

Selma Waldman In Memoriam (1931 – 2008)

©Susan Noyes Platt, Ph.D.

“Lust for power and territory is the same lust that kills man, women, children and the land itself” Selma Waldman

On a bitter day last winter, I accompanied Selma Waldman to the last demonstration that she attended before her death in early April 2008. “Shut Down Guantanamo” sponsored by the ACLU and Amnesty International on January 11, 2008 began at 4PM with a demonstration of the inhumane practice of waterboarding. A young man faced down on a board to which he was tied, had a wet towel over his face and water poured over his head into a bucket. Even in the simulation, the volunteer felt as though he was about to drown. Knowing it was only a simulation did not lessen the horror of the experience for him. During the speeches that followed by politicians and political activists, Selma and I held up enlarged images of one of her waterboarding drawings from the **Black Book of Aggressors**. It scrupulously depicts one means of waterboarding. Selma urgently said in my ear, “But it shouldn’t be only Guantanamo, what about the black sites, the other places of torture.” With her deep knowledge, she always understood that one place is connected to so many other places; one manifestation of torture connects to the will to power everywhere, the will to oppress, the desire to destroy the human spirit.

My first contact with Selma came through Radical Women, the dynamic socialist feminist group based in Columbia City who urged me to seek her out in her tiny house in Rainier Valley. When I saw her work, I immediately recognized that she was a major artist. I included her in an article I wrote in 1999 on politically engaged art.¹ After my article appeared, she wrote me a detailed letter both protesting and praising what I had said about her. Thus began our lengthy correspondence and friendship. As a writer on art who was sympathetic to artists who address social issues, I was someone with whom she could talk frankly. We often had conversations about political issues, as well as the banality of much of contemporary art and the art “world.” She wrote a whole pamphlet about the Jonathan Borofky’s *Hammering Man*, the enormously tall black steel silhouette outside the Seattle Art Museum, as a “comedic consummation and absurd materialization of the current trivializing notion of the worker in Western society.” Another letter went to Richard Andrews, then director of the Henry Art Gallery, concerning James Turrell’s Skyspace *Knowing Light*. : “Mr. Turrell’s high-end sky-peep gazebo, customized like a corporate stadium box, is a viewing extravagance with a blind spot: none who enter will be able to see as far the burning skies of Iraq... rather viewers will only be able to peer up at a predictably privileged curtain of forgetfulness. “

Only months before she died she wrote an eight page letter to Artists Trust on “Refusing to be Nominated for the Fourth Time Around in the Twining Humber Competition” “By virtue of its current petty format and protocol, the Twining Humber grant has manipulated lifetime achievement as one more familiar strategy of competition.” Selma took continual delight in pointing out the foibles and misplaced efforts of the established art institutions in Seattle and elsewhere.

¹ “Politically Indirect: Outing the Activist Artist” Art Papers, September/October 1999, 32 – 34

Every detail of Selma Waldman's life contained her urgent engagement with social and political issues, her resistance to silence, and her belief that creative voices could win over forces of oppression. Her answering machine, for example, had long, inspiring messages from authors like Bertold Brecht or Roque Dalton about resistance and creativity followed by her crisp "leave messages for Waldman here" as a call to arms.

Selma Waldman grew up in Kingsville, Texas, deep in South Texas, where everyone was employed by the mighty King Ranch. The giant cattle ranch employed hundreds of Chicano workers. She belonged to the only Jewish family in the town. Although her own family was middle class (her father ran a shoe store, as well as being a boxer and a singer), she learned about oppression as a way of life in her early years from Chicana/o friends. From Kingsville, she went to art school at the University of Texas, Austin from 1948 to 1952. Even her earliest work demonstrates her outstanding skill in rendering the human body. She was immediately recognized with exhibitions and awards. But in 1971 she consciously withdrew from traditional art exhibitions, and its partner, self promotion, in order to pursue a commitment to social justice. The seeds for this dramatic decision had been planted ten years earlier.

