

War Drawings

Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz | Wellesley College, Professor of art emerita

This is a suite of 50 to 70 drawings I made mostly in the summer of 2005, but which I continued until the fall of 2010.

The first drawing I made in my suite of war drawings was stimulated by feelings of shock and horror at the bombings in the London Underground on July 7, 2005. Inspired by images already available to the public in newspapers and through the Internet, my project was certainly not to add any information to the already existing Associated Press archive, or to further record news events; I was clearly not documenting. I drew simply to manage and to express my own sense of alarm.

Responding subjectively to journalistic facts with inks, charcoal, smudges, rubbings, and erasures on heavy drawing paper, I strove to embody a more visceral sense of violence than could be manifested in the more disinterested photos I was looking at. Since my practice required no obligation to the veracity or detail of fact, I was free to imbue each drawing with my own distress and empathy: did this make them “truer” or “less true”? Unlike Goya—who famously inscribed his “Disasters of War” etchings with the words, “I saw this, and “I was there”—I was not present at the scene, depending solely on mediated images. Neither the product of an eyewitness or a photojournalist, were my works “truer” or “less true”?

My drawings use the archive but do not comprise one. Drawing at a time when political violence seemed ubiquitous to me—with bombings in Madrid, Iraq, Russia, Israel—I sought images from anywhere and everywhere that captured a certain magnitude of violence and that elicited a generalized sense of empathy in me, regardless of which specific conflicts they represented. Time was compressed; victims of current events became interchangeable with those from earlier wars. In lifting my subjects out of the context of their documentary sources I knew I was forfeiting their concrete power to make pointed moral commentary about specific situations. But de-contextualizing them allowed me to focus on violence itself, violence that supersedes the specifics of politics and geography, violence that is and has been our omnipresent, universal tool to resolve disputes.

It was but a short step, then, to leave publicly sourced photographs behind altogether and do a photo shoot with a posed model in my studio, to use my own photographs as the source for my drawings. No matter what the source of imagery, the experience of drawing and the results obtained were striking in their equivalence. Photographs of simulated poses in my studio triggered the same response in me while drawing as actual documents from current events; sometimes the most “real” sources resulted in the most abstract drawings and, conversely, my studio models provoked the most “realistic-seeming” drawings. My own photographs offered

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more detailed information, yet left me freer to invent. Now, only titles distinguish the differing sources.

Finally, I forsook all existing imagery and invented abstract prospects of palpable destruction that seemed the realest of all, ripping and burning my paper, staining it red—yet they were “of” nothing, Were these drawings “truer,” or “less true”?

A small handful of the photographs I used for source material may become iconic representations of a particular conflict in time and place, as did the famous [napalm girl](#). But most will have been seen only in shades of grey on newsprint, blurry and indistinct, to be thrown out with the daily recycling. My drawings, using heavy, stable archival drawing paper and high quality art materials, enter the quite different context of art, made to last. Selecting and inventing victims of violence as fit subjects for art, the drawings implicitly honor them, saying: this is important, remember this. They are meant to be awful and beautiful at once. If they are beautiful enough, we will keep looking. As Nietzsche says in *The Will to Power*: “We have art lest we perish of the truth.”

Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz is a visual artist whose signature [work](#) employs materiality in the form of rough cast plaster surfaces, on which she paints small, intermittent *trompe d’oeil* details in oil, lately focusing on the fires and detritus of war. A fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation in 2007 supported three series of work, which continued exploring the question of how to make meaningful art from the subject of political violence. Spatz-Rabinowitz's work may be found in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Addison Gallery of American Art, the Rose Art Museum, and the Worcester Art Museum among others. She is currently preparing for a residency for 2013 at [theartticircle.org](#), in which she will travel to the North Pole for two weeks on an ice-class tall ship, in preparation for a future installation project. To learn more about the artist's work, please visit [www.espatzrabinowitz.com](#).