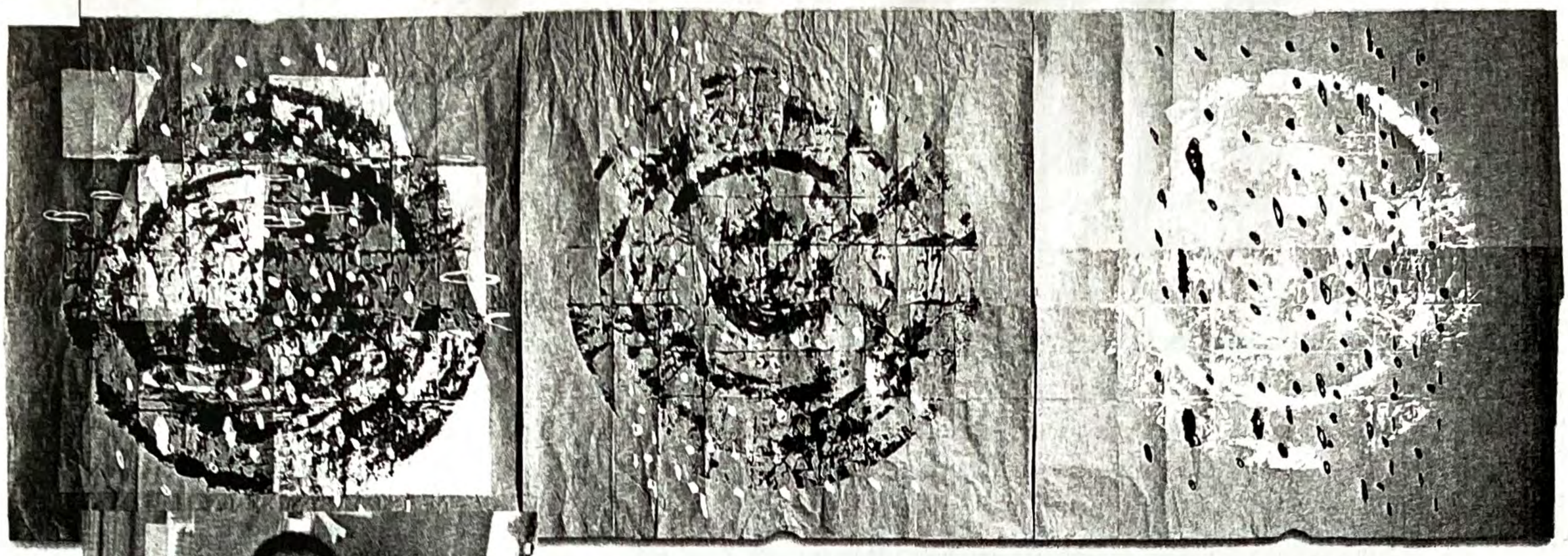
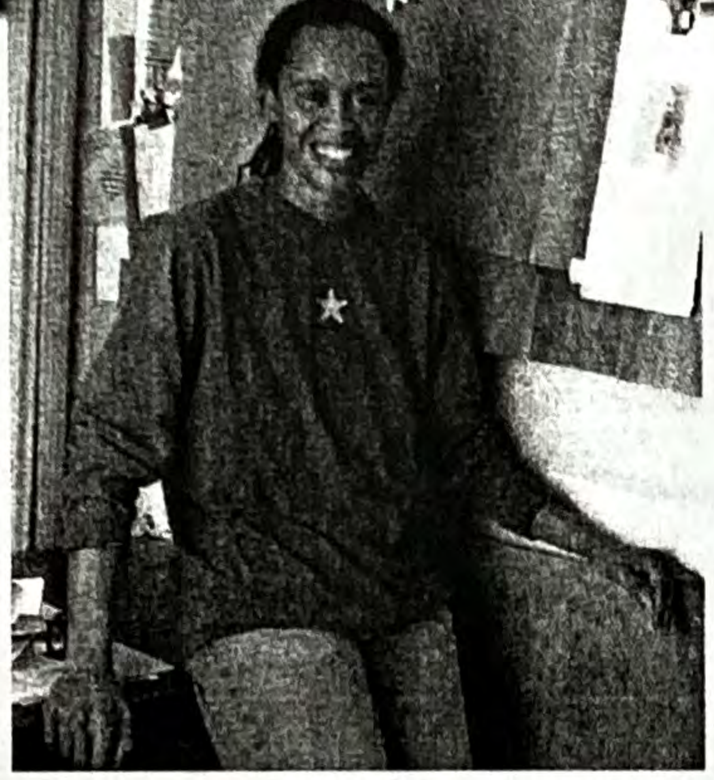




LEFT: Artist Annette Lawrence, shown in her home studio, teaches at UNT.

