



Eminent Domain

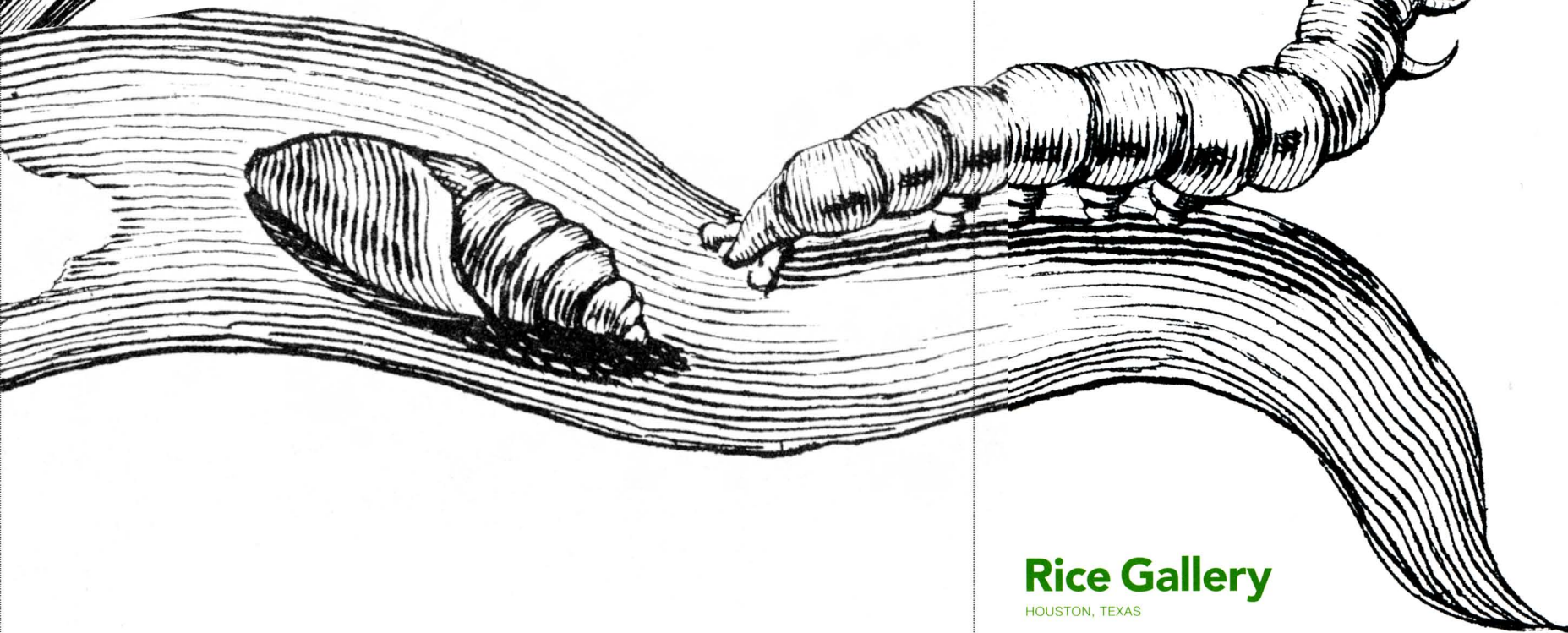
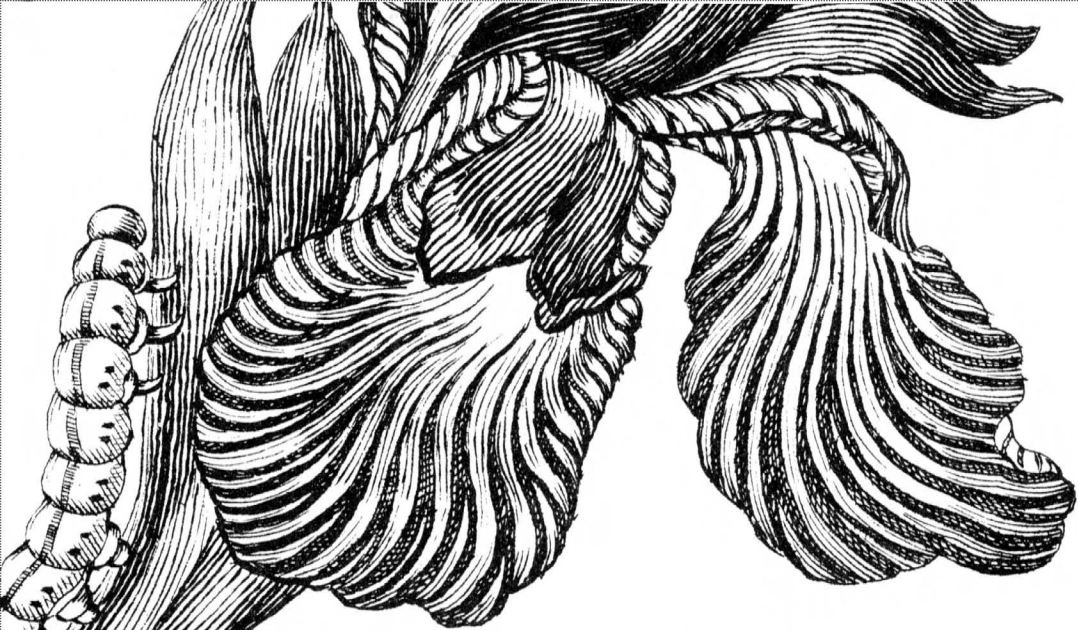
AN INSTALLATION BY
MATTHEW WHITE AND FRANK WEBB



