

## **Abby Schmidt's Waxed**

Caroline Roosevelt ©2009

*Used to describe the growing luminosity of the moon through its lunar cycle, the word wax signifies accumulation and growth. In her exhibition "Waxed" Abby Schmidt considers the viewers response to pain and suffering through a series of assemblage-based and wax-based work.*

Schmidt employs the use of a bright color palate, and the marriage of two-dimensional and three-dimensional symbols to obscure found images of pain and suffering throughout the world. Specifically concentrating on such images of war, famine, and childhood obesity exploited by the media, Schmidt focuses her energy on presenting these images in a strikingly light manner. Their unorthodox appropriation raises questions of ethics as the viewer considers their own context and individual empathy for the subject at hand.

Schmidt's study of international conflict visible in this exhibition, sprung from her interest in educating herself on a variety of shocking examples of human behavior. Leading up the creation of these pieces, she viewed "Taxi To The Darkside" a documentary explicating the arrest and subsequent murder of an Afghani taxi-driver by U.S. soldiers stationed at the Bagram Air Base. The film focuses on torture methods, racism and human behavior. She researched several well-known photojournalism images captured in areas of Africa. Specifically, she appropriated Kevin Carter's Pulitzer prize-winning photograph in her piece, "Vulture".

Upon observing these materials, Schmidt's research turned towards the media representation of these events. In the western world, images of starvation and war in Africa flood the news via television, internet, and newspapers. As she focused on the means by which she, a western viewer, was researching these social issues, the relationship of the observer to these images of suffering intrigued her. Transitioning from material documenting conflict abroad, to images of childhood obesity on western documentaries and popular western television shows, Schmidt further investigated the role of the media as a sensationalist filter between the viewer and the context of human conflict.

In each of her works, Schmidt explores a variety of popular artistic genres, which in theory, clash with the severity of the subject. From impressionism and pastorals, to assemblage and pop art, Schmidt expands on the original photographic subject of her work, and plays with the viewers' response by injecting images of pain, anger, and subjection with themes of romance, aesthetics, and consumerism. Her piece, "Tank" appears as homage to the impressionist style as it portrays two healthy children surrounded by a rural landscape. Disregarding the tank blocking the horizon line in the center of the composition, this image would appear peaceful and decorative. The use of her pastel color palate, and balanced composition present a jarring contrast to the violent image of war. This juxtaposition of style and theme appears throughout her work, presenting a conflict of representation and reality.

"Tank" as well as "Fork", "Hand", "Maize", the "Jessica" series, the "Still Life" series, and the "Get Closer" series employ a rude version of the ancient art of encaustic work.

While classically, artists combine the molten wax with linseed oil or resins to retain it's

liquid state, Abby melts down cheap crayons upon a Plexiglas surface to create a thick, globular composition. Prior to application, Abbey creates “maps” of each photograph, which she then places behind the Plexiglas to create a guide for her hand.

Abby’s play on historical fine art expands beyond her technique to incorporate features of decorative art. Her pieces, “Maize” “Vulture” and her series “Get Closer” are enclosed in faux baroque frames. The images of starving children created from melting drugstore crayons and framed in gaudy, discount frames create the illusion of an expensive ornamental art piece through inexpensive means. She brings together the style and technique of 20<sup>th</sup> century pop art with the kind of presentation that accompanies traditional fine art.

Plastic figurines scatter chaotically throughout the surface in Schmidt’s collage work, as though a child has made a mess with his toys. She adheres painted plastic babies, tanks, soldier figurines, farm animals, buildings, cartoon characters, and food to a wood surface in the “assemblage” style pioneered by early 20<sup>th</sup> century artist, Jean Dubuffet. Schmidt employs this technique later notoriously used by pop artists to create an unfiltered mess of colors, textures, advertisement and consumerism.

