

Encounters in the Aftermath: *Works by Lorie Novak*

BY LAURA WEXLER

A pile of newspapers occupies the center of Lorie Novak's new work. It consists of the front section of every edition of *The New York Times* from March, 1999, to the current day. The pile is a very interesting shape. It is slouchy and large, but not *that* large. Its size is a little surprising, given the number of papers it archives. Although the duration it represents is long, Novak is able to register an impression of this historical moment on a human scale because she refuses to aggrandize the pile. She turns against the monumental mythmaking of demagoguery. The papers remain individual, things to be held in the hand even though the events they portray are formidable.

Novak began collecting these sections of *The Times* when NATO started bombing Serbia, thinking to measure, in the periodical time of a newspaper, the duration of hostilities. "My idea," she has written, "was to have a stack of newspapers that signified a war." But the war, though it officially ceased, did not stop, and neither did Novak's collecting. "When the cease-fire was signed a true resolution had not been reached, so I kept collecting. The World Trade Center was attacked, and I kept collecting. I have not stopped." Novak's premonition in 1999 that something needed to be tracked was right on target. Her hope that there would be an end date was not. There is no real end in sight.

The pile of newspapers is dense yet its surface has the ruffled semblance of feathers or fallen leaves. On parts of the outside layer, what's above the fold of the papers is legible. The reader grasps that *Times* photojournalists make an enormous effort every day to use pictures to show what is going on in the world. The pile is also rounded and molded like a haystack. Does the haystack suggest that something of significance could be found within, like the proverbial needle... or is that too simpleminded an idea?

When did the hostilities within which we are ensnared actually begin? Were we – that is to say, the readers and writers of *The New York Times*, -- paying sufficient attention? In his new book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, author Rob Nixon writes of a procession of events that necessarily is resistant to the spectacular single image. Novak's collection is another expression of that idea. In her work, the timeline of disaster steadily accretes but nearly imperceptibly, as one day's news fades into the next. Was 9/11 just the day we were finally forced to pay attention?

It is very difficult to pay sustained attention in the contemporary media environment. Novak observes this by means of what she calls "photographic interference." She joins photographic images of the newspaper collection, now arranged in stacks, and of a headline banner proclaiming that someone "plans to send troops to Sudan," to a photograph of a weeping woman, her eyes blinded by tears. The woman is pulling down in agony at a brightly colored head cloth, that someone else's hand is trying to lift up to expose her face to the camera. How did this violation come to be possible? Ought we to be surprised? Do we even spend enough time with the photograph to see the third, violating, hand?

Nearby, a self-portrait of Novak covering her eyes with her hands bursts into its own negative register, like the record of a nuclear explosion, or at least how we have come to imagine such an explosion. Looking is unbearable. Being seen seeing is also a crisis. The eyes want something behind which to hide, like the tears of the weeping woman in the previous image. For Novak, unlike that woman, at least the hands are in her own control, like the shutter of her camera. In another image, an elegantly designed blister pack for painkillers lies on top of a page of newsprint. Each burst bubble is a portal to more pain – in a visible face, in legible words such as "soldiers," "killed," "revolt." Compared to the pile of newspapers, which seems diminished from what one would imagine, the scale of these photographic interferences is huge. Perhaps their size references the internalized enormity of trauma. Can we look without our analgesic filters?

Even so, after 9/11 photography was also a route towards reconstruction, the shattering having already had a ghastly materiality. This too is a "photographic interference," in Novak's terms, and it differs from the other idea, that to look is to lacerate. During that time, thousands of people interleaved family photographs with the mediated events, in "wanted posters" that were public acts of reclamation. These final images in the show are of a different character than the previous ones. They are images of horror but not in the same way as the others. The photographic tributes labor to interrupt the nightmare images of the last moments of a loved one's life and insert more acceptable visions, taken from the personal archives of family and friends. In so doing they claim public space and attend to the dignity of that need. Poignant handwritten messages mark the passage of grief as these ordinary snapshots turn in retrospect into mourning pictures – yet another kind of photographic time. Some writers even come back again and again, relieved to find these fragile papers still in place, leaving yet another layer of comment. This temporality affects Novak's earlier negative critique as these mourners write upon images that they very much hope to see.

Over the past two decades, Novak has been exploring the ways in which photographs connect public and private memory. During this time, by means of a recurring small number of her own as well as

other people's family photographs, and media images of a certain set of iconic public events, Novak has printed, collaged, projected, paired and parsed many of the relationships between the public and the private. Here, found images expand even further upon the vocabulary she has long been using. She focuses her attention on the non-ironic use of family photographs by so many of the families and friends of people who died in the collapse of the twin towers, -- every one so much the same, every one unique. Novak carefully reproduces the conventional pastel colors of these posters and the spidery handwriting in ballpoint or felt tipped pens. She does not layer, project, interpret, comment or appraise them. She simply shows them. The hand has yet another meaning here. Neither holding a newspaper, nor covering the eyes, nor exposing pain of another, it leaves the mark of an embodied soul. Despite the hair-raising discoveries she has already portrayed, Novak's images are quiet in the face of that particular aftermath.



Top: *Photographic Interference*, 2010, 40 x 26"
Above: *Medicated*, 2011, 40 x 24.4"

Photographs on reverse side:
Cover: *April 1, 1999–September 7, 2011*, 40 x 60"
Inside panel: *Double Negative*, January 31, 2011
(fragment) 40 x 28.5"

All photographs are Archival Ink jet Prints

Lorie Novak dedicates this exhibition to Linda A. Day (1952–2011), an extraordinary artist, devoted friend, and inspiration to all who knew her.