10 NOVEMBER - 11 DECEMBER 2005

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Rice Gallery
HOUSTON, TEXAS

F O R E W O R D



One day while perusing the Style section of *The New York Times*, a photograph caught my eye. Two men, looking suave and relaxed, stood with furniture that appeared to be plucked right out of a cartoon, and of a style falling somewhere between Louis XV and Mickey Mouse. It was Matthew White and Frank Webb, founders of the interior design firm White Webb, LLC, with objects from their new *Intaglio* collection, a line of furniture and accessories that is a witty, ultra-modern take on the classical past.



I wondered if the designers might be interested in expanding their idea to an entire room, albeit a really *big* room. Frank and Matthew's answer was to create *Eminent Domain*, an installation for Rice Gallery that was at once the world's biggest pop-up book, an *Alice in Wonderland* experience, and a dazzling garden-in-winter.

doubt about what the term "professional" encompasses — original thinking, precise planning, and extraordinary results — Frank and Matthew reminded us. How we agree with the visitor who wrote, "It's nice to be in a fairytale world, even if only for a little while."

— Kimberly Davenport
Director

There has never been a more joyful occasion at Rice Gallery than the run of *Eminent Domain*. There, you could step onto an Astroturf lawn and into another reality, putting aside exams, holiday stress, or the grayness of a December day. For a few moments you could stop and enjoy a feast of pattern and decoration within a quiet pavilion, or be a Lilliputian sightseer walking among enormous flowers and insects. I want to thank Frank and Matthew for their willingness to work with us, and within our small budget. If our staff ever had any



On Eminent Domain

BY MATTHEW WHITE AND FRANK WEBB



In man's desire to study nature, there often seems to be a need to bring it indoors and own it. Materialism has always been a factor in art and nature. By creating prints of the world's specimens, early artists made nature understandable for some and controllable for others. The wealthy patrons who commissioned this art had cabinets of curiosities filled with natural objects — objects they owned. Our installation begs the question — between man and nature, who truly has eminent domain?

When Guttenberg invented the printing press in the late 15th century, he produced much more than the Bible. During those early years of burgeoning mass communications, one of the most favored subjects of printers was flowers. Given their broad aesthetic and scientific appeal, botanicals were perfect for the new medium, which enabled a wider audience to admire and study the beauty and bounty of nature. While the process and the subject matter continued to evolve over

the next few centuries, the link between art and intellect remained solidly intact. In the 16th century, Piranesi brought new interest to ancient ruins, and in the 18th century, Chippendale made certain his furniture was illustrated for financial and artistic reasons. In the early 19th century, Napoleon traveled with legions of artists and scientists who created untold numbers of folios depicting flora, fauna, sea life, archaeology and more. For hundreds of years, art, nature,

furniture, architecture, and fashion were all documented via engravings — often by astoundingly gifted artists.