UNRAVELING THE ARTIST

The enigmatic art of Annette Lawrence connects to her past

by Steve Carter | photos by John Smith

Annette Lawrence, an artist who's equally comfortable drawing, painting, sculpting or creating an installation, is reluctant to single out one medium as a favorite mode of expression. "Well, there's just a few materials … brown paper, acrylic paint; black, white, indigo and iron-oxide red specifically," she answers. "And string, packing tape, and Velcro.

"Those are just a few things I actually use."

Missing from the list, however, is one key element, an essential clue to understanding the scope and thematic nexus of her work: time.

Whether she's chronicling her childhood music lessons in "Piano," a recent exhibit at Dallas' Dunn and Brown Contemporary; tracing her ancestors in "Lineage," a series of 13 drawings; or creating a string sculpture installation in a gallery, university or abandoned row house; there's a poignant evanescence of temporality that connects the dots of Lawrence's art.

"I think it's what we have, you know?" Lawrence suggests. "That's pretty much it, so I'm really interested in how that is recorded, and the way that stories are told, what stories get told, and what's an important enough story to tell. And having real small things that are regular occurrences, and observing those things seems to me to be a worthwhile thing to do," she says, echoing the metaphysics of Blake's "to see a world in a grain of sand."

A native New Yorker, Lawrence discovered art when she took a drawing class at age 12. "I just liked the activity, enough to commit to it," she recalls. "In that class, I said, 'this is what I want to do,' and that was it. I've done it ever since."

After high school, she completed her bachelor's of fine arts degree in sculpture at the University of Hartford in Connecticut; she earned her master's of fine arts, in painting, at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Having lived on the East Coast her whole life, the artist was ready for a warm climate, a change of scenery, and thought it might be nice to be near Mexico. She had heard Austin's praises sung by students she had known in graduate school, so she made it her first destination.

Within a few months, job opportunities called her to Houston. Adjunct teaching at the University of Houston and Houston Community College kept her busy, but she was able to maintain a studio practice and exhibit regularly. In 1993 and 1994 she was a Core Fellow at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts Glassell School of Art, a nationally acclaimed Artist-in-Residence program.

After five and a half years in Houston, she moved to Denton and the University of North Texas' studio arts faculty in 1996. Soft-spoken and articulate, teaching painting and drawing agrees with her, as does "the opportunity to talk about art all day."

