

INTERVIEW WITH HEIDE FASNACHT

PATRICK HEBRON

PH: In his essay, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, André Bazin recalls the Ancient Egyptian practice of embalming. He claims this to be an early form of sculpture, in which the practicing culture seeks to preserve something precious to them, their king, from decay. What is it that you are trying to preserve in your pieces?

HF: I'm not sure I would use the word precious, but I am trying to preserve a moment that I don't comprehend. That is why there is a degree of meticulousness in my work. I'm making myself pay attention to something in this moment that is so swift, so momentous and so awesome. It is the only way I have to spend time in there and come to some kind of comprehension.

PH: Looking at mummies we can begin to perceive what was valued by that culture, they deified their political leaders, they believed in the immortality of the soul, and so forth. Do you feel that you are trying to encapsulate some notion of our time in your work?

HF: I think you can't help but make work about your own time. It filters through you. Making an effort has an element of falsity to it. So, I don't know that you can try. In our times, there is a quality of distraction, not paying attention. Things move through the news and through peoples' psyches so quickly. Momentous things are taking place.

PH: So are you countering that phenomenon with the labor of your work?

HF: In my work, there is a quality of mark making and time marking. There is a trajectory that I leave through the marks that can be followed. It's asking [the viewer] to pay attention.

PH: Can you or would you even want to ignore the violence in the events you are depicting?

HF: I don't think I'm ignoring it at all. There is a paradox to the violence. I think some people might find my work morally ambiguous; maybe it is I don't know. In the earlier Explosion series and in the current more domesticated exploding champagne bottles, there is a level of violence but then they have a level of beauty. In the Bruce Conner film, some of those images are gorgeous. But I think they are terrible at the same time. When I say they are gorgeous, I don't forget for a minute what they refer to. There is a scene in this movie, *The Day After*, about an atomic explosion, where people are driving and there is this atomic explosion behind them. They get out of their cars and turn back to look and they are transfixed. You must know that it is going to destroy you and you should get the hell out of there, but they can't take their eyes off of it. I am interested in the kind of image that does that to people. That's a moment that comes before any moral questions. In my champagne bottle and breaking glass pieces, what is taking place is very ambiguous. There could be an act of violence, but at the same time it could be celebratory. There is this Freudian idea that celebrations of this sort are meant to assist people in rehearsing people for tragedy. There is a drawing I did, *Three Buildings*, where one building is being imploded, one is complete and one is under construction. I was interested in pointing to the cycle of this. We live with great losses, recovery from great losses and anticipation of them. There is a sexual component to it. What's the ethics of that?

PH: Sartre called the moment of sexual release an experience of nausea. He said it could be explained as a person being clogged by his objectivity.

HF: You could call my trying to really pay attention objectivity, but I think my approach is a little more Eastern. It is about accepting what the forms are, not trying to alter them by any notions that I have. My job is to record them. I read *Nausea* in high school and I think I identified with his detachment. But that detachment is a disease in this culture.

PH: Do you feel you can ever keep yourself out of the work? It seems to me that the most you can do in this respect is to present yourself as trying to be invisible.

HF: Yes, my touch comes through. To try to totally eliminate personality is almost as problematic as allowing it in a relaxed way. I've tried to achieve the balance between these two.

PH: How have your thoughts on your work changed since September 11? How has the viewer's perception of it changed?

HF: I went back to my place that night and I saw that work sitting out and I couldn't possibly look at it the same way. Some time earlier, maybe a year or a year and a half, I had done a very small sketch of rain dripping down a window and I found myself returning to that drawing and deciding to finish it. When I originally made that drawing, it just didn't resonate for me. I didn't understand how it fit in with everything else I was doing. There is a level in which I am just interested in the physics of stuff breaking up into little points and all the different ways that can happen. But at this point, the drawing actually became a comfort for me and I worked on it every day. Then I needed to do another one. I couldn't work on the other stuff. I never returned to what I had been doing. There was this feeling of no sense of the truth or clear vision. I realized I was still interested in those materials, but I couldn't pursue it. I felt a lot of guilt about the Explosion series. Then I started doing all these drawings of splashes of water. They allowed me to explore the same material but drain away the socio-political misinterpretations. The recent work brings it onto the scale of someone's living room. It's the elephant in the living room.

