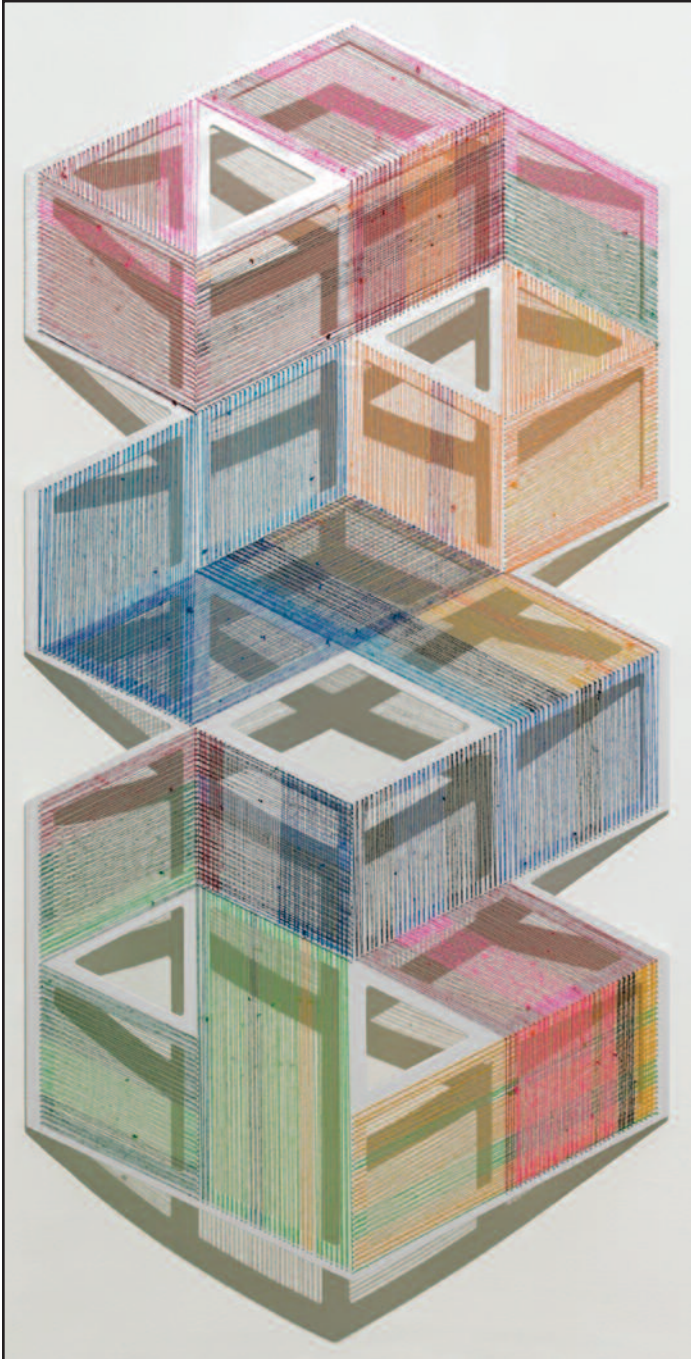


Identity In Cloth

A d r i a n E s p a r z a

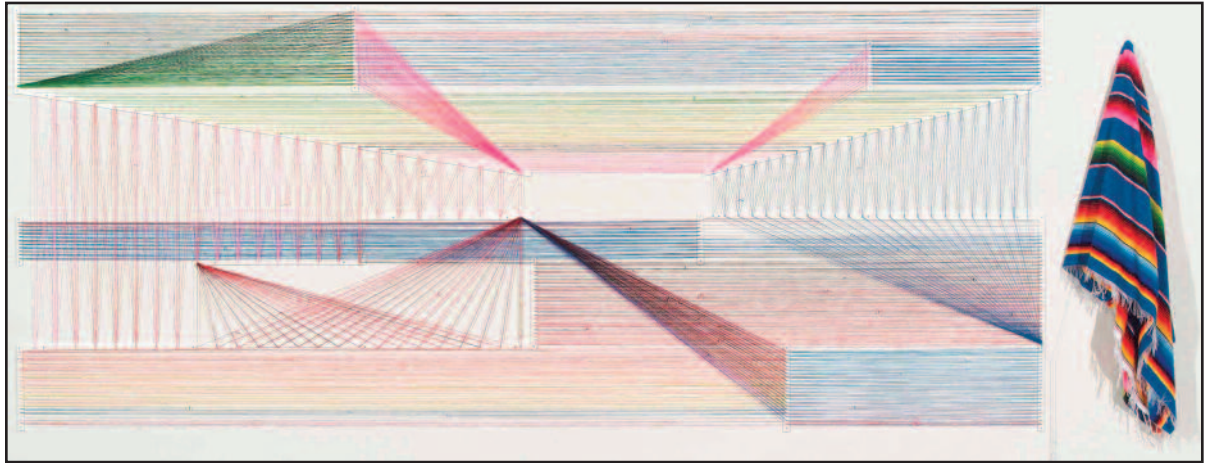
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