

Hanna Hannah: Frames of War

Hanna Hannah

Jun 18 - Sep 10

San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art

by Lea Feinstein

In *Frames of War*, now on view at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, Hanna Hannah throws a tiny spotlight on what is euphemistically called “collateral damage.” In three galleries and a project room, Hannah presents scroll-like paintings of floral wallpaper hand-painted in casein (a water-based, matte-finish milk paint) with inset vignettes focusing on the aftermath of war, poverty, and natural disasters. Haunted by the images she sees daily in the *New York Times*, she clips these and files them in drawers. “I have always liked to paint flowers,” she said in a recent gallery talk, “yet I couldn’t forget these scenes of disaster.” Combining the two in a dissonant mix seems like a compelling idea.

The child of German Jews who fled to El Salvador to escape the Nazis, Hannah was born in El Salvador and grew up across the street from families living in shacks. She remembers having the feeling of “Why don’t I live *there*?” Particularly sensitized to violent disruptions that play havoc with the rhythms of daily life, she has explored this subject for years. Early incarnations of her ideas are presented on a back wall of the gallery: *Postcard: Beirut* (2006); *Postcard: Earthquake in Heyderabad, Iran* (2005); and *Postcard: Teatime in Afghanistan* (2008). In these works, she copied grainy newspaper shots onto scrolls of varying texture and pattern. *Postcard: Five Miles from Chernobyl* (2009) features a rectangular black-and-white scene of overturned chairs in an empty room. Set against a floral pattern, it is a ghostly TV screen in some Eastern European parlor. In these early works, the artist’s technique is still unpolished and the balance of image and matrix is not quite right. The hand-painted photographic images float on the paper, and the vertical format seems arbitrary.

By 2009, Hannah begins to hit her stride, committing to a robust and high-keyed jungle of rampant Victorian flora as “background” that overwhelms, literally buries, the wartime shot. Her inset images are no longer rectangles, which mimic newspaper and photographic framing, but ovals, more in keeping with Victorian style. *Untitled (Iraqi and American soldiers in Ramadi, Iraq)* (2009-2010) features a vignette of sleeping soldiers set into a dense floral pattern. Open-mouthed and snoring but dressed for combat, they have stacked their weapons against a glass-fronted china cabinet.

In the gallery’s two major rooms, Hannah’s ideas are enlarged and aesthetically resolved. For *(embedding)* (2011), the four walls of the project room are covered from floor to ceiling in a camouflage palette of browns and greens. This “wallpaper” is digitally copied from Hannah’s rendition of a Victorian pattern, repeated and installed as actual wallpaper. Four framed works feature fragments of a photo from the *New York Times* (*Amerli, Iraq, Site of Suicide Bomb*, July 9, 2007). The small oval paintings of milling survivors and random piles of debris are inset into

and framed by a floral wallpaper segment, which is itself set into another painted paper of different design and hue. These pictures-within-pictures, framed and mounted on the camouflage wall, telescope and intensify the act of seeing. But surprisingly, in this era of sharp-focus close-ups, the central image is *not* sharp. Rendered in casein with small brushes, the



(embedment), 2011, installation view; Wallpaper and framed works on paper, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the Artist and San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.



(embedment), 2011, detail; Wallpaper and framed works on paper, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the Artist and San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

central scene is blurred, like a half-remembered dream. The separate segments are like tiles set into a wall. The title of the piece, *(embedment)*, also suggests the journalists and photographers at the scene, “embedded” with the U.S. troops and witnesses to the event. The tiny central focus, overwhelmed by its surroundings, is a mere peephole in the wall—its content muted, its impact constrained, barely tolerable for the artist.

Difficult subject matter often requires indirect expression, and this approach makes it more palatable to artist and viewer alike. Consider Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), a documentary in comic-book style that unravels toxic, repressed memories of a young Israeli soldier during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Or Kara Walker’s wall-size paper silhouettes, which recast the humiliations of slavery with outrageous irreverent humor in a technique practiced by eighteenth-century itinerant artisans. Or Christian Boltanski’s *Personnes* (2010), for Monumenta (2010) at Paris’ Grand Palais, which features thousands of pounds of old clothes in gridded heaps on the floor, a material monument to the Holocaust. Or consider the AIDS quilt. Size matters.

With *Wall* (2011), installed in an adjacent gallery, Hannah has taken a different tack. Using projected images as templates, she has painted on both sides of fifteen scrolls of mulberry paper. On the verso of each, a floral pattern in white curlicues reads as lace. On the face of each scroll, she renders the pixilated image of the Amerli aftermath as a broad band of fluid calligraphic marks. Over and over, she repeats the scene, as if to meditate on it and exorcize it at the same time. Originally intended as a long “wall” of scrolls to be spaced two inches apart, they are mounted here ten inches apart on four walls because of gallery constraints.¹ Although the result is handsome, the original intent suffers. The horizontal frieze of gestural marks would have suggested a layer of sediment, the residue left by a high tide—or a wailing wall. The current arrangement diminishes this impact; the verticality of the separate scrolls takes precedence over the horizontal movement of the degraded image. We parse the repetitions, the doubling and mirroring, and try to relate the parts to the series. Each strip becomes decoration, fragile and lacelike, a scroll of inky gestures whose inscriptions cannot be read.

The opportunity to have a major solo exhibition often inspires an artist to take risks and can result in a radical leap in personal and artistic growth. Hanna Hannah has done just that with *Frames of War*. In this show, she has extended her range and strengthened and clarified the presentation of her ideas. As she continues to play with scale, she may find new ways to both obscure and reveal her vital concerns. In the meantime, her technique has flourished mightily.

The artist will talk about her work on Thursday, September 8, 2011, from 7 to 9 p.m. at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

***Hannah Hanna: Frames of War* is on view at the [San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art](#) through September 10, 2011.**

NOTES:

1. Determined in conversation with Susan O'Malley, the show's curator.