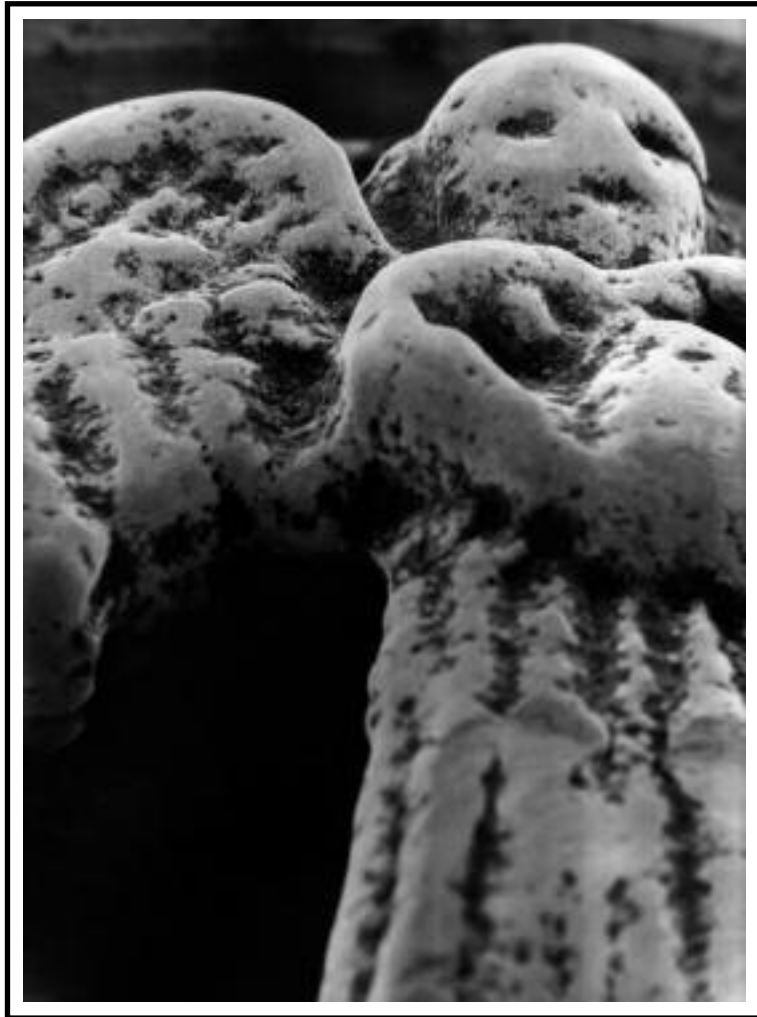


D O R S K Y
G A L L E R Y
Curatorial Programs



APOCALYPTIC POP

JODY CULKIN, CHITRA GANESH, D. DOMINICK LOMBARDI, LAURA PARNES,
TODT, AND MICHAEL ZANSKY

Curated by Kathleen Goncharov
November 16 – January 25, 2009

Opening reception: Sunday, November 16, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

The times we live in are ominous and deeply disturbing to anyone who is paying attention and not totally distracted by the problems of celebrities, shopping, and reality TV.

Environmental catastrophe, economic collapse, genetic engineering blunders, pandemics, nuclear holocaust, and global war all seems inevitable in a world gone mad. The end of the world, or more accurately, the culmination of historical cycles, is common in many ancient cultures including the Maya, Hindu, Hopi, Greco-Roman, and others. However, today, fascination and fear about the possible end of humanity have accelerated exponentially. It has seeped into a popular culture that is violent in the extreme yet populated with fantastic saviors and a kind of kitsch redemption. The art in this exhibition has less to do with the Pop Art of Andy Warhol, although his irony is very present. Instead of advertising, this work channels the absurdity of the news and popular culture, from the Pentagon to Pentecostals, Blackwater to Bollywood. In the words of Jerome Jaffe of TODT, "It's not Pop Art. It's art about

what pops up, such as insurgents in Iraq wearing Rambo T-shirts."

Things are certainly grim. But is the end finally here or is this just another false alarm akin to the hysteria of the last two millennia and of dire prophecies throughout history too numerous to count? The definition of apocalypse is 'revealing' or 'uncovering' but the term has come to mean the horrific events that signal the end of the world. Theories and stories of how our wicked human race will come to an exceedingly bad and well-deserved end have long been part of religion and popular culture, which to this writer are one and the same. Early church art is the equivalent of today's action movies, terrifying yet entertaining and titillating. Think Bruce Willis as an avenging Jesus, Renée Zellweger as Mary Magdalene, and Christopher Walken chewing up the scenery as Lucifer himself, gleefully tossing sinners into Hell. Except that true believers before the age of electricity couldn't just turn off the DVD player and go to sleep. Now, more often than not they choose not to.

