

Julie Comnick

Arrangement for a Silent Orchestra

Arrangement for a Silent Orchestra is a painting and video project which explores the gradual dissolution of culture in contemporary society through the symbolic ruin of a personal and cultural icon, the violin. Using the violin as a metaphor, I intend to raise questions about the relationship between increasing technology and diminishing cultural heritage. I invite the audience to consider what makes the instrument precious in his or her own experience, and the impact of its loss.

As the only child of a piano teacher, I was instructed at an early age to choose one instrument and stick with it. At age eight I selected the violin, and at eighteen I put it down. The ten years between were fraught with accomplishment and ambivalence as I excelled at an instrument that in my adolescence I didn't feel particularly passionate about. Since then, the violin has shown up in a recurring dream: I stand on stage at a recital and the pages on the music stand are blank, I have no memory of the melody, and the ensuing silence is paralyzing. The violin has reappeared periodically in my paintings, and its image has become central to my personal iconography.

We are all haunted by our unrealized pursuits, and anxiety is the material of our collective nightmares. I am interested in iconography as a social construct, and the images that endure in our collective memory. How does personal observation inform common experience? How are images tied to memory and social consciousness? And what is the role of pictorial representation in visual culture?

For a period of nine months I solicited damaged, incomplete or irreparable violins from violin shops nationwide. After collecting nearly one hundred violins, I piled them in a mountaintop clearing and burned them at dusk. I observed the site from six o'clock p.m. to six o'clock a.m., and the documentation of the event is the source material for a body of paintings and a video. I am producing a series of large-scale oil paintings depicting the pile of violins in various phases of ruin: at sunset, the pile illuminated by the lowering sun; at nightfall, the violins in stages of burning; and at dawn, the charred remains. A time-based element in the form of video documents the duration of the pile from sunset to sunrise, and the twelve hours of footage was edited to forty-five minutes. The soundtrack for the video mirrors the event: birds and insects at sunset transition into crickets and burning violins at nightfall, then relatively quiet in the aftermath at dawn. Time is important to both the paintings and the video; the representation of time in the paintings is allegorical, whereas the time-lapse video is a direct experience of the event. An exhibition of this project will include the paintings alongside a projection or screening of the video.

From the parable of the burning bush to the tradition of burning books, burning is a symbolic act, if sometimes a regrettable one. While the violin is personally significant to me, it is culturally symbolic to a generation that, due to circumstances such as increased technology and reduced public funding for the arts, is less likely to learn to play an instrument in school, seldom attends the symphony, and is unlikely to pass values of musical heritage onto their children.

The creation of my project involves preparatory work that will not necessarily be included in an exhibition. I have been making small studies in gouache on paper that will inform the color scheme and composition of the large-scale paintings. And, to re-familiarize myself with the instrument after an eighteen-year hiatus, I am taking violin lessons for the duration of the project and incorporating music practice into my studio practice.

This project departs from and expands upon my previous work in several ways. My previous paintings have been more literal interpretations of specific sociopolitical themes, whereas this new project returns to my earlier interests in metaphor and allegory. My past work has been figurative, and in this project the figure is omitted; implied rather than depicted, the absence of the figure emphasizes the viewer's own relationship with the objects. This is my first project that includes a video component, acknowledging the role of the source photograph and the process of staging reference material that has long been important to my work. Also, in contrast to my past work this project immerses me more personally and fully into my subject matter and process.