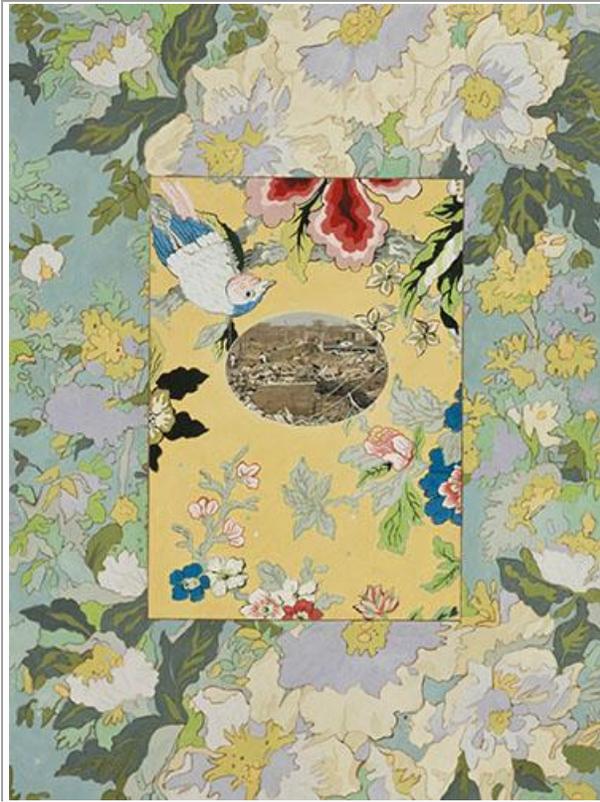


Hanna Hannah @ San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art

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"Amerli, Iraq, Site of Suicide Bomb I", 2010

Contrived dissonance is a common device in art, whether it's the scene at the end of *The Godfather*, which cuts back and forth between the baptism of Michael Corleone's nephew and the murder of the new Don's enemies, or the cheerful colors splashed on Andy Warhol's [Electric Chair](#) paintings and prints. Countless artists since have played with this time-honored trope, which means dissonance alone has long since lost its ability to wrench and shock.

For her recent exhibition at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, Hanna Hannah explores what's left of the powers of dissonance by framing (embedding, if you will) news-media images of war and other assorted tragedies against decorative floral-motif backgrounds. Hannah did not invent the idea of painting pretty pictures of flowers, although for her show at SJICA she appears at times to literally turn the form on its head. Nor did she risk life and limb out in the field like the unnamed Agence France-Presse

photographer, whose mundane snapshot of the aftermath of a suicide truck bomb in Amerli, Iraq, on July 7, 2007, accompanied an article about the bloody incident that Hannah read in [The New York Times](#) from the comfort of her studio in Santa Cruz.

In both cases, Hannah is letting those who have come before her do the heavy lifting, which means, I think, she's obliged to create something moving, or at least do something unique, with the familiar sources she's chosen to exploit. That's a high bar, I suppose, but she set it. So, while I admired her artistry and production values, I'm not sure she quite delivered the intellectual goods. If anything, I fear her calculated gambit to expose the numbing ubiquity of mediated death deadened our nerves further. By now, given the news of the past few decades, they should be irreparably frayed, but I left the gallery in a state of relative calm. Shouldn't we be furious?

As you walk into the gallery, three vertical casein works on paper, each 72 by 36 inches, seem to stand at attention, as if in greeting. All are pastel florals — pink roses and blue clematis almost beckon to be picked. The foliage is similarly inviting. In the background of one untitled picture, whose parenthetical description reads “Iraqi and American soldiers in Ramadi, Iraq,” multiple shades of green leaves give way to sprays of lilacs and washes of purple. In that piece, about two-thirds of the way up, inside a diminutive oval shape, is a painted image of soldiers taking cover behind a wood-and-glass China cabinet. We notice the undisturbed possessions within it, the pair of machine guns perched on top, and wait; is that a dead guy on the right?

To an extent, Hannah has successfully lulled us into a false sense of serenity with her gaudy splays of flowers, but I wanted to know more about the scene before me. I’m past being schooled about how we all take mass-media imagery for granted. I’m standing in front of a painting. Teach me something new; tell me a story I haven’t heard.

Wall has a more ancient, almost funereal aura to it. Upon 15 mulberry paper scrolls, each of which appears to be stained to achieve its tan-colored hue, the artist has combined the white outlines of creepers, flowers, and leaves as the background for even sketchier reprise of the above-mentioned Agence France-Presse photograph.



Detail of “Wall”, 2011, mixed-media on mulberry paper



Source material: Agence-France Presse photo

This may be the best piece in the show precisely because Hannah ditches dissonance in favor of an overall tone that is more somber without being arch or preachy. I liked her loose handling of the photo's various elements, in one case repeating and inverting a zigzagging line of onlookers six times. While we learn from a short description on the gallery's wall that 150 people were killed and 300 injured in what had been a crowded market, it's only by reading Stephen Farrell's article in the *Times* that we discover how the suicide truck bomber's 4.5 tons of explosives were concealed: in watermelons. How can an artist ignore a visual detail like that?

Beyond a quartet of skinnier, earlier scrolls from 2005 to 2009, Hannah has transformed the Cardinal Project Room with an installation called *Embedment*. The walls of the room are papered with camouflage-like floral patterns, against which hang four more pieces, each marked by a small, above-center oval in which resides the same suicide-bombing aftermath seen in *Wall*. In two of those works we glimpse only rubble, a confused tangle of former things. In the others, which include bystanders who appear in *Wall*, we see the anonymous stupor of the citizenry mocked by the happy colors and decorative patterns surrounding them. By this time, though, I was ready to exit this hall of flowered mirrors to find out just what exactly took place on 7/7/07. Here's hoping that call to action was one of Hannah's goals.

—BEN MARKS

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Hanna Hannah: "Frames of War" @ [San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art](#) through September 10, 2011.

About the Author:

Ben Marks is the senior editor of [CollectorsWeekly.com](#) and a contributor to KQED.org.