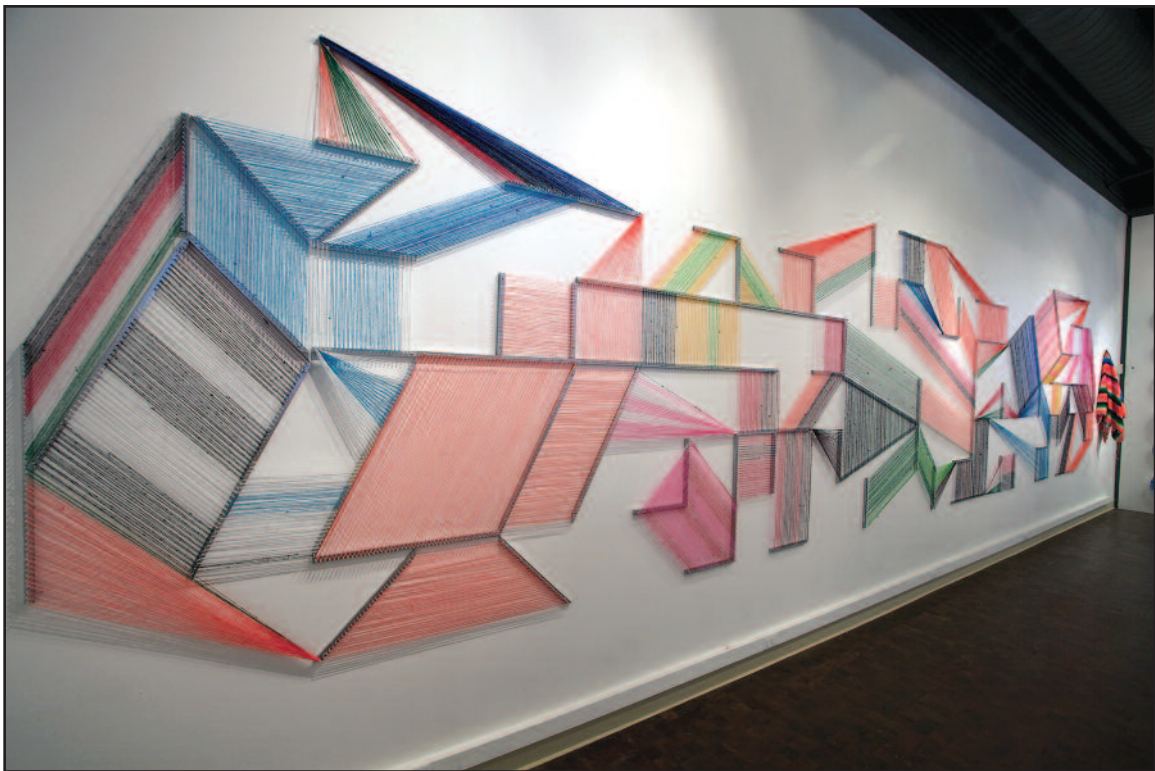
Clothing constitutes a significant part of material culture in the development of identity and personhood.

