

The Omen Series: Wars and Rumors of Wars

Four Paintings by Matt Ballou

Early this year I began a series of paintings dealing with war. Each work consists primarily of three symbols – figures in landscapes, smoke plumes from explosions, and geometric constructions called dodecahedrons. The works are strange to me, even now after I’ve been working on them for six months. Given that I often try to keep my work more metaphysical and philosophical, I’m not certain how I got so involved with such a socio-political type of expression. Whatever the reasons, these paintings just started coming out. I think a lot of it has to do with my agitation with the current state of our world.

I’m agitated about war, about how humans continue to interact with each other. I’m agitated by the philosophical implications of our warring, and I’m agitated that it seems inherent to our very existence to be war-like. How did we let things get this way? Why do we always seem to end up bludgeoning one another? What can we do to change? Why do people suffer? It all comes back to existential questions for me – questions of faith, questions of personal responsibility in the world. I wanted these paintings to reflect all of these issues to some degree.

With these thoughts in mind, I started looking at chemical plant explosions, roadside bombings, oil field fires, and rocket attacks, all of which are part of very recent events in our world. I brought in the dodecahedron because it was one of the five Platonic solids – fundamental elements of the universe according to Plato’s models. He considered the dodecahedron to be not only a symbol for the cosmos, but its real physical shape as well. So I decided to pair the explosions with this ancient symbol for the universe as a representation of the violence we’re doing to the world and ourselves. The form also functions as a symbol for an outside, extra-human witness to these events. The figures – representatives of us – observe the scenes along with the cosmos, implying that we, as viewers, have responsibility for what we’re seeing.

The first painting (figure 1), *The Omen (Sisyphus’ Fall)*, is the most allegorical of the series. The Greek myth of Sisyphus tells the story of a man who was condemned by the gods to roll a stone up a mountain, only to have it roll back down, whereupon he’d have to roll it back up again. Here I depict a double-torsoed Sisyphus, who has lost both his grip on his “stone,” as well as on the mountain itself. Below him the fires burn and smoke rises. I wanted this image to be about the equivocation and ambivalence with which we often view conflicts.

In *The Omen (Two Women in a Field)*, I wanted to move from the world of Sisyphus toward a real world of sorts, while still maintaining a mythological feel (figure 2). The green, pastoral landscape and posing of the figures (not to mention the oddity of the large dodecahedron) are meant to strike a mythic balance against the massive, monolithic confluence of the smoke pillar. The disturbance implicit in the explosion and its plume are an omen, a sentinel, an ensign shouting: pay attention! Think about what’s happening!

Figure 1:



Figure 2:



Figure 3:



Figure 4:



The world of *The Omen (Three Figures in a Landscape)* is, in contrast to the previous painting, grimmer, more shadowy – perhaps more true to our own world (figure 3). The figures are silent, horrified witnesses, their individual identities swallowed up in the murk. That they blend into the land is important, both in terms of their anonymous witnessing and suffering, but also in their inherent identification with their world – they’ve become a part of their earth in the midst of its destruction.

The Omen (Group Upon a Height) is an image that could be pulled from any day of the last 3 or 4 years in our world (figure 4). This scene could easily be of Beirut, Haifa, Kabul, or Baghdad. The figures – once again melded into their land, once again bearing witness – rise above their city to take in the view. The plume they see is smaller, more localized than some seen in other paintings of this series, but it is no less potent. It signals destruction in *their* world, in *their* lives, in *their* emotions, *their* beliefs, and *their* ideas.

Installation View:



Formal Note:

All works are 22 by 31 inches, oil on paper mounted on panel, 2006.

The reason I've left sharp and often disjointed or jagged edges on these works (rather than framing them tightly or painting tidily to the edges) is that I wish for them to rip away from the surrounding wall space. I don't want their edges to blend into the viewer's peripheral vision. I want a jarring scene to leap out from the wall rather than sit nicely. I want some dislocation to happen in the seeing of these paintings. I want a shifting to take the viewer from the exhibition space to the illusory picture space.

Visit www.gillockgallery.org for more information. Show continues through August 2006.