

By Lisa Wainwright



Against a spectacularly rendered cityscape of gestural bravura where yellow, red and orange flames lick the sky above and caress the river below, a single iconic head looms out of the immediate foreground up into the space of the evocative scene. The figure's eyes are closed and her lips parted as if internalizing the landscape just behind her has left her in an altered state, one both remote from the viewer yet intimately close due to her presence at the very front of the composition. Our gaze is not met, but she fiercely pulls us in none-the-less. The blocky strokes of colored paint—lavender, yellow, red, orange, and pink—that describe the contours of her face, turns the visage into a dazzling surface one equal to the mesmerizing factored richness of the background painting. The tension of the two parts—the face and the landscape—is compositionally intense and subtly psychological. This is Susanna Coffey's *Stream* from 2003, part of a larger body of work that juxtaposes the artists' well-known self-portraits with a series of war images culled from the press around the time of the second gulf war, the 9/11 attack, and the U.S. invasion of Haiti. [order and dates?] In stunning picture after picture, Coffey serves up various self-portraits whose modest accoutrements locate us in a particularly contemporary moment, but are then set against depictions of war, terror, and military aggression—the ubiquitous haunting of a world gone mad.

Like J.M.W Turner's romantic depictions of the Burning of the Houses of Parliament [date], Coffey is captivated by a beauty she identifies in the catastrophic images from the media (Turner was actually at the scene), and wishes to artistically chronicle the same dark historical moments. And yet her relationship to the subject is complex as her recording of the event is redolent of both the horror of the scene depicted—the bombing of Baghdad, the carnage in Haiti—and the sublime wonder of the romantic form she employs to depict it. And so she inserts herself at the heart of the painting, thereby outing her own dilemma as a painter in a time of political strife. Again, the position of her head in the foreground outs the viewer as well by calling us to question what is our real relationship to the semiotics of war that surrounds us on a daily basis. Coffey's ever present head, on the one hand an armature for seductive painting—or how mimesis can serve abstraction, here also acts as a mediator between the viewer and the scene that rises up behind the uncanny stillness of the artist's presence. As the late Robert Rosenblum wrote of a related strategy in the work of Caspar David Friedrich, "...the presence of static figures, seen from behind and frozen into place by the starkly simple symmetries of the compositions, permits the spectator a maximum of empathy, for he can easily take his place beside or within these faceless beings who seem transfixed and absorbed by the luminous spectacle before them."

Coffey tracks a moment that must never be forgotten and she does this through the means of an art-making that is imaginative, complicated, open-ended, and alluring. Like Gericault's Raft of the Medusa or Picasso's Guernica, history painting will always serve a culture well as a unique measure of what has been and as an example of what truly creative endeavors can teach. As the cultural critic Carol Becker has written, "What is almost unspeakable, what cannot be contained is allowed to live through the form of art." Susanna Coffey provides this place of "unspeakable" contemplation in a language thoroughly engaging to behold.

Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, New York: Harber and Row, Publishers, 1975, p. 21.

Carol Becker, "Hervert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art," *The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society and Social Responsibility*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 118.