Miguel Angel Rios
Mapping by: Raphael Rubinstein
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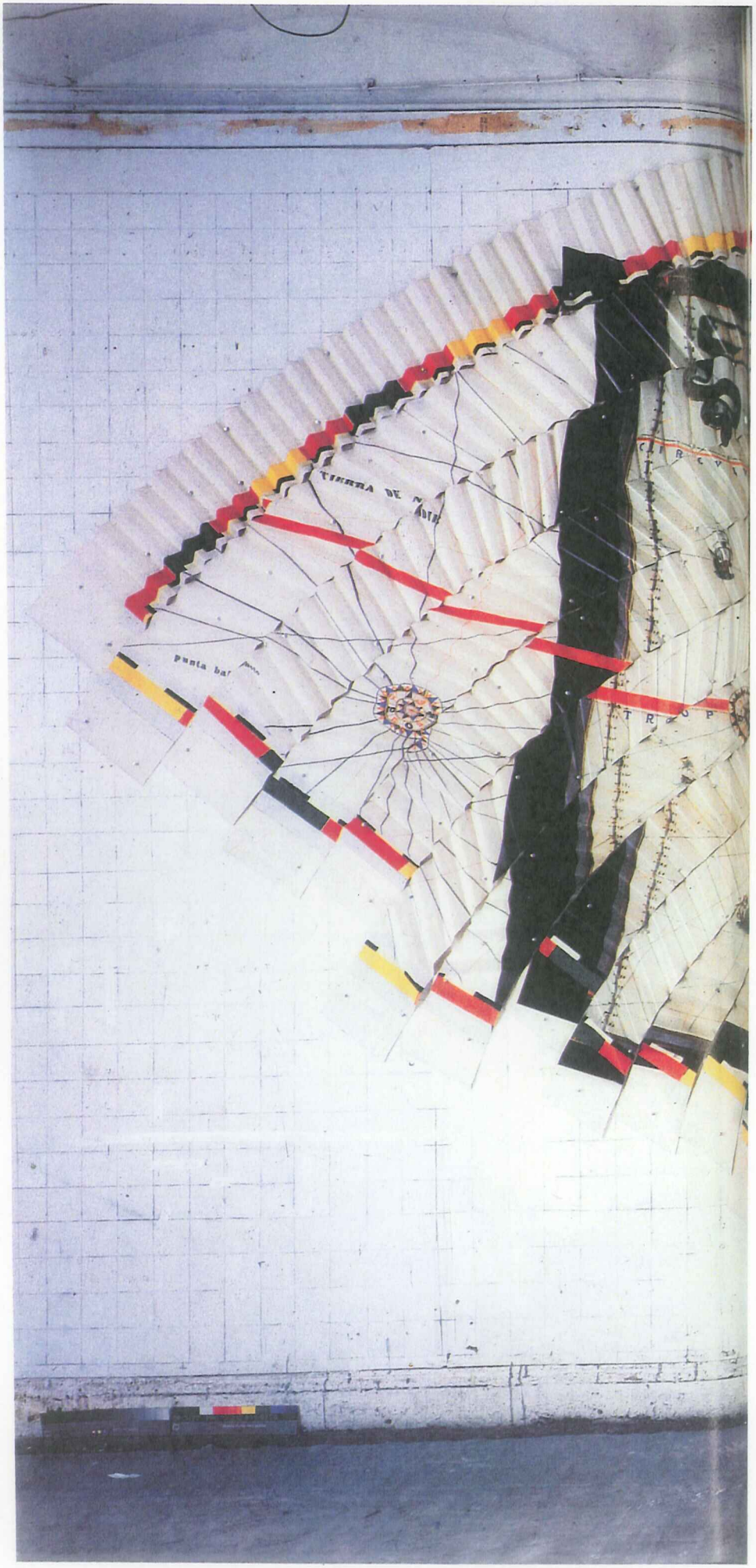
Mapping & Identity