It has been used throughout history to differentiate oneself and to physically express cultural rituals, identities, and relationships within a society. The relationship between identity and material culture suggests that things embody cultural ideas through methods of production, experience, exchange, and consumption. Identities are created by the continuous exchange between people and things.

In the unraveling of a cultural icon, an object of material culture can shape the identity and personhood of an individual and a culture. Contemporary artist Adrian Esparza intricately weaves the threads of his identity within the deconstructed warp and weft of the blanket-like *sarape* and geometric patterns on a wall.



ADRIAN ESPARZA *One and the Same* Deconstructed sarape textile, wood, nails, 60" x 140", 2005.
Collection of El Paso Museum of Art. Photo: Marty Snortum.



ADRIAN ESPARZA *Before and After* Deconstructed sarape textile, wood, nails, 72" x 360", 2010. Photo by the artist.

ADRIAN ESPARZA *Superstructure* Deconstructed sarape textile, wood, nails, enamel, 88" x 44", 2013.
Collection of Jorge and Darlene Perez. Photo: Marty Snortum.

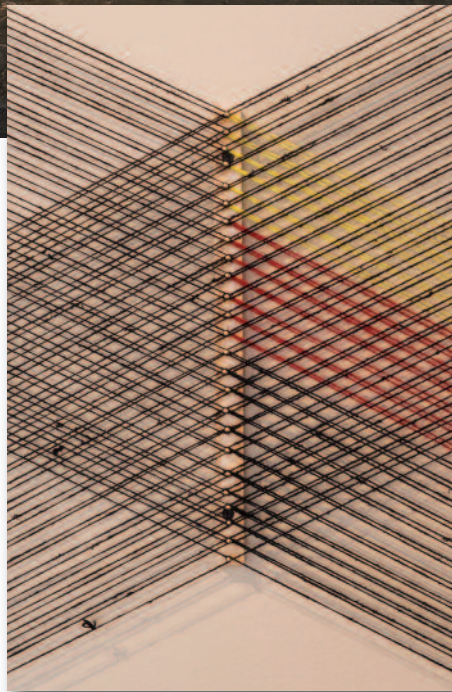
All images shown courtesy of the artist and taubert contemporary, Berlin.



ADRIAN ESPARZA *Spectra* Deconstructed sarape textile, wood, nails, bamboo furniture, dimensions variable, 2014. Details *INSET* and *FAR RIGHT*. Courtesy of Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, Houston, TX. Photos: Logan Beck.

The sarape finds its origins in the colonial relationship between Mexico and Spain. Horizontal looms and dyeing techniques were introduced by the Spaniards and adopted by the native inhabitants of Mexico. The northern weaving center in the Saltillo region was influential in the spread of the traditional design of the sarape, which consists of two panels sewn together in the center with mirrored designs on the front and back.¹ From the beginning of Spanish colonialism, clothing came to be understood as a signifier of social standing and a symbol of power. Skin color was not always an immediate distinction of class, and clothing became the substitute. From its inception, clothing is established as a material marker of identity construction in society.

