more connected than before. These works were included in her recent show at five myles in Brooklyn, along with new gouache drawings that juxtapose starry skies from the dioramas with telescopes and hurricane fencing.

Another small piece shown at five myles is the model for a large work-in-progress in Dennis's studio. The installation-in-process is densely interwoven and maze-like, camouflaging the entrance to a roller-coaster ride at Coney Island after hours. Its filmy, shifting texture is built of layer upon layer of chain-link fence, railings, ramps, track-work, and dimly lit light bulbs. The last physical tier between the structure and the viewer is a row of bare, skeletal trees. Pale and spectral, this composite structure represents a public space

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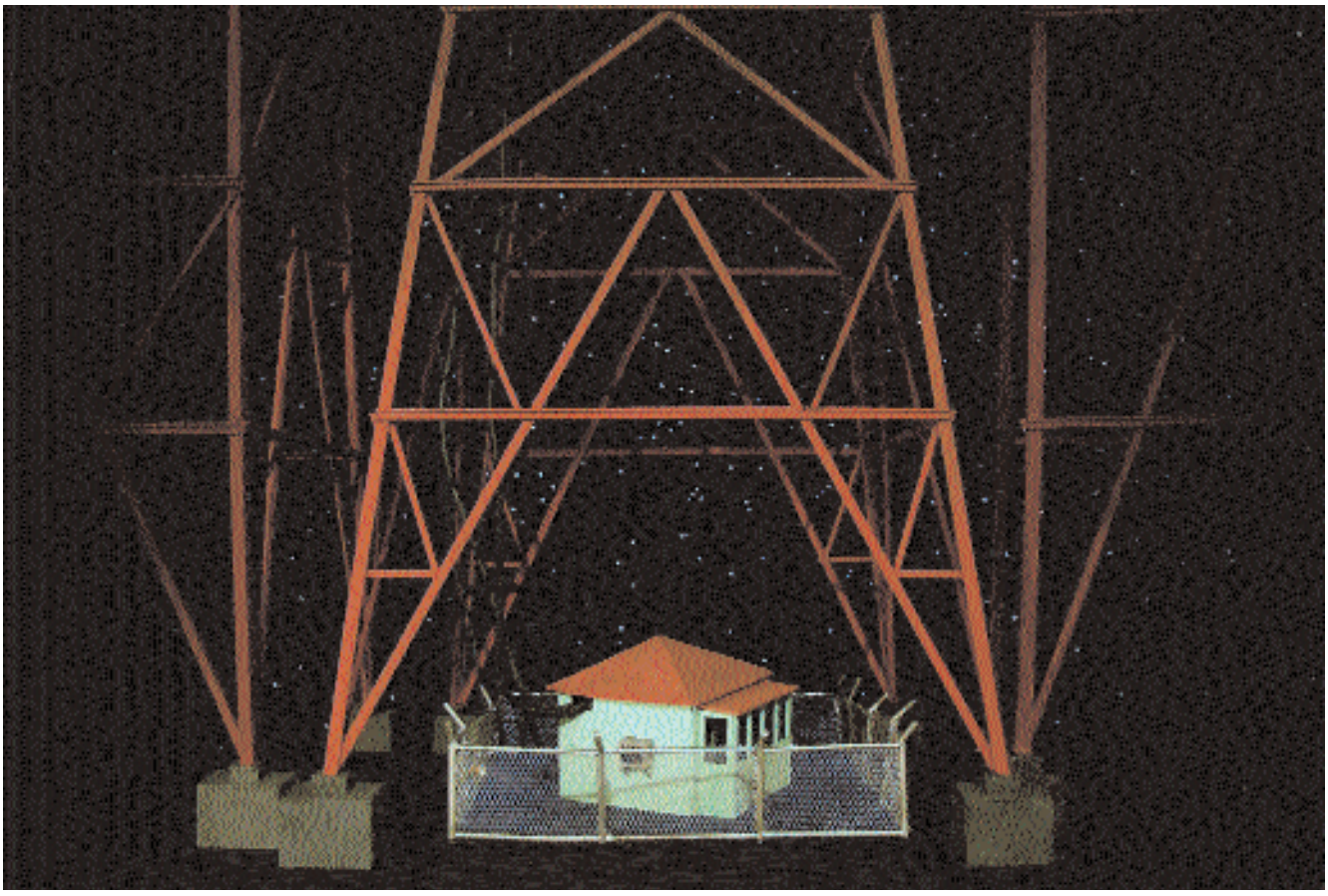

***Connecting*, 2004–05. Acrylic paint on wood, balsa and basswood, museum board, rubber, plastic, nylon stocking, metal screen, and wood and glass box, 20.25 x 24.4 x 12 in.**

turned private—a deserted, dark, and alluring night-world just beyond reach.

A wave of re-kindled interest is bringing new attention to the whole spectrum of art from the '70s and '80s. Earlier this year, NYU's Grey Art Gallery opened its important survey "The Downtown Show" (subtitled "Scintillating Survey of the New York Art Scene from 1974 to 1984"), and one of Dennis's works was included. This is the latest in a series of related reprises, including Julie Ault's recent book *Alternative Art, New York, 1965–1985*, and the New Museum's even more recent show "East Village USA." In addition, Dennis's *Subway with Silver Girders* has just been placed between works by Frank Stella and Jason Rhoades in a permanent installation of the Martin Margulies collection at the Warehouse in Miami. And in the 2004 Genoa Biennale, curated by Germano Celant, her work was presented as part of a sweeping overview of the ties between art and architecture.

When such a resurgence occurs, one cannot help but ask, "Why now?" Certainly this interest in architecture-based art may be related to the current frenzy over contemporary architects like Rem Koolhaas and Frank Gehry. It may also be that the art of the '70s and '80s is getting new attention because enough time has elapsed to see its staying power. It was a period of singular innovation, buoyed by its high energy as the first wave of Postmodernism. More recent Postmodernist developments, on the other hand, are beginning to strike some critics as over-extended and derivative. In a December 2005 article surveying the current art scene in Miami, Roberta Smith talked about looking for an "antidote for [exaggerated] spareness (and hipness)," and she found it in Dennis's installation at the Warehouse.[1]

But aside from the formal achievements of Dennis's work, it has another appeal now—that of elucidating our identity at a time when the concepts of patriotism and Americanism are stirring public and private debates. All art, to some extent, reflects its culture of origin, but Dennis's work goes beyond that to reveal our secluded, self-absorbed inclinations. When we frequently find ourselves at odds with the world community—the embattled loner more than the good neighbor—our commitment to democracy and majority rule begs review. Dennis's vernacular architecture reveals the isolationism behind our individualism, posing timely questions about our capacity for social contracts, while offering a challenge to the courage of our convictions.

Note

[1] Roberta Smith, "A Carnival of Art, Money, Surf and Sand," *The New York Times*, December 3, 2005.

Deborah Everett is a writer living in New York.