

Ground Zero exhibition in Detroit

Signs of a more critical mood among US artists

David Walsh
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An exhibition of art works created in response to the September 11 terrorist attack in New York City and to the events that followed it is currently on display at the Museum of New Art (MONA) in Detroit. Nearly sixty artists from a number of countries are represented by 300 paintings, photographs, digitally altered images and sculptures. The show, which opened July 13, was curated by New York artists Danny Scheffer, Frank Shifreen and Julius Vitali.

In conjunction with the exhibition, a public discussion was held at MONA on July 14. The principal speaker was Rozalinda Borcila, artist and assistant professor at the University of South Florida. The meeting centered on the implications of the recent events for artists, the role of “political art” and the nature of artistic practice itself. In her opening remarks Borcila referred to the “open-ended war unleashed on the world” by the Bush administration. She spoke of the manner in which efforts are made to “isolate September 11 from everything else” and, moreover, of the prevailing conception in the US that art is merely a matter of individual “emoting”. (See interview below)

The general tone of *Ground Zero*, taken in the widest sense, is oppositional and critical of US government policy. As curator Frank Shifreen notes in the conversation below, the show and the thinking of those involved have evolved over the past half-year. There are pieces taking up specific actions by the government, in particular the incarceration of individuals of Middle Eastern descent. British-born artist Douglas Fishbone placed a young man in Arab garb and placed him within a fence, where he sat silently throughout the exhibition’s opening. David Camilleri from Malta shot a video of a man chained to a bed over the course of 24 hours. New York’s Jenny Pollak interviewed family and friends of those incarcerated and displays the results; other works, painting and sculpture, convey an artist’s response in more intimate and personal terms, in abstract or semi-abstract form.

There is little doubt that the Bush administration’s bellicose and provocative foreign policy, as well as its systematic attack on democratic rights in the US, has had an impact on artists. *Ground Zero* suggests that there is a mood of foreboding, even dread, within the artistic circles represented, and a growing hostility to the exploitation of the World Trade Center tragedy by the US government for its own geo-political purposes.

One would not, however, want to idealize the exhibition or gloss over its weaknesses. As much as the show indicates the readiness of more thoughtful artists to adopt a critical standpoint, it always reveals the limitations of their present thinking: the general absence of historical knowledge, of a context in which to locate their responses, and an overall unpreparedness for the upheavals to come. In addition, there is a distinctly “American” outlook, which, while not nationalistic, leaves the matter of officially-sponsored patriotism and jingoism unaddressed. For example, while there are references to the victims of US foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere, these are limited. It would be a grievous error if American artists were to concern themselves only with the tragic fate of innocent Americans.

Moreover, those pieces which merely record the event as an isolated episode and remain at the level of horror and indignation tend to reinforce the official version that there was no pre-history to the September 11 tragedy, either in terms of predatory US policy in the Middle East and Central Asia or the repeated warnings that Washington received about the possibility of a terrorist attack. Under present conditions, not to question the manner in which events have been utilized by the Bush administration, intentionally or not, strengthens the hand of those in power.

The WSWS spoke to one of the curators of the show, Frank Shifreen, and to Rozalinda Borcila, who is represented in *Ground Zero* by several pieces.

Frank Shifreen, visual artist in New York city and a curator of *Ground Zero*

Frank Shifreen: I’ve been doing this kind of show for a long, long time, maybe 21, 22 years. All my shows have been about politics. I really believe you cannot separate art and politics. Everyone puts me down for thinking that politics has any role in art, especially in the art world in New York, which has become very conservative. Art there is not about critiques any more. It’s about mimicking sensationalist culture.

I strongly believe that the community of artists must be in the vanguard to change society by having shows, exhibitions, by creating art that gives us a sense of beauty—understanding also, but beauty is critical—because that’s how we show how we’re different. That’s how we show that we stand for something, that we’re different than the people we’re opposing. We’re opposed to these people who are controlling, oppressive and are trying to defend this unjust social order. This elite class of people: We don’t believe in that.

David Walsh: What were the origins of this show?

FS: I was creating a show called *Witness*. We started it and then September 11 happened. So as soon as that happened, things turned into almost a martial law situation. There were cops, soldiers everywhere. You couldn’t cross the street; it was amazing, you never saw that here in the US. It was like that for a week or so. And we heard of all the firemen killed, from all the fire stations here, policemen, innocent people, including artists. We changed the name to *From the Ashes*.

We had a wonderful show. There were other works in it. Some of the artists are the same. We got some press from that, we had an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, the television people came. We had a performance series. At that time, everyone was saying, “We’re all in this together.” Even [New York Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani looked good. Then things started to change. I wondered about the issues, what they were saying to us, Bush, Ashcroft, etc. What were the issues that were being played out? So it started to evolve, from a memorial show to more of a show that explored where we were going, what was going on.

DW: What you’re saying is that it began to become more critical?

FS: Yes, for sure. Exactly, it had to become more critical. We all began to see that we had been had. We were had by these political leaders, especially when we began to see the violations of rights, innocent Arab

men being held in jail for months, and even now, 10 months later. People being held in jail without rights, even though they are known to be innocent.

