

Lucid Dreaming: Aesthetic Dis(interest)

by Beth E. Wilson, September 29, 2008
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*Carla Rae Johnson, Shame,
charcoal drawing, 8" x 12", 2007/2008*

Where might we be today if the reporters covering the run-up to war had been more creative in their thinking, more questioning of the bogus information trotted out by Cheney, Rumsfeld, and the gang in 2002 and 2003? How many Americans to this day still believe that Iraq had something—anything—to do with al-Qaeda and 9/11? (The responsibility falls not only on the news media, but also everyone who saw, heard, or read any of this news as well.)

The show open now at TSL in Hudson is a stark contrast to such

political quietism. “War: Material and Lies” is a scorching rejoinder to passivity of any sort, but especially the kind that allowed the current debacle in Iraq to take place. Most bluntly addressing that blind spot is a work dating to 2003, the year of the war’s start. R. Muttmussman’s (obviously the Duchampian nom de guerre of TSL founder Linda Mussman) *Thinking While Reading Series*, in which she dissects pages from the *New York Times* with blue and red Sharpie marker notes, arrows connecting stories and individuals, and outraged responses to outrageous claims that were otherwise dutifully transcribed from White House press briefings into the pages of our “paper of record.”

Now, the “R. Muttmussman” work is certainly not physically or visually beautiful, although it is a manifestation of the kind of creativity that I’ve been talking about. There are other works in the show, however, that embrace both, in particular a series of monoprints by Marist College’s Ed Smith. All printed with the same soft blue ink, each print bears the color in its title—*Blue Cloud*, *Blue Pole*, *Blue Tunnel*, et cetera. The intimacy and immediacy of the monoprint process (where the artist applies ink directly to the plate, without incising or etching lines into it) translate here into delicate yet precise images. *Blue Tree*, for example, beautifully renders a small landscape, dominated in the center by a blackened, scraggly tree that appears to be holding its ground against rising waters. Twisted lines dangling from the branches remind me of nooses, setting up a recollection of Goya’s famous *Disasters of War* portfolio of etchings, where one finds quite similar blasted trees, hung with the tortured fruit of summary military executions. Only in *Blue Pile* is Smith quite so graphic, where the eponymous pile is a heap of skulls, shown killing-fields style; otherwise, the Goya reference itself is sufficient to generate a harrowing feeling that, combined with the extraordinary economy of means of the prints themselves, makes for a surprisingly effective, intimate interlacing of beauty and horror.

There are many other examples of the juxtaposition of the

beautiful and the political here—Carla Rae Johnson’s series of monumental (8-by-12-foot) charcoal drawings, *Snarl*, *Shred*, and *Shame*, which each apply the stars and stripes to configurations suggested by the titles; or Jane Gennaro’s delicate, meditative, monochromatic collages on life, war, and mortality using materials like deer bones and pigeon eggs. Sam Sebren’s Walls: *Price vs. Cost* translates the Caterpillar heavy equipment logo (a piece of instrumental graphic design itself) into an ironic memorial for peace activist Rachael Corrie, who was run over and killed by an armored bulldozer by the Israeli Defense Forces while protesting the destruction of Palestinian homes in the Gaza strip in 2003.

But the real show stopper here is Berta Leone’s *E PLURIBUS UNUM* (*Out of Many, One*), an American flag-cum-wall-hanging constructed out of 30,000 spent bullet casings painstakingly punched and wired together. (The whole thing weighs 500 pounds!) Leone made the piece in 2001, finishing it in late summer after months of laborious work. She told me she went to visit with friends in Canada not long after, planning to stay for some months, but then 9/11 happened—and she felt like she needed to “come home.” It’s amazing how the shifting frame of world politics has relocated the emotional core of this powerful piece, and perhaps it’s a testament to both the vision of the artist and the beauty of the finished work that it can withstand the vagaries of US foreign (and domestic) policy so well—or perhaps it’s telling us something about the trajectory the country was already on, even before 9/11. Regardless, experiencing the work in this exhibition underscores for me the ever greater need to find ways of re-incorporating the beautiful, deploying the power of the aesthetic, into the sphere of otherwise business-as-usual politics. Connecting these dots is an exercise that not only artists need to dedicate themselves to.