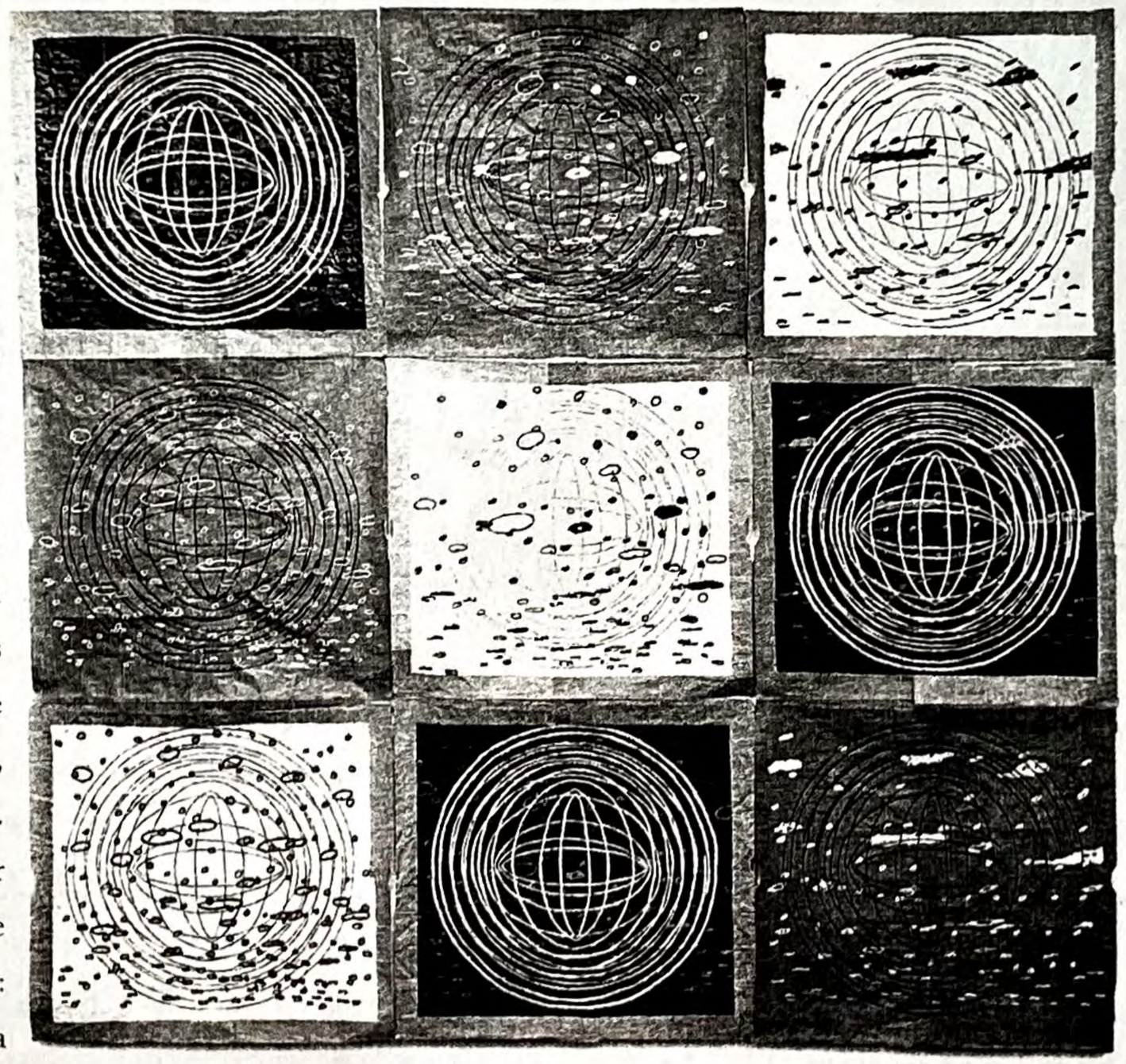
Earlier this year, Dunn and Brown Contemporary in Dallas presented "Piano," a one-person exhibition of Lawrence's recent paintings and drawings. The genesis of the series is rooted in the artist's childhood, specifically her seventh year, when she was subjected to eight months of piano lessons.

"I didn't like the lessons, I didn't find it satisfying musically," she remembers. "There was a real disconnection between the written part and the reading and the technical stuff that didn't connect to sound; there wasn't any listening involved, it wasn't emphasized."

Lawrence had been mulling over the idea of a large-scale project which involved musical notation as a visual language, and had been searching for manuscripts of John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk, but without success. While visiting her parents, she found the inspiration she needed: her piano lesson book, a musical journal from her childhood. "It had been in my parents' piano bench for almost 30 years. It made sense to me — it was my own handwriting, at the age of 7, and it was music notation...The printed version of a score, to me, doesn't feel very musical. But handwriting has a different feeling altogether, more of a lyrical, visual presence. It was like one of those moments — 'eureka!' "

