

Phyllis Plattner: Other People's Pictures

Friday, September 28–Sunday, October 21

RECEPTION: Thursday, October 4, 5–7 pm

Maryland Institute College of Art

Bunting Center: Pinkard Gallery



C-90 Type II, cassette tape, 45 minutes of equalized tape hiss per side, edition.

Surprisingly, a peaceful landscape is central to the last four themes in the Chronicles listed above. Here there is an intended contrast between “the unfathomable and tragic ubiquity of warfare throughout history” and humankind’s (or nature’s?) “equally powerful drive toward harmony, beauty and peace,” in Plattner’s words. The central painting in *Skies*, a section of Leonardo’s *Battle of Anghiari*, is anchored below by a marvelous long frieze of battles woven into the eleventh-century Bayeux tapestry, yet it is practically surrounded and crowned by a glorious blue sky streaked with pale pink clouds (based on Thomas Cole). On the contrary, in the more recent and equally simple grouping, *Life*, a luminous sunset sky is center, as well as anchor and crown, flanked by four issues of *Life Magazine* covers with tormented war images and blood-red borders. In these works, the framing alone – with no fragmented, peaked or jagged forms – communicates a peaceful mood. In my initial quotation from her, Plattner describes this entire body of work as both appropriation and political/anti-war art. To this I would add that it is far more complex and multivalent in content, being richly and wonderfully human.

Athena Tacha (Spear)

Professor of Art Emerita, Oberlin College

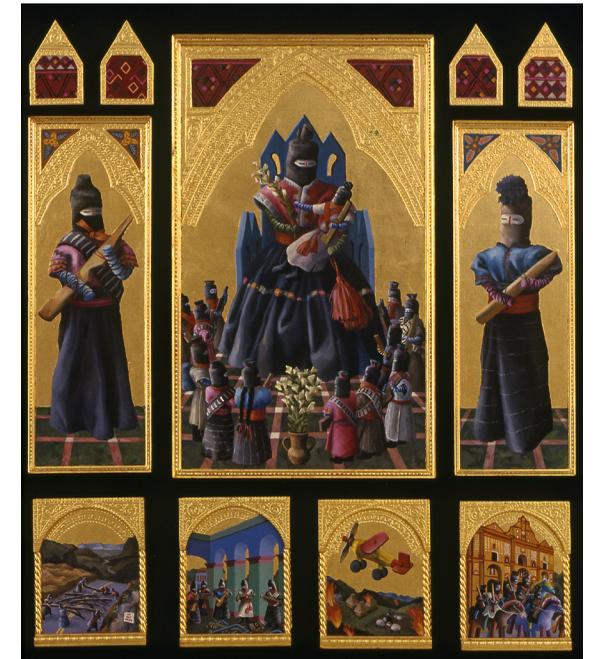
(Former Curator of Modern Art, Allen Memorial Art Museum)

Phyllis Plattner, 2001-11: From Everyday Reality to History and Politics

Why, in 2001, did Phyllis Plattner, an accomplished representational painter of huge interiors, jungles, and common household objects, turn to completely different work, a strange and intriguing series of multi-panel paintings, *Legends* (and later the *Chronicles of War* series), with colorful yet awkward fictional figures on elaborate gold-leaf grounds? A confirmed painter from reality, she had never worked before from pre-existing images and styles, or on political subjects, which she does in the new work.

As the artist explains: “Categories that could describe this work may include political art, anti-war art, activist art, appropriation art, quotation art, altarpieces, multi-panel paintings, triptychs, polyptychs.” The first three categories refer to the content of the paintings, the next two to approach or tactic, while the last four describe their format. Aside from numerous new movements in the contemporary art scene from the late ’60s on, what prompted the sudden shift in her work seems to have been the traumatic political events, revolutions and wars taking place worldwide at the turn of the millennium. During 1994 she witnessed firsthand a dramatic uprising in Mexico, which led to the *Legends* paintings in the summer of 2001, almost as a premonition of the 9/11 disaster at home.

While the mental or psychological origin of these works may be multiple, their format and many of the subjects of individual images stem from the two foreign countries and cultures that she experienced extensively earlier in her life. During the past decades Phyllis had lived for long periods, on and off, in Mexico with her cultural anthropologist spouse, Stuart Plattner, who was conducting research on the Mayan highlands in the state of Chiapas. And from the ’90s on, they both lived for several semesters in central Italy where Phyllis started teaching in the MICA program in Florence. Her long exposure to Mexican folk art and to early



