

Doug Hall: *Piacenza Opera House*

Doug Hall brings his singular vision to the tapestry medium in *Piacenza Opera House*, his 2006 collaboration with Magnolia Editions. Based on a series of C-prints of the Teatro Municipale in Piacenza, Italy, *Piacenza Opera House* represents an exciting foray into the world of textiles for Hall and a coup for the Magnolia Tapestry Project: the work's arresting presence attests to the medium's capacity to translate even the most detailed of sources into unique new forms.

Hall's ongoing inquiry into the relationship between spectacle, seeing, and space can be traced back to his pioneering video and performance work of the 1970s and 80s, both individually and as a founding member of the multimedia art collective T.R. Uthco.

In the late 1980s Hall began focusing on large-scale photography, both as a means to critically document the way that spaces and visual structure organize and define human activity, and in order to remove the predetermined temporality of video from his audience's experience of the work.

Using digital technology to generate a resolution and focal depth beyond the limitations of the human eye, Hall pushes his photographs past the realm of literal description, ushering the viewer into an allegorical space in which the act of seeing itself comes under scrutiny. In the case of *Piacenza*, the artist overexposed the negative to achieve the deepest possible shadows, which in a conventional print would sacrifice detail in the highlights – but by scanning the negative and using digital techniques, Hall was able to achieve remarkable brightness and scale without any of the traditional loss of detail or sharpness. “*The picture contains so many things you could never have seen with your naked eye,*” Hall explains in a 2003 interview, “*allowing the image to insinuate itself into one's unconscious.*”

Hall's deliberate manipulation of perspective in *Piacenza* is at the heart of its allegorical significance. Single-point perspective has traditionally accompanied a historical, anthropocentric conception of the world as a logical, rational panorama, compliant and static, unfolding before the viewer. This model has been critically evaluated throughout much of the last century, as Foucault, Benjamin, and the Frankfurt school sought to reveal the hierarchies and power structures encoded in the spectacles of global commerce and tourism.



Doug Hall, *Piacenza Opera House*, 2006 · Jacquard Tapestry, 78 x 96 in. Edition of 9

Hall's photographs address this same issue – the shaping of space by power into a controlled arena for spectacle and surveillance. *Piacenza*, then, is both a literal theater and an allegorical representation of a greater cultural phenomenon. Hall's camera positions the viewer onstage such that the theater's space unfolds before the eye, each arc and line aligned perfectly and opening out into a panoply of impossible detail, as if the discourse of spectacular power had wrought its ideal in three dimensions: the opera house as panopticon, the viewer granted invisible omniscience. By giving us a spectacular view from the stage, Hall underscores the reciprocal nature of surveillance, inviting the viewer to consider his or her dual role as both performer and observer.

But the physicality of *Piacenza* supercedes its intellectual considerations. Hall's images provide an undeniable visual pleasure; their engineered beauty and grand scale lend them a distinctive aura that transcends cerebral interpretation. The somatic engagement that his work invites has been intensified by its translation into tapestry: the sheer presence of *Piacenza* transforms the space in which it is displayed and confronts the viewer physically. The edition was woven using a custom palette incorporating five hundred colors to capture the full spectrum of Hall's image, from the rhythmic gradation of shadows in the receding seats to the glow emanating from the theater's gilded ceiling. Visually and conceptually rich, *Piacenza's* near-limitless detail and layers of meaning offer a unique sensory experience. ■