While the great artists of the past took real objects and turned them into engravings, we take engravings and turn them into real objects. We create our furniture by taking tiny, one-dimensional images and blowing them up . . . way up. Through the process of enlarging the engravings to human scale, we create a new reality. One could say our pieces are paper doll furniture come to life.



In Eminent Domain, we used the same technique, but injected a new take on scale and perspective. A human-scaled domicile was surrounded by a towering Technicolor forest: Louis XV meets Munchkinland on steroids.

The elegant pavilion located in the center of the gallery was composed of images from various periods and countries. Mid-eighteenth century engravings of French boiserie covered the walls and a 1720 French Regence print formed the chandelier. The floor was a 19th century print illustrating

15th century designs from the Great Mosque in Damascus, while the ceiling was a glorious Italian painting. By discovering and assembling these disparate antique images, we created a fully realized and unashamedly “decorated” room, which simultaneously paid homage to, and poked fun at, grand European style of the 18th century. With the

room rendered completely in black and white, viewers felt as if they had wandered into a gargantuan, Enlightenment Era pop-up book.

Outside of this exceedingly controlled structure was a very different world. Plant life and various insects, all from the famous *Erucarum Ortus* by Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717), came monstrously to life. Merian's prints of bearded iris and lowly dandelion were magnified into a larger-than-life jungle/garden that threatened to engulf the staid pavilion. To add to the science fiction freak show, we partnered the oversized flora with hauntingly huge butterflies and insects. Blushing with color and peeling off the walls, this natural imagery stood in sharp contrast to the controlled perfection of the architectural folly.