She moved to Seattle in the late 1950s. In 1959 her life was forever changed by a two year Fulbright Fellowship in Berlin. A 1960 Berlin preview of the documentary *Mein Kampf* profoundly affected her with the deep ideological roots of the Holocaust. She immediately began a series of large drawings of dehumanized and distorted figures based on images and accounts of the Warsaw ghetto. These are the first works on the Nazi holocaust by a Jewish American artist to be acquired by a German museum. Collectively titled **Falling Man**, the ninety drawings are near life size representations; they were dramatically installed hanging from the ceiling and stairwell of the Jewish Museum in Berlin shortly after she completed them.

On March 21, 1960 came another shock: the front page photographs of the Sharpeville Massacre, in South Africa, photographs of police shooting at an unarmed crowd of civilians, killing 69 people, including 8 women and 10 children. Among the 180 injured were 31 women and 19 children. She immediately decided to deeply commit her art to a "struggle to end genocide and racism."

For Waldman, the human figure rendered in charcoal and chalk is a metaphor for the fragility of human life. She called her work **Graphikos** "the practice of bonding the viscerally exposed archetypes of war, genocide and violence to the demands of witness, the passion for justice, and the discipline of drawing . . ." ² Specifically in reference to apartheid in South Africa, she created the **Brutus series** (based on the poetry of Dennis Brutus³), black and white drawings depicting the police beating and arresting

² Statement by the Artist, *Absence/Presence: The Artistic Memory of Holocaust and Genocide*, Katherine Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, 1999, 58.

³ Dennis Brutus is a major South African poet who was active in the anti Apartheid struggle and is still active today in struggles for justice. He was jailed on Robben Island for 18 months in 1963 then fled to the United States as a political exile. Steve Biko was arrested by police at a road blockade under the 1967 Terrorism Act. It is worth noting the language of this Act in South Africa as it has unfortunate parallels with what is happening today in the United States. "Section 6 of the Act allowed someone suspected of involvement in terrorism - which was very broadly defined as anything that might "endanger the maintenance of law and order" - to be detained for an indefinite period without trial on the authority of a senior police officer. Since there was no requirement to release information on who was being held, people subject to the Act tended to disappear."

Steve Biko, the well known leader of the anti-apartheid struggle. Waldman's active black and white drawings depict the force of the blows as conveyed in Brutus's poetry: "Biko, you know/Resisted the terrors/ confronted by them/ he braced himself to die/ even as their clubs pulped his brain." The drawings from the 1980s were the first time that she represented police brutality, a theme that would continue in the last two decades of her career.

The endurance, resistance and suffering of women appears everywhere in her work. **Unearthly Grief** makes indirect reference to a German expressionist artist, Kathe Kollwitz's depiction of Black Anna, leader of a peasant resistance in the sixteenth century. Waldman's large drawing embodies resistance to oppression in its tangle of lines that emerge from near abstraction into a face distorted by grief and strong arms raised in anger. Waldman called this the "archetype of the unspeakable"

Unearthly Grief also refers to the Russian village wailer, the woman who grieves for her community. In the 1990s, Waldman began to don a weeping mask and with two other Jewish women demanded peace with justice in Israel/Palestine and an end to the occupation. She together with other women assumed the role of the weeping woman as the Sisters of Bat Shalom, in solidarity with the Israeli Bat Shalom and the Palestinian activist organization, the Jerusalem Center for Women. She took those same masks to Berlin in 2001, where two days after the September 11 catastrophes, she organized a protest against the occupation of Palestine and in support of freedom. Waldman also worked frequently in collaboration with Women in Black, the Israeli-based peace group opposing all forms of aggression and oppression'

