MARTHA ROSLER: BRINGING THE WAR HOME


Martha Rosler: Bringing the War Home is the first museum exhibition to bring together Rosler’s two landmark series of photomontages. In the pioneering series, Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful (1967-1972), news photos of the Vietnam War from Life magazine are combined with domestic interiors from House Beautiful. The prosperity of postwar America is integrated with images of soldiers, corpses and the wounded. Made during the height of the war, these images were originally disseminated in underground newspapers and on flyers and were made, in part, as a response to the artist’s frustration with media images, reporting techniques, and even some anti-war propaganda. The recent group, Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful, New Series (2004) revives the strategy to address the current conflict in Iraq. Rosler’s montages raise questions about the connections between advertising, journalism, politics, sexism, and violence and re-connect two sides of life that have been falsely separated — distant wars and the living rooms of America.

BRINGING THE WAR HOME: HOUSE BEAUTIFUL (1967-1972)

“...I began making agitational works ‘about’ the Vietnam War, collaging magazine images of the casualties and combatants of the war — usually by noted war photographers in mass market magazines— with magazine images that defined an idealized middle-class life at home. I was trying to show that the ‘here’ and the ‘there’ of our world picture, defined by our naturalized accounts as separate or even opposite, were one.” Martha Rosler

From 1967-1972, Rosler combined graphic news photos of the Vietnam War from Life magazine with images of a prosperous America epitomized by the domestic interiors reproduced in House Beautiful. In jarring juxtapositions, pristine living rooms and safe kitchens are “invaded” by the perpetrators, refugees, and bloody
landscapes of war. Developed in the context of Rosler’s anti-war and feminist activism at the time, the montages were born from her frustration with images of the war in television and print media because they seemed to be “always very far away, in a place we couldn’t imagine.”

Produced during the height of the war, Rosler’s images were originally circulated in underground newspapers, anti-war journals, and flyers, or as photocopies. Not until two decades later, were the original collages printed as a limited edition of color photomontages and exhibited in an art-world setting. Photomontage, with its roots in German Dada produced in the wake of the First World War, has a history of being an effective aesthetic-political technique. Using the same cut-and-paste process, Rosler carefully matches color, scale, and perspective, to create scenes that read as coherent, authentic spaces. The Vietnam War montages re-connect experiences in life that have been falsely separated — a distant war and the living rooms of America — exposing powerful relations between media representation and public opinion, advertising and politics, sexism and violence.

The Vietnam series began in 1967, the year that the three major networks began broadcasting fully in color, and ended in 1972, the last year that Life magazine was published as a weekly. Rosler’s jarring juxtapositions play on the montage character of Life, where photo-essays documenting the news alternated with lifestyle features, all of which seamlessly flowed into ads for the latest appliances, the ideal mattress, the designer sofa, or the perfect lawn. Vietnam came to be known as the “living room war” and the TV screen, which brought images of daily carnage (interrupted by ads for consumer comforts) into homes across America, appears in Rosler’s early montages.

BRINGING THE WAR HOME: HOUSE BEAUTIFUL, NEW SERIES (2004)

During the 30-plus years between the Vietnam War series and the new series, created in response to the current U.S. occupation of Iraq, Rosler has become one of contemporary art’s most respected and incisive cultural critics as artist, writer, and teacher. Since the 1970s, she has worked in photography, video, performance, and installation, bringing her feminist perspective and critical eye to visual representations of everyday life through a process she describes as “inserting public narratives into private ones.”

Driven to create the new series by a renewed sense of urgency and outrage, Rosler also was cognizant of the way the “news value” of politically motivated art is eventually “replaced by a mythologized, universalized message. People can look at the Vietnam War works now and see universal messages. Which is why it was time to do a new series.” Despite the availability of Photoshop technology this time, Rosler relied on her primitive cut-and-paste, “you can do this” collage process because it subtly shows traces of the seams between images, reminding us of the photos’ origins in the popular press.
In the Iraq images, Rosler both revives earlier subjects and strategies and updates them to reflect the latest technologies and fashions, new perpetrators and victims. She confronts us with chilling clashes of narcissistic runway models and burkha-covered women, raging fires and hi-tech kitchens, tortured prisoners and leather sofas. The places (Baghdad, Saddam’s Palace) and faces (George and Jeb Bush, Lynndie England, Muktada Al-Sadir) are specific to this conflict. Scenes of this war are not confined to the view outside the picture window or on the flat-screen TV — they erupt across any available surface from oven, pillow, mirror, book cover, and picture frame to the ubiquitous cell phone screen.

