us Not Pine After an Absent God

Unveil at Tiger Strikes Asteroid (January 8-29, 2010) gathers together a number of complimentary and, as I will hope to show, conflicting attempts to investigate the contemporary power of the art object or image to disclose, unveil or unconceal. And the exhibition purposely leaves obscure precisely what art unveils. Whereas for Corey Antis, unveiling has distinctly phenomenological connotations, investigating the manner in which painting unveils unveiling as such, in Ben Pranger’s sculptures the notion of unveiling is cast in prophetic tones: both secular, as in his interest in the scientific messianism of Buckminster Fuller, and sacred, as in his reference to the Book of Revelations. However, for my purposes here I would like to simply focus on the problematic dialectic that emerges between the sacred and profane notions of unveiling in Hunter Stabler’s Sator Square, Adam Parker Smith’s collages and Donna Ruff’s Aureola Series.

Hunter Stabler’s Sator Square seems paradigmatic, precisely because of its mock sophistication, of a contemporary impulse that fetishizes craft and invests in the hand made a redemptive force. The intricacy and complexity of Stabler’s cut-paper does not serve a merely decorative function. The various cuts, twists, and folds in the design serve to unfold a latent, invisible mystery—the mystery in this case of the Sator Square. Without going into the archeological record in detail, this ancient graffiti whose earliest appearance is traced back to 79 AD, is a latin palindrome that spells out Rotas Opera Tenet Aereop. Arepo (the sower [Farmer] Arepo has [as] works wheels [a plough]). Since the palindromic itself contains the anagram Pater Nostra (the Lord’s Prayer) that can be made into the Greek cross, the remaining letters, A and O, letters symbolizing alpha and omega, some interpreters have suggested that it functioned as an early code that enabled early Christians to clandestinely announce their presence to other Christians. Due to these esoteric connotations, the Sator Square has entered into folk traditions and contemporary new age spirituality as a magical talisman capable of warding off calamity. Isn’t the suggestion here that art is itself a talisman, drawing on hidden forces which either await or have been bombed. If such an hypothesis is tenable, the work assumes an explosive new dimension. Ruff’s paintings would appear to chart a middle ground between the sacred and profane. Her tasteful abstractions we are instructed allude to Afghani gold and Islamic art (traditions of which I am woefully ignorant). The title, however, clearly centers the series within the legacy of Christian art works (aureola refers to the golden cloud surrounding for the most part the Godhead in Christian paintings). This melding of eastern and western traditions could indeed be read as symptomatic of the ease with which the late liberal subject appropriates the foreign in a blind and dehistoricized manner, following the dictates of her “good taste.” However, when looking at these paintings, I could not but conjure up images of the aerial views of Afghanistan’s rugged terrain and the geometrical patterns that take shape in these paintings, I could not but conjure up images of the “developing world,” we would be wise to remind ourselves that a significant portion of the concrete buildings had to be build without steel reinforcement and that the population of Port-au-Prince has skyrocketed to 2 million due to the influx of the desperately poor from the countryside. To fully understand this situation, light needs to be shed on the fault line lying deep beneath the recent earthquake: the fault line of American imperialism in Haiti.

From 1957 to 1986, the U.S. supported the corrupt dictatorships of Papa Doc Duvalier and then Baby Doc Duvalier (according to some estimates, Haiti owes $1.3 billion in external debt and 40% of it is due to the U.S.-backed Duvaliers). Baby Doc opened the Haitian economy to U.S. capital in the 1970s and 1980s, and American agricultural imports flooded the market, destroying peasant agriculture. Hundreds of thousands of people flocked to the slums of Port-au-Prince to the U.S.-backed Duvaliers. Baby Doc Duvalier (according to some sources), in the same year of his election (1991).

Although Bill Clinton sent troops to Haiti to restore Aristide to power in 1994, it was on the condition that he implement the U.S. neoliberal plan. Since he never fully cooperated, the U.S. eventually imposed an economic embargo on the country, driving workers and peasants deeper and deeper into poverty. Finally, George W. Bush’s government collaborated with Haiti’s ruling elite in 2004 to back death squads that toppled the

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Salami is cruelly literal in this regard and Hella Diamonds is a close second. Whereas the literal in Sator Square served to initiate the viewer into an esoteric depth, with Smith’s vision we have no comforting exit from the piteous colonization of our desire by the commodity. Such truths, however, by no means provide an echo of a complex and vulnerable universe, as the news release suggest. Rather these collages seem to expose a universe buried. If I may borrow a formulation of Jacques Rancière, beneath the rubbish of its frenzied consumption. But to

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