

**BAT—Blatantly Accumulating Targets: Art Criticism and Discussion**  
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**Comments on Pamela Wilson: *Hard to Remember, Easy to Forget* at Monique Meloche, and a Dialogue with the Artist**

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Pamela Wilson's exhibition, *Hard to Remember, Easy to Forget* at Monique Meloche (November 18- December 31, 2005) presented sixteen pictures- watercolor & ink paintings on paper and two prints. These works were drawn from what have sadly become familiar images from newspaper photographs of the last few years. Immediately apparent was that nearly all of the paintings depicted scenes of terrible violence or, its aftermath. Yet there was a refusal to treat these images as documentary, and instead the artist sought to investigate other aspects of the pictures, which made for compelling viewing.

A sense of tragedy seemed the overarching theme, borne out in the title of the exhibition as well as in the individual titles and works on paper. One can see this in *Mistake 2*, (2005), which depicts a solitary figure examining an utterly ruined dwelling. However, the visceral, more immediately emotional responses that the source materials may have carried, they were subsumed under a studied investigation of the pictures in and of themselves.

There is a disconnect between the violence of the subjects and the analytical method of their construction, which emphasizes the linear development of component elements, their interrelations, and an interlocking of forms within the works. In short, there is a high degree of abstraction in these paintings, which pushes at the more literal, "real world" aspects of the subject matter. There is very little "news value" in these works on paper. So what should we to gather from them?

In *Truck* (2004), the wreckage of a car bomb became an overgrown thicket of overlapping marks that threatened to overcome the tiny figures beside it. The most overtly "pretty" of the pictures, in my view, *Wave #1* (2005) presented the waterborne detritus of the South Asian tsunami as a shimmering network of soft, pastel tones. A lattice of rippling water, represented by the stark white of the page, became almost blinding against the close-value coloration in the piece.

Though thoroughly steeped in a meditative engagement with the material, I do not feel as if the artist is necessarily making a judgement—at least in most of the works. Instead there's an attempt being made at understanding them in some other way—perhaps simply as pictures.

Though it may be too simple or literal a view, it's as if the abstractions, the complexities, the real-world intangibles that generated the source material have been rendered as a physical presence in the paintings. Descriptive elements, identifying features of the figures were reduced—"blown away," and the human presence within the work stripped down to the barest structure. Here, the environments become a dense tangle, constantly threatening to overwhelm the figures. Clearly, in these pictures, figure and environment are inextricably linked.

The show also contained a diptych of etchings which made for a markedly different experience than the rest of the work. *Journalist* (2005) is a depiction of a frequently occurring image- a video still of a captured female reporter, presumably begging for her life. Against a stark field and rendered in shades of pink, the central figure has a pathetic desperation.

The other half of the diptych shows a more-or-less straight, if simplified depiction of a mosque. Also printed in pink tones, the mosque image resembles the strange air of a surveillance photo, a kind of demented night vision. The coloration of *Journalist* underscored the pitiable aspects of the picture, with maximum disparity between the weariness of its central figure and the pink page's inviting warmth.

These pictures in particular seemed to make judgements—how could they not? Who could help but feel anger, sadness, and pity in seeing the sunken visage of this poor woman? And who could be so cold as to purchase one of these etchings and hang it in their home, to contemplate the hostage's fate while simultaneously admiring the picture's attractive color scheme? I sensed in them almost a dare on the part of the artist—not quite an admonition-- but a sense of longing to connect with the audience—to find out if these works, and all the attendant complications on the other side of their origins-- are as troubling to them as they are to her.