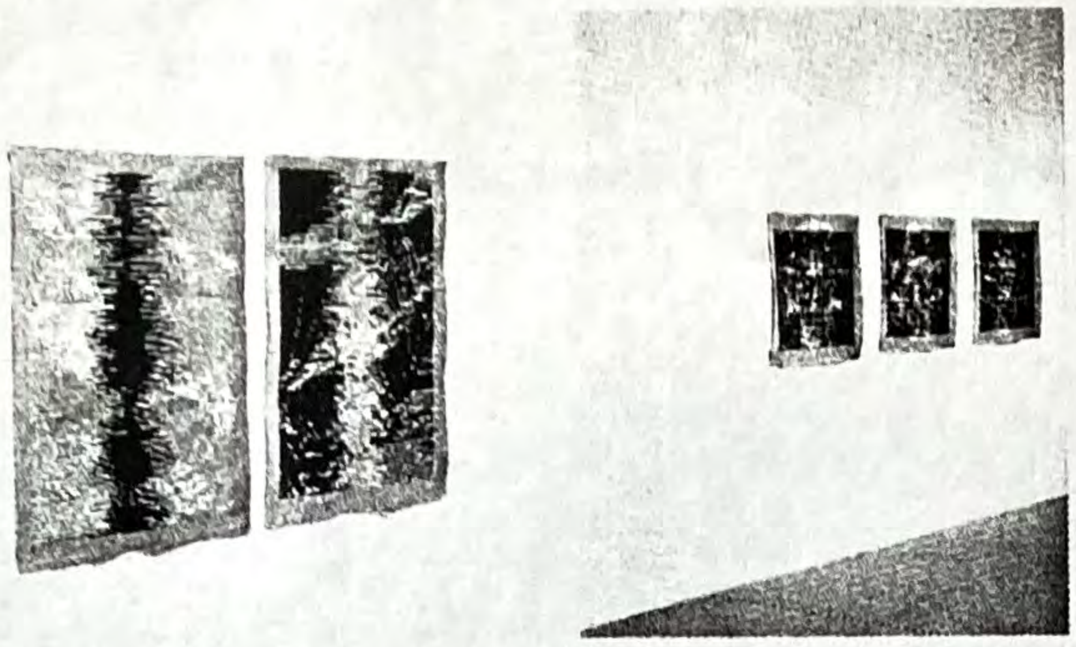
Back in her studio, Lawrence pored over the pages, eventually developing a methodology for manipulating the raw material. In an effort to make the works move, she explains that "I made slides and projected them and started drawing them at a very sharp angle, which caused the page to shift a little, and then I did it again. So I have these two perspective shifts in the series." The overall effect of the "Music Lessons" collection, some 63 pieces in all, and which dominated a wall at Dunn and Brown, is breathtaking — shimmering, mysterious and strangely familiar.

The artist is nationally known for her string installations, which have graced museums in Dallas, Houston, Ann Arbor and elsewhere. Using only postal cord, brown paper, fabric fasteners and packing tape, Lawrence weaves a site-specific geometric sculpture of monumental proportions. The end results have reminded some viewers of the Brooklyn Bridge, a boxing ring, a stringed instrument, or light diffused by prisms; it's impossible not to be awestruck. "I'm responding to the architecture, and usually the space is quite large," she explains. "I want the piece to make you experience that particular place differently than you ordinarily would."



ABOVE: "Red Ellipse" from the Piano exhibit formerly housed at Dunn and Brown Contemporary.

