

Lisa Bulawsky: *A Clearing of Measures*

Eleanor D. Wilson Museum

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Essay by Stephanie Ellis Schlaifer

In *A Clearing of Measures*, Lisa Bulawsky explores the idea of the *integral accident*. Formally, this idea is manifest as the unintentional marks created during the printmaking process; conceptually, Bulawsky is creating a meditation on consequence. The inevitability of disaster, here, isn't rueful—it's hopeful. It's how William Kentridge described *The Refusal of Time*: "it's a celebration of making against the fact of our own eventual disappearance." Each element of the installation has its plangency, but, ultimately, it's an optimistic view of mortality that's achieved.

Using newsprint backing paper collected from her studio practice since 2001, Bulawsky creates a massive grid of ghost prints—hollow squares with dynamic, eruptive marks. Despite its scale, the grid is only a glimpse of the infinite album of the mind. This arrangement denies events the hierarchy of a timeline. Here, you can start anywhere. The only dominant image is the collection of images, giving the feeling of grandness and insignificance simultaneously. An apparitional monument. It is the mass that is important. The sense of time and history, then—it's glacial. The *longue durée*.

Individually, the prints remain dominated by the hollow square—their form generated by the absence of form. One thinks of the poet Mark Strand's lines, *In a field/I am the absence/of field./ This is/ always the case./ Wherever I am/ I am what is missing*. In this case, the absence is the absent image. What we have instead is the residue of the actual event. The color, the happenstance, the unpreciousness of that accumulation is refreshingly poignant. It's haunting, the afterlife of images.

Where the grid remains almost exclusively personal, in the books, *Odes & Epochs*, the personal and public narratives run concurrently. The grayscale images and text are encased between a mass of black pages, imperceptibly smattered with pale ink that rubs off onto your fingers, just as it would from a newspaper. Many of the images come from exactly this source—public disasters chronicled in the news media. The insidiousness of the events can create a tremendous, terrible beauty. The BP oil spill creates an obsidian splatter on the ocean green. A Japanese ferry is precariously marooned atop a shed. Drained of their color, it's as if the images have been absorbed by the individual unconscious—the public has become the

personal. The text is similarly provocative. The language often comes from Bulawsky's own notebooks, but it's appropriated from other sources as well. The one that stops my heart—SORRY FOR THE MESS—comes from the suicide note of an 80-year-old grandfather who shot himself to death. It goes right through you. The book has a filmic quality, and it progresses like an uncomfortable dream in black & white television: flashes of light and sound, of understanding. Before the colophon, your eyes are assaulted by an almost hyperbolic green tangle of vines. A gasp of fresh air.

The books sit atop benches arranged in a hollow square—the formation used in the American singing tradition of Sacred Harp. From a speaker suspended in the square's center, a four-part chorus rises and falls beneath spoken language—a poem written by Daniel Kelley, Bulawsky's husband. In the Sacred Harp tradition, the group sings into the hollow square with a unified, communal breath. The voice reaches and is reached. It calls and is heard. It extends and is contained. Here, it is Bulawsky's voice we hear, singing tenor, bass, alto, and treble; indeed, even the deep, distorted speaker's voice is hers. She becomes her own communal voice. The effect of this is hypnotic, transporting. It is quieting and discomfiting at once.

Ultimately, the events—public or private—outlive their immediate wake. They ebb. Their weight changes. They resurface. The act of documentation changes them; it contributes and corrupts. When the speaker of the poem says, *everything is still happening—I will never get out of here*, the anxiety coupled with relief is plain. The concurrence, recurrence of events. The layering of choices. The opportunity of exits and outlets.

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