

WITNESSER

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ABSTRACT

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This series of paintings and drawings attempts to navigate personal and pandemic tragedy via the depiction of trauma as a collective experience. Within my work, publically accessible images of oil spills, human induced wild-fires, decomposing mental wards, nuclear bombings, etc., are used in combination with moments of personal hysteria, death, humiliation and loss to create a new landscape that explores the ties between how individuals navigate incidents based upon their own memories and experiences with the world. Using the physicality of drawn and painted collage to place the viewer into the experience, these works take on a sinister mythology that connects moments of small town tragedy to tragedy shared among mass society. Referencing large scale historical events and splicing it with modern intimate, and often private experiences, heightens the drama due to the vague and haunting undertones that the works evoke. Ambiguous ghostly limbs and misplaced objects within the scenes allow for a sense of uneasiness. The series elicits a sense of nostalgia and otherworldly encounters using realism combined with moments of juxtaposed tension due to the dislocated and precarious subject matter.

INTRODUCTION

“The truth kills the possibility of fiction, but truth does not kill the possibility of art – on the contrary, it requires it for its transmission, for its realization in our consciousness as a witness”

(Claude Lanzmann, *In an Era of Testimony*, 40)

This exhibit focuses around the physical conglomeration of personal and pandemic tragedies manifested through the act of seeing, as the witness, the viewer, and the artist. Testimonies of trauma pulled from individuals are transposed into a 2D image that blends fact with fiction thereby creating a space in which the viewer can connect their own first hand storyline, the collective personal trauma. This community of witnessing, as noted in Shoshana Felman’s, *In An Era of Testimony*, brings together each individual perspectives that allows for the viewer to grasp the magnitude of the event while simultaneously taking part in it (Felman, 48). Large scale disasters directly linked to man’s folly are also incorporated as a theoretical individual marker for accessing that empirical investigation by the viewer. This orchestrated amalgamation of tragic imagery provides an idiosyncratic waypoint to navigate the human pandemic, a coping mechanism, a lantern in the dark.

A BLACK YEAR/ PROCESS

Traditionally, a black year tends to be defined as a year in which one experienced extreme stints of bad luck, often suffering major setbacks that effected their financial, emotional, and/or familial status. Over this past year, I experienced the loss of multiple friends due to car accidents, overdose, and police violence, as well as returning from work to find that my house had been robbed. I also experienced the unexpected end of a long-term engagement with my former partner. This series of events, or Black Year, gave way to the current body of work culminating within this exhibit. The narrative works take on the identity of the witness to these tragedies, placing the viewer directly into the situation of the victim. Collecting stories from individuals who have directly bared witness to trauma, and correlating those plotlines with large scale man-made disasters, such as oil spills, explosions, or war, creates a dialogue between how humans interact and cope with traumatic events. Testimony of the individual documented in a physical representation forces the witnesser, the viewer, into the event in a way that allows them to both realize the fiction of the experience in the context of themselves while simultaneously connecting their own personal experiences with that of the storyteller.

The pine board mounted to watercolor paper with matte medium allows for a surface that mimics wallboard. Using these materials, along with the use of an iron for tinting, I could create a texture that is rough enough to hold charcoal, but maintained the smooth consistency. With an interest in achieving a high level of realism with the medium that would not distract the viewer via unnecessary mark making, I was able to create a series of drawings that mimicked the feel of an old photograph. This was done intentionally to evoke a sense of nostalgia in the viewer and allow for an easier access into the image that wasn't thwarted by gesture or much abstraction. By

making the imagery obvious and available to everyone via the use of rendering, one was not left to deal with the notion of style, but focus solely on the subject matter. The lack of color causes the drawings to appear dated and factual, while the large size reinstates the importance of the subject matter.

Uncommon in the contemporary field, the style of rendered realism within this series forces the viewers to take on the context in the image without the veil of stylization. The concealment of blatant mark making coerces the witnesser to contemplate the content directly. Artist's like Vija Celmins work much in this same manner, using her hyper realist style to create a sense of stillness and greater focus on the object by suspending the event within time. Translating the context of creating an image via a machine (camera), and adapting it to the physical hand mutates the context from anonymous to personal. These recognizable objects and surfaces within her work connect the viewer in a moment in time, whether in the gallery, or location painted. Visually recreating the event projects the past into the contemporary by giving it a personal narrative through the choices of the artists and reflections of those viewing. The delicacy of the medium engages the surface that allows for this overlap between time and space. Current events within society necessitate this intimate connection. Through excessive depictions of violence and disaster in mainstream media, viewers often emotionally disassociate from these happenings due the oversaturation of non-intimate imagery. Through these works, viewers can reinstate their connections as the witness without being dragged through the muck of mainstream media.

