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"Interview with Catherine Wagner : Catherine Wagner Speaks with Lisa Sutcliffe on Reparations and its Connection to War, Identity, and Spirituality"

Interview with Lisa Sutcliffe

Fall 2011

Catherine Wagner's newest series – Reparations– was first inspired by a personal injury. The final typology represents and questions much more.

For over thirty years, Catherine Wagner has been observing the built environment as a metaphor for how we construct our cultural identities. She's examined institutions as various as art museums and science labs, the home, and Disneyland. Ms. Wagner's process involves the investigation of what art critic David Bonetti calls "the systems people create, our love of order, our ambition to shape the world, the value we place on knowledge, and the tokens we display to express ourselves."

Lisa Sutcliffe: Your most recent pictures – of splints and prosthetics – offer a typology of medical devices from the most rudimentary wooden examples to more modern and even abstract models. What motivated you to begin this series?

Catherine Wagner: This work developed in response to both the constant presence of war images in the media, and my observations of our reactions to them. I am struck by how inured we have become, how easily people can disregard the images and the information they contain. I chose splints and prosthetics because I thought they were the perfect metaphorical device to address the violence of war, and more abstractly, global fissures.

CW: The process of healing from a severe fracture allowed me to glimpse what I came to understand as a complex, highly technical and intricate, and intensely human and individualized practice of creating splints and prostheses.

The first typology was developed from a wall of "retired" splints hanging in the office of a hand clinic. I spent about a year and a half staring at the photographs I created, questioning both their formal and conceptual dimensions, as well as researching medical archives. My initial thought was to map the whole body with images of splints; so in one sense this project could be ongoing, but I think that the issues I wanted to explore are already embedded in the work.

Ironically, my own splint was one of the last ones I photographed. My experience became the catalyst for what was ultimately a much larger cultural exploration.

LS: Process is an important part of your work. What kind of decisions did you make about how to handle this subject and how did the work change from the first iteration to the final presentation in which some images are grouped thematically in grids?

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CW: I am interested in taxonomical approaches to photography, a visual strategy for investigating sameness and difference. For example, in selecting splints from the collections of various medical archives, I was drawn to the immediacy of a simple wooden plank created to support a broken arm (*Carved Arm Splints*) in contrast to the high-tech, formed polymer splints (*Wrist*), which when paired, speak to changing technologies and attitudes towards medicine and the body. In the course of the project, I began identifying and photographing similar splint forms which I knew would become part of various typologies. For instance, *Six Forearms* is comprised of images of those wooden supports, which vary in scale based on the anatomy and age of the patient. I was fascinated by the subtle and idiosyncratic differences in these forearm splints, which map both the gesture and form of the human body.

By contrast, the prostheses remain singular images, portraits of the owner; an identity is embedded in the reconstructed limb. *Left Leg* is a portrait of the man whose red sock and black shoe bear the personal traces of his time. In *Right Arm II* the glove bears a gesture that is assumed to be that of a woman. Isolated from the body on a black background, the prosthesis can function both as portrait and as comment on scientific method and the isolation of laboratory research from its cultural context.

LS: You refer to your pictures as portraits. These photographs of devices of healing and support all refer to a broken body -whose presence do you think the work suggests?

CW: The pictures suggest the presence of the body through shape, indentation, the residue of wear. I have never concentrated on the specificity of a face or created a traditional portrait, a strategy that allows the images to form a collective rather than individual portrait, speaking to violence and repair globally.

LS: These pictures formally recall medieval torture devices and they allude to veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with damaged limbs. Photography has been intertwined with recording war since its inception and has played a major role in the public perception of global military endeavors, often shaping the way the world reacts to and understands these events. How do you see your work in relation to this history?

CW: The process of doing research at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C. offered small glimpses into the personal role that the prosthesis plays in the life of the returning soldiers; many of the prosthetic devices were adorned with patriotic symbols, American flags, and camouflage patterns. I chose to focus, though, on the larger, cultural dimensions of these splints and prostheses. Throughout my practice I've been interested in ways of seeing, feeling, and learning about larger issues that are made possible through more abstract or oblique methods. The images in this series are at once very literal, but open up a conversation well beyond their specificity. I'm employing a strategy not unlike Trevor Paglen's; on one level his images of secret military installations are very abstract and quite beautiful, but the the viewer has to navigate the knowledge of what's really there in the image.