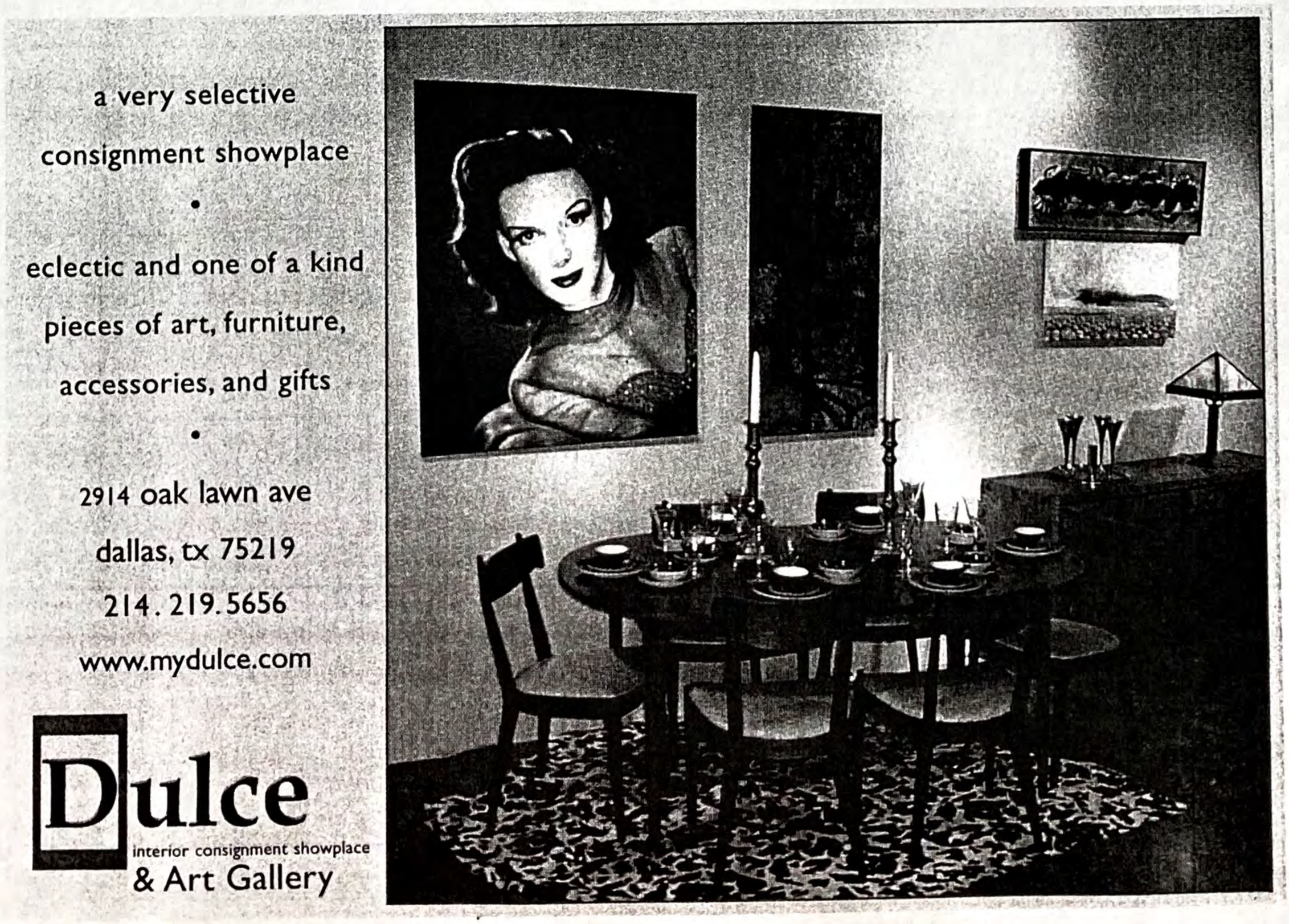
An exception to the grand scale of most of the string pieces was an early installation in an abandoned "shotgun" row house (a style which features a central hallway, with roots in Africa, the Caribbean and the South) in Houston, as part of "Project Row Houses." Organized by Houston artist Rick Lowe, her contributions to the project had an "in-your-face" immediacy that demanded viewer collaboration. "Those spaces were nice and compact; when you're in there you have to interact with the string somehow," Lawrence notes. "You have to move in the space in a certain way, and that's what the string work is about, more than the size — how you have to physically be there."



ABOVE: The key to the "Piano" series? Childhood music lessons.

Despite the apparent abstraction of some of Lawrence's work, there's always a unique significance underlying it, at once personally relevant and universal. Her paintings and drawing frequently incorporate dates, symbols, mathematical allusions, and text; grids, geometric patterns and spirals are also part of the artist's language. Her fascination with the passage of time, and the commemoration of it, has given wing to "11/97-11/98," "Moons," "The Ancestors and the Womb," and "Lineage." In the latter, she explored her family history in a series of portraits; superimposed on each was her own silhouetted likeness — the artist as observer, creator and heir.

Widely acknowledged as one of the most important artists of her generation, Lawrence has been celebrated nationally and internationally; most significantly she was included in the 1997 Whitney Biennial Exhibition in New York. In addition to the Core Fellowship from the Glassell School of Art, she was the recipient of the Camille Hanks Cosby Fellowship for African-American Artists from the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. She also has been an artist-in-residence at the Fordsburg Artists' Studios in Johannesburg, South Africa, and through the Texas Commission on the Arts. Her exhibitions are numerous and widespread, from Dallas to New Orleans, Houston to Johannesburg and New York.

In the near future, look for a string installation at Dallas' McKinney Avenue Contemporary, group shows in San Antonio, Fort Worth, and the occasional lecture or workshop. Lawrence has applied for a grant for free studio space in New York City. If she's awarded the grant, she could return to the East Coast for a time.

"There seems to be interest developing in my work in New York," the artist says. And although the possibility of a New York studio is an exciting one, she admits ruefully to dreading the winter. "I can't tell you how much."