

Nothing to Fear

DECEMBER 2, 2005

FEBRUARY 26, 2006

PEGGY DIGGS
HUONG NGO
KRISTIN OPPENHEIM
MICHELE PRED



YUMI ROTH
CHRISTINE TARKOWSKI
DIETRICH WEGNER
TONA WILSON

CURATED BY NADINE WASSERMAN

"I know what fear smells like. Have you smelled it?...It's unmistakable, hey? All fear is - it's the smell of discharged adrenaline."¹

The above quote was recorded by the author Alexandra Fuller from a conversation she had with Benjamin K., a white ex-soldier from the Rhodesian Army. What is so remarkable about this statement is that it exposes the paradox of fear because while fear seems to be a purely physical response it is in reality an emotion, one that is based on the expectation of impending danger or harm. Fear is a natural response to a direct threat and it triggers the chemical reaction necessary for "fight or flight." However, because it is an emotion it can be manipulated, particularly in a media driven culture where anecdotal evidence may lead to misperceptions. Once fear becomes over-whelming, it turns into terror and a terrorized populace has a greater potential to be coerced and subdued. In a recent op-ed piece in the New York Times, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, who teaches risk management at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst explains that we may "think of ourselves as rational animals, (but) risk avoidance is not governed by reason, cognition or intellect," but rather by our emotions which can "distort our decision-making."² These days, fear-mongering seems to be having a heyday, fueled by a media that promulgates sensationalism over information. No doubt humans are hard-wired to be fearful given that our early ancestors were initially prey

rather than predator and our survival necessitates an appropriate response mechanism to threatening circumstances. But our present conditions are not as threatening as they are made out to be by the media and by our government. Whether it's the bird flu, dirty bombs, AIDS, anthrax, Y2K, 9/11, July 7 (London), or biological agents, much of the information we receive is media hype more than help. It is all part of a culture of fear that is inseparable from a politics of fear. Past governmental administrations have tried to allay our collective fears, not propagate them. In 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's inaugural speech sought to calm an anxious nation by stating "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself - nameless, unreasoning, unjustified." Our current administration prefers to magnify our fears. Recently, former Newsday reporter Laurie Garrett observed that since 9/11 she has found America to be "a place of great and confused fearfulness."³ Rather than allay our fears, our government chose to take advantage of fear to wage a war on terror with no apparent end against an unknown enemy.

While studies do show that people generally learn to function despite an uncertain climate - take for example places like Belfast or Tel Aviv - it is clear that what contributes to the break-down of societies is a sustained anxiety.⁴ After the attack in London, a city that has experienced the blitz as well as IRA bombings, the response of the populace

was less fear than back to business as usual. Part of the reason 9/11 was so unsettling was the extraordinary visual effect. But despite the initial shock, Manhattan has begun to recover, and despite travel warnings tourism all over the world is on the rise. So, the questions we have to ask ourselves are "what are we afraid of and why" and "when should we believe the hype?" In a media driven culture, print media, photography, film, and television present images that settle in our collective consciousness and linger there waiting to be conjured up again. Who can forget the shower scene in *Psycho*, news reports of crimes committed by serial killers, or the devastating images beamed to us from war zones? But so much of what we fear is based on context and presentation. News stories tend to focus on heinous homicides committed by strangers when in reality the majority of people who are murdered are killed by someone they know.⁵ Most reporting regarding the Avian flu, which has caused 60 deaths, fails to mention that each year approximately 20,000 people die from Influenza. While the news focuses on suicide bombers, there is statistically a much greater chance that an individual will be killed in a motor vehicle accident. Given the facts, it starts to become pretty clear that many of our fears are misplaced.

