

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Painted Dirt and Folded Canvas: Elena del Rivero's 'Letter from Home'

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Installation View of "Letter From Home" (2015). From Left: "Letter from Home in Cobalt" (2014), oil and dirt on primed canvas, 72 x 72 inches. "Letter from Home in Turquoise Cobalt" (2014), oil and dirt on primed canvas with thread, 72 x 72 inches (courtesy Josée Bienvenu Gallery)

As one enters Elena del Rivero's exhibition, *Letter from Home*: a rendez-vous at the Josee Bienvenu Gallery (April 16 – May 23, 2015), three 72-by-72 inch canvases hang in folds, like towels on hooks, on the center wall. These primed canvases (all entitled "Letter from Home," with differing subtitles), stretched and then removed from their frames, suggest warmth, intimacy, and domesticity.

Up close, they are noticeably dirty, smudged, and frayed. Dirt is listed as a component of the work along with oil paint. It is in smudges and stains as well as in broad, painted swaths often ending unevenly at the border: the slightly darker, off-white, shadowy tone melds and toys with the actual shadows from the folds on the cloth. With their painted dirt, the unframed "Letters" reach beyond the personal or anecdotal (the morning coffee stain or spill over dinner with friends), as they locate art as dirty, quotidian, and stitched up with everyday life. These are not the clean, impersonal, separate, and pristine objects of the modern art gallery or museum.

What kind of paint is dirt? What kind of dirt is paint? Through del Rivero's work, the conventional distinction between the two seems artificial and pretentious — but also beside the point. Whereas her past work — particularly her 2001 show [Swi:t] Home: one year of my life and [Swi:t] Home: A Chant 2001-2006 — inscribed the accidents and effects of life into her art, this work introduces dirt as an intentional mark in an exploration not of paper (as in much of her past work), but of canvas and oil paint.



Elena del Rivero, "Letter from Home in Ultramarine (detail)" (2014), oil and dirt on primed canvas with thread, 72 x 72 inches

In their title, appearance, and mode of display, the canvas paintings clearly call upon del Rivero's extensive work with the concept of letters — a term she has explored since her original 1992 series *Letters to the Mother*, written just after she moved from her home country of Spain to New York, where she continues to live.

More specifically, these works expand upon her 2001 exhibit [Swi:t] Home. There are two pieces from that exhibition here, both updated. The colon substituting for a missing letter in the title locates an absence, foreignness, and ambiguity.

The original project took place over the course of one year, beginning in July 2000. For the first six months, del Rivero placed twenty large pieces of handmade abaca paper (an especially strong, skin-like surface) on her apartment floor, her bed, and also (for a shorter time) outside her apartment. They recorded her footprints and other bodily impressions over time. During the second six months, she prepared the sheets for installation with various sewing techniques, including an elaborate, scalloped stitch (associated with feminine ornamentation and likely women's work at the time) that dates back to medieval techniques of repairing vellum.

Del Rivero then sewed four sheets together into one large rectangular-shaped piece entitled "Dishcloth" (2001), owing to the strength and endurance of the paper, as well as the dirt it absorbed. The five dishcloths resulting from this process were hung from the ceilings of the exhibit hall. The installation encompassed "one year of my life," and del Rivero included other relics of her life from that period, such as maps framed and hung on the wall, a personal "reference library," including an expense ledger, and in the center a "nest" made up of unused paper. This show introduced viewers to the textures and materials of del Rivero's personal life, in a gesture that suggested autobiography, even though the information it presented was not specifically anecdotal.



Elena del Rivero, "[Swi:t] Home discloth" 2001, stitches and mending on handmade and dirtied abaca paper with watermark, 77 x 117 inches

From the original 2001 exhibition, one of the original dishcloths and a smaller, unfinished one (completed for this exhibition) appear alongside these new works. The smaller work, a drawing on paper (Japanese Nishinouchi rather than Abaca) entitled "Letter from Home, RED\_3" (2001-2015), hangs to the right of the gallery entrance. Del Rivero has sewn a red border of two parallel lines, one thicker than the other, on the outside of this drawing. The piece includes strips of paper sewn on each edge with lines of not-quite-legible text written in black ink. Here writing plays a significant part: in her new works,

small pieces of writing can be found on the backs of the canvases, visible where they fold, but only on close examination. We see in these works del Rivero's shift in the concept of a letter: she focuses increasingly on the object itself rather than on the actual writing.



Elena del Rivero, "Letter from Home in Ultramarine" 2014, Oil and dirt on primed canvas with thread, 72 x 72 inches

These older works attest to the resiliency of objects (and demonstrate the visible process of reparation and preservation) but they also show how uncontrollable forces and new contexts alter them. The objects themselves have survived another kind of destruction and restoration since they were originally shown: the falling towers on September 11, 2001, broke the windows of del Rivero's studio — just across the street from the World Trade Center — and covered all of her work with a layer of dust and debris. Although del Rivero afterwards cleaned and restored them, the dust and dirt they now hold is likely very different from the original dust from the apartment that del Rivero has long since ceased to occupy.

The "[Swi:t] Home Dishcloth" (2001) is here shown flat on the wall rather than hung from the ceiling. In fact, del Rivero's new pieces, hanging from one corner on nails, refer more directly to the original hanging "Dishcloths." The flat position on the wall is more conventional, but it also reveals the work of restoration more distinctly. White helter-skelter stitches, applied between the vertical and

horizontal red lines along the borders, as well as between the red line and paper's edge, make the surface of the paper into a texture resembling cloth. Repairs and ornaments turn this abject, stepped on, dirtied "dishrag," subject to the chance spills of everyday life, into a feminine embroidery project.

The red stitching highlights the rectangular lines, frames, and borders, but the paper does not lie perfectly flat; the surface bears slight creases and undulations throughout, but especially towards the center, where more repair work is evident. Hanging the work in such a conventional mode reveals the power, intimacy, and immediacy of its handworked, tenaciously repaired surface.

The pairing of new and old work reveals the many reversals of media and convention that del Rivero enacts. If the newer work takes a canvas out of its traditional frame and turns it into origami-like folded paper, the older work takes the position of a painting.



Elena del Rivero, "[Swi:t] Home discloth" 2001, stitches and mending on handmade and dirtied abaca paper with watermark, 77 x 117 inches, Detail

Four smaller works on accounting paper hang on the back wall of the gallery near the office. In blue watercolor, geometrical figures (such as a grid of filled-in circles, rectangles, perpendicular lines) are traced over the gridded paper; around these patterns, del Rivero has sewn white circles (which require close attention in person even to see), and in "Letter from Home #6," the sewing needle itself dangles from its final top center stitch.

These works gesture toward the books and accounting materials included in the original show, but without any specific reference to the personal, as if the materials associated with feminine domesticity diverge from any particular account of such a life.

The show intervenes not by way of content (as has been the case with many of del Rivero's other series, *[Swi:t] Home* included) but through form, specifically the conventions of painting: by making dirt into paint, paint into stitches, and canvas into a majestic hanging fabric, the artist creates a new formal register for paintings as material. Del Rivero turns a painting into a three-dimensional object, and in so doing makes a claim for craft as fine art and fine art as a work of craft arising from within the domestic, feminized space of the kitchen.