I thought we had the power to break through it. The old Situationists had something, that art has the power to change the structure of communication in some way, and that by creating its own models and images we are able to halt the power of the Hollywood images.

Your web site is one of the only web sites that is really in opposition to it. There are very few. There's little critical press in the mainstream.

DW: Were the artists changing as you were changing?

FS: I think the artists began to change as well. As a curator, I was a bit of a leader. I said, "I wanted to do the show, and this is what I'm thinking. I'll share my thoughts." I received a sympathetic reaction. They would say, "My work is changing also." I was impressed with Douglas Fishbone's piece, this young Arab guy in a cage. I didn't prompt him. It was beautiful. You see this vulnerable Arab young man inside the fence.

They talk about drawing from life in art, but why can't drawing from life be drawing from the entire social and political life? And every other part of life. We can't separate the political from the artistic. Every piece I do, whether it's outwardly political or not, is very political. I believe very strongly in that.

DW: What has been the response of intellectuals and mainstream artists in general to September 11 and the Bush administration?

*FS: I think there's a lot of silence. I invited a number of more famous artists to be a part of the show, and they were not too interested. They might have been more interested if there were more money involved. Perhaps people were intimidated. They're frightened of what is going to happen. They're afraid that the country is going to turn on those who are not seen as patriotic, loyal. They didn't give me any reasons. I was doing the *Counting Coup* show before, about Bush stealing the election. There was thunderous silence. I mounted the show wherever I could, there were a couple of well-known names, Leon Golub, Barbara Kruger, but a lot of artists just were not interested and didn't want to hear from us, and there was this mood, they didn't want to touch this, things were too good for them. Or perhaps they felt connected to this administration.*

DW: Some of them do.

*FS: Some of them do, I think the arch-conservatism of the Bush administration has almost become the mainstream for some of these people. It's a very conservative strain. I'm a very stuck kind of guy. I get immersed in this, I can't get out of it, I want to keep doing it. With *Counting Coup*, we had small crowds in some places. We were going against the tide. But I believe it. I think we should have this kind of activist art. Artists have the responsibility to help each other, to form networks.*

DW: You mentioned something before about feeling constrained yourself in what you could say about September 11.

FS: I did feel that way. I felt that I had to ... I was apologizing, talking about "fair and balanced." It was almost like the media got to me too.

DW: There has been an enormous campaign mounted to try and intimidate people.

FS: I felt that way. I had to explain myself, to defend myself. Like the comment from the New York curator who said that the show was a very exploitative idea. Someone said that to me. It's not exploitative for the Bush administration to mount this whole operation, but it's exploitative for an artist who has no chance of selling the work, to explore the event!

DW: If you think that the entire US media has been consumed since September 11 with doing nothing but exploiting and sensationalizing the event, to criticize this show is obscene.

FS: I think so.

DW: I did think you were being timid and defensive. You're not going to attract people today unless you say this is protest, this is opposition.

FS: After doing this show, I acknowledge this much more. In future

shows, in the catalogues, there will be more critical material.

When I speak to people, they are beginning to see the situation for what it is, this whole media campaign that is defending all these incursions by the Bush administration. This proposed war with Iraq is crazy. They're going to be punished for it. And the whole business with the companies, the corruption. So many people have lost so much money, in their 401k plans, their retirement. What percentage has lost money? Twenty percent, forty, fifty, sixty percent? It goes beyond that. These funds have lost trillions of dollars in these shenanigans, and it's all connected. Bush was trying to push his program, but they are caught.

I've been thinking about a show called *Corporate Crime*. It's a fair game for art to deal with.

For a while I became sort of an art careerist. Then the art market fell. I realized that I've always been a political artist. I started out as a painter. I've been doing these large computer prints that I have in the show. They are image-based. What I use is images from different sources, often television images. I go up to different facilities in upstate New York and I layer many images all together, Hollywood, science fiction, war dramas, it comes together in this soup of imagery and it also becomes abstract, but not through reducing, but through addition of images. I'm also doing sculpture, painting. As well, I think the creation of a show is a work of art.

Interview with Rozalinda Borcila, visual artist and assistant professor of sculpture and performance art at the University of South Florida

David Walsh: What is your opinion of the exhibition?

Rozalinda Borcila: I don't know yet. The exhibition overall is a tough thing for me to get a sense of. As a collection of works the exhibition doesn't seem very unified, it doesn't have a coherent visual voice. The level of artistic discourse is uneven, the political orientation seems all over the place. As a cultural event, as an event, I have an opinion. As an event that generates ideas, which includes a collection of art works, I find it useful, needed, well-intended, very ambitious. There are works that are trying to be a great deal more critical, more thoughtful than simply memorials, which is a concept I have a great deal of difficulty with.

DW: Can you tell me something about your own work?

RB: The work that I had in the show was part of a larger series of works that I've been doing for years now, that deals specifically with looking at ... in visual terms, looking at experiences of power and violence. Not necessarily the events themselves, but the culture of it, the ideology of it, the legitimating processes that take place in order to allow those things to take place.

