

## **PORNOGRAPHY OF POWER: THE ANTI-WAR ART OF SELMA WALDMAN**

©Susan Noyes Platt, Ph.D.

At the Rosetta M. Hunter Gallery at Seattle Central Community College

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I am an artist who continues to be enamored of charcoal (the tool that does not lie) and the act of drawing. . . nothing more than the visceral release on paper of the most fragile, humble, and deceptively simple of media – in an age that despises fragility, humility, and simplicity.

Although both charcoal and pastel can be fragmented, crushed, and reduced to dust in a single arbitrary or careless moment of time, both of these media can project into visual art potent and sensuous powers of endurance that will resonate with the same epic, intimate, universal and demonic obstinacy as life itself.”<sup>1</sup>

### **PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE**

The Wall concept generally has been to spare nothing and no one: the works will not stop with American perpetrators—from Gitmo to Abu Ghraib to Bagram to CIA “black sites”—but will reconfigure multiples of the infamous Goya God of War painting, to confront global contemporary “gods” who will be seen nakedly devouring both “the enemy” and their own people—in the gulags and combat zones wherever they have raged and continue to rage. <sup>2</sup>

The centerpiece of this small exhibition is **Naked /Aggression: Wall of Perpetrators IV-V, The Black Book of Aggressors (I – IV)**(2005-2006). These walls of drawings bear witness to the degradation of human beings and the systematic abuse of power in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and elsewhere. Left unfinished at the time of the artist’s death in April 2008, the **Black Book of Aggressors** would have included two hundred drawings and eight walls. The final wall would have reconfigured Goya’s *Saturn Devouring His Young* (1920 – 23), *Giant*(1919), and other black paintings, to address atrocities world-wide.

**Wall of Perpetrators IV** and **V** represent acts of torture: beating with chains, the use of dogs, cables, sexual abuse, jumping on prisoners, violation of women, electric shock to testicles, force feeding hunger strikers, extreme positions, prisoners immobilized in their own shit, and the final six works on techniques of waterboarding. Drawn on 9 x 12” black paper 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

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<sup>1</sup> Statement by Selma Waldman in *Absence/Presence: The Artistic Memory of Holocaust and Genocide*, Katherine Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, 1999, 58.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to the author, March 13, 2006.

aspects of the torture: yellow and orange relate to electrical torture, brown to excrement, red to blood.

**Installation: House Raid** was created for this exhibition. Begun in the fall of 2007, Selma Waldman's final large unfinished work, *The House Raid* started from specific photographs of soldiers raiding houses in Iraq, some of which are included here. Underlying it is a lifetime of study and confrontation with the forces of violence in our society. Other artists that Waldman admired included Francisco Goya, Kathe Kollwitz, and Rembrandt, but she studied many other artists for their command of drawing and line, her primary means of expression. She avidly read hundreds of books and drew from poetry, history and literature in her creative process. Even as her work bore witness to the violence of armed power and its victims, she joyfully celebrated the human spirit. The walls of her studio/home were covered with images of this celebration. This installation suggests her working environment where she combined handwritten notes, photographs and poetic quotes, as well as reproductions of her favorite art works.

### THE WTO

Selma Waldman was deeply concerned about police brutality world wide. She collected hundreds of photographs of that subject, documenting the sameness of brutality in every country. **Thin Red Line** 1999 – 2002 is related to press photographs of the Seattle riot police who attacked the anti-World Trade Organization demonstrators in 1999. But they represent mass police assault anywhere. They are dehumanized warriors who advance toward us as a group. They have lost their individual humanity.

### THE BALKAN WAR

Waldman began the **Naked/Aggression** series in 1998 with **Book of Combatant I and II** represented here by three drawings on brown paper, from a total of eighty. Also usually shown as “walls” these drawings, along with the larger **Invitation to the Dance**, are based on documented atrocities of the Bosnia Herzegovina (former Yugoslavia) from 1992 to 1995. **Skelani Stalker (Hunter/Lust)** refers to a Serbian paramilitary on patrol in the Skelani area of Bosnia “who frequently gang raped their ‘prey’ as ‘hunters.’” Typically Waldman included source materials documenting the actual incidents when she displayed these works. She insisted on both the realism of her work, as well as her witness to an actual atrocity. Her transformation of atrocity into art never lost sight of the injustice she was representing. The title unavoidably connects rape and war. The artist was particularly motivated by the book *S* by Slavenka Drakulic telling of the abuses by paramilitaries in “women’s camps” in Bosnia.<sup>3</sup>

### THE BREAD AND SOUP SERIES

The *Man and Bread* drawings have explored limited territory. For the most part, they are images of pain, fear, and anger-turned inwards, or turned outwards, brother against brother. This had to be done, to show a universal fragment of the

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<sup>3</sup> Slavenka Drakulic, *S - a novel about Balkans*, also known as *As If I Am Not There*, Abacus, 1999.

wretchedness inflicted on so many masses of people. But the murdered, the insulted, and the martyred of yesterday and today must in time be reconciled with the earth. And the earth which buries the dead also promotes life and regeneration.<sup>4</sup>

The two Bread drawings come from a group of more than 300 works (of which 25 are in the Collection of the Memorial Terezin Ghetto Museum). The point of departure was the writings of Elie Wiesel, particularly his descriptions in *Night* (Bantam Books, 1960) of the struggle for food to the death for bread

**Soup III** represents an archetypal theme, the necessity of food in order to survive. As stated by Ori Z. Soltes, “much of (your work) can relate directly to Terezin or to the Holocaust, but it is far more universal than only that, and relates to the larger condition of human inhumanity of which the Holocaust is a (merely) particularly horrific subset...”<sup>5</sup>

### **GRIEF IS THE GRAVITY OF THE EARTH**

**Unearthly Grief** is an iconic image of grieving in response to incomprehensible suffering. A related work is in the collection of the Palestine Refugee Center in Amman, Jordan. This subject is also manifested in Waldman’s “Messenger” performances inspired by the idea of the Russian village “wailer”, a woman who weeps for other people to articulate their grief. In 1996, with another Jewish woman, Waldman first wore a weeping mask to demand peace with justice in Israel/Palestine. The group later became the “Sisters of Bat Shalom” and joined with Women in Black. The weeping masks appeared at demonstrations in Seattle, in Europe and in Israel.

### **GRAPHIKOS**

Selma Waldman used this term to refer to “bonding the viscerally exposed archetypes of war, genocide, and violence to the demands of witness, the passion for justice, and the discipline of drawing.”

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.

Susan Noyes Platt  
Seattle, 2008

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<sup>4</sup> Statement by Selma Waldman, Selma Waldman Archives, Seattle.

<sup>5</sup> As quoted by the artist in a letter to Yehudit Shendar, August 18, 1977.

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