ARTFORUM

Pamela Wilson

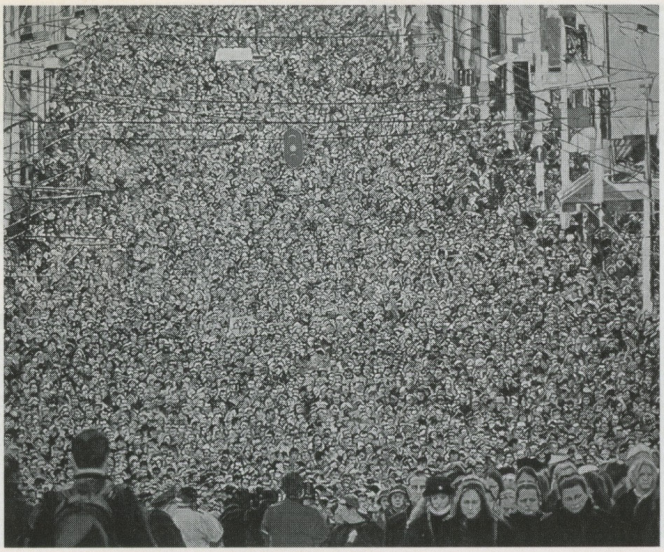
Collapse and catastrophe are timeless themes but also define the moment in which we find ourselves. “Democratic” elections, war, natural disaster, and misguided economic policy are disheartening realities that blend into a shifting cultural backdrop. This is the context of our times, yet the images with which the media bombards us are not without precedent: The rubble of a bombed building is a universal image, and the devastation left by a tsunami doesn’t look so different from the aftermath of any other sort of disaster. Pamela Wilson’s paintings are rooted in catastrophes’ basic sameness, yet she refuses to ignore the potential for visual pleasure offered by her chosen medium. In “Before and After,” her San Francisco debut at Gallery Paule Anglim, Wilson presented paintings and watercolors in which beauty emerged out of chaos.

Most notable among the motifs in the exhibition were images of crowds of people gathered for political and other events, and of buildings in various states of completion and decay. Wavering between reality and metaphor, the sober and the dreamlike, Wilson’s images recall the ambivalence of Luc Tuymans’s impassive urban views and Gerhard Richter’s Baader-Meinhof paintings. Wilson generates an etched-in-the-mind familiarity that is nevertheless slightly blurred around the edges. Some of her paintings, based on actual events, evoke the pomp of history painting while skirting that genre’s didacticism via astute stylistic choices and a judicious ambiguity. Her watercolors of ruined buildings, for example, are anonymous enough to achieve universality. The collapsed lattice of a high-rise in the watercolor *Building*, 2004, could be in Oklahoma City, Beirut, or Falluja. Regardless, the subject is violence and shifting order (a real-world struggle echoed by an art-historical one: the attempted destruction of the modernist grid). But at the same time, there is calmness to these works. *Flee*, 2004, is a loose watercolor depicting a group of running figures on a sketched-in ground. The brackishly colored figures vacillate between states of terror and jubilation, caught between suspension and flight.

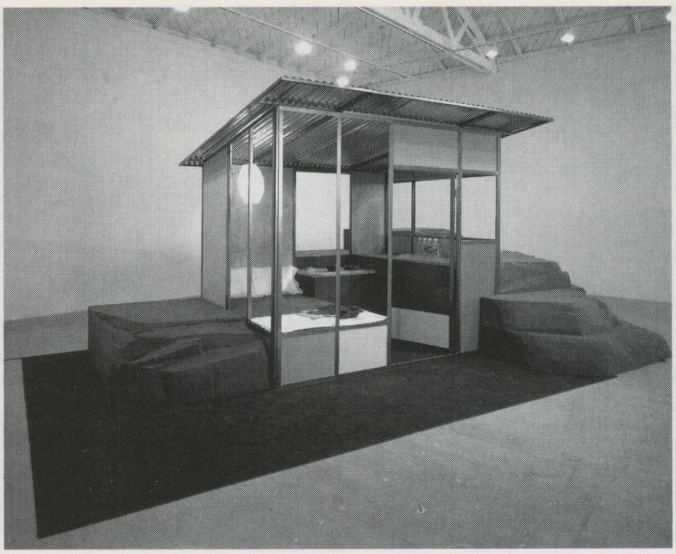
The two largest and most insistent paintings in the show depict images of actual crowds gathered for political purposes. In *Vox Populi*, 2004, the subject is George W. Bush’s 2000 inauguration ceremony, a winter-chilled event seen from a high perch behind the president, who stands alone on an aquamarine floor behind an icy shield of bulletproof glass. He faces a scaffold full of cameras and a vast sea of spectators that extends to the Washington Monument. Seated behind him are dignitaries, politicians, and power brokers, few of them recognizable, while the attendant public is rendered as mere pattern. Wilson seems far more interested in the mass. The throng appears segregated into visual strata by architectural elements, suggesting further divisions that are probably economic.

Another canvas shows a more democratic gathering, in which marchers in a city street are seen from a similarly skewed perspective. A slightly upward-tilting viewpoint has the effect of making this cast of thousands—signified by daubs of pink—appear to be advancing toward the viewer. As in Andreas Gursky’s crowd images, Wilson’s rally forms a visually unified mass, though in this case it is humanized by a more clearly defined group of figures in the foreground, marchers whose downbeat expressions make it clear this is a dour occasion. While the realism is jarring, the establishing of mood makes sense: Wilson depicts a group united in its apparent sorrow and conjures a sense of unity from a scene of apparent chaos.

—*Glen Helfand*



Pamela Wilson, *Untitled*, 2004, oil on linen, 46 x 56".



Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Homestead Unit from A-Z West, with Raugh Furniture*, 2001–2004, powder-coated steel, corrugated metal, birch paneling, paint, polyurethane, foam, fleece, felted wool, fabric, metal, and plastic, 25' 8" x 15' 3" x 8' 10".

In *3Z6N14*, 2004, slender, meandering lines and patches of color resemble the veins in marble or the markings on a map. The canvas is an irregular oval shape, rather like an eye, with an ovoid hole at its center. The lines and areas of color blur and dissolve into pale washes, and the image seems to gather around the central void. In this quieter, more contemplative work, Corey manipulates her data to produce delicate colors and subtle textures that contrast with the broad strokes and intensity of her earlier images. This "painting" runs counter to computer artists' more general tendency to abhor a vacuum, fueled perhaps by their ability to fill pictorial space at the click of a mouse. Corey has often been no exception to this rule—most of her compositions are so densely packed as to approach information overload—but her recent work suggests a promising new direction.

—Philip Auslander

SAN FRANCISCO

PAMELA WILSON

GALLERY PAULE ANGLIM

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