

Deborah Oropallo

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Deborah Oropallo @ Catharine Clark

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May 29, 2018

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Deborah Oropallo, *Caution*, 2018. Photomontage, pigment print, paint on paper. 50 x 80 inches.

Coming to grips with the damage we have done to the natural world is almost impossible. Yet through words and, especially through images, we keep on trying. At least, that's what we tell ourselves, as we peruse threads of disaster porn on cell phones and computers, until we can take no more and look away.

In unframed panoramic photomontages and a series of mesmerizing videos, Deborah Oropallo wields these accumulations of images in ways that cut through the vertiginous mental and emotional overload. In *Dark Landscapes for a White House*, fragmented and stacked pictures of loss and violence —human and environmental — reveal, as if by magic, the awful truths behind the daily onslaught to which we are subjected.

Oropallo has been refining her touch with this digital approach to image making for more than 15 years. Originally trained as a painter, she began moving away from the brush somewhere around the early 2000s, in photographically based industrial images printed on canvas. Soon afterwards, she began considering questions of gender and power by superimposing female figures in bondage wear or scanty lingerie over traditional portraits of men: nobility, politicians and empire builders. More recently, using the same methods, she created a series of works that employed fairy tales as a point of departure, forcing viewers to consider the underlying meanings of such stories.



Deborah Oropallo, *Rogue*, 2018. Photomontage, pigment print, paint on paper. 50 x 80 inches.

As the exhibition title suggests, she has left portraiture behind for the classic genre of landscape. These works depict the rape of the physical world and the apocalyptic consequences. Oropallo acquires source images for these works by scouring online news sources for photos of catastrophic events: floods, melting polar ice, massive fires, oil spills and car bombings — lenses through which she appraises the moral terrain of the 21st century. Sometimes one image is visible through another, like a computer-age palimpsest, a notable example being the layers of figures drenched chest-high in water in *Deluge*. In other works, she stitches together many images to create a larger scene, like the empty Oval Office pictured in *Oval O*. In this, a second set of images float ghostlike over the immediately recognizable space, reduced here to its parquet flooring and curving walls: translucent American flags in which only the white stripes remain.



Deborah Oropallo, *Oval O*, 2018. Video editing and sound design by Andy Rappaport, single-channel digital video with sound, 6:40 minutes.

In *Rogue*, a crowd of forensic experts clad in hazmat suits — harvested from multiple images of car bombings — seem equally insubstantial. The wrecked, burned hulk of a car in the center of the composition is almost hidden by the perversely angelic-looking emergency responders.

Only one piece in the show, *Blazes*, is presented in the traditional form of stretched canvas. It depicts multiple white clapboard houses burned to shells in wildfires last fall in northern California, against a disturbingly benign-looking backdrop of blue skies and verdant lawns. An odd flicker of debris seems to be flying through the air, like ash carried on the wind, resembling nothing so much as static in transmission or (more quaintly) scratching on a negative. It puts us further from the events being portrayed. At 69 x 120 inches, this piece is the visual centerpiece and the largest work on view, though in some ways it seems to point more towards the artist's past than to her future. That surely lies in the arena of video, as demonstrated by the four works viewable either in the darkened media room or on a flat screen in the front of the gallery.

in these mesmerizing video montages, Oropallo brings her skills with accumulation, altering, layering and pacing to a new level of artistry. Accompanied by Andy Rappaport's richly atmospheric sound design, *Meltdown*, *Blazes*, *Crude*, and *Oval O* each present a succession of more than 300 images of natural/political global traumas: oil spills, fires, floods, pipelines built through vast (previously) untouched tracts of land; oceans filled with thick black sludge and polar ice melting. In *Crude*, sailing ships in picturesque seascapes overlay a seemingly endless succession of oil platforms on open water, horizon lines eerily aligned as a graceful schooner fades into a burning rig. Eventually, the accumulation darkens and segues to foul-looking clouds of smoke that fill the entire frame. As the scene fades to black, a funereal-sounding bell tolls.

The one video that does not feature disaster, per se, shows a place where presidents talk about it: the Oval Office. First shown empty, it is then populated with candid pictures of several presidents,

including Reagan, Carter, George W. Bush, Obama and Trump. Their figures fade in and out, as they talk to cabinet members, the press, and — in Obama's case — hang out with little kids. In the background, Frederic Remington's iconic bronze of a cowboy riding a bucking bronco remains as a constant presence, though after Obama disappears and Trump enters, the painting hanging above the sculpture shifts from a Norman Rockwell rendition of Liberty's torch to the famous portrait of America's previous white supremacist-friendly president, Andrew Jackson.

For Oropallo, the Remington is clearly a potent symbol for manifest destiny and white male entitlement, bringing with it the belief in a God-given right to plunder and profit from the destruction of the American wilderness, whatever the consequences. To remind viewers of this, Oropallo places an image of the Remington at the bottom edge of all the digital prints: sometimes silvery, sometimes tar-black, but immediately recognizable. Its presence reminds us that we are, by and large, helpless and passive consumers of this parade of disasters.

A second motif further reinforces her point; it comes in the form of a recurring engraved name plate — the kind museums once affixed to paintings to identify subject and artist. On this one, though, the original name has been scratched out and replaced with Oropallo's own. Sleuthing reveals it to have once carried the name of Abraham Lincoln, followed by 1861-1865 — the duration of the Civil War, and presumably the time period of the portrait this plate originally identified.

Oropallo's decision to show the works on paper unframed (but with clips along the top edge to secure them to the wall) is stylish and smart, in the vanguard of contemporary presentation. In a curious way, this seemingly provisional method also manages to convey the urgency of her message. The bell is tolling, and midnight is fast approaching.

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