Collateral Damage: Echoes In Our Soul

By Virginia Hanczycowicz

It’s easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of tragic news assaulting us every day: diseases, earthquakes, famine, political coups, terrorist attacks, wars... a litany without end. We know that such horrors exist on a scale too grand for any individual to confront. The enormity of it all often numbs us, even the most avid of media aficionados and reduces the ordinary people who are victimized to nameless, anonymous entities. Indeed, the term “collateral damage” encapsulates this distanced view of human life.

Ten Philadelphia artists—all women—tried to put a face on this suffering by using art to explore the intersection of personal ethics, social responsibility, and complexity with state-sponsored violence. The exhibit, while modestly successful in its goal, ironically suffered from a similar type of information overload.

Upon entering the gallery, Linda Panetta’s photographs provided immediate context. Taken during the past two years, her color images of Afghanistan and Iraq bring those war-torn countries into perspective. These are not documents of land battles or “shock and awe” bombings. Instead, they portray ordinary people in the midst of chaos. A colorful Afghan truck, women in black chadors and blue burkas, and a boy posing with his leg prosthesis show the will with an actual cluster bomblet. The large number of images (nearly 50) and the salon-style hanging, however, made it hard to see these people as individuals.

Brooding from the back of the exhibit is Lou Ann Merkle’s Mr. Big’s Wounded World, a masterful construction involving a deeply disturbing, carved wood figure with puppet-like, moveable joints, fingers made of real bone, and a misshapen leg. Sitting on his throne, encased in a cage-like cocoon, he loomed above his surroundings. A large, phallic form stands guard at his left. Illuminated entry steps contain reliquary-like assortments of war-time memorials. Framed photos of soldiers and civilians ring the upper perimeter, and engraved and painted texts led the back of the installation.

Unfortunately, the breadth of the issue Merkle tackles—war-mongering through the years—makes it difficult to keep the immediate emotional impact from becoming subsumed by the myriad details. Mr. Big is so repulsive by himself that he doesn’t need his wounded world for illustration: he had already devoured it (as evidenced by his grotesquely distended belly).

A number of the other artists struggled with the same dilemma: how to deal with a large subject on a scale small enough for emotional comprehension.

Marcia Ruth’s combined installation, War Games and Wedding Party, although valiant attempts at synthesizing information, also provide too much of it: the blackened shoes and dobits of the latter were strong enough on their own.

Dot French constructs a matrix that enables the many details in her three framed collages to be seen as a whole. In The Emperor’s New Clothes, for example, pictures of butterfly ballets, nuclear bombs, Rumsfeld, and Cheney shared the surface with those of Osama bin Laden, Sadam Hussein, and Adolf Hitler. Her use of cool, geometric patterning and patches of reflective mylar (the shimmering of which turned reality into a mirage) create a sense of tension. Dot French constructs a matrix that enables the many details in her three framed collages to be seen as a whole. In The Emperor’s New Clothes, for example, pictures of butterfly ballets, nuclear bombs, Rumsfeld, and Cheney shared the surface with those of Osama bin Laden, Sadam Hussein, and Adolf Hitler. Her use of cool, geometric patterning and patches of reflective mylar (the shimmering of which turned reality into a mirage) create a sense of tension.

Possibly the most successful piece was an unpretentious 3 1/2 minute videotape by Sharon Mullhly, Fadi Files a Kite. It chronicles the attempt of a 14-year-old Syrian boy to fly a kite off his apartment building’s roof, something many children do after curfew. Narrated in English and Arabic, it relates Fadi’s desire to “fly over soldiers, tanks and roadblocks.” He management to get his kite to the plate, maneuvering it between a satellite dish and telephone wires, a kite logo becomes visible on his gloved hands. Hope, tragedy, and irony come together in this simple image, and put a “face” on the faceless.

The problem of giving form to large social and political issues is not something that plagues only the artists of “Collateral Damage.” My criticism in no way means that their effort was not worthwhile. In a political atmosphere where Janet Jackson’s breast gaters more attention than presidential primaries, it is heartening to see a group of artists committed to producing an event of this scale. The artwork needs more exhibits like this; artists need a forum where they can develop a visual and political lesson.

Creating that lexicon involves walking a tightrope between the poetic and the political. It is synecdoche—the form of metaphor that uses a part to represent the whole—that makes Mullhly’s video so engaging. “The whole world is a metaphor for something” says Mario, the central character of the film, Il Postino, who apprentices himself to the politically exiled Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. If we can invert Mario’s observation, perhaps something is a metaphor for the whole world.” It becomes the artist’s task to find it.