

World Trade Center Artist Paints Pre-, Post-911 Views

Painting on the Same Block: From Glass to Absence

Pamela Lawton, painter and Professor of Art at the New School, knows Ground Zero intimately. For more than ten years, the area surrounding the World Trade Center has been her canvas. “In 1997, I lucked into a studio on the 53rd floor of Tower 1 and the light entranced me, though I found the views initially overwhelming. I had been working on the river view but one day I began painting Tower 2’s reflection in glass,” explained Lawton. A decade later, she paints in the same spot, where reflection, and now absence, continues to inform her art.

Lawton remembers that in those first months in her new studio she felt physically vulnerable and avoided the windows, especially the monumental view of Tower 1. Over time, however, she would work on her canvas and then find herself transfixed by the steel and glass splintered by glare. “It had a hallucinogenic effect. I would get an adrenaline surge from the heights and the loss of a sense of being grounded, and began painting from that feeling of disorientation.”

She painted refraction: Tower 2’s shadowy edges abutting the windows of the Deutsche Bank, 4 WTC reflected in the Millennium Hilton and the World Financial Center wending into the skyline. The buildings seemed boundary-less, the monumental windows and steel supports of one building, the bands of light, the lakes of color and shadow of another building, all loomed in the glass. Lawton’s canvases grew to be upwards of eight feet high.

In 2001, after the Towers fell, Lawton returned to the same block, now called “Ground Zero.” Returning to the scene, she tried using painting to regain her equilibrium. She discovered the new visual pathways created by the fallen structures. She set up her easel on the street where her studio was once located and began to paint the windows of the World Financial Center from across a great pale gap. “The light and scale has changed, no shadows remain, but there is a new story unfolding in the absence, and I paint from that place.”

She chose to turn her back on the literal hole that is Ground Zero, using instead the new sun in the windows as her subject. Tourists who gathered expectantly around her easel to confirm their view of the hole were baffled. “Why don’t you turn around and paint Ground Zero itself, you’d get more sales,” one remarked, to which another replied, “She isn’t turning her back on the hole, she is capturing its reflection.”

Lawton’s art is a veritable reflection of the changing Manhattan skyline. Writes critic and poet David Shapiro, her “work is a hymn to the created beings (of the skyscraper) through light and water. ... “[It] alludes simultaneously to water and light, to architecture and landscape, to the stress of modern glass...” Lawton portrays the fluidity of solid structures; her depiction of them as ‘liquid in glass’ is a metaphor for their vulnerability.

“Window Collections III”, a new art public art painting installation, features murals that portray shimmering glass reflections of Wall Street Plaza reflected in the glass curtain of 180 Maiden Lane, whose atrium the work is now on view until May 9, 2008. This atrium lobby is open to the public Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m to 5:30 p.m..

Lawton's solo exhibitions include 180 Maiden Lane (current), Galeria Nacional, Costa Rica (2004); White Box Gallery's project space, NYC (2003); Galeria Isabel Ignacio, Spain (2002). Artists' residencies include The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Swing Space (South Street Seaport) and World Views (The World Trade Center), the Millenium Hilton, and the Marriott World Financial Center. She is on the faculty of Eugene Lang College, New School University, where she created a study-abroad art program in Sri Lanka. Two books featuring her drawings are forthcoming. *A Place In the Sun*, forthcoming from Spuyten Duyvil press, Brooklyn, New York, with author Lewis Warsh; *New York Verticale* forthcoming from Thalia, Paris, France, with author and editor Francis Benteaux.

Presently she is working at Wall Street Plaza. She can be found in her outdoor "studio" amidst the lunch crowd, paintbrush in hand.