



**JOSEPHINE TAYLOR**

WRITTEN BY: Arden Sherman

***Beautiful/Decay***  
March 2009

**CATHARINE CLARK GALLERY**

IMAGES COURTESY OF: Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco



"Bomb Landscape 5," 2008  
Sumi ink, colored ink, and white pencil on paper  
100" x 149" (Diplych)

In the event of a nuclear disaster or the cataclysm of an apocalypse, artist Josephine Taylor foresees the dire landscape and struggling survivors. Her work displays a residue of some vague disaster: moist dark caves, hungry wolf cubs, and naked and hairless beings all dance atop the flat surfaces of her latest series of drawings, *Bomb Landscape*, currently presenting at San Francisco's famed Catharine Clark Gallery.

When approaching the gallery on Minna St., the glass windows reveal massive black and white shapes, indiscernible figures, and undulant imagery, attracting onlookers with magnetic force. Upon entrance, a dark mural—literally and figuratively—immediately commands attention. The actual scale of Taylor's profound scenes is indicative of her artistic practice, with most of her work being created on floor-to-ceiling, unframed paper canvases. Three twists and a tug away from her past works, *Bomb Landscape* yanks on humanity's worst fear (principally Taylor's) of losing everything tangible in a radioactive disaster. Taylor's formally diluted pastel playspaces evolve into subterranean landscapes, highly contrasted with black Japanese sumi ink on stark white paper. Famished wolf cubs chew and gnarl without satiation, leaving the protagonists of these cave sites with little hope for an easy getaway.

*Bomb Landscape* is a radical departure from the formal style of Taylor's past work and the show, perhaps for some, demands an acquired taste, its first impression being that of bold and violent subject matter which can be rather unpleasant. After some time with the work, though, one can appreciate Taylor's accentuated black-and-white color scheme and vaguely postlapsarian theme, either embracing her artistic shift or denying it.

The drawing "Bomb Landscape 4" depicts a marriage between Taylor's new and old working styles. The wall-size painting is of a plagued woman, pockmarked, naked, and in dire straits, feeding a baby through a tube attached to her breast. From the baby, the tube continues down to a sickly, oxygen-masked figure in the foreground. The scene takes place in the vortex of an underground cave, the figures trapped in the aftermath of a catastrophic event. The woman could be Taylor herself, the baby her son, and the sick figure her husband, and the situation a hypothetical survival scenario positioning Taylor as the life-giver. Strange, yet intriguing, *Bomb Landscape* gives the viewer much to interpret even with Taylor's statement that the show "points to the tenderness and poignant exchange that is (and would remain) the crux of humanity, even amidst disaster."

Among the works, of particular fascination was a series of "sun prints" that were made by exposing dark paper to sunlight, creating images where Taylor did not allow sunlight to hit the paper. This process produces faded dark images, and the sites are shadowy, smoky, and nocturnal, appropriately titled "Radioactive Landscape," "as if those images," Taylor explains, "were being seen using 'night vision,' either by a predatory animal or a military night vision device."

*Bomb Landscape* is rather dramatic, and Taylor envisions the future to be just that. Her subtle imagery from the past is now whitewashed in the flash of a nuclear explosion. Wild wolves, ubiquitous caverns, mangled, naked, and struggling beings are floating, weightless bodies on the dark abyssal backdrop. Taylor's fears are manifested in *Bomb Landscape*, and at a time of relative political goodwill in America, the scenes could be seen as exquisitely provocative.