



Joy Garnett, "O.P.P.," 2010, oil on canvas, 60" x 70"

Blast Radius

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The other day I stopped by Winkleman Gallery to see Joy Garnett's new paintings, and then hurried up to the Cort Theater where I had tickets to "Time Stands Still," a uniformly well-acted play featuring Laura Linney as a photojournalist, home from a stint in Iraq where she had been badly injured in a roadside bombing. The two shows made for an excellent double feature.

The play, by Donald Margulies, explores how artists' lives are affected by the passage of time. Sarah (Linney) and her journalist boyfriend Jamie (Brian d'Arcy James) have spent their twenties and thirties covering wars and other humanitarian disasters overseas. As the play begins, they have just returned to their gritty Williamsburg loft where Sarah, recovering from her injuries, chafes to get back to the action. Meanwhile, shell-shocked Jamie yearns for marriage and a comfortable life - maybe even a couple of kids - along the lines followed by their friends Richard (Eric Bogosian) and his very young fiancée (Christina Ricci).

Margulies, understanding the tradeoffs facing most serious artists, explores the dynamic that occurs when one partner is ready to put the action and ambition aside and the other is not. Living behind the camera and courting the risks of human folly have given Sarah a noble excuse to disengage. Looking through the lens has also afforded her the extraordinary sensation that time stands still. For Jamie, it has marched on. He comes to believe that they have spent decades of their lives under the illusion that their moments in hell perform an indispensable social role, leaving precious little time to do other less grandiose but more joyful, comforting things.

Joy Garnett's forceful new paintings capture the evanescent bursts of violence recorded by photojournalists (like fictional Sarah) around the world while also acknowledging the comfort of distance that softens the apprehension of a far-off war by an artist in her studio - and which Sarah disdains. Seeking to transform her secondary experience of the depicted events into something more authentic, Garnett culls photographs of military explosions from online sources, reconstituting the harrowing, split-second images using traditional oil paint and canvas. Painting fast and loose, she renounces exactitude to embrace clunky, restless brushwork that fuses painterly glee with exasperated rage, setting the explosions adrift from both their geographical and their political contexts.

Reinventing the news images as luscious paintings rich in art historical referents, Garnett's work, which she calls "apocalyptic sublime," might come off as glib and exploitative to some. But from Margulies' perspective, even if she's safe in the studio, enshrining the world's daily tragedies is worthy enough, and an acceptable existential compromise. A painter can't make real time stand still the way a great news photographer can. But Garnett's paintings force viewers to contemplate how ugly and destructive its procession can be, and proclaim that physical remove is no excuse for ignoring that reality.

"Joy Garnett: Boom & Bust," Winkleman Gallery, New York, NY. Through November 13, 2010.

"Time Stands Still," written by Donald Margulies, directed by Daniel Sullivan. The Cort Theater, New York, NY. Through January 23, 2011.