These notions of the end times abound at turning points in history when there is turmoil and seismic change. The book of *Revelation*, the last canonical book of the *New Testament* outlining events culminating in



Laura Parnes *The Only Ones Left*, 2007



D. Dominick Lombardi *Boy with Clubbed Foot (Potato Eyes)*, 2006



Jody Culkin *Argon*, 1998

the battle of Armageddon, was written, according to most scholars, just after the disastrous Jewish-Roman War, a watershed in the history of both Judaism and Christianity. The concept of the rapture, which has no basis in theology, has vague antecedents in the time of the Reformation, but really took hold in the early 1800s in Britain after the shock of the French, American, and Industrial Revolutions, and the Enlightenment. It came to the United States and Canada a few decades later and coincided with the Spiritualist movement, with its cheesecloth ectoplasm and tap dancing tables. The latter was more positive and life affirming, more New Age, but nevertheless the flip side of millennial fears. Change was, still is, and, if we survive, will continue to be very, very scary to many people who take refuge in the irrational.

After a hiatus, the belief in the aforementioned rapture has reemerged with a vengeance during these troubled times. Sarah Palin's former pastor believes that Alaska will serve as a haven for (the right kind of) Christians escaping the 'lower 48' during the 'Time of Tribulations' leading to the apocalypse. This migration will occur just before these righteous individuals are snatched up, just in time,

by Jesus as Superman, and carried off to Heaven. In a brilliant marriage of eschatology and late Capitalism, some churches that profess these beliefs sell rapture insurance although how one makes a claim and the identity of the beneficiaries is unclear. With the enormous popularity of the bestselling *Left Behind* series by Tim La Haye and Jerry B. Jenkins, now numbering sixteen books and counting, the rapture and especially the end of the world have become embedded in popular culture. In it, the Antichrist, a charismatic and genetically engineered creation of artificial insemination, becomes the United Nations Secretary General, and causes the apocalypse.

Anxiety about the end of the world has co-joined with fantasies about savior figures in the mainstream. Superheroes, with ever more astounding powers, have never been more popular and are featured not only in comics but also in Hollywood movies, TV, Internet, and video games. Mythical figures such as wizards, dragons, ogres, trolls, fairies and aliens abound, some evil, some redemptive. Nostradamus is a bestselling author. There are scores of books and several movies about the year 2012, which is the end of the Mayan Long Count calendar. Many believe this date will bring the end of the world, but some New Agers believe this will be a positive time of spiritual reawakening. Either way, the notion that something really big is going to happen, and soon, has permeated our culture.

Ezra Pound wrote, "Artists are the antennae of the race." They are always the first to respond and reflect



TODT *Installation View*, 2007

their times, often in extreme images or in absurd ways that mock the status quo. The Dadaists and Surrealists reacted to World War I, and artists such as Max Beckmann and Georg Grosz foretold the coming of the next one. Artists reacted to the Vietnam War by rebelling, albeit ineffectually, against the art patronage system. The artists in this exhibition, **Jody Culkin**, **Chitra Ganesh**, **D. Dominick Lombardi**, **Laura Parnes**, **TODT**, and **Michael Zansky** all have something to say about the dangers of our world, and they do so with dark humor.

Through their use of popular culture, they embrace both the horror and the hilarity of our current situation. In some ways, they concur with the ironically sunny apocalypse of *Dr. Strangelove*.

Video and filmmaker **Laura Parnes** is known for her critiques of a dysfunctional consumerist America, obsessed with youth, religion, and violence, and its effect on women in particular. Her sources are as diverse as the horror movies of Dario Argento and David Cronenberg, to Dave Hickey and Dante. The effects are both disturbing and absurd. Her three-channel video, *The Only Ones Left* takes its title from a quote by George W. Bush. "At some point, we may be the only ones left. That's okay with me. We are America." Taking its cue from the genres of film noir and mafia movies interspersed with CEO diatribes, this video combines Hollywood plots and climaxes throughout its three channels to draw attention to the familiarity of the subject matter and the inevitability of violence. Her characters, like some of our political leaders, cannot abandon their code of "honor" and the absolute certainty in the righteousness of their cause. No doubt can ever be expressed, although in case of Parnes' mafia plot, it means the death of everyone, the end of the family. In politics it can mean the end of civilization.