The elemental struggle for survival is the subject of the **Man and Bread** series. Elie Wiesel who vividly described the struggle to the death for one piece of bread in *Night*⁴ was one reference point, but Waldman understood that the struggle for food moves across cultures and histories. She dedicated the series to, among others, "all the human targets of genocide and slavery who have had the bread of humiliation forced on them by the pillager, the plunderers, and the barbarians of Western Civilization." In this series, we can see her extraordinary facility in drawing, from scrupulous attention to realistic detail to sweeping emotional lines that tell us of the grief of the starving. One of these works was still in her studio at her death, unfinished, and very much of the present moment.⁵ IT could be representing the nightmare of Gaza Strip, blockaded and invaded by Israel

⁴ Bantam Books, 1960.

⁵ One of the few publications on her work is *The Man and the Loaf of Bread, including Brotfresser Mid Dem Messer, He Who Devours Bread and Pulls a Knife and Das Ringen Um Brot, The Battle for Bread*, Polly Friedlander Gallery, 1971. In the Selma Waldman Archives is also a partial copy of a pamphlet on the theme of the Struggle for Bread in Germany during the 1920s with the work of well known German expressionists like George Grosz and Otto Dix. Other literary quotations in the catalog are Jorge Semprun, *The Long Voyage*, Harrison Salisbury, *The 900 Days: the Siege of Leningrad*, Yuri Voronov, *Blockade Jottings*, Chinua Achebe *Ignazio Silone, Bread and Wine*, Lewis Nkosi, *Stories from South Africa*, Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, and Richard Wright

during the winter of 2008-09. Selma would certainly have joined the protests against Israeli brutality and aggression.

In response to the accounts of violence by police, military, and paramilitary in Bosnia- Herzogovenia in 1992 - 1995, she created the 80 small drawings of the **Altars of Fear, Naked/Aggression Series**, (1998-2003). She used brown paper taken from a spiral memory book with the perforated edges still visible, an intentional format that speaks to the need to remember these events. The drawings represent combatants committing specific atrocities such as beating prisoners, rape, and random shooting. Also in a larger size is the *Skelani Stalker*, an armed irregular in a region called Skelani, naked from the waist down carrying his weapon. Waldman connects

\ of lust and war, shooting and sex, violence and loss of humanity. Framed in vertical groups of three that are installed as a continuous wall as a prolonged gesture of protest.

Naked /Aggression: The Black Book of Aggressors (I – IV)(2005-2006) are also framed to form walls, each with 40 drawings that bear witness to the degradation of human beings and the systematic abuse of power in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and elsewhere. Left unfinished when Waldman died, the **Black Book of Aggressors** would have included two hundred drawings and eight walls. Drawn on 9 x 12” heavy black paper (also taken from a spiral memory book), the works glow with brilliant colors of blue, orange, yellow, green. But these colors are not decorative, they correspond to aspects of the torture: yellow and orange relate to electrical torture, brown to excrement, red to blood. In sequences of five or six drawings the specific subjects include beating with chains, sticks, guns, abuse of women, degradation by forcing dog like behavior, electric shock, bright lights, force feeding of hunger strikers, extreme positions, prisoners immobilized in their own shit, and water boarding.

To give just one example, **Testicles V**, a red and blue chalk on black paper, depicts a prisoner sprawled helplessly over a stool with his hands shackled to his ankles. Two soldiers on either side give him electric shocks. His body arches in pain. One soldier holds the wires directly to the prisoners’ testicles, the other sends the shock from a box. The red is the red of fire, of electricity, of pain, of torture.

Her drawing both witnesses and resists the depravity of injustice and torture. She searched for archetypes. Her theme is that the perpetration of violence takes away an individual's humanity, abuser and victim are locked in one energy field, that is like sex,

they join together with energy, but in this energy field, they are killing and being killed. Her lines are discontinuous, they do not allow us to relax and enjoy the flow of the body. There are many short tight, taut lines that speak of the violation of the human spirit as it perpetrates violence on helpless people.

Waldman saw that these problems are in every country, there is no difference from one place and another.