LS: Why did you call the series *Reparations*?

CW: I'm drawn to the multiple meanings of the word. It can mean "the act or process of repairing or the condition of being repaired" as well as, "compensation or remuneration required from a defeated nation as indemnity for damage or injury during a war." I like that the word denotes repair and healing in a broader sense, and can specifically reference the consequences of war.

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LS: You mention that your choice of focused subject matter represents a greater cultural commentary. What are the various meanings and intentions behind choosing an object such as a splint or a prosthetic?

CW: A splint and/or prosthetic represents both fracture (violence) and healing; paradoxically its corporeal nature stands in for the body, including the viewer's body, and points to the absent body. The devices themselves are most often visibly wrought by another hand, gestures of healing and repair, suggesting both the human toll of war as well as efforts to heal physically, culturally, and spiritually.

LS: In your early photographic work you examined cultural systems such as the American classroom, and moments of extraordinary transformation in the urban landscape at Moscone Center. How do you think these threads from the past are continued in this work?

CW: For thirty years I have been observing the built environment. Although my work comes from seemingly disparate models - museums, science labs, classrooms, or the home - the conceptual foundation is similar. These projects all reference the ways we construct our cultural identity, and how systems of knowledge are transferred. *Reparations* continues this practice by engaging the ways in which international conflict and both collective and individual crises attendant to war, are shaping our culture today.

LS: This work is simultaneously abstract and very specific. In comparison to your early work your style is now formal and minimal. You examine these objects removed from their context like a scientific study. How has your work evolved into this pared-down style?

CW: My earlier work involved working on site and therefore incorporated more of a cultural and physical context. As I started working specifically on scientific models I began to isolate my subject matter.

Depending on the subject matter I can choose between varying positions and degrees of distance which allow me to study the broader, physical context or the singular, iconic object, while exploring the same foundational concepts.

LS: Your work is often in dialogue with the history of painting and sculpture. The wooden splints become architectural, like sculptures or relics. Why did you choose to work with the medium of photography?

CW: Lens based media can describe information like no other medium. I am interested in the ability to analyze, organize, and record information; this allows me (and the viewer) to rethink, interpret, and see differently.

I find that the representation of the object can become more evocative and charged, than the object itself. A photograph of an object is imbued with the nuance of all of the photographer's conceptual decisions. The photographs from *Reparations* have a hyper-real clarity that transcends the object itself.

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LS: Since Marcel Duchamp turned a urinal on its side in 1917 and christened it *Fountain*, "readymades" or found sculptures have occupied an important place in the history of art. Can you discuss artists who have influenced this body of work?

CW: I have been influenced by the work of both Doris Salcedo and Joseph Beuys who use a form of "readymade" in installations and sculptures. Both artists address issues related to healing that trace and reference the human body despite its absence.

Joseph Beuys worked with pharmaceutical bottles, medical text books, syringes, and other medical objects; he hoped that his work would be a catalyst for healing the "social organism." Through domestic objects: tables, windows, and chairs Doris Salcedo investigates political issues specifically related to her Columbian heritage. Yet, her work transcends these contexts to deal more broadly with absence, violence, and healing.

While Ms. Wagner has spent her life residing in California, she has also been an active international artist, working photographically, as well as site-specific public art, and lecturing extensively at museums and universities. She has received many major awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, NEA Fellowships, and the Ferguson Award. In 2001, Ms. Wagner was named one of Time Magazine's Fine Arts Innovators of the Year. Her work is represented in major collections nationally and around the world, such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; The Whitney Museum of American Art; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She has also published several monographs, including American Classroom, Art & Science: Investigating Matter, and Cross Sections.

*Lisa Sutcliffe has been an Assistant Curator in the photography department at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art since 2007. In 2009, she organized *The Provoke Era: Postwar Japanese Photography*, and *Photography Now: China, Japan, Korea*. She is currently assisting on *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera Since 1870*, which opened at Tate Modern in 2010 and traveled to SFMOMA and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. She received a B.A. from Wellesley College in 2001 and an M.A. in art history from Boston University in 2006.*

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