

Rhonda Wall, *Easton Irregular* Art Profile, October 2012

In the 80s New York was the center of the Art World and Rhonda Wall was painting and living in Soho, archiving art books at the Soho Center for Visual Artists. Her son grew up thinking every family had an art gallery. She was friends with Keith Haring (he bought two of her paintings) and she jokes now that the check itself would be worth far more than what she made from the sale. Rhonda was a Neo-Expressionist at its zenith and in 1985 she showed in 17 different venues. A short list of New York galleries she exhibited in includes: the B-Side, Civilian Warfare, Sensory Evolution, Dramatis Personae, Limbo, M 13, Bess Cutler, and Mo David. As Postmodernism was gaining steam and mingling “high and low” culture, Rhonda was showing at the Aldrich Museum in Connecticut, Sande Webster Gallery in Philadelphia as well as the Palladium Nightclub.

Wall received her B.F.A. from Rhode Island School of Design in 1978 and M.F.A. from Vermont College in 1995. But that gig as the arts librarian is the best clue to the kind of artist she has become. She organizes detailed information; she’s the person who strives to make sense of a complex situation: the “observer or commentator,” as she says. Gathering images and ideas from online news, books and other media, she cobbles together hybrid symbols and new, imaginative narratives. For each series of ten or so pieces, Wall creates a novel compositional layout, chooses paint techniques for changing the found images, and invents provocative titles.

She addressed 9/11 and the death of her mother by making a series of work as each story unfolded. In the 9/11 series “As the World Turns Now”, she planned her compositions to look like Persian rugs, replacing medallions and repeated carpet designs with world leaders, media logos, anthrax scare workers, and women in burqas. Playing with the bilateral symmetry of a rug pattern, she spread the blame for 9/11, the Iraq War and suffering equally to both sides of the conflict. Rhonda emphasized the temporal, fluid nature of “breaking news” by painting the digital image with ephemeral, watery paint. She draws attention to death and suffering then resolves them with decorative order. To me, she is one of a handful of artists who made successful work about 9/11, work that continues to convey fear, urgency and beauty.

Concurrent with creating her imaginary worlds “where everything happens at the same time”, Rhonda teaches Installation, 3-D and 2-D Art at Kutztown University. Also, she has taught at Alvernia College in Reading, Northampton Community College in Bethlehem, Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, and at the College of New Rochelle in New Rochelle, NY. At Kutztown University, Rhonda made performances with the students: “Four Performances” (2001), “Life is a Dada Fashion Show at the Bauhaus” (1995), and “Russian Fantasia and the Avant Garde” (1995). Imagine layers of dance, cheerleading, installation, costume design and performance held together with the mortar of art history. Bridging the gap between historic ideological enemies--Dada vs. Bauhaus, Russian Folk Art vs. the Avant Garde--she cleverly exposed students to the art canon through personal involvement.

Over the years her cartoon-style characters such as “World Woman” (who sports a globe for a head and a clock necklace), “Determined Girl” and “Tropic Rhonda” have given way to a loose association of subjects: aliens, scientists, religious groups, drugs,

animals, movies, TV shows and news, diseases, humor and mortality – subjects we all have in common. Ms. Wall blurs boundaries to expose facts; she’s like a librarian who arranges material according to a visual rather than verbal grammar.

—Elizabeth Johnson