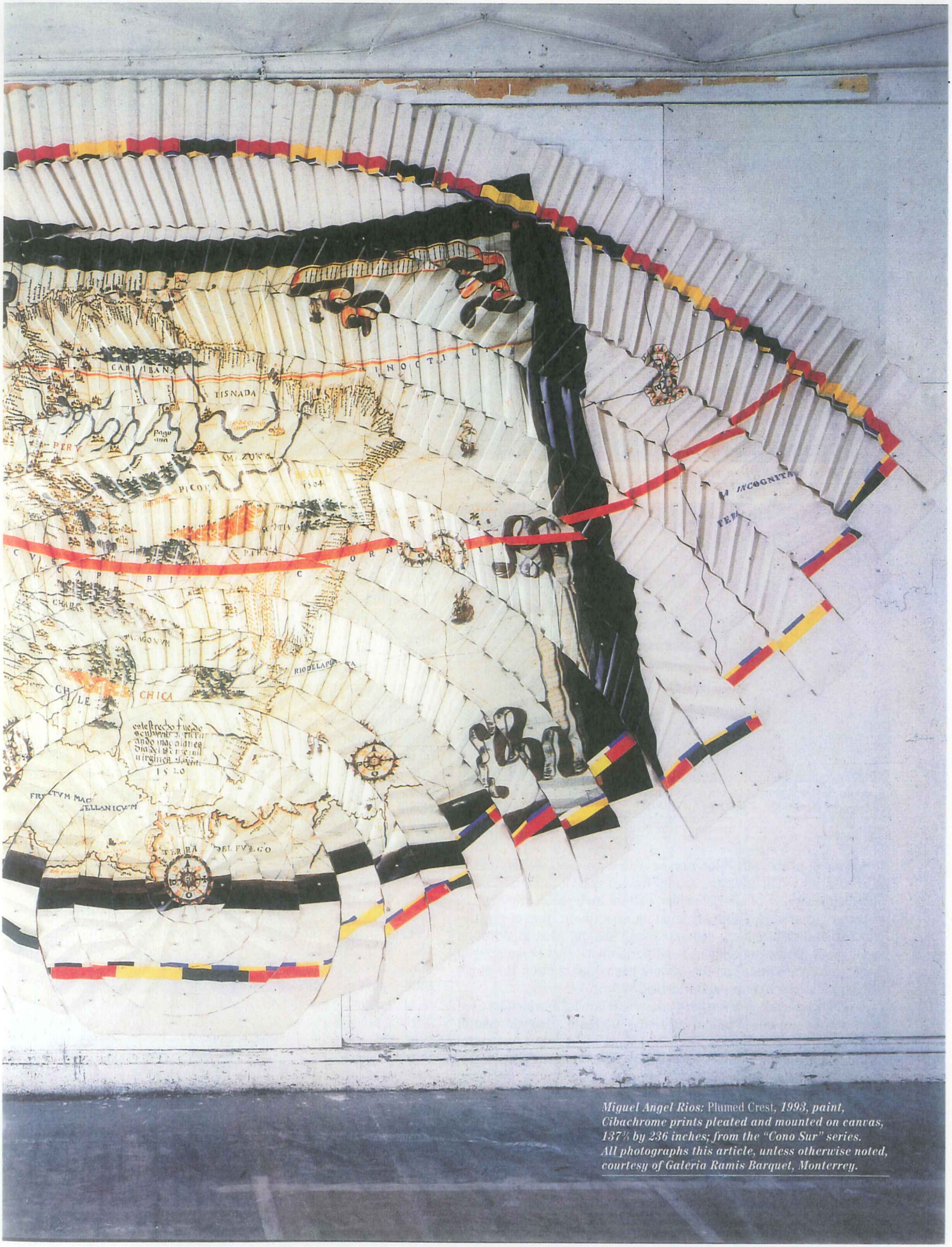
Miguel Angel Rios, Argentine-born and New York-based, adds a distinctively Latin American cast to the Minimalist poetics of repetition.

