

Antoinette Herivel: **F**ragmented

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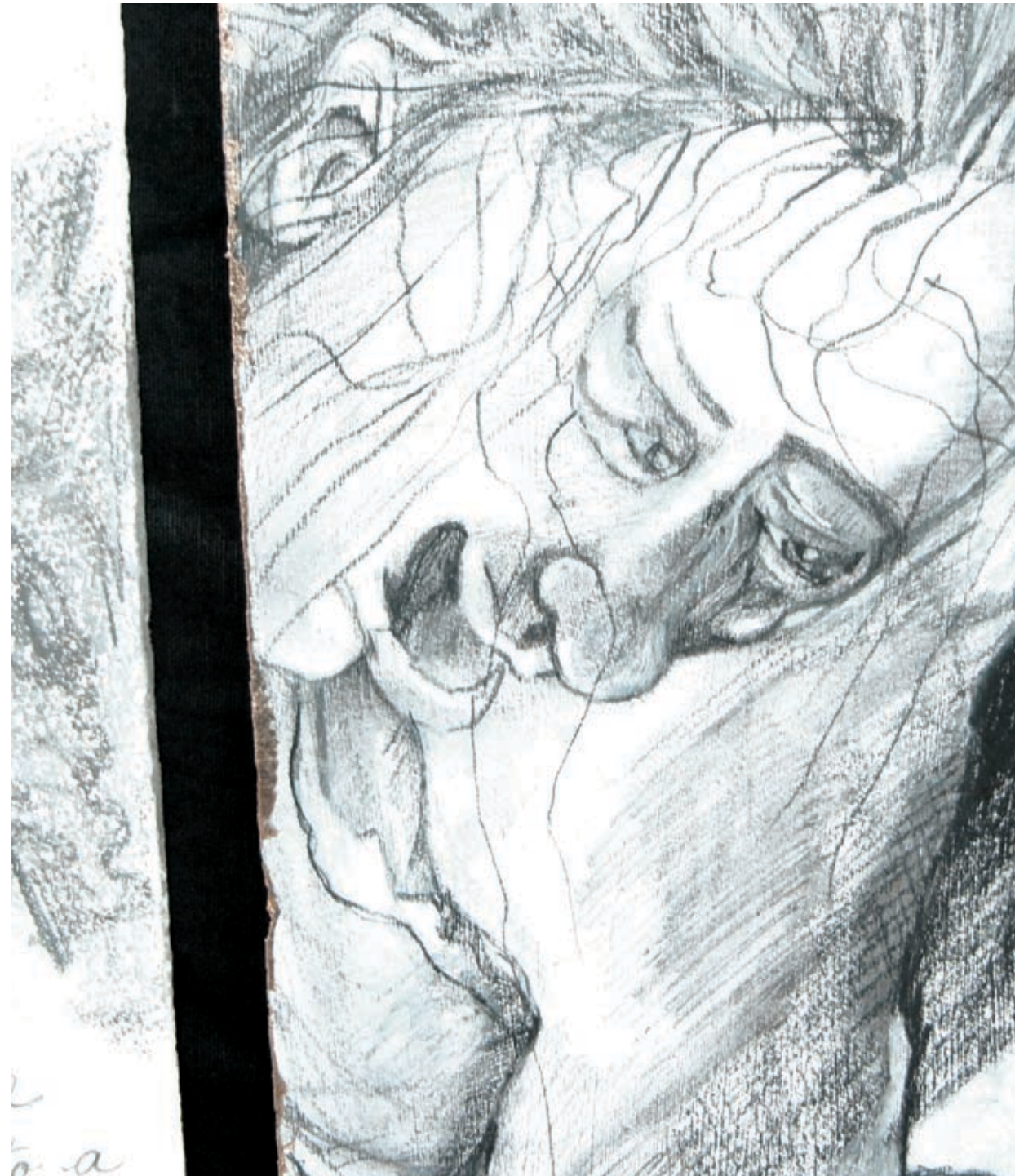
ART GALLERY OF REGINA

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"Die Festung: The Fortress", mixed media , 2009

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Cover: "La Corbière: the Throw Away Woman", detail, mixed media, 2009

Fragmented

History is fugitive, unfixed, transitive – something like identity itself.

Antoinette Herivel knows this well, having made this largely the subject of her work for the past 20 years or so. Her project of revisiting, re-imaging and repainting the past serves both a social and personal function: to bring forward into the present – to remember - ways of being, now largely forgotten, and at the same time to attempt to understand for herself her relationship to it. This kind of endeavour – revisiting the immediate or historical past - has many precedents in art, of course, from history painting itself where grand events performed long ago by extraordinary and now famous individuals are permanently and dispassionately memorialized; to the work of early feminist artists who claimed a place within art's history by telling an alternative version of it.

