

Pam Wilson BY MICHELLE GRABNER

Moniquemeloche Gallery, Chicago IL
November 18 - December 31, 2005

Culled from newspaper photos, Pam Wilson's ink and watercolor drawings delicately re-image the compressed chaos and destruction of contemporary life as captured in print media. Natural disasters, acts of terror, and social upheavals of all sorts are pictured as washy ephemeral records that are laid down in watery pools of sepia, blue, red, and green pigment. These are beautiful drawings, if not simply by nature of their impregnate medium. The luminosity of watercolor on white paper and the alluring atmospheric effects Wilson confidently achieves in this medium creates images that are neither photographic nor illustrational but seductively abstract and representational.

The obvious question that arises when confronted with this body of work concerns the degree of depth and sophistication in the conceptual interplay between the charged subject matter and the transcendental palette Wilson employs. Watercolor, after all, has preferred subjects that are inherently divine and organic. Social commentary in picture making, in contrast, sides with realism and the readability of languages oriented toward graphics. But in Wilson's "Hard to Remember, Easy to Forget" exhibition at Moniquemeloche, her 14 framed works on paper collapse notions that separate beauty from social and political commentary, photo-documentation from painting, abstraction from representation, and imagination from originality.

Clearly, Wilson is also exploring ideas of memory and recall. She exploits the subjectivity inherent in the consumption of media imagery. Abandoned shantytowns as viewed from above are equated with compositions depicting Desert War wreckage. The lack of specificity in all of these drawings leads the viewer to assume that their subject matter is derived from specific newsprint images documenting, for instance, Hurricane Katrina or a military plane downed in the Iraqi desert. But the attribution of a drawing to a singular media image or global event lacks conviction. This leads to a confusing gallery experience where the viewer expects an analytical, political, or sociological engagement with the subject at hand. Instead, what we get is an emotional framework that speeds up the crossing of the constructions of collective memories with the global conflicts and disasters which Wilson otherwise eludes.

Ad Reinhardt regarded Ben Shahn's political work, because of the latter's "fine arts" experience and the popular appeal of his images, as mass cultural statements that were not especially aimed at protest or working class solidarity. Wilson, although depicting politically charged scenes of conflict, social duress and devastation, is likewise not concerned with the specific nature of such events, but with the reception of journalistic images and their accompanying news stories. *Wave #3* (2005) is a drawing in which figures appear to be moving anxiously in a vast landscape where billowy clouds or smoky fallout from some unknown disaster block the blue sky's distant horizon. Her use of masking fluid and quick brushwork accentuates the anxiousness of the figures. Yet, as in all of these works, it is impossible to tell if this is an image copied from a human interest story or hard news report.

Somewhat ironically, Wilson's project works against the anecdotal nature of "embedded" journalism. Her ability to bathe violence in a resplendent light using stokes of transparent paint renders universal the countless acts of violence that befall the world every day. Wilson underscores the passivity with which we encounter front-page news over our morning coffee. Yet her act of representing news photography via the medium of watercolor and its abstract language doesn't mean we get to spend more time contemplating the political forces behind current events. Rather, Wilson's drawings withdraw from the speed race between remembrance and our collective amnesia and leave us instead with pools of pigment and light.

REVIEWS

