

Piper began her LSD drawings and paintings in the mid-1960s. Although her practice would soon evolve into a highly conceptual one—in which ideas take primacy over art objects or images—in these early works she explored the possibilities of figurative representation.

The subjects of these works refer to real things in the world—the artist, her cat, her close friends, and the popular nineteenth-century children’s book *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*—but are obscured by the kaleidoscopic, mosaic-like manner in which they are rendered. The works’ psychedelic style, which serves to destabilize spatial relations and merge the subjects with their fantastically colored backgrounds, reflects Piper’s experiences with the hallucinogenic drug from which the series derives its title, and it also marks her growing preoccupation with the limits of perception.

In 1966 Piper began her studies at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, where she became increasingly preoccupied by the interrelation of aesthetic and intellectual concerns that “could only be confused or lost by trying to deal with them in terms of figurative images.” Her radical shift away from the figure as a subject for art corresponded to the ideas and principles of Minimalist and Conceptual art that she encountered in the New York art world, especially those of the artist Sol LeWitt, with whom Piper began a lasting and significant friendship. For Piper, the abstract concepts that guided her figurative drawings—perspectival space, color, form—later became the subjects of artworks themselves, as in *Nine-Part Floating Square* (1967).

Conceptual art's focus on ideas rather than objects allowed Piper to explore projects that would otherwise seem logistically impossible. Using maps—small-scale tools for representing large-scale areas—Piper engaged more explicitly with the events of the outside world while employing the vocabulary, forms, and ordinary materials favored by Conceptual artists.

The Dugway Proving Ground, in Utah, is a biological and chemical-testing facility where, in 1968, a nerve-gas leak killed more than six thousand sheep grazing nearby. Piper's *Parallel Grid Proposal for Dugway Proving Grounds Headquarters*, made the same year, comprises a large-scale grid to be installed over the site, which would function as a colossal solar clock. The looming shadow of the grid on the testing grounds would progress over the town over the course of the day, as a permanent reminder of the danger posed by the facility.

The selection of Piper's typed and collaged works from the late 1960s shown in this room provides an overview of the artist's radical experiments with the limits of language and reality and the nature of objects. Pieces such as *Concrete Infinity 6-Inch Square [This square should be read as a whole . . .]* (1968) use words as infinite building blocks in the composition of finite geometric forms, while the two *Relocated Planes* notebooks (1969) apply intense and methodical analyses to everyday spaces, using photographs and predetermined ratios to transfer various indoor and outdoor areas onto standard sheets of paper. The complex internal logic of these works relies on each viewer's willingness to engage with an idea that extends thought beyond the limits of the real, and to rethink the hidden possibilities of ordinary experience, as in the straightforward yet arbitrary-seeming instruction from *Untitled ("Street Works: Friday, April 18, 1969, 5-6 PM . . .")* (1969), to "bike around designated block from 5 to 6 PM."

In the fall of 1973, at a turning point in her artistic and philosophical careers, Piper birthed the Mythic Being, a persona that could be deployed in both performances and art objects. She disguised herself in a black afro wig, mirrored sunglasses, and jeans and roamed downtown Manhattan—and, later, Harvard Yard in Cambridge, among other locations—repeating passages drawn systematically from her adolescent diary. These passages, which Piper called “mantras,” also appeared alongside a photograph of the Mythic Being once a month from September 1973 to February 1975 in the alternative newsweekly the *Village Voice*, bringing the character to a wider audience.

As Piper spent more time as the Mythic Being in public spaces, she became increasingly aware of others’ perceptions of and responses to him not as an alternative persona but as an autonomous (and presumably nonwhite) male. As a result, she found herself “getting involved in his mental framework” despite his fictive origins. This process of identification—how she came to see the Mythic Being, and why—was the basis for works featuring further appearances of the character in 1975, after which Piper retired him from public view.

In the late 1980s, Piper resumed using direct-address texts, in the same typewriter typeface she had used in the 1960s and 1970s. Now she screenprinted them onto media images of African Americans locking eyes with the viewer, creating dissonant and powerful juxtapositions. The three series represented in this gallery—Free (1989), Pretend (1990), and Ur-Mutter (1989)—rely on Piper’s incisive textual interventions to reveal and thereby highlight the subjectivity of our interpretations of words and images, while also forcing us to question our personal biases and assumptions. By often using the same imagery across various series and pairing it with different text, Piper calls attention to the stereotyped mutability of visual images of African Americans, and to the role language plays in affecting their reception.

The works in this gallery, some of them shown for the first time here, are taken from the most recent decade and a half of Piper's practice. Through pieces such as those in The Color Wheel Series (2000) and the Everything series (2003–ongoing), we vividly encounter artistic points of entry into a different conception of reality that includes but extends beyond material existence and temporal duration.