

Borders, Boundaries, and Barricades

By Elizabeth Fasolino

(8/26/2008) Last year at the Boltax Gallery on Shelter Island, the artist Nuala Clarke, a Belfast native who has lived and worked in New York City since 1993, showed “Breakup Paintings,” a series done in the wake of her split from the painter Jimmie James, her lover and longtime artistic partner.

This weekend she returns to the gallery in a different guise as the curator of “Border Walls,” a show of work by six women artists who have lived in areas where walls have been constructed to stem illegal immigration or curb violence — in Palestine, Iraq, Ireland, and along the United States border with Mexico.

Ms. Clarke’s artistic and curatorial efforts recognize the power of loss and limitation — and the depression and sadness that often follow — as having the power to stimulate creativity, resilience, and understanding. It represents a defiance of the conventional wisdom that the best way to remedy grief is to slink off and lick one’s wounds, withdrawing from dreams and desires.

In “Border Walls” Ms. Clarke has brought together artists who have drawn on their proximity to borders for artistic inspiration: Eileen Ferguson, from the Republic of Ireland; Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, a Mexican native living in San Diego; Sama Alshaibi, of Iraqi and Palestinian heritage and who now lives in Arizona; Larissa Sansour, a Palestinian living in Denmark; Ariane Littman, who grew up in Jerusalem and now lives in Switzerland, and Rita Duffy, from Belfast in Northern Ireland.

Though uncommon in the art world, there is a well-established tradition of women writers documenting conflicts during the 20th century with bravery and empathy. Some of the most memorable are Vera Brittain’s “Testament to Youth,” a memoir of World War I, Lee Miller’s documentary photography and journalism during World War II, and Gloria Emerson’s stories of the Vietnam War in “Winners and Losers.” It is a tradition that continues through the reportage of conflict by many contemporary women writers including Samantha Power and Elizabeth Rubin.

But work by women artists, as Jerry Saltz, an art critic at *The Village Voice*, noted in an essay in the periodical “Modern Painters,” has been given short shrift: “Given that for every five solo shows of work by a living artist in a New York gallery only one is by a woman, and that only a small percentage of these are by women painters, and that an even smaller proportion of those are by women who paint in what could be called an abstract manner, for a woman to be painting in a nonrepresentational, vaguely gestural mode right now is, consciously or not, a political act. If that woman is over 35 it could be called revolutionary.”

The work in “Border Walls,” which includes a video installation by Ms. Sansour, as well as photographs, fiber installations, and abstract paintings and figurative drawings, is notable not just for the quality of the work and thematic unity, but for the life-affirming reminder of the power of creativity to foster understanding and, more poignantly, rescript identities battered by violence, intolerance, and grief.

The idea for the show began when Karen Boltax, the director of the Boltax Gallery, saw a series of pencil drawings by Ms. Clarke. Scrolls of paper were covered in ziggurat-like patterns of laddered rectangles done in a spontaneous and notational hand. Ms. Clarke explained that the patterns became a predominant motif in her drawings, which correlated chronologically with her finding out about the construction of the Mexican border wall in 2006.



Boltax Gallery

A detail from Consuelo Jimenez Underwood’s “Mendocino Reboza,” a fabric-and-safety-pin shawl, which is included in the “Border Walls” show at the Boltax Gallery on Shelter Island.

“It reminded me of Belfast,” Ms. Clarke explained in an interview in her studio in New York City. “There, the walls are 25 feet tall, brick, corrugated metal, and topped with barbed wire. They divided different neighborhoods beginning in the 1970s. It was done for safety along the back of the houses where we lived. At different intervals, gates were constructed and they would close at 6 p.m. The houses all had bulletproof glass. That’s the thing about walls — what’s going on when they are coming down, or going up.”



Boltax Gallery

Ellen Ferguson’s “Lackey Bridge IV” is based on a painting of a Northern Ireland border crossing. She lives in County Monaghan.

The idea for the borders exhibit began when Ms. Clarke was thinking about “having a bunch of artists dialogue about the experience in a way that wasn’t political or social, and I wanted to do it properly. Karen [Boltax] just said, ‘I’ll do it,’ and I began to research artists.”

Eileen Ferguson was the first artist Ms. Clarke contacted. Ms. Ferguson had created an installation in 1993 for a gallery in Belfast that was destroyed by a bomb one week before the show was scheduled to open. The gallery was damaged, but her work survived, and two pieces, “Lackey Bridge IV” and “Lackey Bridge VI,” transparencies mounted on lightboxes, will be displayed in the show.

