

Martin Luther King is assassinated: Memphis, April 4, 1968. Dallas, November 22, 1963. My Lai. Tiananmen Square. Space Shuttle Challenger. 9/11. Abu Ghraib. Katrina.

These are the shorthand notations of pivotal historical moments that we can instantly identify. We think of them as key moments in our nation's, and the world's, recent history, and perhaps they are. But are they as important as we think they are, relative to other events in the same period? Is our outrage, shock, or compassion proportional to the magnitude of the specific events? Or is our reaction proportional to the singularity of the *image* that encapsulates the event? Each of these events is defined for us by singular images or short sequences of film or video that indelibly capture the moment.

In Dallas, the famous Zapruder film. From Memphis, the image of men on a balcony, pointing to where the shots came from. Tiananmen Square, the lone man amidst the tanks. On 9/11, the video of the plane slamming into the tower, the enormous fireball erupting from the building, and buried amidst our denial, the images of victims tumbling through space, hurtling towards the ground. Challenger streaking through the high, cold, distant sky, suddenly erupting—gone. In Abu Ghraib, a hooded figure embodying the twisted mess of a wartime prison and a chain of command gone awry.

Other calamities have befallen us, other outrages have been committed, but these, for better or worse, have been documented, and the resulting images have captured our attention. Only rarely do we stop to consider who shot the original images—what was their point of view, from what sequence of images were the pictures we see selected? Who made those decisions? Who cropped the photos? What “extraneous” imagery did they remove? Were the photos enhanced or manipulated in any way? And the video or film footage, what re-contextualization or manipulation was that subjected to?

The images that define history for us are never pure or unedited conveyors of information. At the very least they are defined by the context in which we see them



Untitled #7 (16 m.m.), 2005

(*National Enquirer* or *Washington Post*?) and the caption or voice-over accompanying them. So how do we, as consumers of imagery, make sense of what we see?

It is into this thicket of intertwined questions that Josh Azzarella introduces his hybrid imagery. His artwork is, at first glance, a re-presentation of familiar and iconic images from the news media. Through meticulous digital manipulation of these images, Azzarella manipulates history.

The results can be heart-stopping—United Airlines Flight 175 flies past an untouched World Trade Center; in this video American Airlines Flight 11 is not burning wreckage inside the North Tower of the WTC, but must be still flying benignly towards Los Angeles. Just as in a dream, this makes no sense; why is United 175 not also heading west to LA? But watching Azzarella's video, this is not the question we ask. Instead we wonder “what if.” What if 9/11 never happened?

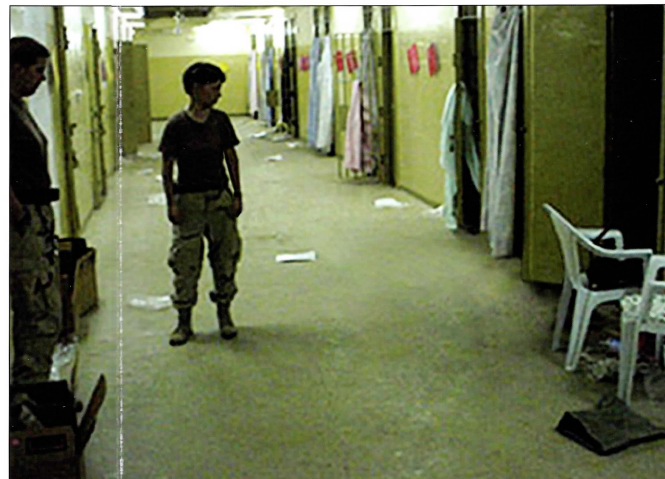
The potency of these images is so intense that logic does not apply; rather we interpret them emotionally. By mining the common consciousness of news-media imagery, Azzarella has neatly moved Pop art forward into the twenty-first century. As a culture we are perhaps no longer in awe of our Pop icons; we have no Marilyn, rather we have Angelina and Jennifer and Jessica and Nicole. They are diluted by our constant attention, amusing but not arresting.

We now measure impact by Google results—Marilyn leads Nicole sixty-three million to seventeen million. But “reality” captures us in ways more profound. The four-hundred-and-eighty-nine-million entries that Google has for 9/11 as of this writing reflect not only the reality of what happened that day, but the reflected passions, beliefs, and thoughts of millions of people. Their thoughts and ideas are reflected back into the story we know, and we have no objective reality left to interpret.

Of course, history has always been subjective; the difference is that now the voices are multifarious, and the images loom large as beacons of events. By editing these already-edited images, Azzarella forces viewers to scour the background for information and to notice the context of the event. In some cases Azzarella invites us to imagine alternative outcomes, or allows us to avoid the dreaded outcome we know is coming. The image of the 9/11 victim tumbling through space is oddly reassuring; the moment transformed from the last seconds of a life lost to the promise of eternity.

As we become aware of Azzarella's manipulations we begin to ponder the means by which the message has been delivered, how the image has been altered. By questioning the degree of manipulation, and even the “right” of the artist to change what we “know” to be true, we are confronted with the real truth of these images: they are our icons, and as such they contain only the truths we put into them.

—Harry Philbrick  
Director of *The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum*



Untitled #14 (Lynnelle), 2006

#### Education

MFA, Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2004  
BFA, Myers School of Art, University of Akron, 2002

#### Solo Exhibitions

Lisa Boyle Gallery, Chicago IL, 2006

#### Selected Group Exhibitions

Lisa Boyle Gallery, Chicago, 2006  
Emily Davis Gallery, University of Akron, OH, 2006  
New Image Gallery, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA, 2006  
Cuesta College, San Luis Obispo, CA, 2006  
San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, 2006  
Art Interactive/New Media Caucus of the College Art Association, Boston, 2006  
Western Bridge, Seattle, 2006  
Lisa Boyle Gallery, Chicago, 2005  
City Without Walls, Newark, NJ, 2005  
Temple University, Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, 2005  
Gallery 1f, Brooklyn, NY, 2005  
7hz, San Francisco, 2005  
Montclair Museum of Art, Montclair, NJ, 2005  
University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2005  
City Without Walls, Newark, NJ, 2004  
Shane House Gallery, Tucson, AZ, 2004