***After viewing the exhibition, I had a chance to address my questions to the artist. What follows is a conversation I had with Ms. Wilson via email.***

*BL- Insofar as the source material is concerned, I felt drawn to the images first, but was diverted from delving into any particularities in the motif (as distinct from the pictures themselves) by the method of depiction. There is some remove from the "subject matter." The reasons to look at these paintings can't be the same as the reasons one would look at the photographs, even if the photos were presented in an art context.*

*However, given what I have seen of your previous work, you have established some precedent for using such images to create the paintings in a more directly representational manner.*

*My question is not as much "why did you paint these pictures in this manner," as what was it that these particular images allowed you to do?*

*PW- All the images deal with some form of disaster- natural, man-made, mostly unexpected. One encounters these scenes all the time as part of the visual culture we are in at the moment. You don't have to go find them, if you read newspapers and magazines they are delivered to your doorstep every day. One glances at them and then they are tossed out with the daily papers, but they register in our visual memory.*

*Working with these photographs was one way of exploring how art can put an anchor into contemporary life: Was there a way to re-think this imagery through painting, in effect to slow down the visual experience? The images seemed to suggest many kinds of references, historical and art historical, besides depicting what was happening in different parts of the world at any one moment. Their chaotic nature seemed very abstract. I was interested in whether there is a way that one could become engaged in them in a more complex way.*

The medium allowed me to do something very fragile and at times abstract, while at the same time taking what's there, not denying it. It was a way to explore a more complex engagement with images that are inherently ephemeral (from newspapers) but exceedingly disturbing, violent, immediate and risky.

*BL-What did watercolor/ink on paper offer you in terms of constructing the paintings?*

PW-The medium, watercolor/ink, is something I have used for many years to work out ideas. When working with these pictures the watercolor took on an autonomous direction and became its own medium of exploration. There's an element of speed to these images, not only do they come and go quickly, they capture specific moments, or momentary events. The medium seemed to allow for this swiftness while at the same time condensing the moment.

*BL-Did you find yourself confronting the images in a way that you didn't expect? That is, did the results (or the development of the pictures, for that matter) surprise you?*

PW- In developing a direction in one's work (pursuing a line of inquiry) you always discover new ways of doing things. The results didn't surprise me, they interested me - I knew intuitively, and in most cases specifically, what I was after in each image.

*BL- I'd like to ask how the paintings interested you. Specifically about the question of irony. That is, it seems that there is some irony involved, whether in intent or outcome, in that there is a definite aesthetic involved in the pictures that's completely separate from the source images. For example, the painting entitled "Wave" struck me as a very beautiful picture, yet it depicted a scene of total devastation. It seems to me that one's (or at least my) aesthetic engagement with the pictures is at odds with the "content"—or perhaps you see them as interrelated necessarily. Could you address that?*

PW- There is no intended irony in my treatment of these scenes. The convention is to address disturbing images in a rougher manner or through some version of agitprop or socialist realism. Of course there are other examples in western art history e.g., Goya, David, Delacroix, Manet, to name a few. The expectation is to deal with political events by taking an obvious position. While there is no such thing as a non-partisan view, the treatment of an image doesn't have to be didactic. Too much art is like that today. People should be able to think for themselves.

*BL-That leads me to the issue of judgement. By that I mean, the pictures don't seem to judge the events they depict—for good or ill. But in the etchings, I began to have a strong sense that they did exert a kind of judgement, perhaps indictment- (but maybe it is too strong, or too legalistic a word) toward the viewer. I would find them very difficult to look at, say, if I had them in my home. I felt as if this was due to them being somewhat more direct, representationally speaking, or more "in your face" than the other pictures. In any event, I felt a sense of culpability as a viewer of these pictures, perhaps more strongly than the others. My question is if that is something you are addressing in these prints, or did you intend them to be any more pointed than the rest of the works?*

PW- They do have a different quality, but I think that is due more to the medium. The prints are intended to work on a number of levels. First there is a portrait and a landscape. But a narrative circulates between them. The portrait is of Julia Segreta, the

Italian journalist who was kidnapped in Iraq (she was later released). What struck me was how much she looked like the carved wooden statue of the Mary Magdalene by Donatello, an extraordinarily moving piece of sculpture from the 15th century. Segreta seemed to have the same facial structure, and the same look of terror, pain, a glimmer of hope. It was the power of the image as well as the art historical reference that I gleaned from it, that interested me. The landscape is from a news photo of the neighborhood in Baghdad where it is believed she was held. In this way they were related. But it is not important to know these specific facts. The image of a terrified individual begging for help from the center of a TV screen is one that has been ingrained in all of our memory banks. The diptych references this.