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MYARTSPACE IS A FRESH NEW COMMUNITY-BASED WEBSITE FOR ESTABLISHED ARTISTS, EMERGING ARTISTS, ASPIRING ARTISTS, PHOTOGRAPHERS AND MEMBERS OF THE ART WORLD - TEACHERS, COLLECTORS, MUSEUMS, GALLERIES, ART BUYERS. MEMBERS WILL BE ABLE ESTABLISH THEIR PRESENCE IN THE COMMUNITY, BUILD AND DISPLAY GALLERIES OF THEIR WORKS, PROMOTE THEIR WORKS AND CAREER, PARTICIPATE IN DIALOG, COMPETITION AND EVENTS, AND BUILD AN ONLINE STORE TO SELL PRODUCTS.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2007

Art Space Talk: Valerie Hird

I was introduced to the art of Valerie Hird by Laura Pabst of the Nohra Haime Gallery. Valerie is known for creating work that has a unique focus on cultural myths and their interaction with historical memory. Her research lead her to travel the world for eighteen years.

She has visited and traveled with semi-nomadic communities in Morocco, Turkey and Central Asia. Through the years she has also tackled the legacy of myth and metaphor within her own society-- the culture America consciously or unconsciously exports to the rest of the world.

Valerie believes that the fictionalization of history provides a rich and evocative tool for societies that rely on oral narrative. That wealth of metaphor, fact and cultural myth was her creative home while abroad for eighteen years. Valerie now focuses on her own oral traditions-- based on radio stations, television news, and other forms of media that bombard us with opinions and information on a daily basis.

Valerie finds that these sources utilize a similar strategy compared to the oral histories she embraced while traveling-- they are equally rich as a source for visual imagery.



Gentlemen, When The Bell Rings, Shake Hands and Come Out Fighting by Valerie Hird

Brian Sherwin: Valerie, you studied at Beloit College and the Rhode Island School of Design. Who were your mentors at the time? Also, can you recall any of your early influences?

Valerie Hird: Beloit College was where I learned that my interest in archeology and in anthropology would never become a career. It was clear to me in my first year that visual art was my primary, all-consuming obsession; other disciplines could only influence and inform. I transferred to RISD where the teachings of Dean Richardson and the critiques of Richard Merkin brought me to focus less on technique and more on content. They told me to break my fingers and learn how to see. They exposed me to my early influences; Vulliard and Bonnard, Robert Henri and David Levine. I was also fortunate to work as a conservator for the RISD museum under Diane Johnson and the wonderful curators Christopher Monkhouse and Eleanor Fairweather. Together they opened my world to the rich expanses of visual language in the decorative and design arts. This rich terrain stood in contrast to three colorful years as an apprentice to a Sicilian family of picture framers and commercial restorers (I was working my way through RISD).

Between those two worlds, my education beyond rural Vermont ; my original home, was assured.



Lysistrata Revisited by

Valerie Hird

BS: Since that time you have held several art-related positions, including: Conservator at the Museum of Rhode Island School of Design, Director of the Passepartout Gallery, Trustee for the Vermont Arts Council, and you have instructed at several educational institutions. How were you able to find balance between these positions and creating personal art? I know from experience that it can be difficult to take on responsibilities while remaining active with your art at the same time.

VH: So many disciplines feed my artist practice. In addition to archeology and anthropology I also love to read and write. At one time I wanted to apprentice to a Romany family to learn flamenco dancing. About the time I start to feel comfortable in my life is about the time I think I'm not doing enough. So 'balance' as a lifestyle concept has always made me nervous. I've learned to use travel as a means of gaining insights into lives and identities other than my own in order to build a mental warehouse of remembered experience from which to draw imagery. I've traveled with Uzbek herdsman through 1000 year old juniper forests, made a diet of fermented yogurt and grazed sheep on glaciers. I've had the privilege of working with archeologists in the Great Western Desert of Egypt.

Under the watchful eye of an ancient librarian, I've gazed at 12th century Arabic texts in southern Morocco and had the distinct pleasure of swapping stories with a Sufi mystic while hiking in Turkey.

