



Wall at WAM

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ON VIEW BEGINNING MARCH 2013

THESE DAYS OF MAIUMA

Robert & Shana ParkeHarrison

Wall at WAM: These Days of Maiuma, 2013, inkjet, 17 x 67 feet.
Courtesy of the artists. Photo credit: Stephen Briggs

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Wall at WAM: *These Days of Maiuma* (detail), 2013, inkjet, 17 x 67 feet. Courtesy of the artists.

STEPHEN BRIGGS

Wall at WAM *THESE DAYS OF MAIUMA* Robert & Shana ParkeHarrison

The collaborative husband and wife team of Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison were commissioned to create the 10th mural for the Worcester Art Museum's Wall at WAM series. The mural is installed on a second-story, 67-foot expanse situated in the most public of the Museum's galleries – a faux Renaissance-style court – and overlooking a 6th-century Roman mosaic.

Over the past two decades, the ParkeHarrisons' staged photography has involved performance, sculptural props, and digital technology and often has raised questions about the politics of natural resources, the polarizing distribution of wealth, and the inherent contradictions between human activity, responsibility, and

destiny. Their collaboration began while both were studying at the University of New Mexico (1990-94). And while photography has remained at the heart of their practice, they regularly acknowledge the influences of other media including painting, literature, dance, theatre, and film.

The ParkeHarrisons' process of staging a scene and building a composite image from multiple negatives has affinities to cinema; their sensitivity to the expressive role of color has parallels throughout the history of painting. As they describe it, an initial concept evolves into narrative-charged imagery through lengthy phases of drawing, writing, research, and conversation. "Collaboration is an organic process for us.

We work from our shared vision and love for art. We have a great amount of trust and respect for one another's diverse artistic visions. Our collaborative process is similar to a game of throwing a ball back and forth. In our collaborative game, we start throwing the ball far from each other and progressively get closer and closer until we meet in middle."¹

In their critically acclaimed series, *The Architect's Brother* (1993-2005), the ParkeHarrisons worked with paper negatives to create sepia-toned images of an "everyman" (Robert) tending to a wounded landscape which raised questions about the Earth's vulnerabilities. The end of that project spawned two years of experimentation and resulted in a body of color photographs that displayed a greater degree of narrative ambiguity and a dramatic shift in palette. The ParkeHarrisons brought to this new work a deep understanding of the painter's relation to color—as a signifier of both "conceptual and compositional intent"—as well as a desire for color to evoke a sense of "magical realism."²

Their concept for the *Wall at WAM* was "to create a continuous detailed tableau photograph for the mural site. Creating a photograph at this immense scale presented far more of a challenge than we had imagined. In our studio, we photographed the elaborate image using multiple negatives that were scanned and merged together to retain the overall detail and resolution for this image...The other challenge was creating a photograph that offers a provocative and intriguing experience for viewers over the duration [typically two years] of its installation."³

These Days of Maiuma, with its iconography of the remains of a grand feast and its themes of contemporary wealth, decadence, and disregard for the environment is intended to be a visual and conceptual counterpoint to the Worcester *Hunt* mosaic from 6th-century Antioch (present day

Antakya in southeastern Turkey). This floor mosaic, which is installed beneath the mural, was once the setting of luxurious private dining by Antiochenes in an ancient city known for its lifestyle of sophistication, affluence, and excess.

The ParkeHarrisons introduced the iconography of the feast and its aftermath in an earlier photograph, *After the Feast* (2008). About that image the ParkeHarrisons said, "We were inspired by an early Peter Greenaway film—*The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989). Throughout the film, color is a dominant and expressive vehicle, from the interior walls to the lighting and costumes. In our feast image we wanted to portray a moment after a gluttonous feast. We chose highly saturated red walls and overly abundant color found in all of the foods piled onto the head of this person."⁴ The *Wall at WAM* site's proximity to the *Hunt* mosaic led them to a multi-layered engagement with the theme.

