PAMELA WILSON-RYCKMAN

Home and Away

DETACHABLE, CONNECTABLE

by Michelle Grabner

TO TAKE RISKS THEN, TO TEST CRITICAL LIMITS, TO MAKE "BOLD OMISSION."[1]

Culled from newspaper photos, Pamela Wilson-Ryckman'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-Ryckman confidently achieves in this medium creates images that are neither photographic nor illustrational but seductively abstract and representational. Her near effortless pulls of washy pigment over equally nimble contours of watercolor resist convey impressions of social urgency, temper and tone in a suspension of confounding light; a contemporaneous practice indebted to the pictorial feats of both Social Realism and Post-Impressionism.

The obvious question that arises when confronted with her body of work concerns the degree of depth and sophistication in the conceptual interplay between the charged subject matter and the transcendental palette Wilson-Ryckman 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 her works on paper collapse notions that separate beauty from social and political commentary, photo-documentation from painting, abstraction from representation, and imagination from originality.

Through a literary lens, Wilson-Ryckman's work is similar to the construction of prose narratives where fictional discourse can expound on structural content such as syntax, style, and tone. Yet Wilson-Ryckman's paintings are always closer to fiction than to recorded fact. Their loose representation and earnest range of emotional affects operate like novellas more than news-story. This is important because the work diligently activates the viewer's imagination and stimulates narrative construction instead of merely relegating the viewer to a position of info-consumption. In this way her practice is generous, liberal, and participatory.

In the essay, "Your Brain on Fiction," writer Annie Murphy Paul reports for the *The New York Times* that, "Brain scans are revealing what happens in our heads when we read a detailed description, an evocative metaphor or an emotional exchange between characters. Stories, this research is showing, stimulate the

brain and even change how we act in life."[2] And it is here where Wilson-Ryckman's work becomes political, not in the fact that she is translating photo-journalistic images of global hotspots but by the fact she is obligating us to build narrative into these images. She gives us the room to identify the good and the bad, to assess fault and to seek justice, to identify prejudice and to evaluate our own politics and believe systems in the face of social upheaval. In short her images offer up multiple tonalities and intensities, "always detachable, connectable, reversible, and modifiable, with multiple entrances and exits."[3]

After the Day After depicts a seated man among urban debris. Yet is it difficult to assess the litter and chaff as daily squander or rubble from a physical assault. The same ambiguity is at play in *The Letter* where a woman in a sundress engages an unrecognizable object in a vast unfamiliar exterior environment. Locating signifiers in these images is difficult work for the viewer, making single "entrances and exits" nearly impossible. One can only trust Wilson-Ryckman's confident mark and the remote frame of the camera. Her series of paintings that take on flooding—and by extension issues of global warming—shifts the inquiry from identification and narrative building to degrees of beauty and transformation. Wilson-Ryckman's process and lively editing can also confuse an everyday tragedy such as a car crash with a clandestine terrorist act. Or a common oil platform dwarfed by calm seas can double as a source for an environmental disaster. "We cannot stop noticing: no sequence too absurd, trivial, meaningless, insulting, we register, provide sense, squeeze meaning, and read intention out of the most atomized words," claims Kenneth Goldsmith whose thesis on uncreative writing argues for invention in appropriation.[4] Wilson-Ryckman's rearticulation of found photographs brilliantly illustrates Goldsmith's position. Her practice manages information and re-presents it as a complex and political visual engagement with imagery, authorship, interpretation and authority at its fore.

Clearly, Wilson-Ryckman 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 Sandy, Katrina, the financial meltdown, the Arab Spring, 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 confounding viewing experience where the spectator anticipates 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-Ryckman 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-Ryckman, 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-Ryckman's project works against the anecdotal nature of "embedded" journalism. Her ability to bathe violence in a resplendent light using strokes of transparent paint renders universal the countless acts of violence that befall the world every day. Wilson-Ryckman 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-Ryckman's drawings withdraw from the speed race between remembrance and our collective amnesia and leave us instead with pools of pigment and light.

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[1] Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Bold Omissions and Minute Depictions," *When the Moon Waxes Red*, (New York: Routledge, 1991). pp.155-168.

[2] Annie Murphy Paul, "Your Brain on Fiction," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2012.

[3] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1986). P. 3.

[4] Kenneth Goldsmith, Uncreative Writing, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). p. 221.