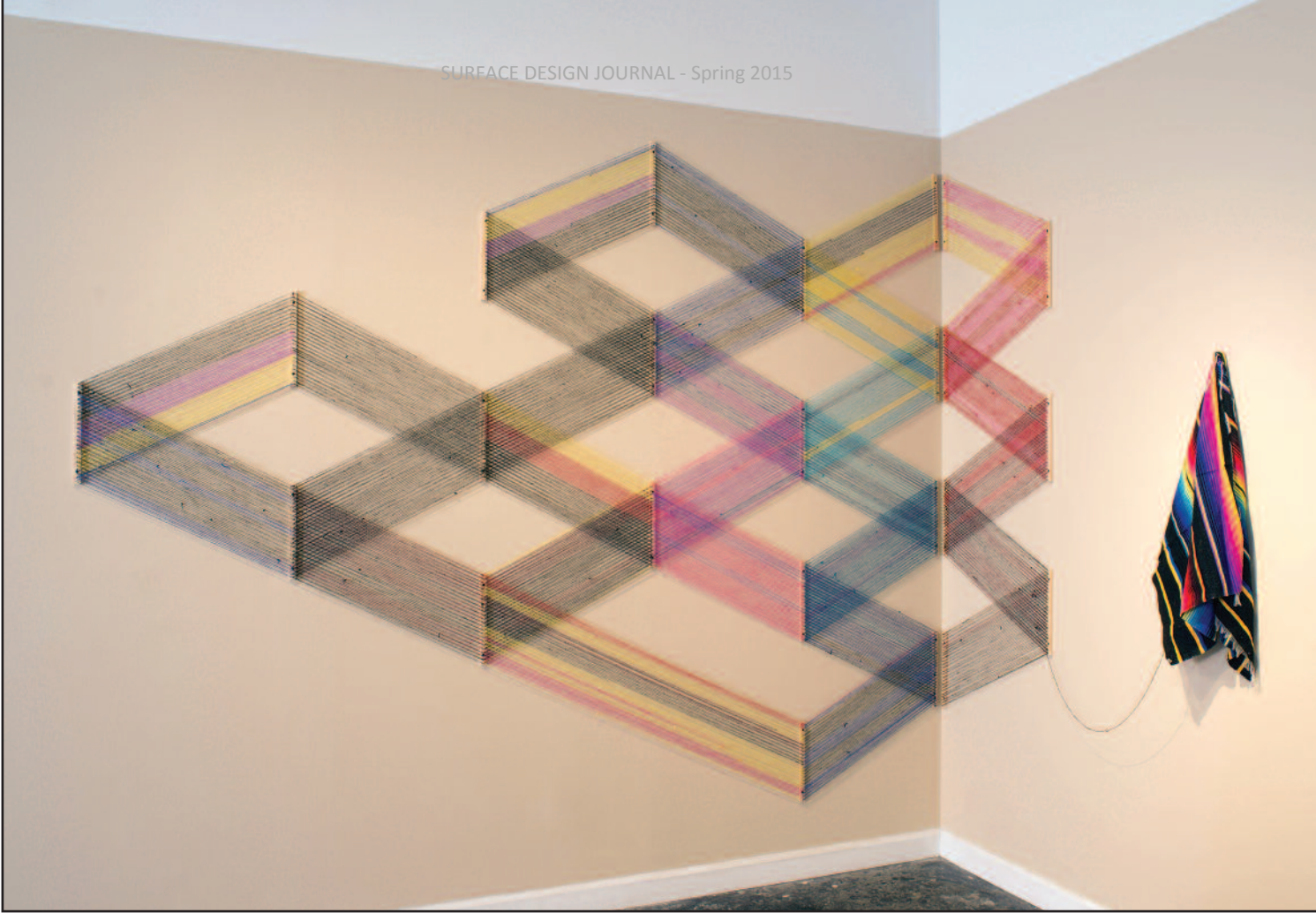
Esparza's work straddles the line between material culture studies and contemporary art. The physical act of unraveling the sarape once again releases the medium from the confines of the loom in the tradition of fiber artists from the 1960s and '70s.² The act of deconstruct-



tion represents the cross-cultural language of living in a border town where inhabitants are both bi-cultural and multi-lingual. A symbol of Mexican heritage, the sarape is taken apart and reassembled into an amalgamation of these two countries, becoming

cultural assimilation in physical form. The transformation of the sarape becomes a "kind of self-portrait" for the artist, representing a hybrid spoken language.