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MICA

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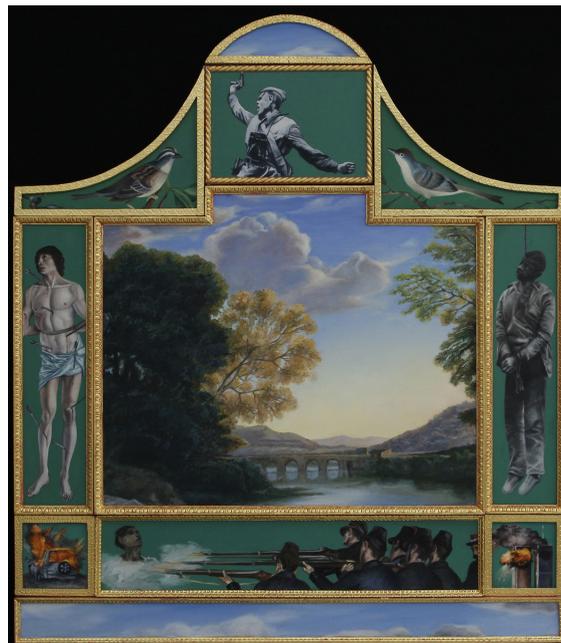
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Renaissance panel paintings with gold-leaf background provided the stimulus and backbone for both the *Legends* and *Chronicles* paintings, although their deeper content results from a combination of her interest in the history of art and her human/social concerns—fundamentally her deep objection to violence and war.

In the *Legends*, as Plattner explains in one of two excellent statements on her website, www.phyllisplattner.com, her initial group of protagonists were taken from “the small woolen dolls representing the Zapatista guerilla warriors that Mayan women made in response to the indigenous uprising there of January, 1994, [while] the ski-masked, machine gun-toting dolls depict Subcommandante Marcos, the uprising’s leader.” Her figures have the awkwardness of mannequins, yet they are threatening in their inhuman, masked invisibility. Their stick-like limbs and blunt bodies create a pathetic and powerful contrast with the ideal personages in those biblical scenes by Italian Renaissance painters that were the basis of almost all of her panels of this series (and some in the next). One recognizes fragmentary quotations from famous masters, such as Duccio, Simone Martini, Fra Angelico, Uccello, Mantegna, Leonardo, Grünewald, van der Weyden, Caravaggio, and Guido Reni, with some from less known ones, such as Daddi, Antonio Vivarini, Perugino, Fra Bartolomeo, Albertinelli, and Domenichino. However, in *#42/Polittico* (Polyptych), after Bernardo Daddi, the eight panels of the predella narrate by day the events of the 1994 insurrection in Mexico, while the arrangement of the main panels above matches a *Sacra Conversazione* by Daddi.

It is just a short leap from Catholic Mexico, with its gilded church interiors and colorful, dressed up Madonnas and saints, to the religious myths of Renaissance Italy. Nor is there a wide gap between religion and war. In addition to the guerilla dolls’ clunky guns and rows of ammunition (with Mexican toy airplanes and helicopters in the predella of *#42/Polittico*), more modern war machines started appearing in *Legends* (*#43/In God’s Name*); and in the *Chronicles*

real war horrors came to be juxtaposed with stories from the life of Christ or saints, depictions of angels, and patterns derived from textiles and architecture. In the two *Legends* series, colors are inspired by a blend of Mexican folk art and early Italian painting, as are many of the decorative motifs. Plattner seems to have relished ransacking the history of art and recreating numerous wondrous images, while maintaining a subtly gorgeous palette startlingly at odds with doll figures and “naive” renderings. Some of the depictions are childlike, even hilarious, such as Mary Magdalene in Glory or the lambs and donkey in the Adoration (from actual handmade Mayan woolen animals), but a number of the scenes, such as the Visitation and the Deposition, are gentle and touching. With extreme skill, Plattner conveys tenderness and deep human emotions through stick-like, crude toy forms.



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In 2006, after a troubling trip to China, Plattner embarked on her second series, *Chronicles of War*, with art historical citations and decorative patterns from different periods of European, Latin American and Asian cultures – ranging from Uccello’s *Battle of San Romano* and Picasso’s *Guernica*, to war scenes in Persian miniatures and Japanese prints. Ferocious battles and brutal shootings, horrendous explosions and bloody beheadings, bombings and fearsome armies (from Mayan and ancient Greek to Chinese or Nazi warriors) are adorned with floral motifs and often contemplated by angels or birds. She maintains from European altarpieces the symmetrical panel arrangement and pairing of subsidiary images, but transforms the overall format of the polyptychs, sometimes with sophisticated allusions to the internal compositions of the panels (e.g., in *Swords and Lances*). As each group has a unique theme, the changes of subject lead to different color gamuts as well. Plattner’s

paintings are rigorously thought out in every detail on an intellectual level, yet the color hits you in the gut on an emotional level.

Meanwhile, photographic images of contemporary war disasters documented in the press and on the Web invade her art-historical scenes – from horrors of the Vietnam or Iraq war and tortures of the Holocaust or Abu Ghraib, to the destruction of the World Trade Towers in New York, of which two views are included in the predella of *Saints and Martyrs*. There, Goya’s great Third of May shooting is the central panel, while two earlier famous Baroque painters, Velázquez and Claude Lorain, are the focus of other polyptychs in the series. Escaping the predictability of Renaissance altars, now the arrangements of the panels are constantly varied, dealing with a wide range of themes: *Heads and Hands*, *Swords and Lances*, *Regiments and Obedience*, *Horses*, *Children*, *Moments*, *Toy Soldiers*, *Skies* and *Life*.