

Blog Rule: Some Speculative Remarks on History Painting, Infamy and Erik Bakke's

Untitled: Saddam Hussein (2007)

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Erik Bakke's *Untitled: Saddam Hussein* from 2007, consists of 59 paintings of still images taken from Hussein's now-infamous hanging video. Hussein's death is infamous not because of the life he led but because of its means of transmission; its infamy is based less on his own dastardly deeds than on that of the video and its means of distribution. His execution was meant to be a private affair, not a public spectacle. But someone present—either a guard or a witness—recorded the event with a cell phone and leaked the footage to the Web. Once released online the video went viral, spreading rash-like around the world, like an external symptom of a deeper disease. The prediction that snuff films were about to be unleashed on the viewing public, which David Cronenberg made in his 1983 film *Videodrome*, had come true; public execution has returned via the internet.

A general description of the paintings is in order. Each painting is approximately 9 by 8 inches, done in acrylic on wood, hung all together in a single room so that they encircle the entire room at about eye height, surrounding the viewer. Their colors are predominantly black and brown, with occasional brushy patches of vibrantly bright blue, blood red and flat white. They move from figuration to abstraction and back again. They are hung in their original, temporal sequence, in this instance moving clockwise around the room. (Bakke has considered hanging them in reverse order, which may be the case in future exhibitions.) Especially in the passages

where Hussein's visage is apparent, the images seem to reanimate themselves with a flick of the eyes across their contiguous surfaces.

Even today, nearly a year after the event, Hussein's execution is the first hit that appears in Google upon searching generically for "cell phone video." The negotiation between painting and new forms of video is an important part of this work. The difference in small-format video and painting becomes apparent in several ways.

Number 1: abstraction. The panels that appear to be fully abstract are based on the appearance of the original still images. These images, although photographically accurate, appeared abstract either because the camera captured something unrecognizable in a single still, or—in the case of the blue (as well as the red panels, although Hussein is clearly recognizable in these)—because of the burst of a flash. Throughout, but especially in these panels, Bakke maps the hand-of-the-artist onto the unsteady hand and shaking images of cell-phone video. He exaggerates the brushiness of these panels in an ironic homage to the high-era of abstraction and the work of Jackson Pollock and de Kooning, et al. But the hand-of-artist returns not in a heroic struggle with the medium of painting but in an exaggerated imitation of a technical glitch in the original, as a relatively accurate reproduction of the shaky hand and blanked-out image of the badly shot cell-phone video. His move in the sequence of images from naturalism to abstraction is really, therefore, a media-based naturalism and not pastiche. His images are relatively naturalistic in as much as they translate small-format video into painting.

Number 2: the still. In the translation from cell-phone video to painting Bakke stills the image. He slows down the original 2 minutes or so of the video to an eternity, making monumental that which was ephemeral. And yet, to still a video in paint—however a-temporally permanent painting may be as a medium—is never to capture the whole of the event. Each image choice is arbitrary, each missing part of the event. Given about 10 frames of video per second for cell-phone video and about 140 second of footage, this means that 59 images were chosen from

approximately 1400 possible images. Between each painting a multitude of other paintings unfolds, each as necessary a part in the story's telling as it unnecessary. Rather than memorialize the event by condensing it into a single, heroic history painting, here painting becomes the supplement to net-based video. Bakke recovers history painting but he can only do so in the face of contemporary net-conditions. Which leads to...

Number 3: distribution. *Untitled: Saddam Hussein* does what painting can do today to represent history in the face of the internet and the flood of information (including images) that now colors everyday life: it piles a few bricks into a wall as a rearguard action, in an attempt to produce a bulwark against the coming wave of other readily accessible, internet-distributed video nasties. In the age of the internet, Bakke's series seems to say, history ain't what it used to be. For an artist like Benjamin West, General Wolfe's death was shown as THE NOBLE END OF A GREAT HERO WHOSE LIFE REACHES ITS APOTHEOSIS AT THE CULMINATING MOMENT OF AN EPIC NARRATIVE IN WHICH SELF-SACRIFICE IS EQUATED WITH NATIONAL PRIDE. History painting traditionally condensed a real-world event into an image of a heroic figure in order to produce a role model whose fame would act as an inspiration to the viewer. But as Andy Warhol recognized, the age of photography changed all this. On the covers of the tabloids, death has become a banality. And in a culture where celebrity has trumped fame, anyone can be famous for *at least* 15 minutes. The internet has only exacerbated this situation. In Wikipedia anyone is worthy of encyclopedic citation and there is nothing either admirable or heroic about the Hussein video. Consider the video's corollary image: Hussein in his underwear on the cover of the tabloids. Yes this was a tactic to humiliate an enemy, but remember the color of General Wolfe's coat (red) but the success nevertheless in the Colonies. (Wolfe was a British officer, who died fighting the French in Canada.)

While each painting in *Untitled: Saddam Hussein* is modest in scale, as a whole they form an installation that recalls the original installation of Gerhard Richter's *48 Portraits* at the

1972 Venice Biennale. Richter culled his series of "famous men" from illustrations in an encyclopedia, making a capricious selection of figures which included William James, Paul Valéry, Paul Hindemith and Albert Einstein. These were figures designed to form a new pantheon of father-figures in Postwar Germany, to become the heroes that Nazi parents could no longer be. Nevertheless, in their randomness, they also hint at the differences between an encyclopedic model of history versus a singular, epic model of history. Compare *48 Portraits* with *The Death of General Wolfe* and this becomes readily apparent. Wolfe becomes an object of veneration in his Christ-like sacrifice. Based on photographs, the paintings in Richter's *48 Portraits* are designed to be as documentary as possible. They are simply bits of information in the larger information scheme of the encyclopedia, purportedly neutral in their inclusivity. Of course Richter is undermining this purported neutrality by putting it on display, but that is precisely the point (or one of the points) of this work.

Bakke's *Untitled: Saddam Hussein* sucks information out of the internet as an encyclopedic system. While there is nothing neutral about information online, its sheer quantity has the potential of becoming neutralizing. It is likely that the beheading of Timothy Berg and Hussein's execution will inaugurate the widespread circulation of readily accessible images of video-documented death online. Will viewers become as numb to these actual events as they are to the fictional ones now ever present in films and video games? Bakke's work offers a demonstration of the continued relevance of history painting in the face of new media. He slows down the transmissions of the blog-o-sphere. In turning a net video into a series of paintings, he stills the endless flood of online information. He gives us an image of death not in an act of mourning, but—to follow Sigmund Freud's well-known distinction—in an act of melancholy. In *Untitled: Saddam Hussein* between each of these still lies another still and so on, ad infinitum in an endless working over of historical memory. Can this be read as a metaphor the death of history?—for net-based history as a bottomless quest for a true event whose substance

evanescently dissolves into a repeating calculus of interstitial gaps based on the ever-changing tides public opinion?

To repeat: this is where the infamy of the Hussein video lies. Not in anything that Hussein did while alive, but in the impossibility of being truly famous—the way that West literally made history by making Wolfe famous—in the age of the internet. In the age of Web 2.0, where Warhol's 15 minutes of fame has become the generalized condition of net-being, infamy would perhaps be better called im-famy or a-famy; meaning, in the case of the former ("im-famy"), that we are all—at least potentially—famous; and therefore, in the case of the latter ("a-famy"), that no one is either famous or infamous. The melancholy that infuses *Untitled: Saddam Hussein* comes from the recognition that when the stars come down to earth both the security and the terror of famous men are lost. Fame reverts to the original meaning of "fama." For better and worse, it no longer upholds the reputations of big men, but flows via blog rule into to a babble of small talk.