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

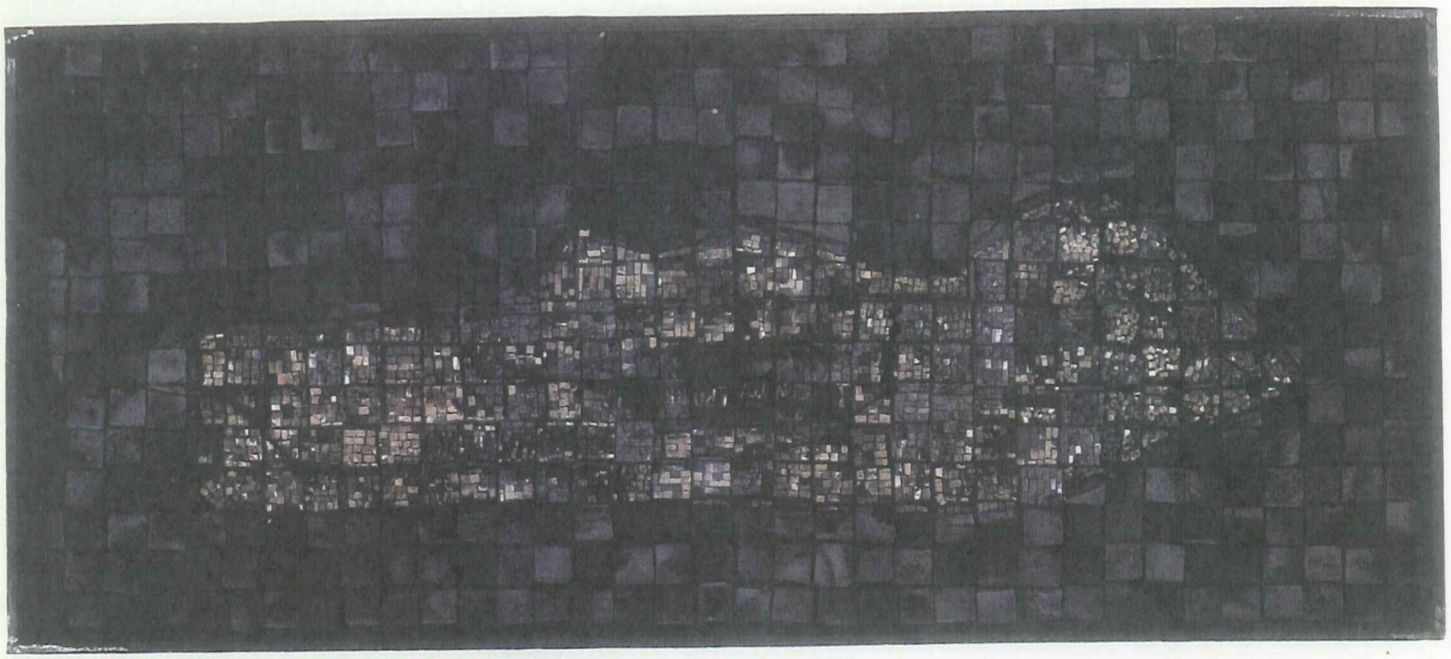
Miguel Angel Rios was born in Catamarca, Argentina, in 1943. Located in the far north of the country, Catamarca is distant from Buenos Aires both geographically and culturally. On the edges of what was once the Incan empire, the people and culture there still possess an indigenous identity that isn't found in the Europhile capital. If Buenos Aires has traditionally imagined itself as a suburb of Paris, Catamarca is firmly located in South America. Although Rios has not lived in Argentina since the mid-1970s (he now divides his time between New York City and Mexico), he continues to draw inspiration and ideas from his birthplace.

Out of this background, and an innovative reinterpretation of the modernist grid, Rios has developed a unique visual style, reminding us that Latin America does not speak with one voice. Rios does not broadcast his cultural identity by incorporating popular national imagery as does the Mexican painter Julio Galán, nor does he pursue the intentionally international language of fellow Argentine Guillermo Kuitca. Of an older generation, Rios was perhaps more influenced by formalist ideas. At moments his work shows affinities with the Minimalist oeuvres of artists like Walter de Maria and Carl Andre, who have pursued a poetics of repetition, yet the Argentinean's work avails itself of a rich, complex range of references. Nor are these references limited to Latin America, as a group of works inspired by the Gulf War—which marked something of a turning point for him—emphatically demonstrates. (More on these works in a moment.)

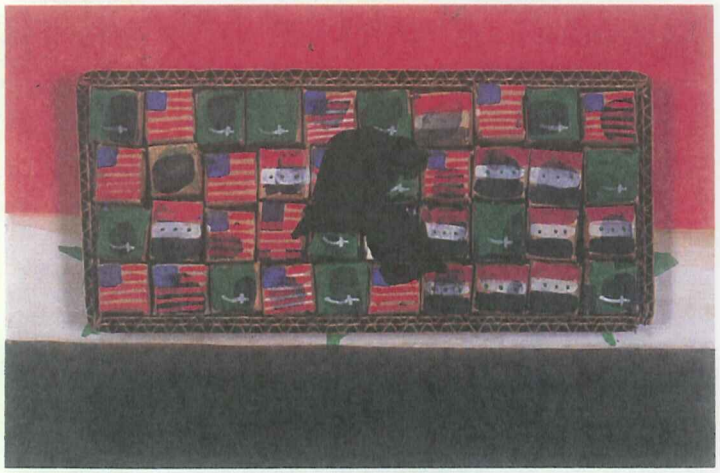




Miguel Angel Rios: Plumed Crest, *1993, paint, Cibachrome prints pleated and mounted on canvas, 137½ by 236 inches; from the "Cono Sur" series. All photographs this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy of Galeria Ramis Barquet, Monterrey.*



Manhattan Codice, ***1990, iron, clay and mica, 19½ by 44½ by 6 inches.***



Souvenir Series: Assorted Candies, ***1991, watercolor, corrugated cardboard, 8 by 12 by 2½ inches.***

For much of the '80s, Rios worked with cubes and ovoids of fired clay arranged in grids and usually framed by wide borders of steel. Suggesting aspects of pre-Columbian culture from Incan architecture to pottery to an agriculture centered on corn, these rows of remarkably varied clay forms are decorated with shining mica inlay (often spelling out phrases in Spanish) and perforations that evoke skeletal faces. One commentator on Rios's work has suggested that the punctured ovoids refer to flutes and whistles.