D. Dominick Lombardi's sculptures, drawings and tattoos all tell a post-apocalyptic tale with an elaborate cast of characters who have survived a globe-shaking environmental disaster. These denizens of the future have evolved in reaction to a poisonous world where the average life expectancy is 20 years. Some of these creatures such as *Boy With Clubbed Foot (Potato Eyes)* and *Whistling Bird* are also the result of genetic engineering where food and animal DNA have



Michael Zansky *Order of Magnitude*, 2008

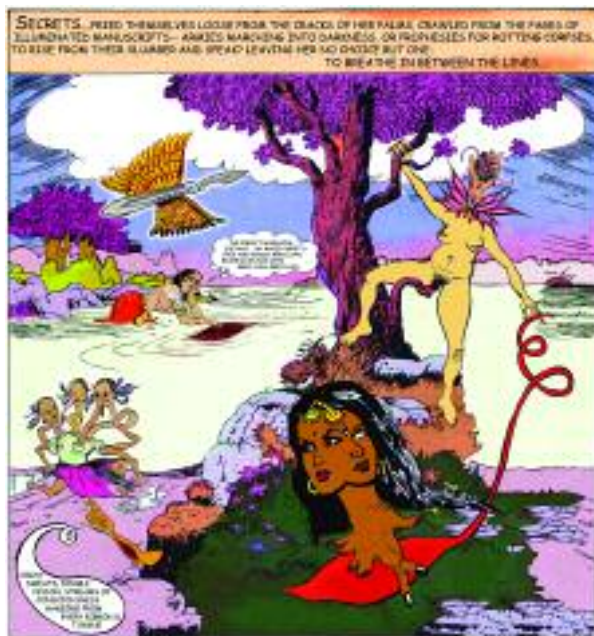
combined and gone horribly wrong. Lombardi's blue bird has been crossbred with a laundry soap container to make it a cleaner, flightless and more perfect pet. His characters inhabit a kind of Dystopian Disneyland where everyone is misshapen and grotesque but somehow still cheerful. His *Post-Apocalyptic Tattoo* series is filled with extruded brains, rubbery forms, thing-blobs, zombie clowns, and hideous mutants, all executed in old-school comics style. Lombardi says his work is about "where we're headed as a species in this world in which humans are guinea pigs in a larger experiment and grab for power and money run by sinister enterprises."

Jody Culkin's black and white photographs appear to depict the giant distressed remains of a partially destroyed and abandoned world devoid of human inhabitants. The mysterious collapsed figures found among giant piles of rubble could be the kings and idols of an ancient vanished civilization and recall Shelley's poem *Ozymandias*. They are not what they appear to be, however, and are the antithesis of monumental. They are really pictures taken with and magnified many times by an electron microscope, normally used to record objects on a cellular level. The subjects are tiny pieces of jewelry, particularly those found on St. Mark's Place that are sold to multiple piercing aficionados. Extreme magnification turns these pieces of bling such as fake diamonds, angels, and sneakers into post-apocalyptic pock marked memorials to contemporary pop culture. They are a peek into what the explorers and archaeologists might find when they stumble across the remains of our civilization.

TODT is a collaborative group whose name refers to the archaic German and Dutch word for death and to Fritz Todt, the German engineer and predecessor of Albert Speer as Hitler's Minister of Armaments. They have worked together since 1978 and are known for their complex installations that depict a world of war, bizarre machines, depleted landscapes, nuclear fallout, genetic engineering, rampant consumerism, and ecological destruction that is manipulated by a sinister government and mad scientists. Theirs is a vision of the future, often repellant but also often funny, albeit in a very dark way. Their

installations are made up of the detritus of American culture, weed-whackers, bomb casings and other military surplus, body prosthetics, baby furniture, children's toys, medical equipment, pharmaceutical supplies, plumbing, plastics, and everything including the kitchen sink. These objects and materials are spliced together with the expertise of the garage tinkerer. These unforgettable contraptions remind us of just how grim our future might turn out to be.

Michael Zanksy's dioramas, optical installations and the photographs that relate to them, star a diverse cast of characters that run the gamut from Voltaire, George Washington, and Kennewick Man to Bosch's demons, Michael Jordan, and the Three Stooges. A key motif in the work is the swing of the pendulum throughout history between reason and superstition. Zanksy reflects on an increasingly destructive modern era in which things have gone horribly wrong and human beings are locked through unwavering belief into dead ends that may herald our ultimate destruction. His backdrops can recall the barren moonscape in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* or the cover of a science fiction novel by Phillip K. Dick. Some of his protagonists are hybrids of animals and humans like the Egyptian gods, characters from Greek mythology,



Chitra Ganesh *Secrets*, 2007

Kafka, or B movies of the 1960s. Clowns join theoreticians of western civilization to gaze upon the Tower of Babel. In Zanksy's world, existential angst ultimately leads to slapstick comedy.

