

clear nylon wires and dramatically lit, recreates a Caravaggio-like drama. However, this ghostly presence's allusion to a finer time is marred by a large, violent and ugly alteration to its back. Similarly, in *Rest* (2003), installed as a centerpiece in front of the gallery's main wall, a coffin-like steel box encases twelve burned, long-stem roses. Displayed chest high on a white pedestal, its height and location carefully considered, this charcoal-coated bouquet invites us to peer through glass, as if inspecting an artifact, at this commingling of beauty with death. The dark, cap-sulated issues of mortality and melancholia, which emerge from the deep sense of loss reflected in the destroyed tablecloth and burned roses, suggest the psychic death of an illusion.

For more than a decade, Ridgway has employed organic forms and domestic objects in her installations to address personal and social issues. Although the use of manufactured objects heavily influences this exhibition, the artist includes a bronzed, leafless bush with three plastic leaves attached to the tips of its branches. *Without a Cloud* (2003) metaphorically reflects these works' changes from the natural to the artificial, while obliquely referring to our global ecology's sad state. Fastened to the wall at eye level, this barren shrub devoid of nature's blooms subtly yet revealingly comments on beauty's constant companionship with death.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, Ridgway's attention turns to diagrams and patterns manufactured by the arts and craft industry. Using illustrations from a text on the Japanese floral arranging technique called "Ikebana," she ignores the directions provided, instead interpreting the line drawings of several stilted arrangements to create five sculptures, which she pins to the wall following the proportion and placement of each diagram.

Ridgway's selection and installation investigates the purpose of Ikebana, which originally guided priests preparing floral arrangements as offerings to the gods. Centuries later the stems and branches of each floral arrangement symbolically reflected the philosophy of Confucian teachings. The text from which Ridgway works was printed in English and published in Japan around 1955, and suggests

that creating these beautiful arrangements brings peace of mind. However, this marketed philosophy encourages conformity rather than originality and autonomy.

Ridgway's deconstruction of formulaic flower arranging undermines dangers similar to those she sees in the manufactured patterns of crochet, a craft that she turns into a viable form for metaphor. Her banner-like bronzed reliefs supplant mass-produced blueprints with words like *Quiet* (2003) and *Order* (2003). Still, the feminine re-emerges, suggesting both celebration and repression, and making these works the most ironic in the show. The many interpretive layers of Ridgway's subtle meanings always can be unraveled further. Disturbing at first, these achingly beautiful works transform the displaced, thus revealing the harsh ironies of our own desires. (Who so brilliantly said, "Americans can't make a decent radio but we're great at creating desire"?)

## SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

By Anjali Gupta

"Distance Education" (Cactus Bra Space, February 6—March 21, 2004) establishes **EILEEN MAXSON** as the thinking man's Alex Bagg. Like Ms Bagg, this Houston-based multimedia artist often turns the video camera on herself, adopting different personae at will. However, Maxson addresses notions of self, place and context with equal finesse—a holistic, theoretical approach absent from the work of many young video artists. The video element of "Distance Education" extends an extant sentiment rather than forming the installation's static conceptual fulcrum. Like its title, the piece is a visual oxymoron that playfully subverts learned notions of spatial and intellectual propriety.

Maxson's installation transforms Cactus Bra's tiny gallery into a production set, a sterile locale befitting a taping of the pervasive infomercial or, in this case, a distance learning program. The artist creates this functional illusion particularly adroitly. Faux books and bookcases, a podium and stage-like lighting reinforce her ruse, each prop appearing useful at first.



Eileen Maxson, *Distance Education*, 2004, mixed media installation (courtesy Cactus Bra).

Upon closer inspection, Maxson's props are hollow, her encyclopedic volumes mute blocks dressed in well-designed slipcovers, her podium an obtrusive, non-functional placeholder.

Most interesting, however, is Maxson's omnipotent use of visual control mechanisms to establish a very physical distance between object and audience. Gray barricades at the gallery entrance initially read like roadblocks, stopping visitors in their tracks. Yellow gaffer's tape bounds the stage upon which the bookcases and podium stand, rendering them seemingly off limits, though bookcases traditionally invite close examination. The podium and a bench also obscure examination of the bookcases from a distance, making the viewer want to cross the tape despite its cautionary purpose. This psychological push and pull forms a calculated, mixed bag of conflicting behavioral directives—involuntary and voluntary—that mimic the bureaucratic red tape so prevalent in all institutions.

Here, "distance" is obviously presented as problematic. Maxson's tangled signifiers and cheap yet effective aesthetic confuse the physical separation posed by her visual cues and the intellectual distance spurred by forced spectatorship. Those who traverse Maxson's artificial boundaries discover that her encyclopedic volumes are movie titles on laser-printed, slip-off book covers, arranged merely by color and sleeve design.

Monitors hang from the ceiling at stage left and right; on the left, a static shot of the bookcase mimics a live feed (a gimmick only revealed to those who ignore the gaffer's tape and ascend the stage). On the second monitor, Maxson, dressed in impeccable teacher drag as the meek "Professor Catherine Poplar," delivers a lecture entitled "Existentialism and Stephen King: The Artist's Role in Society, According to 'The Shawshank Redemption', 1994. Directed by Frank Darabont; 142 Minutes/Rated R" to a silent audience. Her monotonous delivery, coupled with intentionally cheesy, low budget cutaways, lend this absurd topic a typical sense of academic distance—as separate from day-to-day reality as any standard, upper division class on Postmodernism or Film Theory. At certain moments, however, the sound of the video drops out, efficiently rendering the lecture impotent. Our professor soon gives up in frustration, but the evidence of her communicative failure loops incessantly.

In this subtle yet calculated parody, Maxson advances a rather dystopic view of the information age, characterizing intellectual distance as the root of misinformation and, when combined with physical separation, a recipe for potential disaster. Her methodical, sparing use of video avoids blatant comedic gesture—conceptual ventriloquism at its finest.