The paintings function much in the same way. Their inclusion of color is due to the more intense relationship between personal events and the current disasters we are all experiencing. The reduced scale creates a more intimate feel, requiring viewers to come in closer, and

experience the event in a more private setting. The present-day arguments over the potential Dakota Access Pipeline have sprung issues over drilling headlong into mainstream media. Major Films like *Deepwater Horizon*, released in 2016, enhance the increasing uneasiness towards the oil industry. Because of its contemporary relevance, I chose to include colored paintings into the exhibition to pull the human induced issues into the modern day instead of the wistful approach of simply using charcoal. These paintings are spliced down the middle, separately painted, and later reconfigured into an aggregate diptych where the dividing line remains visible. Forcing the comparison of one event to another creates a dynamic circulation requiring the viewer to create their own comparisons and interactions.

WORKS/ INFLUENCES

The drawing “Equivocations on a Robbery”, created in 2016, displays two oil rig workers surrounding a single central pipe. The depiction of the employees was referenced from creative commons licensed images from the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill which occurred in March of 1989. The Exxon Valdez, an oil tanker which run aground off the coast of Alaska, resulted the second largest spill in United States history, dumping approximately 10.8 million gallons of crude oil into the Prince William Sound; second only in US history to Deepwater Horizon in terms of amount of oil leaked. Failure to actively move, maintain systems, and supervise the course of the vessel resulted in its running aground. Estimations have been made that this diligence was due to the captain’s heavy drinking the night before. This spill in particular was chosen due to its direct result of man’s folly and the environmental impacts that resulted. Upon second look, the viewer will notice two hands wrapping around the central pipe in the image. The arms seem to appear from nowhere, with no reference to a form behind the structure. The outstretched, veiny, elongated fingers appear to be grasping for something, but what? Closer inspection will reveal the lower hand loosely dangling a key which one can assume is a reference to the title, a robbery. The central pole could be viewed as a phallic symbol, arms wrapping around it, or simply a dividing line with the focus centered around the two male rig workers. Little other information is given as to the plotline of the narrative and viewers are left to fill in the blanks as they choose.



Figure 1. Charlotte White, *Equivocations on A Robbery, Valdez*. 2016

The charcoal drawing, “Church Camp”, depicts the decaying room of a Tuberculosis ward inside a sanatorium. Internationally known for their poor quality of life habits, this man-made issue was chosen by a participant as their own large scale reference of human shortcomings. The background setting depicts a figure, presumably female, though intentionally devoid of any defining features, that wraps around the corner of the door which leads to a dark ambiguous space unavailable to the viewer. The elongated fingers on top outstretched hand reference back to the earlier drawing (Robbery), allowing for flow of continuous reference from work to work. The arm and leg placement of the form directs the eye over to the overlapping

carcasses of white geese on the bottom left side of the composition. The simple title leaves questions intentionally unanswered, allowing for the viewer to fill in their own storylines with their personal histories. While meant to evoke a sense of uneasiness with the simple color format, shallow spacing, and decaying imagery, the metafiction of the image, through its combination of imagery, allows for just enough space for the viewer to place themselves within the scene while simultaneously being aware of the unnatural strangeness of the context.



Figure 2. Charlotte White, *Church Camp*, 2016

“Sorry I’m” compiles references to war with physical reminders of childhood memories. The aircraft carrier within the top left of the composition along with abstracted parachutes places the viewer within the context of Vietnam. Attached to the individual parachutes are children’s building blocks, faintly spelling out the phrase “I’m sorry”, or “Sorry I’m”, with the interpretation of the syntax is left up to the viewer. The commonality and innocence associated with building blocks is directly halted as soon as the viewer realizes that the words total into an apology. This exchange of guilt could reference a childhood memory, a sense of nostalgia, or a feeling of guilt over Vietnam. The overlapping drapery was intentionally altered to allude to a sense of vertigo within the experience, as if one is falling and happens to look up to this scene. The strong contexts of the two different objects create a disjunction that enhances the uneasiness of the scene. The foreboding texture in the background heightens this experience, referencing cloud cover or smoke, the aircraft appears to be flying directly into the potentially threatening atmosphere.



