

## Andrea Bowers at the Gallery at REDCAT

A young woman framed by a swath of fabric and a vase of flowers speaks plaintively to whoever passes by to listen. "Please do not put a return address on the envelope as my employer is a devout Catholic and I think it might cause problems," she intones from the large flat screen monitor hanging from the ceiling and surrounded by two walls with neat rows of decorative paper and photocopies of letters. The woman's place on the screen is replaced, in elegant and eerie succession, by flowers and silence; another person, another vase of flowers, another request for help. Men and women of diverse ages and ethnicities are looking for answers—a list of doctors, facts, information—and they need them fast. Is this a fiction? A document? A plea? *Letters to the Army of Three*, a video piece in Andrea Bowers's complex and moving exhibition, *Nothing is Neutral*, at the Gallery at the Roy and Edna Disney CalArts Theater (REDCAT), is all three.

The video features actors utilizing letters written to Patricia Maginnis, Lana Phelan and Rowena Gurner from 1966 to 1969 as scripts for emotional monologues, but the tone conveys an imperative desperation that feels emphatically current. From 1964 to 1973, Maginnis, Phelan and Gurner worked tirelessly to

help thousands of women gain access to safe abortions. Through leaflets, speeches and classes, this "Army of Three" taught techniques for safe abortions and dis-

seminated lists of doctors in Mexico and Japan where a woman could go for an abortion. Bowers's video is a testament to the vitality and ethos of their invaluable pre-*Roe v. Wade* work. At the same time, it speaks to the current struggles to preserve our civil rights.

Bowers's subtle but powerful use of beauty in the service of meaning combined with her poetic conceptualism is reminiscent of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Nothing is Neutral* is as unique and necessary today as Gonzalez-Torres's works were a decade ago. A distinct vase of

flowers and fabric backdrop separates each actor, each story, each letter from the other and points to the ubiquity of abortion and the diversity of those affected. The shame and urgency so palpable in the words are soothed and acknowledged by the fragile beauty of cut flowers. Two large walls framing the hanging monitor are papered with enlarged versions of the letters alternated with colorful sheets of decorative wrapping paper. Designed to hold a gift, to beautify and to delight. The flat, unused sheets mark a tenuous space between expectation and relief that is amplified by two series of drawings. In one, Bowers replicates the letters in pencil with a gesture as repetitive and intimate as caring for a patient. Another group of exquisitely rendered, colored-pencil drawings echoes the designs from the wrapping paper, an anti-abortion button resting quietly in the penciled folds of each one.

If the majority of *Nothing is Neutral* speaks to the pause of a hanging question, *Eulogies to One Another*, composed of two long rectangles of sixteen drawings, hanging two-by-two in black frames, embodies erasure as memorial. With painstaking detail, Bowers re-creates the texts of eight news articles. Both sets include the same news items, but on one, all of the text remains while in the other, selected words float on a graphite expanse like a haiku. Each article tells of the tragic death of Marla Ruzicka, an American humanitarian activist killed in Iraq in 2005. Ruzicka fought to retain an accurate accounting of the civilians killed in the current Iraq war and the drawings include a newspaper photo of the young, blonde woman. The words that remain on the second set of drawings are those from each article that speak about Faiz Ali Salim, the Iraqi who worked with and was killed alongside Ruzicka. Dark and light, silence and noise, erasure and inclusion resonate with the pathos war while poignantly honoring Ruzicka's cause.

First and foremost an artist, Bowers does not preach nor admonish but applies acute curiosity, compassionate observation and meticulous craft to her subjects. The result provides a rare and much needed bridge between art and activism, and history and presence, while indicating the depths of questions seldom inhabited with such thoughtful precision.

—Annie Buckley

*Nothing is Neutral: Andrea Bowers closed in August at the Gallery at Roy and Edna Disney CalArts Theater (REDCAT), Los Angeles.*

Annie Buckley is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.



Andrea Bowers, *Letters to the Army of Three Displayed*, 2005, photocopies, decorative wrapping paper, 24" x 18" ea, at the Gallery at Roy and Edna Disney CalArts Theater (REDCAT), Los Angeles.