If I spent too much time in the studio I feel trapped. If I'm away too long I begin to feel fractured and irritable. Generally, I find outside jobs to be an impetus toward constructing a productive studio schedule. I try to put in about 30 hours a week during the academic year. My teaching syllabi usually relate to projects confronting me in the studio. So my students are sometimes integrated into my artistic practice. Having said all that, my time can often feel out of my control. My solution is to travel without a cell phone or internet. Away from daily stress I can look at life through another lens and reset my internal clock.



In God(s) We Trust by

Valerie Hird

BS: Valerie, you have been represented by Nohra Haime Gallery since the early 90s. Nohra has represented you at several major venues: Art Chicago and Art Miami-- just to name a few. It seems you have built very good rapport with Nohra. What does it take to establish a strong bond between artist and gallery owner... as you have done with Nohra?

VH: It is very important to understand the opportunities a dealer can provide, it is also very important to understand a gallery's limitations and where you yourself must carve out opportunities. The more clearly those roles can be defined, the easier it will be for artist and dealer to work together cooperatively for mutual benefit. I was aided by having owned and run a gallery before working with Nohra so our relationship has the advantage of my 'dual perspective'. Nohra is also an unusual gallery owner. Instead of focusing all her energies on sales, her strategies are aimed toward advancing an artist's career. Having a dealer truly believe in your aesthetic makes those lean financial times spent floundering in obscurity much more bearable.

BS: Valerie, I understand that you have been extending your work on cultural myths and their interaction with historical memory. Much of your inspiration is drawn from years of visiting and traveling with semi-nomadic communities in Morocco, Turkey and Central Asia. Can you go into further detail about how these communities have influenced you and how your art will continue to explore these issues?

VH: My time observing and traveling with semi-nomadic tribes was central to my interest in oral narrative as a tool for recording cultural history. Myth and metaphor are mixed with fact and fiction within their historical memory. A particular location would provoke the memory of a past event -- thus geography became a series of oral/visual narratives that would change depending on the memory and tribe of the orator.

So much of my time is spent collecting stories. Narrative is a constant in my work. I also layer paintings with historical imagery to give context and depth. My 2003 *Cycles of Faith, Cycles of Fiction* was all about appropriating formats from 12th century Spanish and Persian illuminated texts to form a strata for contemporary cultural events.

But as globalization escalated the stress on tribal lifestyles, it seemed increasingly

irrelevant to remain focused solely on the icons of a cultural past. And with the rise of fundamentalist Islam it became increasingly difficult to find people willing to host a white American female with limited language skills. So I altered my imagery to focus on people instead of their landscape. I began researching individuals from both the East and West who have been stressed by recent religious and political turmoil. For the past five years I've been absorbed by these manifestations as they play out in daily lives. Insights into other cultures become comprehensible when the stresses involved are filtered through the lens of specific individuals; their lives and their interaction with their communities.



Lest We Forget by

Valerie Hird

BS: Valerie, recent news events have provoked a shift in the direction of your art. I've read that you are concerned with the legacy of myth and metaphor within the context of your own society, within contemporary Western culture itself. You feel that this is the culture we consciously or unconsciously export to the rest of the world. Can you go into further detail about this... what concerns do you have? I understand that your studies have lead you to focus on war and how war plays a part in these cultural changes...

VH: While researching the rise of American fundamentalism I was struck by the similarities in vocabulary between faiths under siege and their embrace of violence in a just cause. Pope Urban's peculiar Christian take on the 'Might Makes Right' concept by exempting holy warriors from the first commandment continues to be a rallying banner for a number of religious/nationalist conquests. It seems a recurring paradox that men/women are willing to 'march into hell' for a 'just cause'. As Americans we are passionate about 'justice', and deeply concerned about morality and ethics, but wildly divergent on what constitutes a 'righteous cause'. Americans believe in the heroic myth. It is present in every facet of our popular culture.

I have a son who is twenty three. When the present war with Iraq broke out he was the exact age my ex-husband was when he was drafted into the Vietnam War. My son's perception of war in 2003 was based entirely on the action movies and videos games that we export with such success to Europe and Latin America . I became intrigued with the differences in our perceptions of victory and heroic myth. Thomas Hirschhorn's exhibition 'Utopia' using the camouflage pattern on military fatigues as the ubiquitous world-wide fashion statement testifies to the cultural ambivalence toward violence and the attraction of the commercial heroic myth.