PH: In your studio, I noticed that you are working from photos of your subject. Is this your primary means or do you ever actually break a bottle?

HF: I'm looking at a lot of images I have found of breaking glasses. I use a lot of photography. I looked at the last scene of [Antonioni's] *Zabriskie Point* a lot. The champagne piece is loosely based on a liquor ad. I've looked at so much stuff that I can just draw it off the top of my head now. I have a very strong sense of the physics of how things break and shatter. If I were to break something myself, it would just happen too fast. I really need the mediating.

PH: You bring it in already mediated. That's interesting to me. Do you think that is entirely a practical issue? It seems to me that you need to maintain your own serenity and keep the disaster outside.

HF: That's very interesting. Maybe it's that. I'd never thought of it. I'm interested in photography. The screen becomes something that you come to embrace rather than look through.

PH: You are working in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional mediums and for both you are looking at two-dimensional images. Do the two sides of your work, each of which has a very different experience tied to it, interact with and affect each other?

HF: Yes, I do think back and forth a great deal. Someone once said that making sculpture takes four times as many brain cells as making two-dimensional work. Both of them come from looking at images, but then the sculptures start to recreate their subject, they start to bring it back. That goes back to the mummy analogy.

PH: You could work in photography or film, but there is something very appropriate about the work you're doing being in the mediums you have chosen. You have to synthesize your subject and that allows the viewer to look at it differently than we can look at Conner's film.

HF: I think there something about the reenactment that you look at differently than just the thing itself. I think this is why I moved away from the things that I grew up with as a young artist, with performance art and post-minimalism, the idea of the thing as it is. We've learned how to look at that now and so it isn't the thing as it is anymore. We've learned that those things still have frames around them. So in a funny way, I've reverted to something that is a little bit traditional. I'm making drawings and putting them into frames and I'm making object sculpture. I think that's what is required now in order to have a reenactment, in order to reframe things in a way that they can be seen. I place a great value in experience that can be shared and transmitted. I'm interested in the fact that if I really make myself pay close attention, I can act as a conduit.

PH: How does that sharing occur? Is the shared meaning in the object itself?

HF: I don't know if it resides in the work. When I talk to different people, I get different responses. I think some people find the work somewhat shocking. My hope is that people would be empathetic. I hope that they would be as awed by this stuff as I am. I'm trying to make these drawings beautiful, it is important to me that they are. At the same time, it's kind of horrible.

PH: Do you believe that there is a universal value or something in the object that must be uncovered by the viewer in order for him to understand it?

HF: A made-for-TV movie is formulaic, it tells you what to think. It even has an epilogue that says, "This happened to so-and-so. He served three years and then he was out..." Whereas a film like *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* doesn't tell you what to think. It's more like the way life really is. It's confusing. It's maybe boring or frustrating at turns. It allows you to experience valuable emotions that people need to experience to get through life. It's a kind of humanism that I am arguing for. When I use words like 'value' and 'quality,' I don't mean them in terms of connoisseurship. I don't mean them in the Romantic sense.

PH: The Romantics believed that the artist creates a window into the soul. Does this have any truth for you? What is your idea of the artist?

HF: My view of what it means for me to be an artist is a bit traditional. They say to young writers that you have to go out and have experience in order to be able to write well. I think I agree with this. The artist looks closely. They insert a frame and provide clarity for their viewer.

PH: What is the role of the critic?

HF: It is a gift to make your work accessible to people verbally. I don't find it easy. I am hungry for people to have a dialogue with. It really helps me. I'm not always sure what kinds of questions people have about my work. I like being surprised with questions. I don't think a critic can make up for what isn't there in the long run. Curators put you with one group in one discussion and with another in a different discussion. It is all valid. It all cuts different facets of the same thing.