NIGHTINGALES AND BOMBERS

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ABSTRACT

I received a FRCAA in 2016 to support research and development of a new body of artwork that uniquely combines low-relief sculptural elements with charcoal, gold leaf and ink drawings on cradled gessoed panels. This new work joins together complex layers of imagery and sculptural shapes. I completed the visual research in 2016 in Spain and London, England, documenting Spanish retablos and altars as well as World War II bomb sites that bore relation to specific locales noted in my grand-father’s war journals. My mother was seven years old and living in London when the war began in 1939. By 1940, she spent most of her days in bomb shelters – a make-shift underground classroom on the west side of London. Her recollection of these years included disparate details: being issued a gas mask; clambering underneath her school desk when air-raids sirens sounded; cracked porcelain toilets lining the streets after intense bombing; fond memories of a family rabbit named Bambi; VE Day celebrations; and songs she sang during her underground schooling. Much like the dichotomy of the epic and mundane found in my step-grandfather’s journals, I am moved by the powerful and unlikely combination of images of war with pet rabbits and songs like “This Old Man” (“Knick-Knack Paddy-Whack”).

RESEARCH

While photographing a neighborhood in London near Guildhall, I chanced upon an area that has remains of the original Roman wall that once fortified what is now the City of London. Dating back to 200 C.E. and largely untouched until the 19th century, the wall began to disappear at a fast clip with pre-modern developments in London. In some instances, new construction eclipsed the remaining wall; in other areas, the wall was destroyed. By the time World War II began, the Roman wall was almost entirely hidden or removed, and it wasn’t until the intensive bombing during the Blitz that much of the remaining wall was exploded ‘back into view.’ What could be saved of the wall has since been preserved.

STUDIO METHODS

In keeping with my interest in blended images of past and present (what I described in my proposal as “combining the mundane, trivial and quotidian with the extraordinary, monumental and catastrophic”), I have been conjoining images from the Blitz with subtle layers of colored ink patterns found at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Digging into the inked gesso with knives and carving tools, I have begun “un-earthing” Cretaceous-era dinosaurs that share common ancestry with modern-day birds. The net effect is a “time out of time” feeling and a linking of past with present. This work attempts to suggest a continuum, using material and methods that resonate with the concept as well: the limestone base contains calcified fossils of ancient creatures that ‘resurface’ when carved into.

Results

Consistent with the fusing of past and present that has occurred in this work thus far, I was able to research the Alcazar palace in Seville, a synthesis of Moorish and Christian influence built on Roman and Paleochristian ruins and now a UNESCO World Heritage site. The dimensional bas-relief elements that I am developing come directly from the observations I conducted in Spain, and include architectural embellishments of the interiors and exteriors of cathedrals – pultti (or cherubim); altar-piece details of flowing fabric, spires; varied gilt religious iconography; etc. I have also begun incorporating rusted metal interspersed with gilt into the surface of the gessoed panels: consistent with themes of the mundane with the sacred, I am energized by this and other unexpected turns in the work.

I am in the midst of examining how these complex layers of physical anthropology, history and religion will co-exist in the work, particularly in relation to Mircea Eliade’s notion of the rub between historical thinking and ahistorical mythos described in my original proposal, as I aim to avoid all sense of being prescriptive in the work. Suffice it to say that, as I delve deeper into my research, stronger interconnections appear between many seemingly disparate elements I am studying.

I currently have artwork in two exhibits: one is a curated invitational exhibition, Masters of Drawing: A Contemporary Survey (January 27 – April 8), at the Alden B. Dow Museum of Science and Art in Midland, MI; the other is a curated invitational exhibition, Birds and Bees, at the Lubéron Center for the Arts in Michigan City, IN (January 29 - June 2). This June, I will open a solo exhibition as the featured artist at ArtStart Gallery and Cultural Center in Rhinelander, WI. This exhibition will debut eight of the new works I have created as a result of this FRCAA, and I am completing applications for the following museums and galleries:

-Weatherspoon Gallery, Greensboro, NC
-London Museum, London, ON Canada
-Sculpture by the Lakes, Dorchester, England, UK
-Cooper Gallery, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, Scotland, UK

I am energized by the direction this new work is taking, and remain most grateful to the FRCAA committee for its vital support of my creative research.