Her final wall would have reconfigured Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Young* (1820 – 23) to address atrocities world-wide. She described it to me in a letter of March 13, 2006 "I am also planning to recapitulate the Goya SATURN painting on larger black sheets reconfigured to witness to the gestures and uniforms of specific devourers of their own people." Dozens of surviving notes refer to the details of acts in countries all over the world that she would have included. I am imagining this work, the drama of the huge looming Goya god of war, with his haunted eyes, as he consumes his own son, but in her work it would have been victims in atrocities across the planet.

The House Raid was Selma Waldman's final large unfinished work. Starting, from specific photographs of soldiers raiding houses in Iraq, it assimilates a lifetime of study and confrontation with the forces of violence in our society. Ironically, in the end, her own house was invaded by the forces of society. Only twenty days after her death, the landlord insisted that the house be emptied. The intense layers of her life represented in that house have lost their setting forever.

Selma was active in the street as well as through her art. For the anti-Apartheid and Civil Rights movement in Seattle, she published flyers, resisted police brutality, and went to jail. She created art work that supported the African National Congress, such as posters for mass demonstrations and sit ins in Seattle. From 1969 she collaborated with the Liberation Support Movement led by Don Barnett in Vancouver Canada. She donated drawings to educational books on Civil Rights and on leaders of resistance in Africa. Her dramatic shift from the grand scale of the art for art sake figure drawings of her early years, to small illustrations for political pamphlets, tells us exactly how deeply Waldman committed herself to social justice. As part of Women in Black and Palestinian Solidarity groups she contributed posters, installations, signs, and her own active presence.

Few artists succeed in both political engagement and aesthetic expression without one part of the equation overwhelming the other. Selma Waldman balanced these two disparate worlds, both in her art work and in her life. As she produced hundreds of drawings, she demonstrated against war, genocide, and torture, and in favor of justice, peace and reconciliation. Her dozens of posters, installations, masks, and performances tell us that she was as committed to protesting injustice in the public arena as she was to her studio practice. She brought her acute aesthetics to demonstrations, and her political engagement to her art. Day after day Waldman penetrated to the heart of darkness and returned with detailed, factual information. She embedded those facts in drawings that by their very nature speak of creativity as an alternative to depravity.

I was privileged to spend time with her in the year before she died as she was forced to undergo medical procedures and stay in bed. When I went to visit her in a nursing home, where she was temporarily ensconced (she insisted on dying at home), I

found myself grabbing random envelopes to make crucial notes about what she was saying rather than simply offering cheering words to raise her morale.

In the days before she died, her conversation became more sporadic as she dealt with pain and morphine, but her moments of clarity were still dramatic. At one point she declared “Guernica [Picasso’s anti war painting of the Spanish Civil War] ought to have gotten artists going.” Of the Juarez murders she said “there ought to have been a national outcry.”⁶ And finally, only two days before she died, she grasped my hand strongly and declared, “I want this conversation to end with the power of art. I think I got it right. I think I did.” I was deeply moved as she seemed to consciously give herself over to death with those brief words. After she spoke, the spring sun suddenly bathed her with light and warmth: she opened her arms and received it. She was at peace with her life.

I deeply miss her conversation, her intelligence, and her humor. But her hundreds of intense drawings continue to bear witness to the human spirit in the midst of suffering and depravity, resistance and survival.

Susan Noyes Platt, Ph.D.

Seattle, 2008

www.artandpoliticsnow.com

Pain Haiku

Pain

Occupying the body

Sleep of reason producing monsters

Two weeks of living death

Morphin

Masking the occupiers

What next for the abominal abdominal 3-08-08

⁶ The Juarez murders refers to the murder of hundreds of young female maquiladora workers in the “free trade” zone adjacent to the United States, where many of our electronic products are manufactured. The factories lure young women from villages all over Mexico, removing them from their traditional social system.