This exhibition presents art that is both serious and humorous as a way to explore the ways in which fear can be provoked by the mere suggestion of something threatening or mitigated by challenging the viewer to question what they think they already know, particularly within the context of post-9/11 rhetoric. In *Domestic Tranquility: Towels for Everyday Living*, Yumi Roth turns common objects that we use daily into sources of safety information that can instruct us in the event of biological, chemical, or nuclear attack. These clean and simple illustrations are similar to the safety information cards available in seat pockets on airplanes and are influenced by the information available at ready.gov, the website created by the Department of Homeland Security to help citizens prepare for any emergency. Similarly, Peggy Diggs used information gathered from

various federal and NGO sources to create *Readiness*. This piece, made up of a series of clothing layers with compartments that contain necessary items for survival of up to three days, weighs a cumbersome 80 pounds. Huong Ngo's safety training video and safety equipment offer "protection" and a means to vanquish fear and panic associated with the government's fixation on security. Michele Pred arranges ordinary, everyday objects that have been confiscated by airport security, such as scissors, pocket-knives, nail clippers, and lighters, in mounds and circles that emphasize the weightiness of their new designation as "dangerous" items. Christine Tarkowski takes as her source the notion of "freedom," particularly in our present circumstances when there are threats to our civil liberties. In 1941 Franklin D. Roosevelt addressed congress regarding the "four freedoms" - the first was the freedom of speech and expression, the fourth was freedom from fear. Tarkowski challenges us to consider the delicate balance of freedom and our first amendment rights. Tona Wilson considers how the information we do receive is whitewashed and uses both the medium of gouache and the image of walls to explore what happens when a populace is fearful, isolated, and perhaps even willfully blind. Kristin Oppenheim's glass grenades are visually striking. They attract us with their beauty while repelling us with the implication of violence and destruction. Similarly Dietrich Wegner's mushroom cloud is both beautiful and utterly devastating. His work explores the delicate balance between comfort and fear. Each of these artists, by considering the ways in which fear infiltrates our cultural and political discourse, stimulates our skepticism in order that we might conquer our fears.

— Nadine Wasserman

1. Alexandra Fuller, "The Soldier," *The New Yorker* (March 1, 2004), p. 61.
2. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, "Scaring Us Senseless," *New York Times*, 24 July 2005, Sec. 4, p. 13.
3. "Pulitzer prize-winning journalist quits Newsday," 14 March 2005, www.democracynow.org.
4. Benedict Carey, "The Half-Life of Anxiety," *New York Times*, 10 July 2005, Sec. 4, p. 1.
5. Kate Perry, "All We Have to Fear," *The Post-Star*, 1 May 2005, Sec. A, p. 8.

CHECKLIST

KRISTIN OPPENHEIM

Glass Grenades, 1991, glass, 5 x 3 x 2.5 inches each, courtesy the artist and 303 Gallery

MICHELE PRED

Security Circle, 2004, scissors, 25 x 26 inches

Security Necklace, 2004, scissors, 22 x 15.5 inches

San Francisco Stack, 2004, confiscated airport items, dimensions variable, courtesy the artist and Nancy Hoffman Gallery

YUMI ROTH

Domestic Tranquility: Towels for Everyday Living, 2003, mixed media, dimensions variable

HUONG NGO

Hazmat Suit, 2004, felt, vinyl, 6 x 4 feet

Escape Pod, 2004, Winter Pod, 2004, Summer Pod, 2005, Tyvek, Velcro, suitcase, fans, DVD, 14:23 minutes, 5 x 5 x 5 feet

4 Safety Posters, 2004, digital prints, 18 x 24 inches

Safety Blanket, 2004-2005, Tyvek, felt, 24 x 36 inches

Training and Development (in collaboration with George Montcleone and Alexander Stewart), 2005, DVD, 28:17 minutes

CHRISTINE TARKOWSKI

An Un-submitted Proposal to the Freedom Museum, First Amendment Sculpture Competition, 2005, graphite on grid paper, 30 x 40 inches

PEGGY DIGGS

Readiness, 2004, mixed media, dimensions variable

DIETRICH WEGNER

Blood Splat, 2003, mixed media, 6 x 6 x 3 feet

Playhouse, 2004, Sharpie on photograph, 16 x 16 inches

TONA WILSON

Shell, 2005, gouache and watercolor on black paper, 13.75 x 19 inches

Whitewash, 2004, gouache and watercolor on black paper, 11 x 14 inches

The Arts Center of the Capital Region
265 River Street, Troy, NY 12180
(518) 273-0552
www.artscenteronline.org