Chitra Ganesh's sources include Hindu and other ancient mythologies that are filled with sex and violence that are used to repress those who transgress the strict rules of a patriarchal society. Shiva is literally the destroyer of worlds in her work. She also uses Bollywood movies, western comics, lyric poetry, the words of Indian pop songs and girl rock, imperialism and queer politics. She says she continues "to be

obsessed by how memories, dreams, and their repression shape personal and social crises, be it between lovers or global empires." Her vision can often be dark and gruesome, full of female body parts and severed limbs. It is apocalyptic both personally and politically, and speaks to a human history of repression and exploitation. One of Ganesh's works in the exhibition, *Upon Her Precipice*, has the reassuring pop colors and format of a cartoon but carries a grim message. It says in part, "Secrets... pried themselves loose from the cracks of her palms, crawled from the pages of illuminated manuscripts... armies marching into darkness, or prophecies for rotting corpses... to rise from their slumber and speak?"

Whatever their interests and sources, all of the artists in this exhibition reflect today's understandably deep-rooted unease. For the first time in history, we are fully capable of engineering our own destruction through global warming, nuclear war, and genetic manipulation as the most likely catalysts. This notion has embedded itself in popular culture, and as usual, artists take the temperature of the time and reflect what is in the air. □

— Kathleen Goncharov
New York, NY
November 2008

BIOGRAPHY

Kathleen Goncharov has been the Director of the Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions at Rutgers University since 2007. Formerly, she served as Adjunct Curator of Contemporary Art at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Public Art Curator at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Curator of the Collection at The New School. In 2003 she was US Commissioner to the Venice Biennale where she organized an exhibition by Fred Wilson. She also curated an exhibition by Wilson at the Cairo Biennale and has organized exhibitions and artists' projects in Europe, Latin America and India, as well as New York City.

CHECKLIST

JODY CULKIN

BISMUTH, 1998
Electron micrograph
30 x 40 inches

ARGON, 1998
Electron micrograph
30 x 40 inches

PROMETHEUM, 1998
Electron micrograph
30 x 40 inches

AMERICIUM, 1998
Electron micrograph
30 x 40 inches

NITER, 1998
Electron micrograph
30 x 40 inches

PHOSPHORUS, 1998
Electron micrograph
30 x 40 inches

SULPHUR, 1998
Electron micrograph
30 x 40 inches

IRIDIUM, 1998
Electron micrograph
30 x 40 inches

All works courtesy of the artist

CHITRA GANESH

SECRETS, 2007
Digital C-print, Edition of 5 + 1 AP
47 ³/₄ x 44 ³/₄ inches
Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery

FINGERPRINTS, 2007
Digital C-print, Edition of 5 + 1 AP
40 ¹/₂ x 73 inches
Courtesy of Toni and Daniel Holtz

D. DOMINICK LOMBARDI

BEACHCOMBER, 2008
Sand, acrylic medium and objects
45 x 26 x 23 inches

WHISTLING BIRD, 1998
Wood, acrylic, and plastic laundry
soap bottle
16 ¹/₂ x 17 x 13 ¹/₂ inches

*BOY WITH CLUBBED FOOT
(POTATO EYES)*, 2006
Charcoal on museum board
20 x 16 inches

*HEAD (20 DRAWINGS: #426, #485,
#523, #532, #580, #590, #661, #842,
#3906, #911, #925, #942, #957, #958,
#969, #981, #989, #991, #1,000,
#31,020)*, 2003-4
India ink on paper
10 x 8 inches

All works courtesy of the artist

LAURA PARNES

THE ONLY ONES LEFT, 2007
3-channel video installation

SUBURBAN PEACE COALITION, 1998
Single channel video

All works courtesy of the artist

TODT

REAPER, 2007
Mixed media
118 x 70 x 88 inches

SENTRY, 2008
Mixed media
72 x 12 inches

BALLISTA, 2006
Mixed media
30 ¹/₂ x 70 x 27 inches

DANTE, 1987
Silkscreen and kodalith lightbox
32 x 24 x 5 inches

FLAG STONES (8), 2006
Mixed media
12 x 12 x 2 inches

FLAG STONES (8), 2006
Mixed media
18 x 18 x 2 inches

MAM, 1998
Mixed media
36 x 40 x 40 inches

All works courtesy of the artists

MICHAEL ZANSKY

ECHO, 2008
Mixed media, objects and lens
40 x 50 x 20 inches

ARK, 2008
Mixed media, objects and lens
40 x 50 x 20 inches

TOWER OF JUPITER, 2008
Mixed media, objects and lens
40 x 50 x 20 inches

ORDER OF MAGNITUDE, 2008
C-print
30 x 40 inches

All works courtesy of Nicholas
Robinson Gallery

Cover: Jody CulkIn, *Prometheum*, 1998

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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11-03 45th Ave., Long Island City, NY 11101 | T: 718 937 6317 | F: 718 937 7469 | E: info@dorsky.org | www.dorsky.org

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