



Lamentations for our times

By Charles Bonenti, Berkshire Eagle Staff
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Tough images for tough times. They're coming to Mass MoCA this weekend.

Yet the gloom that curator Denise Markonish felt about the state of the world as she was assembling "These Days: Elegies for Modern Times" last year, was brightened, she said, by the hope that Barack Obama, then a presidential candidate, would bring a new vision to the Oval Office.

And so it came to pass in November.

"The moment Obama was elected," she said at an interview over coffee at MoCA earlier this week, "everyone just went aaaahhhhh."

Yet while the election lent a measure of hope to the tone of the exhibition, "there's still a valid struggle," she went on. "The pinprick of hope is important, but there's a lot of lamenting to be done."

And so the tone of "These Days," taken from a lyric by Jackson Browne — "These days I seem to think about/How all the changes came about my ways/And I wonder if I'll ever seen another highway" — remains decidedly, if defiantly, mournful.

"These Days" is a sequel of sorts to "Badlands," an exhibition on the despoiling of landscape on view at MoCA through April 12, that Markonish also curated.

Both were originally to have been a single show titled "The End is Here," for which Markonish had lined up a roster of artists years ago. But even she found

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that apocalyptic outlook "a bit dark" for the times and split her proposal in two,

The artists she assigned to "Badlands" coalesced easily around the topic of landscape, she explained. But the others she had chosen — early- to mid-career individuals she'd had her eye on even before she came to MoCA in 2007 — were harder to gather under a single umbrella. Their sculptures, photos, videos and installations were too diverse.

What they did share, she concluded, was a poetic outlook; a tendency to frame the present within the past; and an inclination toward fine craftsmanship

She saw their artworks finally as "individual poems that could exist in the same book."

Four of the artists — George Bolster, Micah Silver, Chris Doyle and Pawel Wojtasik — were commissioned by MoCA to create work for the show. The other two, Sam Taylor-Wood and Robert Taplin, contributed new pieces.

The artworks are political, but not pointed so, Markonish said. They are not so much about "Bush and his war," but about global conflict — about Bosnia and Beirut as well as Iraq and Afghanistan.

And they meant to be "immersion experiences," not objects an observer should stand back and contemplate in a detached way.

No one can really put himself outside of what's happening globally, Markonish said. "We are all in the same boat."

George Bolster's installation, "Reckoner," for example, named after the song by Radiohead, and meant to suggest the return of Christ (symbolized by a suspended narwhal) at Judgment Day, is fashioned as a chapel, with mirrored walls that reflect the viewer to infinity. On the ceiling, images of the Virgin Mary (holding an atom bomb) and the saints look down and weep tears of lament on viewers below.

Bolster, who was working on his unfinished installation that day, admitted to "obsessing about religious imagery." Churches, he said, were the first "pop culture" venues, combining visuals, music and words for the common man.

"Reckoner" is meant in part, he said, to comment on the abuse of human intelligence used to build nuclear weapons as tools of our own apocalypse.

Also borrowing from the past to frame events of the present, Robert Taplin's "Everything Real is Imagined (After Dante)," follows the narrative of "Dante's Divine Comedy" in nine cabinet dioramas that cast Dante's words upon sculptured scenes of a car bombing, a refugee exodus, a ruined city and other images from everyday newscasts.

Sam Taylor-Wood's photos and videos weigh a sense of desolation against one of transcendence. In one video "A Little Death," for example, a dead rabbit in a classical still-life arrangement is eaten by maggots in a time-lapse sequence, while a peach nearby, a traditional art symbol for virtue, remains untouched.

Pawl Wojtasik has created a 12 by 35-foot cyclorama, "Below Sea Level," of the watery landscape around New Orleans that will surround viewers with immense moving photo images and urban sounds. (See a video clip at www.pawelwojtasik.com)

Micah Silver's "The End of the Safari" looks at the idea of fantasy — and its loss — through a faked jungle environment. Finally, Chris Doyle's big-screen animated video, "The Apocalypse Management Training Program, Part I-IV," presents a Hieronymous Bosch-style vision of an urban disaster, out of which human survivors emerge in a chorus of operatic resurrection.

It is an example of "elegant defiance in the face of tragedy" that permeates the whole exhibition, Markonish said.

"There is this sense that we'll still go on; that we'll keep fighting the good fight."