

Artweek

Gale Antokal at Couturier Gallery

Gale Antokal's twenty-four works on paper at Couturier Gallery both appear and fade simultaneously, softly evoking fleeting memories. These gentle pastel-like drawings conjure traveling on a train and as the landscape rushes by, scant glimpses of faded events and places flicker as in a reverie. The forests and houses, as seen from a moving perspective, are generic, some merely reduced to blurred streaks of motion.

All the drawing titles are also generic, and it is the two large-scale drawings, *Group Shot 1* and *Group Shot 2* that give the work its edge. *Group Shot 1* shows families that appear to be frolicking in the ocean, but why are they fully clothed? *Group Shot 2* shows a group of adults gathered in the woods for a family-style photo, but why are they so static, staring straight ahead? When examining the drawing closer, the faces fade entirely, as if from an impressionist painting.

Everything and everyone depicted is fading, irresolutely refusing to be fixed in our perception. The drawings are obviously based on old photographs, so everyone depicted once lived in flesh and blood, but here, are simultaneously erased and preserved in ash, the media Antokal is using, along with a hint of graphite, flour and chalk. Interspersed among the figure and landscape drawings are five drawings of cyclists, from a time period when the bicycle was used for daily transportation; with this work the title of the show, *The Messengers*, kicks in. The cyclists could be messengers of an occupational sort. But they look vaguely European from the time period of the forties, and so the cyclists, under the disguise of ordinary activity, could also be riding in stealth, carrying a warning message.

It is only the catalog to the show, however, that verifies this. It informs us that the exhibit depicts a narrative of the



Gale Antokal, *Group Shot 1*, 2007, powdered chalk, graphite, ash, flour on paper, 19" x 62", at Couturier Gallery, Los Angeles.

Nazi pogroms against Eastern Europeans from 1941 to 1943. *Group Shot 1* actually portrays, in a forced exodus, women and children who had been rounded up and forced to bathe in an icy river, and *Group Shot 2* portrays a political youth group whose members would meet their death while working in the underground resistance. The cyclists *are* messengers, warning of the approaching terror. In fact, this is the third in a series of exhibitions that Antokal has devoted to the ethnic extermination of Europeans in World War II. Here, the drawing *First Shot* depicts a building where the victims may have been held before they were executed. The building however, is entirely generic, floating in empty air.

The crux of the exhibition seems to be centered on the risky possibility that Antokal is softening brutal experience from real history into a sentimental reverie. These drawings are quite pleasant to look at. However, this history *is* fading from our collective memory and in a few years, there will be no one left to recount it. Perhaps this is the most brutal fact; that real injustice and suffering will waft into oblivion, and thereby be rendered meaningless. Relentless dissolution is inevitable, but with humans it takes place with excruciating swiftness—and we forget quickly. Antokal's feathery ash is the ironic remembrance.

The deliberate ambiguity of these images removes them from the purely documentary and emphasizes the thin membrane that separates human joy from tragedy, and life from death. The failure of memory and of the image to report accurately places both on the line. But in life, it is not only memories that live and fade simultaneously, but also the present moment. And so these drawings stand as a bittersweet homage to the uncorporeality that hovers over *our* every living moment and of our own ultimate dissolution into the softness of fading memory. What first appears to be a gentle evocation of memory actually disguises an existential brutality of more than one kind.

—Victoria Martin

Gale Antokal: *The Messengers* closed October 13 at Couturier Gallery, Los Angeles.

Victoria Martin is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.