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Jordan Essoe, *In Company With a Memory That Serves No Purpose (Panel One)*, 2007, paper, acrylic, blood on canvas, 16" x 20," at TART, San Francisco.



JORDAN ESSOE at TART

Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise.... When a war breaks out, people say: "It's too stupid; it can't last long." But though a war may well be "too stupid," that doesn't prevent its lasting. Stupidity has a knack of getting its way; as we should see if we were not always so much wrapped up in ourselves.

—Albert Camus, *The Plague*

Despite our American mythology of heroic frontier individualism, the past several years have revealed some rather unattractive national character flaws—a confusion of cynicism with realism, an unwillingness to accept the constraints of reality, and an indulgent and ignorant view of our national greatness—economic, religious, military and cultural.

There have been, however, artistic exceptions to this pervasive bottom-feeding mercantilist ethic. The recent Anselm Kiefer show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art was impressively mythic and portentous (despite the inclusion of some dubious individual works), and the just-ended show of Goya's *Caprichos* etchings at the Sonoma Valley Museum was likewise dazzling, and paradoxically heartening despite its bleak surrealism; Goya was mad as hell and not going to take it anymore. While much smaller in scale than the shows just mentioned, Jordan Essoe's *Omega Man* installation aims high as well, combining "history painting," that disgraced nationalistic 19th century genre of spotlit dying generals, with contemporary formalist art concerns (abstraction, process, minimalism, conceptualism), and infusing the resulting progeny with human meaning and fellow-feeling.

Essoe takes on nothing less than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that perfect storm of tragic religious irony—the triangular firing squad of Abrahamic fratricide, if Christians join the fray. The artist, motivated partly by the dismay and disgust we all feel, regardless of our tribal affiliations, and partly by a need to empathize in some small way with the victims, to follow Camus's "path of sympathy," sees violence as a social malignancy—as a plague on humanity. Camus's 1947 existential novel is a crucial part of the artwork: Its plague is half-realistic and half-symbolic, both fact and metaphor, like Melville's ghostly malefic whale. All wars, defended by apocalyptic rhetoric, wreak their havoc on the innocent: It's "a scheme of things in which children are put to torture."

Essoe coats strips of text cut from the novel with white paint and collages them into his mixed-media paintings. The writings are not always readable, however.

Affixed to the surfaces of the canvases in polygonal patterns that recall soap bubbles or dried, cracked mud or beehive cells, or building foundations or levees, the phrase-and-sentence walls in fact replicate the streets of war-torn areas depicted in aerial photographs. Casual viewers may not recognize the particular sites of Gaza, Jerusalem and the West Bank, but they probably will infer that natural processes and manmade construction seen from afar are equivalent and complementary elements of a cosmic cycle of growth and destruction. Quotations from the novel are requisitioned for the works' titles as well. *In Company With a Memory That Serves No Purpose* describes the suspension of time experienced by those separated from their families, as in *Gaza. Likely I Was Brought Into the World to Live With A Woman*, linked to Jerusalem, quotes Camus's young journalist Rambert, desperate to leave the quarantined town to rejoin his lover in Paris before accepting his social role. *What Man Knows Ten Thousand Faces* quotes Dr. Rieux's speculations on the mortality rates in previous plagues, likening the horrific daily toll in sixth-century Constantinople with that of today's West Bank. The text both infects us with the reality of the plague and universalizes it.

Counteracting that literary/historical abstraction is a visceral material long known to ritual and violence: human blood is employed as paint. Essoe, who suffers frequent nosebleeds, paints with his effusions; the movements of his torso and head, the viscosity of the blood and the violence of the flow determine the basic look of the paintings, some of which are elegant calligraphic abstractions. He writes, "I arrived at using my blood in this project as a direct result of something that was customarily part of my day-to-day life ... an unexceptional and quotidian event ... I don't use brushes or tools other than gravity and little blowing with my breath. In this way it is a performative act, like Janine Antoni drawing with her ink-saturated hair, or Yves Klein's women painting with their bodies." The shedding of blood onto white canvas creates metaphoric landscapes. To this red-oxide topography the artist adds the textual, cultural infrastructure, piece by piece, even along the sides of the stretches, so that we see the text as archaeological layers or sediments: civilizations

interspersed with recurrent blood inundations. The flowing blood suggests as well the sacrificial victim and the biblical scapegoat of Leviticus. Essoe's video *Omega Man* is patterned after the 1971 Charlton Heston science fiction film, and, in turn, its 1964 Vincent Price predecessor, *The Last Man on Earth*. In both films the dying hero's blood redeems an inferior mutant race (a similar theme recurs in the recent *Blade* films). In his video, the artist pours homemade wine over head and chest while kneeling at the border of the vineyard; it's a baptism, purification and libation all in one.

Despite the risks inherent in such charged material and materials, Essoe's work steers clear of melodrama; it is actually rather cool and scientific in tone. The watercolor portrait of Ariel Sharon neither heroizes nor demonizes; it's a portrait in simulated hemoglobin of a leader, now in a coma, flooded by white light, as if being transformed from human to radiant icon or legend. "The dense negative space," the artist writes, denotes "his comatose status of forced inaction and forced nonviolence—that his life is in limbo. But, more importantly, that his moral status is in purgatory." Essoe's version of Millet's *Sower* eschews van Gogh's Time-the-Reaper romantic fatalism in favor of something more open-ended: Covered as it is by snippets of text, it suggests that dialogue and logic might bear fruit—or, alternatively, gibberish. In any case, thought is the continuous agent of culture, not violent martyrdom.

Viewers seeking to tune out of history and shrug or to cast blame will find here neither tragic fatalism nor partisan accusation, but, as in *The Plague*, a combination of objectivity and empathy. As one of Camus's stoic secular saints concludes, "each of us has the plague [of consenting to cruelty and murder if sufficiently distanced from it] within him...no one on earth is free from it...we must keep endless watch on ourselves..."

—DeWitt Cheng

***Omega Man: Installation by Jordan Essoe* closed in June at TART, San Francisco.**

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