Great Minds at Play by

Valerie Hird

BS: Speaking of war... in January 2006, your principal gallery – the

Nohra Haime Gallery in Manhattan-- presented an exhibition of your work which juxtaposed some of the historic and contemporary ambiguities surrounding war. Can you tell us more about the work that was included in this exhibit? I understand that it involved aspects of graphic novels and video games...

VH: It did. The 2006 exhibition Myths Now and Then was an examination of the substructure of our culture of violence. Each painting had a strong narrative structure layered with imagery appropriated from medieval paintings of epic or heroic battle scenes. Like the originals, they seduce the viewer with a brilliant pageant of color into an appreciation of the heroic ideal. But in Shake Hands Gentlemen the reference to the relative civility of structured combat seems inappropriate when applied to the contemporary combatants.

Killing Time was based on a conversation I had with a local veteran. Recently returned from combat in Iraq , he saw no irony in playing the Doom and Halo video games as the preferred means of decompressing between duty hours.

My work on paper juxtaposed compositional forms from illuminated medieval texts with contemporary images taken from media coverage of war. In Transition Team, the apostles, the biblical embodiment of the heroic ideal, are replaced by their equivalents from American and British action films; seated in gilded splendor, they are surrounded by sectarian violence.

BS: Valerie, can you discuss you artistic process... how do you start a painting? Also, how did you feel making the jump from traditional works of art to the use of animation? Will you continue to explore animation or perhaps digital art? Film?

VH: Any visual vocabulary I use is dictated by the concept image. Painting has a long track record that is specifically germane when having a visual conversation about historical memory. My process begins with research, empirical to start and then supported by text. The gestation period of any body of work is about 5 - 7

years. My use of animation, as developed by William Kentridge, was a logical extension of my drawing process. Digital animation using a succession of drawn images scanned into a computer, prolongs process and allows me to interrogate every element in the project. I am using animation as part of my Maiden Voyages Project.

Of course, when all is said and done, the artistic process remains a bit of a mystery to me. I try not to analyze it too closely because clarity doesn't confer success. I wish the experience of painting was cumulative, but even after 30 years of professional practice, good painting demands fresh invention from me every single time. Sigh.



Killing Time by Valerie

Hird

BS: Valerie, what projects are you working on at this time? When do you plan to reveal some of your current work? Do you have any upcoming exhibitions planned?

VH: My work will be included in the Bridge Art Fair in London in October. The Nohra Haime Gallery will be showing Hero Worship my new body of paintings

and animation in a one person show at Red Dot during Art Basel, Miami in December of this year. The work represents my most recent examination of the manifestations of the heroic myth within our culture. It's both serious and sardonic.

The Maiden Voyages project mentioned in the last question is the result of correspondence with women from the Middle East and myself. Each month I collected my own and four e-mailed diaries written about a single day, the same day once a month for a year. The goal of the project is to bring a measure of depth to our knowledge of women from the Middle East . American perceptions are largely based on media sound bites articulated within the narrow vocabulary of war. The results of those diaries will be translated into a series of large-scale drawings structured as timelines which can be exhibited traditionally in a gallery setting as well as on-line in animated sequences. I will be going to Amman Jordan to work on the drawings and animation for Maiden Voyages in the spring of next year. I anticipate exhibitions of the project to begin late in 2008. But images from both projects and information on their exhibition will be available on my website starting next month.

BS: Valerie, do you have any advice for artists who are just starting out?

VH: Work as much as you can. Elevate your craft as much as you can. Expand your visual vocabulary as much as possible. Don't base your research solely on computer generated information. Active engagement with the real world is the best source for concepts and imagery. Having and being able to articulate a great idea, is the best way to get exposure. Competency in business, packing/freighting, computer software and writing wouldn't hurt either!

BS: Finally, is there anything else you would like to say about your art or the artworld?

VH: I've never been able to figure out who exactly constitutes 'the art world'. You

probably have a better handle on it than I. Me, I've said enough about myself.

You can learn more about Valerie Hird and her art by visiting her website, www.valeriehird.com, or by visiting the Nohra Haime Gallery (41 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022). Also, feel free to read my other interviews by visiting the following page: www.myartspace.com/interviews

Take care, Stay true,

Brian Sherwin