— Matthew White and Frank Webb



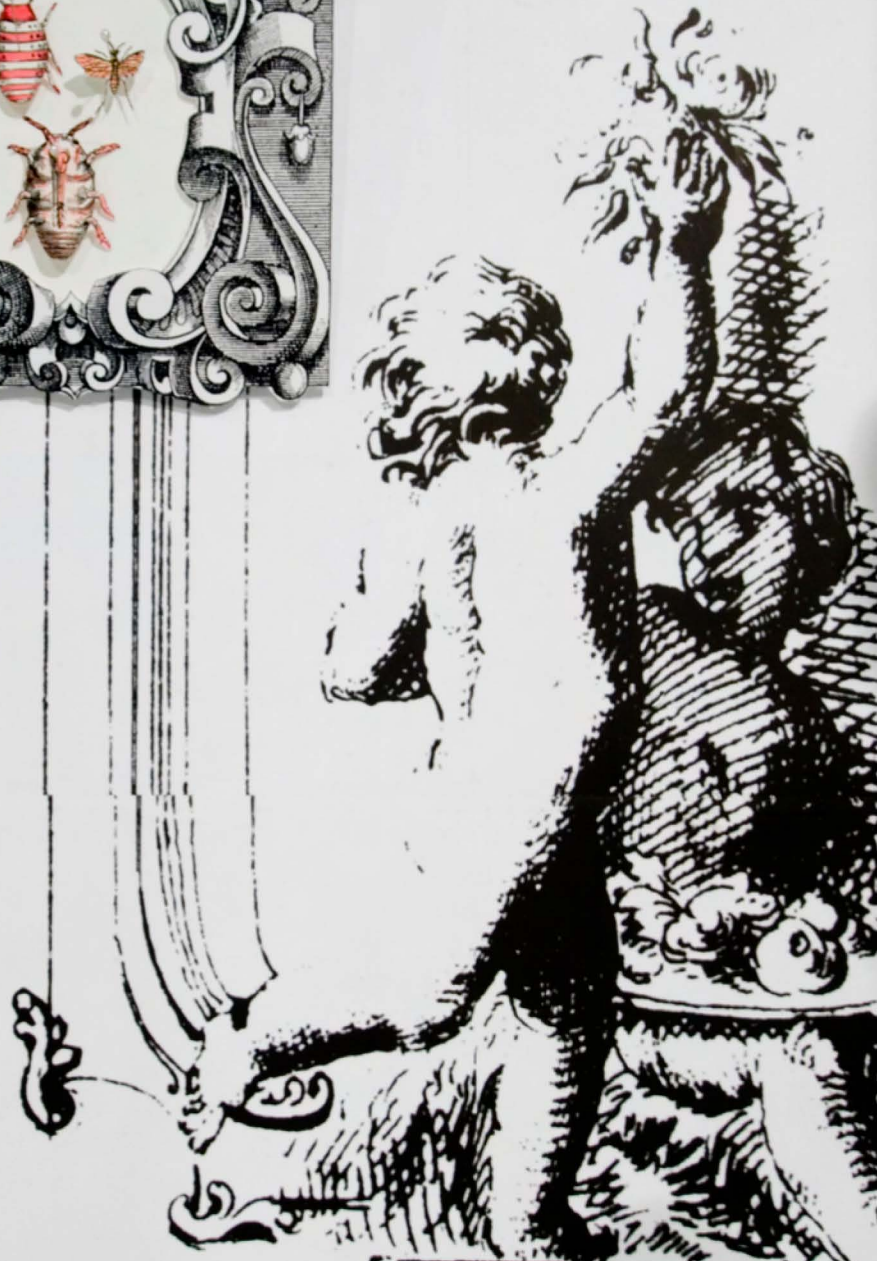














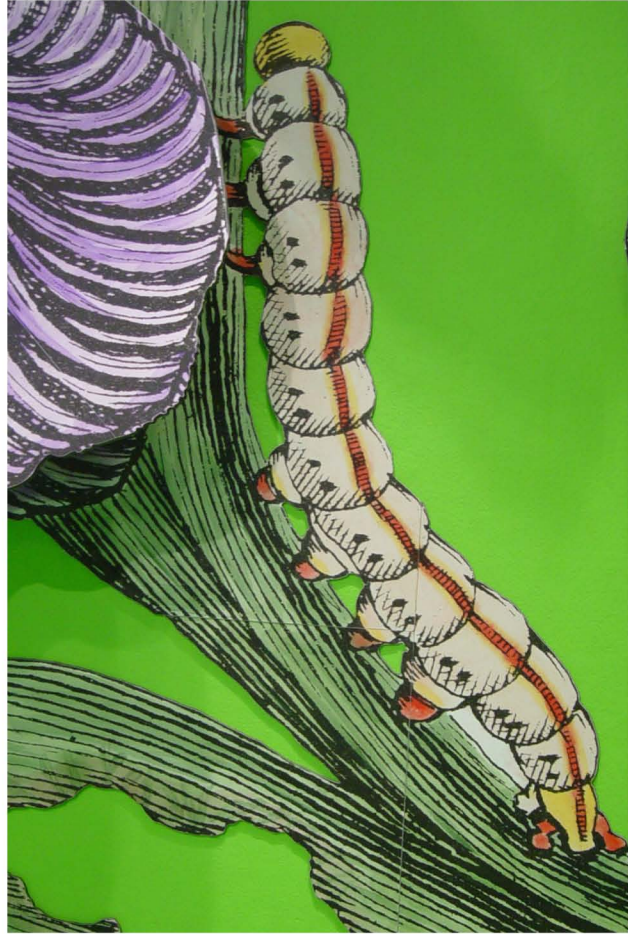














ARCHITECTURAL FOLLY: A lavish or extravagant architectural expression of a particular idea or obsession.

BOISERIE: Popular in 17th and 18th century French interior design, boiserie (often plural, boiserie) is ornate and intricately carved paneling.

BOTANICAL PRINT: A detailed and scientifically accurate drawing, engraving, or painting of a plant, which gives particular attention to the features which distinguish it from other plants.

CABINET OF CURIOSITIES: Not actually a cabinet, but an entire room dedicated to a gentleman's private collection of natural and man-made objects. Popular throughout Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, it allowed its owner to study the world scientifically and to awe his visitors.

CHIPPENDALE, THOMAS (ENGLISH, 1718 – 1779): A leading 18th century furniture maker who published *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director*, a folio of engravings illustrating his designs.

