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Art in America

Teresa Baker's Brightly-Painted AstroTurf Wall Pieces Honor the "Beautiful Open Spaces" of Her Youth Spent on the Northern Plains

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Teresa Baker, *Wheeling Way*, 2022. Courtesy de boer, Los Angeles

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“I was always searching for the right material,” Teresa Baker said during a recent visit to her studio, located below a dentist’s office in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Highland Park. She found it in an unconventional resource: AstroTurf.

For someone well-accustomed to actual grass, AstroTurf was especially unusual. Baker was born in North Dakota and grew up in the Midwest, where her father worked for the National Park Service. This took the artist, who is of Mandan and Hidatsa descent and an enrolled member of the Three Affiliated Tribes, to what she called “beautiful open spaces” and glorious parks that felt “like my backyard.” Her discovery of AstroTurf owes largely to circumstance. After living in New York and then San Francisco, she joined her husband in Beaumont, Texas, where art supply stores are scarce, around 2015. Wandering around Home Depot one day a couple years later, she “came across this bright blue AstroTurf and was blown away. It felt really alien—it’s not something I grew up with.” She took a piece home to experiment with, and quickly realized it was sturdy enough to hold the unconventional shapes she had been visualizing. She wanted to work against the boundaries that traditional canvases present, creating more fluidity in a process that invites slight imperfections.



Teresa Baker, *Missouri River*, 2022

Baker, whose work is currently on view in group shows at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas and the Ucross Art Gallery in Wyoming, now typically uses white AstroTurf, dividing it into color-blocked sections with acrylic and spray paint. She then arranges vibrantly colored yarn atop the AstroTurf, before gluing it down and hand-sewing each piece so the thread is barely visible. Though she works in mixed media,

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Baker sees her art as based not so much in textile or assemblage as in painting, each strand of yarn akin to a pencil mark. “Abstraction forms its own language that leaves questions and some open-endedness,” she said. At the same time, she relates her work to landscapes and “the feeling of being in the vast expanses of the Northern Plains. Land is a place where culture is.”

Since 2018, Baker has introduced a new kind of tension to her art by incorporating into the synthetic materials organic ones that are traditional to the Mandan and Hidatsa people, like buckskin, willow, buffalo hide, and parfleche. “I had to make sure I knew why and how I was using them, because they have a history of how they were used,” she said. “I was raised with a lot of pride in who I am. Caring for culture means carrying forward these traditions. One thing I’ve always thought about, and especially since having a son, is: How do I carry forward those traditions while living in urban environments?”