Esparza grew up in the border town of El Paso, Texas, influenced by the dual cultures of Mexico and the United States. His family speaks Spanish but he is not fluent in the language. He experienced a loss of culture, and this loss is transformed into a visual language of diffused color and materials, divided and expanded through obtuse and acute angles, representing both ends of the spectrum of cultural assimila-



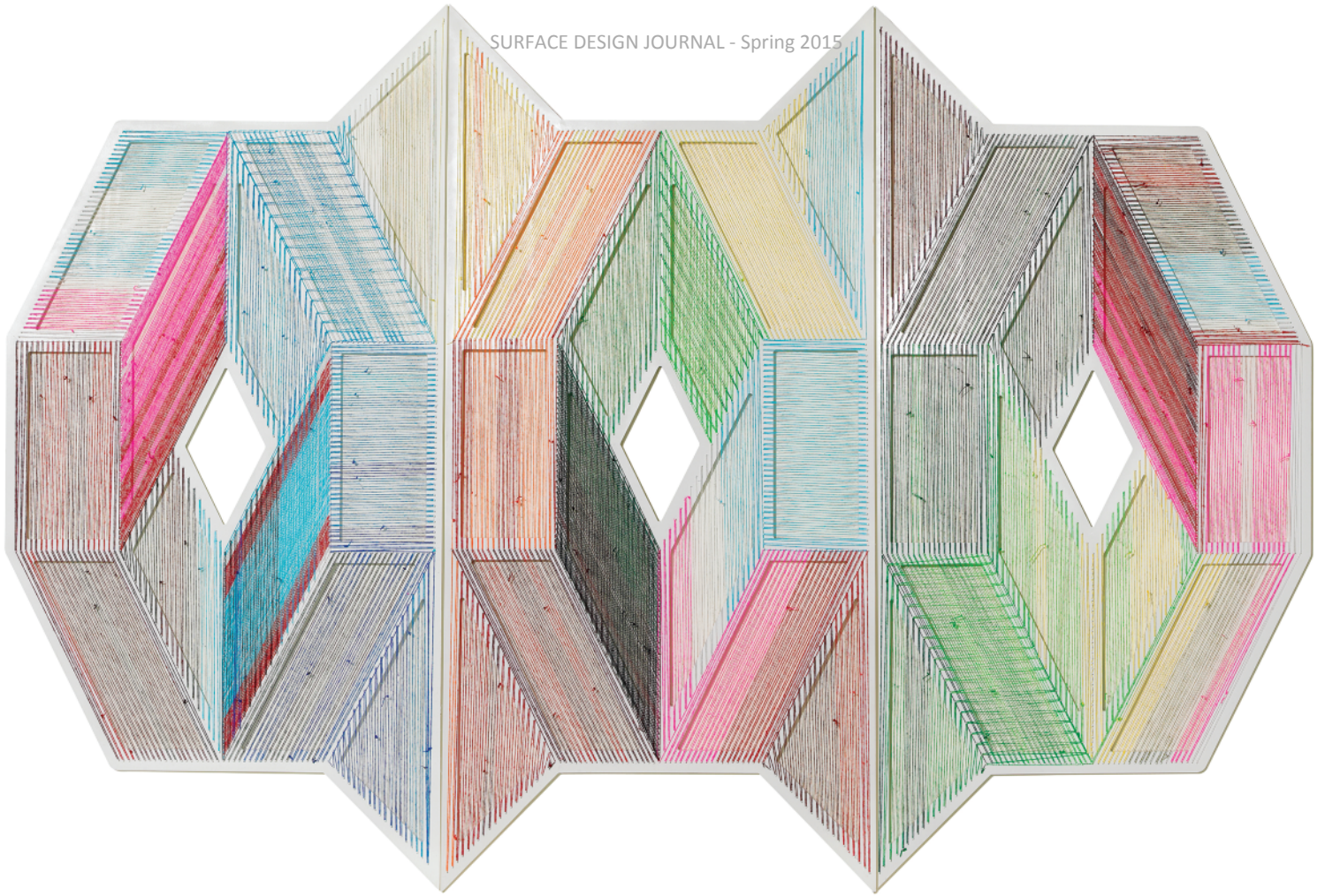
tion. The deconstruction of the sarape calls into question our perceptions of the border, both physical and psychological. The garment has gone through the process of accumulation (or evolution of meaning and purpose for an object) on its life journey—from everyday object, ritual talisman, tourist souvenir, artifact, and art.