As the ParkeHarrisons explain, "Researching the symbolism, history, and culture of Antioch offered intriguing content to our creative process. The brutality displayed in the Worcester *Hunt* became fertile ground for us to explore the cruelty and gluttony of the time in which the mosaic was created. The concept for our mural offers a window into contemporary issues of use and misuse by referencing the past. The central figure of the Worcester *Hunt* stands awkwardly yet casually as a scene of animal brutality is enacted around him. This character is referenced in our image by a man holding a slain deer. In our image it is unclear if his action is aggressive or sympathetic. Clearly the feast in our image references decadence, both past and present. We titled our piece, *These Days of Maiuma*. Maiuma was a religious festival in the ancient world. In Antioch, it became a reason for parties which lasted between five and thirty days. This observance evolved into such a corrupt and decadent display of all forms of excess that it was periodically outlawed or tempered. This festival of



Worcester *Hunt*, early 6th century, mosaic, 20.5 x 23.5 feet, Worcester Art Museum, 1936.30. Excavation of Antioch and Vicinity funded by the bequests of the Reverend Dr. Austin S. Garver and Sarah C. Garver.

excess seems aligned with the excesses visible in the mosaic and in the lifestyles of ancient Antioch."⁵

The *Hunt* mosaic and *These Days of Maiuma*, although separated in time by 15 centuries, are both characterized by a complex embrace of the real and the imagined. Together, they afford us compelling visualizations of humans' complex relations to their world, then and now. The prosperity that once defined Antioch, so evident in the *Hunt* mosaic's unambiguous message of the success and wealth of its owner to his dinner guests and in its display of man's dominance over nature (in the forms of slain animals), would not last beyond the 6th century when the city fell victim to devastation by war, plague, drought, and earthquakes.

In the ParkeHarrisons' imagination, the mosaic floor is the setting of a more recent feast, as well as its aftermath. Evidence of a bountiful spread depicted in *These Days of Maiuma*, seemingly endless, is made explicit through finely articulated and richly colored details (products typical of the region of Antioch including pomegranates, olives, fish, lemons, roses, and wine). By

contrast, the narrative unfolding across the blood-spattered floor is purposefully provocative and disorienting. About those whom we see—a female tethered by her pearls to a peacock, a male carrying a bloodied stag, a moth hovering in a glass—and their relations to one another, there is nothing certain other than the palpable presence of their mortality.

Susan L. Stoops
Curator of Contemporary Art

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, information from the artists is drawn from conversations with the author over the course of the project (September 2011-March 2013).

1. Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison interviewed by Susan Stoops, *Access* (Worcester Art Museum, Summer 2013), 11.
2. The ParkeHarrisons sometimes enhance the film's color by applying layers of acrylic paint by hand to the photographic surface. Among painters they have cited whose use of color was particularly influential are the Pre-Raphaelites as well as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Mark Rothko, and Cy Twombly. See Carol McCusker, "FUTURE imPERFECT," *Color Magazine*, 2009.
3. ParkeHarrisons in *Access*, 11.
4. ParkeHarrisons in *Color Magazine*.
5. ParkeHarrisons in *Access*, 11.



Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, March 2013

TIMOTHY FURMAN

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Robert ParkeHarrison (born 1968, Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri) studied photography at the Kansas City Art Institute and the University of New Mexico; Shana ParkeHarrison (born 1964, Tulsa, Oklahoma) studied painting at William Woods College and went on to study dance history and metalsmithing at the University of New Mexico. They have developed their collaboration over the past two decades and in 2000 publicly acknowledged co-authorship of their images. A traveling exhibition of *The Architect's Brother* toured from 2002-2008 to sites in the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Recent solo museum exhibitions included the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City and the Gallery of Photography, Dublin. The ParkeHarrisons' work is in numerous private and public collections including Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Whitney Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts Houston; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; The Art Institute of Chicago; the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, and the Worcester Art Museum. Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison live and work in Saratoga Springs, New York. They are represented by Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago.

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