Figure 3. Charlotte White, *Sorry I'm*, 2016

The first painting of the series, “Irrefutable Evidence of an Insatiable and Unjustifiable Taste for Outlaws and Alcoholics”, takes on a much more intimate approach. Referencing the artist’s own experiences (the image of the figure is pulled directly from personal engagement photos), with a large scale man-made disaster, this painting creates a figurative psuedo-venn diagram of a crumbling relationship by physically and visually butting two events up against each other for a comparative relation. Painter Adrian Ghenie works similarly within this manor, blurring the subjective personal recollections of his childhood, with the objective large scale faults of man over the course of European history (Wolff). Unresolved imagery combined with selective figuration demand the viewer’s attentiveness to the dialogue between both. Ghenie’s imagery merge vague moments from the selective unconscious resulting in a transposing of ambiguous, though inherently relatable, subject matter. These Jungian themes of tension and subconscious self can be seen in both Ghenie’s body of work, and this exhibition. The color intentionally heightens this experience, with something as common and often dramatic as a breakup, the muted tones of the figures is subdued in comparison to the intensity of the oil fire, raising the significance of the imagery. The central brightness of the left panel is broken down into a cacophony of shades, allowing the viewer to get lost in the mild abstractions of the blaze. The figure seems to be flowing into the fire, with the lines of composition on each matching up, along with the muted sienna undertones within the figures that directly visually connect the two pieces. The work “Extinction”, functions much in the same way through combining two seemingly disparate images and allowing the viewer to create connections between them. The thylacine, or Tasmanian tiger, was a breed of marsupial located on the island of Tasmania before being hunted to extinction in the early nineteen-hundreds. Due to its distinct look and nature, the animal has gained a cult following over the years of those who believe that it could still be alive.

Numerous extensive searches have been doing and rumors of sightings continue to pop up monthly on the island. Humans desire to destroy, then immediately search for an object creates an interesting and complex insight into culpability, aggrandizement, and obduracy. The animal was chosen specifically because of these associations. The chair, spliced directly into the middle of the image, is left intentionally vague. The obscurity of the object within context to its surroundings allows for a vast number of connections between the two, creating more of an interaction for the witness.



Figure 4. Charlotte White, *Irrefutable Evidence of an Insatiable and Unjustifiable Taste for Outlaws and Alcoholics*, 2016

The final image of the show “A Black Year”, showcases multiple characters from each of the previous images within a new setting. The deforestation imagery was collected from multiple

sites throughout the United States. Threats to wildlife, natural vegetation, and the climate increase the growing hostility toward the method, but due to its streamlined and cheap production, clear cutting has remained. Thylacines, as shown in “Extinction”, are spaced throughout the cluttered overlapping branches as visual waypoints for the viewer. One of the figures from the “...Valdez” work can also be seen dragging a parachute behind him, as well as multiple parachutes interlaced within the receding scenery. The labyrinthine of complex detail combined with overlapping characterization attempts to amass the hoard of events one faces over a stretch of time. This created metafiction used to combine characters influence each other’s actions and context within the image as events tend to in human life. Simple repetition of data gains new light when placed in context of new objects and space. The witness to the fiction becomes the witness to reality.



Figure 5. Charlotte White, *A Black Year*, 2017

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this collection of works centralizes around themes of loss, disaster, and tragedy as a means of correspondence between individuals through the attestation of events throughout history. Via artistic documentation, viewers can connect their storylines, as trauma is one of the most epidemic of human experiences. Even if the viewer could not relate specifically through each event depicted throughout this exhibit, an empathetic tone can be derived from each drawn collage, as the widespread disasters matched with personal traumas provide relation to a collective audience from past and modern generations. Every being experiences trauma in some form, and through these pieces, the awareness of personal tragedy and inhumane disasters provide the sense of relief, as if we're not alone in our sense of despair. The deep undertones of pain and nostalgia provided throughout this imagery is meant to show that although tragedy can strike at any given moment, our active decision of experiencing this pain and relating it to the world around us improves our human ability to cope and even acquire a greater understanding of the world around us. Questions of power, nostalgia, and interactions present in these works play a vital role in the understanding and coping of grief. This web of testimonies allows for a sudden collaborative awareness of each other's pain, and the conscious choice to be present for it.

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