



CREDIT - GUANTANAMO ARTWORK PHOTOS & POSTER DESIGN: JOHN HOPKINS

### **Guantanamo: Hilda Woolnough MFA, RCA**

New Drawings, 2005

Guantanamo presents the recent work of Prince Edward Island-based artist Hilda Woolnough, a series of large drawings that focuses on the act of drawing itself in relation to record keeping and investigates the possibilities of art as testimonial. Here she is interviewed by Doreen Giles, a student in UPEI's Public History program, who has been doing an internship with the Confederation Centre Art Gallery.

Q. You have described this project as an exploration of the artist's role with respect to situations of injustice. Can you describe how the concepts in this work evolve through the different elements?

A. Artists are supposed to be the mirror of their society and I believe that sometimes certain things have just got to be said. Think of Picasso's vision of the holocaust at Guernica. Regarding this piece, Guantanamo, there are approximately 600 people incarcerated in Cuba who have been imprisoned for almost four years without any habeas corpus - who have never ever been charged. God knows what has happened to them there; one can only speculate.

I researched the actual history of Guantanamo itself. It is quite interesting. Leased to the Americans in the early 1900s in 1903, or 1904, it has existed for a very long time as a place from which they could maintain control of the strait between the two countries. But the idea that we can still incarcerate people without charging them is incredible. There are people shackled with bags over their heads, you name it. The United Nations says nothing, we say nothing, and the British say nothing. It is ignored. How is it we allow things like this to happen? In this particular case, I felt strongly that something had to be said and the only way I can say anything is through my art. And then the idea just started coming together.

The piece itself is composed of ten panels, creating an installation that is fifteen metres long-a big piece and every one of the prisoners at Guantanamo is represented. In order to make the work effective, though large in scale, I've aimed at finding a subtle way of saying what is going on. There are two other pieces that accompany the installation which are graphic and they have

figures, but the large pieces are a completely separate unit. I exhibited four of the pieces in Annapolis Royal last year to see what the effect would be and there were two women standing in front of them on the opening night with tears rolling down their faces so I suppose it works. Offering a standpoint from which to simply witness is the political premise of the work.

Q. Is that the kind of reaction you were looking to get from people? You have commented that "these drawings are equally about the act of mark making, the memory of signature and transition. The concept of drawing as silent sound." Could you elaborate?

A. Well, I can't tell what the reaction will be; my intention is just to make people think. But that is to do with politics. More than that-from the artistic point of view- it has a lot to do with how I feel about the act of drawing and it is really wonderful to have reached that sort of freedom. I hope it will increase in the next few years. I feel I am free from past obligations to the point where I can now concentrate on my own work and actually pursue an exploration of the act of drawing itself, and the idea of drawing as silent sound. That is what I am hoping to capture.

My feeling is that the Guantanamo situation does not happen to simply one person, it affects all of us. I mean if one person is abused it is the responsibility of the broader community. I think we should be concerned; we should be concerned about each other as a species.

Born, raised and formally educated in England, Woolnough has lived and worked in Prince Edward Island for 35 years. She has been involved in the development of numerous local arts initiatives such as the Phoenix Gallery Craft Cooperative, Great George Street Gallery, the P.E.I. Arts Guild, the P.E.I Student's Art Expo and the Printmaker's Council of Prince Edward Island. She has exhibited in numerous solo and group shows, receiving such awards as the Father Adrian Arsenault Senior Arts Award from the P.E.I. Council of the Arts in 1999. In 2000, she was elected a fellow of the Royal Canadian Academy.

Curated by Shauna McCabe, the Studio Series of exhibitions is organized by the Confederation Centre Art Gallery with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts.

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