As a child of the 1970s, Esparza was influenced by the home hobby crafts and materials that were popular at the time. His mother and grandmother influenced his creativity through their interests in macramé and sewing. Esparza received his BFA (1996) from the University of Texas at El Paso and his MFA (1998) from the California Institute of the Arts. His artistic process began with the influences of craft and evolved into the practice of painting. Having come full circle in his conceptual thought, his sarape pieces began through the process of unraveling. This unraveling process calls into question the purpose and thoughts behind the act of painting, while simultaneously referring back to the origins of craft and the importance of everyday objects.

Esparza developed intimate knowledge of use and reuse during his childhood. "Growing up I remember objects being used again and again, broken objects being restored, and the simplest object becoming valuable. So I return to the found object and attempt to reestablish a kind of lost value."³ Esparza stresses that he objects to the deconstruction of sarapes made by hand on the loom. He places value on the artisan maker and, through his artistic practice, attempts to restore their importance in society.

The artist was not necessarily influenced by traditional Mexican weaving techniques. For him, the making process came from hours spent in fabric stores looking at fashion patterns in books. He recalls family members selecting fabrics and then being put to task to make the clothes. The clothing construction relates directly to his installations through the patterning process. The deconstruction of the sarape is broken down into basic elements of pattern design.

Esparza takes the unwoven cotton yarn and weaves it through nails affixed to



ABOVE: ADRIAN ESPARZA *Sky Sign*

Deconstructed sarape textile, wood, nails, enamel, 84" x 130" (3-part), 2014.

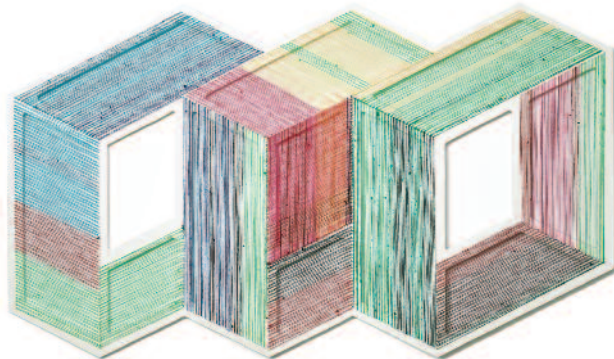
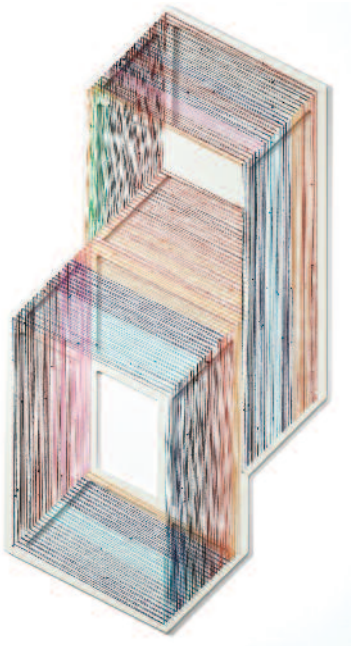
LEFT: ADRIAN ESPARZA *Glass House 3*

Deconstructed sarape textile, wood, nails, enamel, 82.2" x 42", 2014.