In 1990 Rios made *Manhattan Codice*, a wall relief in which he used black terra-cotta cubes inlaid with mica to create a mosaic map of Manhattan. (Oaxaca, Mexico, where he maintained a studio for several years, is famous for its black-clay pottery.) *Manhattan Codice* introduces a disjunction in depicting the borough of Manhattan, the realm of Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* and Trump Tower, with roughly made and tonally varied materials that recall a distant pre-Columbian world. In the context of Rios's oeuvre, *Manhattan Codice* is the moment, it seems to me, when he visually realized his complex position as an artist moving between Latin America (both past and present) and the esthetic and social tumult of New York City. His response to this realization was to step away from Latin American themes and materials by starting the Gulf War works.

When the battle for Kuwait broke out in the winter of 1991, Rios happened to be having solo shows in New York and Madrid. Pushed by the circumstances, he began to make art about the war. The most striking of the 40-plus works in the series were those in which he used cardboard boxes, from Federal Express and the like, as frames for groups of small cubes, also made of cardboard, which he arranged like tesserae in a mosaic. Each cube was painted with the flag of one of the warring countries so that seen together they looked like pieces of a board game. Using these jostled grids of color as backgrounds, Rios added black spots sometimes shaped like Iraq or Kuwait, sometimes in amorphous configurations meant to represent the smoke of burning oil wells.

In dramatic contrast to his previous use of quasi-Minimalist terra-cotta and steel, these works employed watercolor and occasional collaged elements such as news-magazine photos of Saddam Hussein and American Marines. Given the sophisticated technology employed in the fighting, there was a certain ironic aptness in Rios's use of such humble and ephemeral materials. Their nature and availability allowed him to respond quickly to events, creating a kind of artist's diary of the war. He could fashion a work of cardboard and watercolor in a fraction of the time it had taken him to make pieces of terra-cotta and steel, and he could do the work in New York, without traveling to Oaxaca. Intent on showing the war as a sort of geopolitical game played with human lives, Rios used his agile hands to transform the little-valued substances into works of art. Gradually, what had started as an instinctive reaction to a distant event began to change his whole working process.

At first, the Gulf War works seemed to herald a move away from Rios's long-standing focus on Latin America, but with hindsight it can be seen as a detour that led to a better place. In the works that followed, he returned to the subject of Latin America and made it explicit as never before. The recent works, tumbling out of his New York City studio one after the other in the kind of rapid-fire creation that often accompanies artistic self-discovery, can be neatly divided into two kinds, dealing with *kipus* and maps. The *kipu* is an ancient Andean

method of keeping numerical records in which knotted cord is used to represent precise quantities. Rios has adopted this counting system, which he had to laboriously teach himself from books, in works dealing with the history of Latin America.

The *kipu* pieces are not immediately accessible; you see a row of long vertical elements pinned to the wall as if waiting to be assembled, and you're not sure whether to read them from side to side, from top to bottom, or as a whole. To help contain the separate elements, and to make sure that they're placed at even intervals, Rios usually begins the *kipu* works by chalking a grid directly on the wall. He then hangs narrow strips of canvas that have been pleated so that they zigzag in and out from the wall. On these strips the artist stencils words and numbers to convey data he has gathered from all kinds of references sources, ranging from colonial censuses to current government surveys. Hanging in front of the canvas strips, whose projecting surfaces create a syncopated rhythm of light and shadow, are lengths of black cord whose straight verticals are broken at intervals by a variety of knots.

Early pieces in this series, which began in mid-1992, focused on specific Latin American countries, for example Peru. But a more recent work, completed in the summer of 1993 and first shown at the New Museum's "Trade Routes" exhibition this past fall, addressed the wider subject of the languages and religions of the Americas. Suitably for such a vast subject, the piece measured 178 by 235 inches. Against a chalk grid were hung more than 50 strips of pleated canvas of varying lengths. On the left side, in black stenciled letters, American countries and regions were listed; the vertical columns gave figures for the number of speakers of English, Spanish and French, the number of Catholics, Protestants, Jews, etc. The knotted black cords repeated the data of the stencils in the language of the *kipus*. Hidden near the top of the piece, almost impossible to read because of the folds, were indications of the population of the Americas in 1492.

In his *kipu* series, Rios translates information about the present into an indigenous language, illuminating Latin America's cultural past.

In works like these, Rios seems to be interested in how information can be displayed visually, but rather than simply designing graphs and charts, he creates occasions for the coexistence of contrasting languages. Thus we have the ancient Incan *kipus* alongside Arabic numerals. Information about the present is translated into an indige-

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Untitled, 1993, acrylic on canvas, polyester cord, chalk wall drawing, approx. 178 by 235 by 6 inches. Courtesy John Weber Gallery..