TOP 10 TRENDS

American Gothic

Imagery from the Civil War and other dark moments from the nation's history allows artists to express concerns about the present

BY EDITH NEWHALL

ABOVE The materials in Dario Robleto's *A Century of November*, 2005, include paper made from letters written by soldiers who never returned from war. LEFT Allison Smith's porcelain and mixed-media Civil War figures, *Dr. Mary Edwards Walker (in Blue) and Eliza Wilson of the 5th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry*, 2005.

AT THE CENTER OF DARIO ROBLETO'S 2005 sculpture *A Century of November* is a child's mourning dress made of handmade paper. The paper's pulp was made from letters written by soldiers who never returned from war. The dress itself is decorated with, among other things, ink retrieved from letters, carved bone buttons, flowers braided from hair by a Civil War widow, antique fabric and lace, and stitched with surgical suture thread from World War II.

Robleto is one of a growing number of artists who have been drawing on aspects of America's past—the darker the better—for their subject matter. A preoccupation with the sinister forces that haunt America's national identity can be seen in works as varied as Kara Walker's silhouetted slave narratives, Allison Smith's gender-bending Civil War battle reenactments and installations of wood rifles, and Brad Kahlhamer's expressionist paintings incorporating mythic American landscapes and Native American imagery.

Practitioners of this American gothic art need not be American themselves. British artist Dominic McGill's massive, undulating drawing *Project for a New American Century* (2004) charts a dystopian history of social unrest and military aggression. Canadian duo Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller are known for their eerie audio and video walks at such sites as the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, where the concept of solitary confinement was first introduced in a large prison.

Although many of these artists seem to be referring to the past, their concerns are very much with the present. The horrors of September 11, 2001, still loomed large when Museum of Modern Art curator Klaus Biesenbach was making studio visits for last year's "Greater New York" show at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center. "There was a big interest in history, and there was trauma from 9/11," says Biensenbach. "Many artists could not avoid dealing with 9/11. They looked into American history to see how other people had lived through traumatic times." Biesenbach points to McGill's drawings, which were included in the exhibition, as was the work of Smith. McGill explains: "If you make work about history, it's pretty defunct unless it's about the future and learning from the past." He is

3901 MAIN STREET HOUSTON, TEXAS 77002 PHONE: 713.526.7800 FAX: 713.526.7803 INFO@INMANGALLERY.COM
WWW.INMANGALLERY.COM

represented by Derek Eller Gallery, where his small drawings sell for $1,500 to $3,000. Large ones bring as much as $30,000.

"I wanted to show the psychological impact of violence and trauma and how it lingers," says Jeremy Blake of his suite of digital animations, "Winchester Trilogy" (2002–4). The work was inspired by the Gothic mansion that heiress Sarah Winchester began building in California in the late 19th century to appease the spirits of all humans and animals killed by Winchester rifles. "I would hope that a soldier could get as much out of it as anyone else," says Blake, who shows at Feigen Contemporary in New York and whose work sells for between $10,000 and $30,000. "It was made to allow people with different opinions to come into it." J. Morgan Puett takes a similarly inclusive approach by altering existing architectural spaces using props and costumes. In her most recent public art project, *The Lost Meeting* (2005), she gave an abandoned 19th-century Quaker meetinghouse in Pennsylvania new life by transforming it into a temporary drafting studio that investigated the material culture of the Quakers as well as the building's history. "I'm not having a dialogue with art," says Puett, who believes that her work is more suited to public places than to galleries. "I'm trying to have a discourse with the world."

A detail of Dominic McGill's 65-foot-long drawing *Project for a New American Century*, 2004.

The antecedents of American gothic art include the fetishistic assemblages of Bruce Conner, the invented autobiographical histories of filmmaker Eleanor Antin, and the "crock-eyed humor" of painter and sculptor William Wiley. More recently, one can look to Fred Wilson's rearrangements of museum collections, Elaine Reichek's revisionist samplers, and Barbara Bloom's period rooms. At the heart of much of the work is a gritty America personified by such iconoclastic artists as Jackson Pollock, Ed Kienholz, Robert Smithson, and Bruce Nauman; depicted by the gimlet-eyed photographers William Eggleston, Lee Friedlander, and Stephen Shore; and celebrated in the music of Woody Guthrie and John Fahey and the writings of William Carlos Williams, Hunter S. Thompson, and cultural historian Greil Marcus.

"This is art that mines Marcus's 'old, weird America,'" says Alex Baker, curator of contemporary art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. (The phrase was coined by Marcus in his 1997 book *Invisible Republic* to describe the strange and violent history he saw reflected in American folk music.) "It doesn't have to be history with a capital *H*. It can be the forgotten aspects of history, the folk narrative, or, as Howard Zinn would say, the 'people's history of the United States.'"

Baker points to the work of Margaret Kilgallen, who died in 2001 at the age of 33. Her bold, graphic wall paintings, pieced together from words and images, were featured in a 2001 show that Baker curated for Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art. "In her art, I see three things happening all at once: the typographical tradition of 19th-century advertising, like sign painting; the evocation of marginalized people like hobos through the names of places, in particular the names of freight-train yards; and the fascination she had with folk music," he says.

Literary, often craft-oriented, and frequently evoking a human or ghostly presence, American gothic art is not descended from the 1980s postmodern reprises of history by artists like Mark Tansey or McDermott & McGough. Rather, it has more in common with the participatory, site-specific performance art of the 1960s and '70s; with feminist art that seeks to undermine accepted cultural myths; and even with the multiculturalism and identity politics of the 1990s. "Maybe that is what makes this work radically different from traditional history painting," Smith says. "It doesn't try to teach history as an agreed-upon set of facts and time lines, but instead it questions how histories are produced."

Annette Carlozzi, curator of contemporary art at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin, agrees. "That's what I think Robleto and Blake are doing," she says. "They're not citing specific moments. You might start with a specific historical example and then conflate it with seemingly unrelated events. It's a way of asking questions that don't look for absolute answers, and that is what I think is so rich about the art that results." ■

Edith Newhall is the Philadelphia correspondent for ARTnews.

3901 MAIN STREET HOUSTON, TEXAS 77002 PHONE: 713.526.7800 FAX: 713.526.7803 INFO@INMANGALLERY.COM
WWW.INMANGALLERY.COM