

Ellen Caldwell: In your recent series “Flood,” you juxtapose Internet commentary following an article about the alleged decline of the nomadic Moken people of Myanmar with biblical verses about Noah’s epic. These seemingly chance parallels of texts end up aligning quite beautifully and tragically in exploring the current state of both our environmental and personal communicative degradation. Highlighting the comment section of our media is so interesting to me, because I think we often see a real break down of humanity there. Could you speak to this a bit?

Kenny Cole: But, despite this I also see a genuine struggle to find truth. We are all uninformed about something, or we all hold our own set of false ideas or myths that we might not recognize or acknowledge. We may know a lot about some things but no one knows everything about everything. An astrophysicist may not know how to lay a hardwood floor for example, so he probably has no business even discussing how it’s done, though he might add an interesting insight.

As far as the world’s problems go, I think that we really need all the help we can get and I guess I am willing to sift through a wild and woolly online comment stream to tease out truths. People say dumb things, but if we really listen there is usually a “truth” in there somewhere. We tend to have our own beliefs and raise a defense when we feel that our beliefs are challenged, so that’s probably the “degradation” part of this thing we call humanity.

As far as being an artist and approaching the world’s problems through an aesthetic process, which in this case is the drawing of a comment stream, I find myself reading and re-reading this text in order to transcribe it. This gives me a deeper insight into what is being said. I hear rhythms, see patterns, make connections with the ancient ideas, symbols and archetypes of the biblical themes. It’s a far cry from the modern phenomenon of constantly being interrupted with communication that can barely be processed. I like the idea of freezing this snippet of modern communication into a work of art.

EC: I love your sentiments about the comments’ being “a genuine struggle to find truth” and it helps me to consider them in a different light. I often see them as containing offensive language and ignorant, sometimes-racist insults coming from places of misunderstanding and adamant unwillingness to understand. But you’re helping me to consider them differently and I appreciate that...

KC: I think we are still suffering from future shock. Technology is advancing really fast; it always has. We don’t know what we’re getting into. And so nobody really has the answers and it’s just an ongoing, messy, messy, crazy struggle to try to figure things out ... Stuff is happening too fast and we just keep advancing, but we are not sure. Are we destroying the environment or becoming less human? Nobody really has the answer for that, but everyone has a lot to say. And somewhere in there, there is sort of truth in everything.

EC: The concept of future shock is great. And it ties beautifully to your poignant statements about your “Flood” series online. Could you elaborate a little bit more about how you see the virtual and digital world impacting our engagement with the everyday and ephemeral?

KC: Well, although I do not quite consider myself a painter, I see myself as trying to save painting! Painting has died many times before, but it has a very strange persistence. It has permanence and speaks a great deal to our condition as animals that build endless and varied structures, for habitation and shelter. There are 10 gazillion walls in the world that we have created and each one begs to hold some kind of message or vision that can speak to us or transform the space it’s in. This is just a phenomenon of our existence.

The digital world exists near this, but functions away and outside of our physical structures. It’s incredibly seductive and addictive, but I feel that it also has an emptiness and limitation in terms of satisfying our need for feeling human. Painting can address our need to feel human nicely ... Something like painting is a form that can capture things and hold them before us to see if we want to think about them for a longer while.

EC: Your work is certainly politicized and covers a range of topics from religious to environmental and from nationalism to industrialization. Has it always been so? Or was there a tipping point that made you shift your lens and become more political with your palette?

KC: I think that there has always been some political content floating in and out of my work, but I have definitely grown to become more interested in compacting a denser amount of political content into certain

larger pieces. I met Luis Camnitzer through the Drawing Center's Viewing Program in 2002 and was really challenged by him to consider my own willingness to admit my interest in creating politically charged work...

Even though, prior to this, I had experienced a kind of shock of disbelief at the first Gulf War, which, to me, seemed to be the first real major military undertaking post-Vietnam. I had really thought that the anti-war protests of the sixties had established a kind of end to more major wars ... Then 9-11 happened and it became apparent to me that we had reached a level and pattern of non-traditional warfare that was becoming endemic. I started to see that war was no longer something that was declared and nationalized, rather just a form of violence around a struggle for resources. I find it almost impossible now not to view art as needing to engage with this destructive economy, the economy of warfare.

EC: Do you feel like you really came into your own style when you accepted the inclination towards the political?

KC: Oh, definitely. I want to bring a degree of relevance to my art. I think people want to see it too. You make certain works of art and you are hesitant about it and then you get a strong, positive reaction to it ... and you realize that's really the work you should be making that it's more true to what you're feeling and thinking about. Sometime it's hard to get there. I try to work regularly. I basically work full time as a carpenter, so I get up really early and work a couple of hours before and after work I go to work. So it's definitely a struggle.

EC: I hear you. It's the same struggle with writing: finding the time for that practice. And I see it with all of my creative friends, you have your jobs that pay the bills but then you have to squeeze out time that doesn't necessarily exist in the days for your soul.

KC: Exactly. I would like to see in the world more creativity and less destruction. The creative part is such a small part about what's the world's about. Everyone's running around killing each other. And I really believe in my heart that there is a lot of room for less of that and more creative thinking, more making a better world. We all have friends and we all struggle trying to find this time, and that's the big tragedy of our being human, is that we don't have enough of that.

- See more at: <http://artvoicesmagazine.com/2014/12/the-beautiful-struggle-kenny-cole/>