

Attacks, Accounts, Looking & Losses

"What has happened makes the world. Live on the edge, looking." ~ Robert Creeley

By Betty Ann Brown

September 11, 2001 is often referred to as "The Day the World Changed." But how did it change? And what has that change done to our perceptions of who we are and how we see the world?

Alex Kritselis's remarkable *Above The Fold* holds a mirror up to our ruminations on these questions and asks us to go beyond media hype and jingoist hysteria to see ourselves—and our world—in complex new ways. Kritselis collected 366 Los Angeles Times newspapers, from September 11, 2001 through September 11, 2002. He stacked them in his downtown studio, unopened and folded flat to reveal the banner headlines and bright photographs that announced the leading events of the day. Over that fateful year, as the news fluctuated between shock, anger, mourning, and—ultimately--revenge, the stacks grew into twin towers of newsprint demanding reconsideration. For the artist, this meant aesthetic recontextualization.

In his *Above The Fold* installation, Kritselis has splayed the papers across a gridded terrain, sparkling below their plastic wrappers like a postmodern mosaic. He frames the scintillating paper-and-plastic floor with bleachers, allowing viewers to overlook the spectacle of news accounts as if from the distant rim of a deep information canyon.

On the wall above the data ravine is a video projection that alternates between comforting waves and disconcerting close-ups of a heart transplant. The soothing blue of the waves recalls the seduction of television, and by extension, the numbing affect of the news, where disasters always used to happen to someone else—to those "other" people living somewhere beyond the media horizon. This nostalgic comfort, with its calm reassurance that all is as it should be here in the safe and secure United States, is juxtaposed with a painful violation of the heart, symbolic of our emotional center.

Were we cut to the core by the 9/11 attacks? Did we lose the very essence of our collective self? Or have we returned to the protected sense that we are immune to what "they" suffer? What they are somehow meant to suffer endlessly? And if we were cut—or at least experienced a rupture in our way of life—where are we now, ten years later?

Kritselis pairs his constructed spectacle of the 9/11 news with another video, this one an episode from *The Lone Ranger* television series. ABC's first big "hit," *The Lone Ranger* from 1949 to 1957, which is to say, at the peak of American optimism after the victory of World War II. The series featured a renegade Texas Ranger, who hid his identity behind a black mask. He roamed the Wild West, helping those in need. At the end of every episode—after rescuing the damsel in distress or the boy child who would always admire such a hero—the Ranger reared up on his white horse, yelling "Hi-ho Silver and away!" In doing so, he assumed the position of conquering hero that has persisted through art history from the equestrian bronzes of Roman Emperors to paintings of modern military leaders. (Think of Jacques Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* from 1800.)

George W. Bush, who was president at the time of the 9/11 bombings, grew up in Midland and Houston, Texas. He was three years old when *The Lone Ranger* premiered. The program must have had archetypal resonance for him, as a man who identified as a Texan (in spite of the fact that he was actually born in New Haven, Connecticut) and always saw himself in heroic proportions.

But the construction of the hero in *The Lone Ranger*—and throughout our contemporary media portrayals—is a complex one. The ranger’s Native American sidekick was named Tonto. The name translates as “silly” in Spanish; an egregiously demeaning and racist appellation. Tonto spoke in monosyllables and grunts: his character was constructed as the stereotypical “other” to the Lone Ranger’s heroic persona.

Kritselis runs two tapes of *The Lone Ranger* episode, one running forwards, the second backwards, thus pairing the positive view of American heroism with an inversion. Is the artist asking us to reconsider the very concept of the hero? Perhaps the 9/11 attacks have forced us to do precisely that.

Fifty years after the final *Lone Ranger* episode, film critic James Bowman asserted that American media “no longer aspires to portray genuine heroism—even though that’s precisely what audiences want to see.”¹ Bowman added that the heroes who have dominated American cinema over the past several years “can be classified as one of three types: the whistle-blower hero, the victim hero, and the cartoon or superhero.” (One cartoon-like hero was seen in the 1993 satire *Hot Shots! Part Deux*, with a Rambo-like character sent to rescue hostages captured during Desert Storm, the 1990-91 invasion of Iraq led by the first President George Bush. The enemy—a Saddam Hussein caricature—was portrayed as absurdly silly.)

Have we lost the capacity to image real American heroes? Is that one of the great losses of the September 11 attacks?

I close with a quotation from Robert Creeley, an American poet who was born just before the Great Depression and died a few years after 9/11. His 1986 poem *The Hero* begins with lines that point to the discourse of heroic action.

Each voice which was asked
spoke its words, and heard
more than that, the fair question,
the onerous burden of the asking.
And so the hero, the hero! stepped that gracefully
into his redemption, losing
or gaining life thereby.

In *Above The Fold*, artwork, Alex Kritselis assumes the “onerous burden of asking.” How shall we answer?

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¹ James Bowman, “Hollywood’s Hero Deficit”. *The American, Journal of the American Enterprise Institute*, July-August 2008 issue. www.american.com/archive/2008/july-august-magazine-contents/hollywood2019s-hero-deficit