

# TITLE MAGAZINE

## Marc Blumthal: The Flame and the Flower

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The deliberate obscuring of information is the name of the game for Marc Blumthal's exhibition *The Flame and the Flower*, currently on view at NAPOLEON. Its finely crafted curation balances familiar imagery, personal narrative, and a few curious material choices to address the construction of identity at private and public scales. Although much of the content is appropriated, Blumthal's visible efforts to obscure, redact, and otherwise question its significance clearly indicate that his participation is indeed a part of the idea.

Commanding immediate attention upon entering the space is a handwritten sermon scrawled over the better part of one of the gallery's long walls. *For Cause and Purpose (Edit of President George W. Bush's Post-9/11 Address to the Nation)*, as we learn from the title, borrows text from the consolatory call to action delivered by the President in the wake of the attacks. The text, which has been spliced and reconstituted to the point of near nonsense, still manages to cajole a sense of solidarity and resolve that is recognizably American. But in handwriting and editing the content, Blumthal usurps its authority in the service of the individual.

In several pieces, he employs a specific language of image making—the halftone—as a formal connection among the works. The halftone, ubiquitous in printing from *Time Magazine* to the *Penny Saver*, is the atomic structure of proliferated paper media. Here, Blumthal turns the means of proliferation inside-out (or outside-in), where instead of a multiplicity of images, we get a multiplicity of meaning. We are snapped back from the point of recognition to the point of actually looking. In this way, Blumthal's images undermine their provenance as products of mass communication as they are transformed into unique objects now open for reinterpretation. Represented in the images are an assortment of private and public figures: the artist's mother, Ronald Reagan, Kim Jong Il with his family, dueling WWF wrestlers, and Blumthal's pseudo-nemesis Mark Blumenthal. They depict primarily male archetypes (we'll get to mom later) whose titles may be exchanged freely—the leader, the fighter, the stranger, the enemy.

*Halftone*, a 12-inch aluminum disk coated in a granular dust, initially seems to reference the printed image in title only. Given its position directly next to *For Cause and Purpose*, it is tempting to connect its dust-covered surface to the material residue from the 9/11 attacks. However, upon learning (from the work's description) that the material is in fact the cremated remains of the artist's cat, the frame of reference suddenly shifts from a public to a private form of grieving. And if we recognize the form of the object as a magnified halftone dot, then we come to understand it as part of a larger whole—a spec of space dust, a beloved pet, a fragment of a complete image.

While *Halftone* memorializes a personal loss, *For Cause and Purpose* offers some words of consolation and courage. Together, with *Untitled Drone*, they reveal a nuanced picture of how trauma is internalized in often drastically different ways at cultural and individual scales.

*Untitled Drone* conflates the idea of a drone strike with the image of a WWF match. The image, a found photograph of a wrestler in mid-attack, is heavily obscured by a thick milky-white fog screen printed over its surface. Although the wrestling match is an overtly violent spectacle, its transparent choreography allows it to be perceived by the public as entertainment. This is contrasted with the idea of a drone strike, which is a necessarily covert form of violence, as the masking of the image suggests. The treatment of these events by the media, specifically their invisibility, reveals a rather unflattering disparity in the way power is perceived within the American consciousness versus how it is manifested in the real world.

Shifting again to the personal scale, *Punching A Common Mistake (Mark Blumenthal) in the Face*, not only suggests, but physically records a violent act. Although the title offers a direct entry point into the work, the information is not necessary to understand the very real distortion of the object—a digital photograph of a man printed on (dented) aluminum. Whether warped from heat or bowed from blunt force, we recognize the trauma this object has endured. But, in reading the title, we come to presume that the photograph on its surface is Mark Blumenthal, an unsuspecting individual who happens to have a similar name to that of the artist. It is a blow to the ego to be identified incorrectly, and each time it happens it is an affront to one's identity. Blumthal's reaction to what must be “a common mistake” explicitly embodies a basic desire for individualism.

As integral as a name is to the self, nothing is more tangibly integral than the body. We get a sense of this in *Crystal*, a laser-etched cube of glass that gleams atop a clear acrylic pedestal in the center of the gallery space. The image contained within the cube is taken from a photograph of the artist's mother holding him as a baby. However, the artist has removed himself from the image, leaving a curiously shaped void cradled in his mother's arms. This removal is reinforced by the kitschy, machine-made quality of the product. It is a souvenir, suggesting some kind of shared experience turned commoditized memory, rather than a document of a personal event. Likewise, the artist's removal of himself from the image only serves to depersonalize the object further. We are left to question the significance of this anonymous woman, immortalized, or rather frozen, in a state of apparent contentment with the absence she literally embraces.

For those who are familiar with Blumthal's work, *Crystal* assumes additional significance as a reference to an earlier series. By transforming the original art image into memorabilia in an act of self-appropriation, Blumthal both validates and renounces the image as art, and himself as an artist, in a form of ego cannibalism. The gesture hints at an undercurrent that runs through the exhibition—the notion that the construction of identity, the definition of the part amongst the whole, reflects at its most basic level a desire for control.

Control is manifest in the work in both content and form. But it is also present in the relationship between the pieces themselves and the supplementary information inherent in their titles. In fact, the titles reveal key information that is vital in teasing out many of the threads that enrich our experience of what may otherwise be perceived as incongruent elements. And then there is the title of the exhibition itself, *The Flame and the Flower*, which evokes notions of celebration or memorial, and also directly references a 1970s romance novel of the same name. While a number of the individual titles in the exhibition function to focus a reading of the work, the exhibition title serves to open the dialog up again. It represents part of a well-coordinated balance that facilitates consideration well beyond the walls of the gallery.

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