Fragmented is not history but is about history. For the artist it is a kind of return to the past to her ancestral home in Jersey one of the British Channel Islands off the coast of France. It specifically addresses its occupation by Nazi troops during WWII. These are little-known and largely little-discussed events in the history of those times. Almost as a historian, Herivel gathered together information on this topic from diverse sources such as encyclopaedias, history texts, the official Jersey website and published memoirs. More significantly, almost as an anthropologist she mines her own family's stories about these events from their letters to each other from those times; from her grandmother's old diary; from notes and material found in old scrapbooks. Indeed, as with a group of earlier works (that had its source in old recipe files from the family kitchen cupboard and which served as the impetus for the Fragments exhibition), we can consider the work here to find a second thematic location in the private lives - especially of women - who lived through this occupation.

Herivel's approach is not to visually rewrite a cohesive linear history of these events but more to reassign it through the lens of 'lived' history. Thus we find here the small details, daily comings and goings, the quiet longings of the small players who persisted through these challenging times. The drawing entitled *'Die Festung: The Fortress'*, for example, is (like all other drawings here) based on descriptive academic accounts mitigated by lines from personal diaries from the period: the statement "Six thousand slave labourers;...22,000 troops" we find counterpoised by a line from a letter to a family member that states: "You would not recognize some parts of Jersey. We did not go to the sands or to any bays last year...they have built a wall."

Perhaps nowhere is the notion of impartial history challenged more directly than in the private journal or diary, where ordinary people using their own internal voice tell of ordinary events. From them, these drawings compose a kind of anti-narrative – one that pays attention to the multiple rather than the singular version of events: one that circles around the personal, around unimportant gestures, forgotten moments and confidential thoughts that historians might consider 'un-events'. And indeed, in this way, they ask how it is possible any longer to believe in any view of the past that claims to be objective: to believe in what has been referred to cynically as the 'grand narrative' of history?

As a reflection on the past, these drawings are a form of visual rather than literary thinking: a wrestling with both 'data' and diary as much as with her own feelings and thoughts about them, without resolution. Working from both the 'official' record and from the often contradicting experienced, personalized version, Herivel does not privilege one narrative over the other: hers in an attempt to find not so much the intersection where oppositional versions mesh or fail to mesh, as much as their meaning. An often disorderly tumble of images of things, places and people; of words, washes of color and found materials (that sometimes seem to erupt energetically or tumourously from the paper surface), these works do not remember the past but quote it. Simultaneously they trace her ideas and responses to that now-multiple, now-porous past she addresses. Locating and sorting, sifting and classifying, she tries to pull the numerous details of the past together into some kind of manageable and understandable whole that is less orderly than graspable.

As re-iterations of the past, these images then necessarily and purposely fail objectivity as they too are, in their own way, responses to these events. Through this re-telling - this re-narrativizing of the narratives - Herivel constructs her own multi-layered version of events. However, the act of narrating – however we do it and whoever does it – is itself a reconfiguring of the story, a re-constructing of truth. And certainly we must consider whether Herivel is, in the process of making these images, not only rescuing the past from a bland torpor and the icy stasis of our forgetting but, in a way, constructing her own version of events – her own truth. Her process and visual outcomes are, in this way, clearly the consequence of a deep self-reflexivity.

1970s feminist artist Nancy Spero whose frieze-like drawings on long panels of paper traced a male-centered human history of subjugation and brutality bears consideration here and although Herivel's work is more specific than Spero's, it too inscribes acts of horror – as well as her disbelief at their continued occurrence. Indeed, by considering and reflecting upon women's lives in Jersey in the early 1940s – and, in many cases, the lives of her own relatives - Herivel is in some way considering and reflecting upon her own life in the present. Of course in terms of the seemingly never-ending cycles of global violence at the service of ego and power, we too – as she does here - might ask how this kind of situation could have happened...and happens still.

Time clarifies the past by giving it distance so that events can be examined, re-viewed, weighed and judged; but it also obscures it by removing us from events such that they can only be recalled or re-lived through the active imagination in the present. In coaxing the past into the present and piecing it together, this project (and any like it) inevitably begs completeness. In this way these drawings limn a history that is thus not only unfinished but, inevitably because of that, in flux. And indeed, a sense of incompleteness runs through all of these drawings.

History is a messy nuanced affair of both the mind and heart, and because of that, defies a fixed stable order. We must consider then whether through the act of drawing and the desire expressed in these drawings to swim in the murky waters of her own history and try to understand it, that Herivel is, in effect, not only writing or re-writing that history but her own identity as well. In the end, these contemplative drawings become fragmented spaces of interiority: they consider not only events of the past and their meaning, but the limits of her and our understanding- as well as the incompleteness of our knowledge and ourselves.

Jack Anderson
2010



"The Waiting Game", detail, mixed media, 2009