Rosler connects our current obsession with digital cameras and cell phones “at home” with a cultural disconnect to the “distant” effects of war. But the Iraq images — especially those that incorporate Abu Ghraib prison photos — also expose the role that this technology (and the Internet as a means of distribution) has played in the lives of combatants and victims, and how these particular photos uniquely shaped perceptions of this war around the world. Seeing both series shows how the media evolution from newspapers and television during Vietnam to computers and cell phones in the Iraq conflict have redefined our sense of time and space, further blurring traditional boundaries between private and public, inside and outside, us and them.

In both series, Rosler’s interrogation of the interconnectedness of domesticity and war led her to focus on representations of women and the space of the home as a site of political engagement—with each room another kind of battleground in terms of class and gender inequities. The female bodies that Rosler revisits and connects to the politics of war signify a range of realities and roles: victims, laborers, rebels, oppressors, and seducers. In several images, Rosler strategically contrasts women’s domestic labor with the “work” of soldiers. Occasionally, iconic personalities are included (actress Faye Dunaway as the outlaw Bonnie, Pat Nixon as First Lady, Army Pfc. Lynndie England as Abu Ghraib torturer), but more often it is not the individual depicted who is the subject of Rosler’s work but the jarring context of the female and what is repressed, suggested, or exposed by her appearance and action: a young Vietnamese amputee whose war-torn body disrupts the comfortable space of the modern living room and the border of the page; the perverse exoticism of an Asian nude from Playboy in the context of a war in Southeast Asia and in the midst of Vietnamese children, women, and men; glamorously-clad runway models parading through spaces occupied by hooded captives or burkha-covered Iraqi women.

Despite the many changes in the world since 1967 (technology, geo-politics, human rights), encountering Rosler’s Bringing the War Home series together in 2007 not only demonstrates the enduring effectiveness of the photomontage practice to engage viewers as citizens, but the occasion also confirms the subjects’ continued urgency. As one critic observed upon seeing examples from both series, “… if the older series have not dated a bit in 30 years, that is both a triumph and a defeat for an artist who has always had change on her mind.”
RELATED EVENTS

A Conversation with Martha Rosler
Thursday, October 18, 7-7:30pm
Contemporary Gallery
Join Martha Rosler as she discusses her work with Curator of Contemporary Art, Susan Stoops. Reception for the artist to follow in The Museum Café. Free with Museum admission.

Lecture: Howard Zinn on Bringing the War Home
Sunday, November 11, 2pm
United Congregational Church, entrance near Institute Road and Tuckerman Street
$15 members, $20 nonmembers, Veterans Free
Pre-registration is required
For student group rates, please call 508.793.4333 or 508.793.4334, or register online at www.worcesterart.org
Lecture is followed by reception in the Worcester Art Museum galleries
Howard Zinn, noteworthy historian, playwright, and social activist, will speak in conjunction with the contemporary exhibition, Martha Rosler: Bringing the War Home. Using historical research and personal experiences, Zinn will make parallels between Rosler's work and our nation's history with conflict. It is by no accident that this event will take place on Veteran’s Day, and as such will be a time for reflection by people of all political beliefs and past experiences.

About the Worcester Art Museum
The Worcester Art Museum, which opened to the public in 1898, is world-renowned for its 35,000-piece collection of paintings, sculpture, decorative arts, photography, prints, drawings and new media. The works span 5,000 years of art and culture. View paintings by Cassatt, Gauguin, Goya, Monet, Sargent and Whistler; admire floor mosaics from the ancient city of Antioch; see cutting-edge contemporary art; and discover the Museum’s many other treasures. Special exhibitions showcase the masterworks, seldom-seen gems, and important works on loan. Enjoy a delectable lunch in the Museum Café, and browse the Shop for unique gifts and mementos.

Dedicated to the promotion of art and art education, the Museum offers a year-round studio art and art appreciation program that enrolls over 7,000 adult and youth students each year. Public tours are offered Saturdays at 11am and Sundays at 1pm, September through May. Audio tours are also available in English and Spanish.

Museum hours are Wednesday through Sunday, 11am-5pm, Third Thursdays of every month, 11am-8pm, and Saturday, 10am-5pm. Admission is $10 for adults, $8 for seniors and full-time college students with current ID, and FREE for Members and all youth 17 and under. Admission is also FREE for everyone on Saturday mornings, 10am-noon (sponsored by Fidelity Investments, The TJX Companies, Inc. and National Grid).

The Museum is located at 55 Salisbury St., Worcester, Mass., easily accessible from the Massachusetts Turnpike (I-90), Route 290 and Route 9. Free parking is available near entrances on Salisbury, Lancaster and Tuckerman streets. For more information, call (508) 799-4406 or visit the Museum web site at www.worcesterart.org.

Electronic images available.

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