Lackey Bridge was one of the main thoroughfares blocked by the British Army to contain the fighting between the British and Protestant Irish Republicans and the Irish forces comprised largely of Catholics who lived in the six counties that became defined as Northern Ireland.

In her work for the exhibit, Rita Duffy, a well-regarded artist from Northern Ireland who is best known for her figurative drawings blending traditional Celtic symbolism, rosaries, and shamrocks with images of women, explores the nature of surveillance.

On view will be two life-size drawings of women tethered to the earth by pyramids formed by a springform baking pan and a ring of wooden fence posts. Ms. Duffy has also included a collection of textile constructions filled with hair, which form a small clutch of civilization — a village of buildings without right angles or structural support.

“If you start talking to me about England,” Ms. Clarke said, “I have reactions that are historical and emotional. There are areas where buttons get pushed. What’s interesting to me is that here [in the U.S.], it is left to the general public or the media to decide. In Ireland, there were immigration initiatives and a real push to help people embrace unity between the partitioned country. Admittedly, they were very necessary and happened before riots or the like became necessary.”

Thus far the aversion to violence as a means of social protest has not been manifest in the struggle between Israel and Palestine. Ariane Litman, after graduating from the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem in 1991, has explored collective cultural memory through installations that examine cultural myths.

“The Jerusalem Scrolls,” part of an ongoing series she calls the Border Land Project, examines the new borders, visible and invisible, that have been created by the wall around the holy city. She has gone to checkpoints and interviewed people on both sides whose lives have been irrevocably altered by its construction.

“Palestinian artists are sensitive about who they show with,” Ms. Clarke said. “I’ve been told that I was going to get calls from Zionists.” Thus far these predictions have, happily, proved untrue.

Ms. Clarke said she had the most difficulty finding artists who used the Mexican-American border and immigration experiences as subjects in their work. “I wanted beautiful work that would hit you in your heart first,” Ms. Clarke said, “not through the indignation of your head.” Through the Web she found two artists whose work engaged her visually, while examining the recent phenomenon of the American border wall.

Photographs printed on aluminum from the “Borderland” and “Divided Land” series by Sama Alshaibi, who lives in Arizona, capture the surreal nature of deep despair. Alongside endless industrial fences, women are depicted as beseeching the heavens for succor from untold suffering. Ms. Alshaibi, who was born in Basra to an Iraqi father and Palestinian mother, grew up with the lore of the diasporas from the effects of three wars. Her work shows border walls in Palestine as well as along the American border with Mexico.

In the 1960s, Consuelo Jimenez Underwood was a Mexican agricultural migrant worker. She now works with textiles, weaving and embroidering fabric, partly in homage to her ancestral memory, and partly, she told Ms. Clarke, because after years of working in the fields working with fabric is comforting and not physically difficult.

A rebozo, a traditional rectangular Mexican weaving, which Ms. Jimenez Underwood has been working on for 20 years, will be included in the show. It is a remarkable construction resembling a chain-link fence made from small fabric swatches depicting the silhouettes of a mother and father pulling their small daughter along in a mad dash across the border. The swatches, or logos, are replicas of common yellow highway signs urging fleeing immigrants to observe caution. In the rebozo, Ms. Jimenez Underwood has taken hundreds of the fabric pieces and woven them together with safety pins.

Ms. Clarke also selected 35 small works submitted by various artists, many of them from the East End. A clay brick, exploding from unseen internal pressures, titled “Broken Wall II” by Elizabeth Heimann of Shelter Island, is remarkable for its simple ability to convey violence in a cube of harmless clay.

“On the Other Side,” by Samuelson Evanson of New York City, is a luminous circle depicting an ongoing discussion between a couple whose unity is bisected by architectural elements and atmospheric distortion.

“I was very impressed with the work submitted for the small works exhibit,” Ms. Clarke wrote in an e-mail. “Most of it spoke to separation barriers in a very personal and compelling way. I’m really glad that these voices, both local and international, are a part of this show. I think it rounds it out beautifully.”

Ms. Clarke’s own work will not be included in the show. “This was about gathering the work,” she said. “It was my first experience contacting people about their work. They were so receptive. Each year I try to do one entirely new thing. This year, this show was my new thing. It’s been nice because it’s not been a fallow idea — or like I was dragging it up a hill. I feel entirely enriched.”

A reception for the artists will be given Saturday from 5 to 8 p.m., and a screening of Larissa Sansour’s film “Land Confiscation” and a discussion panel with four of the artists will be held tomorrow at 6 p.m. at the Shelter Island School auditorium.

“Border Walls” will be on view at the Boltax Gallery through September.