Aside from the theme itself is another main concern, which is how to approach the method of art-making in and of itself. How does visual language work, how does art make meaning, and how do we approach an image or an object and read something into it, regardless of the theme, of the subject matter. In terms of that, I've been troubled by our assumptions regarding visibility, i.e., our assumption that increased visibility is increased agency, for instance. That only what you see is something that is meaningful.

That makes it difficult to use photography which not only wants to make things visible, but wants to grab onto the conventions of realism. So that's why you see me working with photography in this way, with photographic images where the entire sourcing of something that starts out as a document actually gives you as an end result something that conceals rather than reveals. The whole point is to give you constantly the experience of something that does not reveal itself.

The photographs I have in the show are a way of being invisible, they are deliberately ... they masquerade as abstract compositions, they have been in contexts before where they have been completely misrecognized as something else.

You know those radar images you see on television when the bombs are dropped that come from the cockpit of the plane? And because it is radar

and radar registers only heat patterns, when the bomb explodes, you don't see buildings any more—of course, you never see people—all you see is this white and black, for a few seconds everything withdraws into these patterns. And that contributes to de-realizing everything and they can be safely shown on the evening news like it's no big deal. I re-photograph those radar images after the explosion. The two you see in the show are from the worst civilian bombings in Afghanistan to date.

DW: What is your general attitude toward the post-September 11 actions of the Bush administration and the US war in Afghanistan?

RB: I don't know how much more the world can endure. I have this sinking feeling that it's still not nearly bad enough at home to curtail this administration. I wish it were much, much worse domestically, so that there would be more outrage to curtail this administration. Unfortunately, it's not bad enough at home.

They went to work so quickly as of September 11 to seize the moment, to consolidate power. They needed the incident so badly and they got it, and they got exactly what they needed and wanted, what they were expecting, which was the ability to nationalize police, to consolidate a fascist regime, which is exactly what they are doing. I sympathize for all of us living here, but the consequences in other countries are so much worse.

What concerns me about the present situation is that the US is operating more overtly, with more moral "legitimacy". There's not even the concern for secrecy any more. There's not even the concern for needing to worry about consequences any more.

The list of enemies both domestic and foreign is deliberately open-ended and growing all the time. Even that is very openly stated. None of this has been done secretly. This administration has not felt the need to hide its intentions very much to carry out an all-out war from the beginning.

DW: You spoke about the need to know history, which is unusual.

RB: This is something that is particularly troubling to me as a teacher. I work with young students. It's particularly troubling in our time. I work with students for whom everything happens instantaneously and everything happens out of the blue, and not only is there never any reason for anything, but there are never any consequences to anything. This happens not only in their own work, where they are constantly re-inventing the wheel and there's never any history to their own discipline, to their own struggle, but it also happens in their understanding of the world around them.

I see a real parallel between this struggle to understand the world around them and their effort to understand themselves in relation to their own work. So it seems to me like these two things go together. Artists have always had to negotiate their roles as inevitably as the people who reflect culture or reflect history, but as participants in culture and history. They don't sit around to wait and reflect something, they are immediately participating in something, and very actively so.

They have to be able to understand something in some way about their times. And that includes the political and historical times, and in terms of their medium and how artists before them have dealt with it.

After September 11 I had the impression that people were overwhelmingly surprised by the event, that was one of the strongest reactions, sheer surprise and shock, as though this had come entirely out of the blue. As opposed to having any kind of sense that their country had been in constant warfare for many decades, this had never occurred to them. It took a lot of catching up even to convince them of that in a general sort of way.

It's a very useful stereotype to see the artist as someone who reacts instinctively and immediately to what's happening to them at the moment, as someone who emotes. That's the stereotype that my students are given. They come to me as 19-year-olds, these are the notions that are fairly deeply ingrained, that are really difficult to dislodge. The artist is reduced to the most amorphous being who is poked and then reacts in a jerky way

to exactly what is happening to them at that moment. The results of their work is a record of that.

And even if there were a serious commitment to self-expression, that would be something. But that has been stripped down. They've learned that the self changes, they've gotten that much from the watered down MTV version of Post-modernism, that self is not some sort of non-changing thing that stays with you at all times, that it is a plural thing, shifting all the time. Self is the thing that at every instant is different, therefore it has no history. "I'm reacting now." They have no history and feel no responsibility.

DW: What has been the response of artists to the post-September 11 events?

RB: What concerned me were the visible, successful artists, not so much the "emerging artists," that's where the silence comes in. The silence comes in at the level of the Whitney Biennial, which was this year and which was remarkably devoid, it was a repressed manifestation of something, there is an eerie silence from the upper echelon of the art world, which is troubling. That is accompanied by a devaluing of artists of Middle Eastern background, who were at one time on the covers of art magazines. Compared to other realms of cultural production, other areas in the humanities, the visual arts have been remarkably quiet. That really concerns and troubles me. Perhaps it's because the upper echelon of the art world in New York and Los Angeles is composed of millionaires. I know that many of these artists employ 10-15 full-time assistants, they are their own businesses.



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