In the lower right hand corner of “Natural Resource” a giant spider loads (or unloads) a pile of babies on a truck. A large plastic infant builds the rear of the larger image of the squatting child in the composition. In the top left corner of the piece, a pair of plastic female legs straddle a cherry. While the first two vignettes build towards the overall image of suffering, the third appears random in its’ allusion to eroticism. By injecting

themes of eroticism into her work she creates an aura of playful discord that is a characteristic throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century art.

Schmidt's work recalls pop art by presenting traces of consumerism and advertisement into her work. In her pieces, "Fork", "Hand", "Tank" and her series "Still Life" and "Jessica", holiday lights are poked into the back panel of the incasing in her DIY light boxes to illuminate Schmidt's wax paintings. In this manner, she creates a presentation reminiscent of television sets.

The images of fat babies smashing food into their gaping mouths turn the mirror on America. Appropriating images from The Maury Show, and a documentary on obesity, her light boxes showcase obese children smothering themselves in food. These backyard topics hit home as they have become increasingly sensationalized in the media through talk shows, reality shows, and documentaries.

By juxtaposing images of childhood obesity to widespread starvation and war, Schmidt's work suggests that the severity of the subject is not the focus for media presentation. TV and news coverage plug shock value into western obesity and consumption as well as starvation and violence abroad, placing these incongruous subjects on the same level of severity. Abby removes the context of the primary subject even further as she visually deconstructs the images to call attention to the artificiality of media portrayal

"Still Life" degrades video stills from The Maury Show over the course of the series, through its composition and wax technique. These images of children eating require distance to comprehend the composition. Schmidt's work plays with distance by creating a large, discernable image from afar which grows increasingly cluttered and complex

upon detailed observation. Her collage work presents visibly trenchant reproductions of child soldiers and starving youth by assembling a variety of toys or applying brightly colored wax. The resulting images, while visible from a distance, also appear as modern household objects. While “Natural Resource” and “Toy Soldier” appear as a veritable playground of children’s toys, “Tank” and “Maize” resemble puzzles. “Internal Conflict” is comprised of thousands of military figures moving along different “grains”, which together form a large shag rug. The association of visibility to distance in Schmidt’s work creates a dialogue between media portrayal and viewer observation.

As Schmidt gathered inspiration and knowledge from photographs and video stills, she grew increasingly curious about experiencing the human reaction to violence, and suffering first hand. Early in her artistic career she had become interested in the treatment of animals, and their transition from living creatures to cold cuts provided fuel for her to create her first publicly displayed images. To whet her curiosity for such a savage practice, she visited a Hallal goat slaughterhouse. She described her experience viewing the process in which humans worked as machines to strip the goats of their life force and characteristics to prepare them for consumption. *“The floor was covered in blood...I had to remove myself from what I was seeing.”*

She compares first hand account of suffering to photojournalist Kevin Carters experience capturing an image of a starving Sudanese child. Carter’s image, which won him a Pulitzer Prize as well as international acclaim, also lead to his suicide less than a year later. In his suicide note, Carter stated the moral dilemma of photographing such an image, not intervening as the reason for ending his life. Schmidt’s necessity to disassociate herself from what she was viewing at the slaughterhouse, juxtaposed to

Carters suicide presents the necessity to desensitize ones' self to unperceivable suffering. Schmidt preserves the tragic inability for the observer to connect with his/her subject through her collage compositions. In each of her pieces, Schmidt invites the viewer to observe the image from afar as a one complete image and up close as a combination of several vignettes to explain the difference between the inability of the media to present the image truthfully in second hand accounts as well as the individual inability to empathize with an image in its' original context.

Schmidt's daring decision to reproduce images of suffering through means of bright colors, toys, and television-simulating light boxes, illustrate an inevitable abstraction of the original context of pain as result of the human necessity to remove the subject matter from its setting. In observing "Waxed", the question is raised as to whether the artwork focuses on the detached relationship between the media and the observer, or asks the audience to question their understanding of these global issues and make a change.