EMINENT DOMAIN: The power of the state to appropriate private property for public use with compensation to the property owner, but without the owner's consent.

ENGRAVING: A type of print characterized by strong, parallel lines. The crisscrossing of these lines, or cross-hatching, creates heavy shading and a sense of depth.

ENLIGHTENMENT ERA: A 17th and 18th century European intellectual movement marked by a belief in a rational, orderly, and comprehensible world.

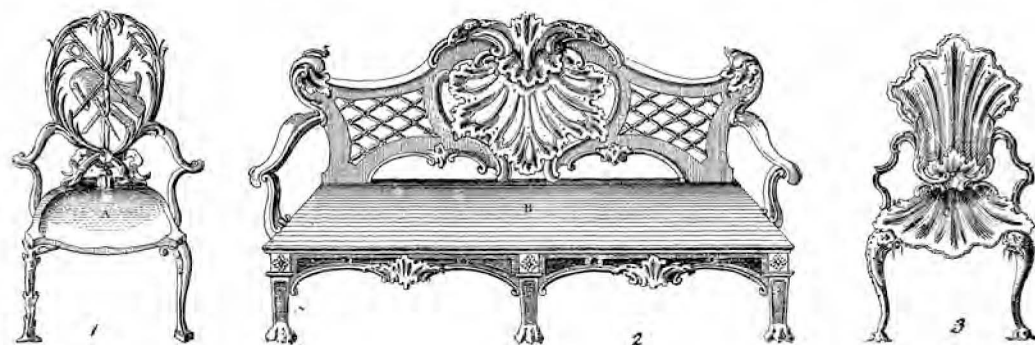
ERUCARUM ORTUS, ALIMENTUM ET PARADOXA METAMORPHOSIS: Life work of Maria Sibylla Merian published in 1717 following her death, although all sections of the work had been published earlier. Merian's drawings of caterpillars, butterflies, tropical plants and animals were admired for their beauty and accuracy, and for the first time, she depicted insects together with the plants on which they were found in nature.

GREAT MOSQUE (UMAYYAD MOSQUE): Located in Damascus, Syria, the Great Mosque was built between AD 705 and 715, destroyed in 1401 and rebuilt. It is known to be the oldest existing monumental architecture in the Islamic world.

MERIAN, MARIA SIBYLLA (GERMAN, 1647 – 1717): Natural historian who drew insects from collections as well as in their natural environment. Her drawings were an invaluable reference for European naturalists and the botanical genus *Meriana* is named for her.

PIRANESI, GIOVANNI BATTISTA (ITALIAN, 1720 – 1778): A draftsman, architect, and printmaker famous for large prints depicting scenes from classical Rome.

REGENCE PERIOD (1715 –1723): France's short-lived Regence period was a transitional style that did away with heavy, carved ornamentation and embraced a smaller scale marked by lightness, grace, opulence and playfulness, with a love of shell-like curves, foliage, bouquets, and ribbons.



ABOUT THE DESIGNERS



Matthew White was born in Amarillo, Texas in 1958. He studied at the School of American Ballet, New York, from 1977 to 1978, and danced professionally with the Los Angeles Ballet until 1983. White then worked as a graphic artist until he launched his own antiques business in 1996. He expanded his practice into interior design, and in 2004 was named one of the “AD 100,” Architectural Digest’s list of the 100 best designers in the world. He is on the board of Save Venice, a non-profit group that restores art and monuments in Venice, Italy. White lives and works in Los Angeles and New York.

White Webb, LLC is an interior design firm with offices in New York and California. Their projects have been seen in nearly every national design magazine, as well as The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times.

Born in Massachusetts in 1964, Frank Webb holds a degree in international economics from Georgetown University’s Walsh School of Foreign Service (1986), as well as a certificate in international business from Nijenrode, the Netherlands School of Business. He worked in the financial service industry for seventeen years before leaving to explore other fields. In 2004 he joined forces with Matthew White and formed White Webb, LLC. He lives and works in New York.



Matthew White and Frank Webb, *Eminent Domain*, 2005
Commission, Rice University Art Gallery

Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the campus of Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the web at ricegallery.org.

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