

When Art and Events Collide

PHOTO REALISM

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"THE ATTACK ON THE WORLD TRADE CENTER IS NOT THE LENS THROUGH WHICH I WANT PEOPLE TO READ THIS WORK": THE GALLERY ANNOUNCEMENT DETAIL OF DAVENPORT'S *BOMBARDMENT* (2001).

In one color photograph, a man is falling down the side of a building, his body splayed and twisted in midair. In another, a sooty cloud explodes from behind a group of boxy urban buildings, staining the sky next to a column of billowing white smoke. But these are not newspaper pictures from the scene of the World Trade Center attack—they're digitally collaged images by artist Nancy Davenport, whose show at Chelsea's Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery opened five days earlier (and continues at 526 West 26th Street through October 6). Seamlessly rendered, cleverly conceived, Davenport's photos also couldn't be more sickeningly timely.

That coincidental timeliness makes both the artist and her gallery nervous. "Some of the staff thought we should take it down," Klagsbrun says of the falling figure image, titled *Suicide*. "We don't want to offend people, but we also don't want to censor something just because it's very loaded now. This is not an exploitative show, and you have to be able to express ideas, even if they're very uncomfortable." Davenport, who has been developing this material over the past three years, doesn't want the work sensationalized, and she's loath to see individual images divorced from the series as a whole. But she's been forced to deal

with the question Klagsbrun poses: "Can a very emotional response question the strength and validity of an artwork?"

Davenport says her series—called "the apartments" for the generic, white-brick buildings where her staged events take place—arose "from thinking about certain dilemmas for an artist who wants to engage in a critical discourse, and thinking about what's happened with art's political engagement. It was really about disillusionment and the failures of ideology—certainly the ideologies of the late '60s and early '70s." Most of the photos involve what appear to be activist takeovers of buildings and small, often symbolic acts of resistance: A banner (N'EXPOSENT PAS) is unfurled, unmarked red flags are waved, a fire erupts on a cramped balcony, figures rappel down the side of a building. One of the photos—a man on the terrace of a high-rise aiming a pistol at a passing airplane—is a direct reference to Chris Burden's 1973 performance piece, *747*. Other pictures use photojournalistic touchstones as their sources, including images from Kent State and the terrorist attack at the 1972 Munich Olympics. "The specific historical references are very important to me," Davenport says. "I did decontextualize them, and they are about trying to have a certain distance,

but the kind of dialogue I'd hoped to provoke with this work is difficult now. The attack on the World Trade Center is certainly not the lens through which I want people to read this work."

But Davenport knows that lens can't be denied. "Obviously it's how everyone is going to see images like this for some time—it's inevitable, and any critical discussion of the work has to include that. So I'm thinking about that difficulty, but also wanting to be sensitive to people who might not want to look at pictures like this now." To that end, the artist has decided to post a statement, not yet written at press time, explaining her intentions. "I want to assert that there's no celebration in these images. I'm not supporting any ideology at all. The work is ambivalent about lost ideals and the collapse of ideology, and that obscurity is very important. But the relationship of terrorism to political activism is a very difficult thing to deal with right now."

The night before we spoke, Davenport had been rousted from her apartment by one of the many post-WTC bomb scares, so she sounded a bit shaken. But she was remarkably clearheaded, articulate, and anxious to keep work that she intended to be knotty and subtle from being exploited or eclipsed by current events. At her gallery for a meeting with Klagsbrun, she still hadn't decided whether or not

to remove the image of the plummeting man from her show, but she was adamant about not allowing it to be reproduced in the *Voice*. "I think that is one particular image that cannot in this context deal with any of the issues I'd wanted to," she says. "The suicide is another aspect of a more generalized loss of ideals, and the purpose of that image was not horror. These are not documents. These are digital collages, fictions. The purpose of them was not horror, and it was not sensationalism."

But her photograph can't help but resonate with images in the news, particularly the Associated Press shot that ran in color in *The New York Times* the day after the attack. In that picture, a man falls headfirst past the World Trade Center facade, his body silhouetted against its severe geometry. The elegance of the image and the horror of its subject are difficult to reconcile, and the decision to run it was controversial. But great photojournalism—and this is a perfect example of it—doesn't need justification. "Looking at these pictures in the news is part of the way the country deals with trauma," Davenport says. "Photography is often about trauma, but my work certainly isn't meant to create more of it. Still, I guess the meaning of my work is going to shift in ways I cannot even begin to sort through right now." □