BELOW: ADRIAN ESPARZA *Glass House 5*

Deconstructed sarape textile, wood, nails, enamel, 42.3" x 71.7", 2014

All shown courtesy of taubert contemporary, Berlin.



The act of unraveling is at the center of his installations, as are the ideas of deconstructing and analyzing cultural symbols.

the wall in patterns reminiscent of geometric abstract paintings. The process of unwinding and reassembling is arbitrary; emphasis is placed on the final design. Esparza has learned to trust the beauty of random colors and the elements of surprise. The constructed lines reference both color field paintings and the southwestern landscape with its expansive sky. To explore formal elements of design and visual perspectives, he creates vanishing points and optical illusions. The linear aspects also relate to his preference for drawing and diagrams. By including the remnants of the unwoven sarape in his installation, Esparza references the sociopolitical changes that have occurred along the US/Mexico border.

A hierarchy does not exist for Esparza in regards to process vs. content. The act of unraveling is at the center of his installations, as are the ideas of deconstructing and analyzing cultural symbols. This has now become both his medium and artistic signature. His main purpose is to reinvent the work at each new installation, to push personal and physical boundaries. The references of craft, art, and art history validate his choices; however, the placement of his work within the system or the canon of art is no longer important.

For Esparza, the sculptural evolution of his creative practice seemed the most logical point of departure and the next step in the making process. He has moved away from the wall and into the construction of objects and the continuation of repurposed materials. This departure also refers back to art history: the minimalist approach to flat canvas and the act of stripping everything down. *Superstructure* (2013) exhibits the beginnings of the three-dimensional transformation. The white frame extends off the wall to further accentuate the optical illusions of the form. Previous titled works, such as *One and the Same* (2005), *Before and After* (2010), and *Now and Then* (2010), are a literal translation of the physical changes that occur in deconstructing the sarape. His 2014 solo exhibition *Spectra* at Houston Center for Contemporary Craft was influenced by the city's urban landscape and sprawl. From canvas to wall and wall to object, the work evolved from a more narrative approach.

Looking to the future, Esparza does not want his pieces to exist solely as illustrations of a concept. He wants to maintain an "unknown quality"—the mystery or surprise that occurs

from unraveling. A lack of control keeps the process fresh and enriching for him. It is also becoming increasingly more difficult to find sarapes manufactured in Mexico. The most readily available source comes from India, introducing an additional transformation of the object. The symbolism behind the sarape has become more important than its origins, location, and maker. Upon close scrutiny, one can immediately recognize the overseas production reflected in new designs reminiscent of Eastern cultural influences, including color, quality, and thickness of yarn.

Esparza suggests that people are fascinated by his work because it can expand in so many different directions. When exhibiting internationally, he has now become removed from the process much in the way that mass production has removed the craftsmanship from the traditional sarape. He can email plans and have others execute installations, similar to the site-specific works of Sol LeWitt that are interpreted and executed from his written diagrams and instructions. This new form of remote execution alters the process and the presence of the artist's hand. It becomes a new ritual, related to the traditions of weaving and the unweaving of a textile. From canvas to object, two-dimensionality to physical form, Esparza is a thoughtful practitioner of how our lives and identity are shaped by objects and how, in turn, objects are shaped by our lives. The rebirth of the sarape into infinite geometric patterns represents the identity of an individual and a culture, both of which are bound up in the remnants of the woven cloth.

¹Haughey, E. 2013. "A History and Conservation of the Saltillo Serape." *LOGOS: A Journal Of Undergraduate Research*: Missouri State University. 18-19.

²Auther, E. 2010. *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Life*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis. xxi.

³Gonzalez, R. 2007. "Interview with Adrian Esparza." www.glasstire.com

Adrian Esparza is represented by Cindy Rucker Gallery, New York, www.cindyruckergallery.com; and taubert contemporary, Berlin, www.taubertcontemporary.com.

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