

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ: AN INTERVIEW WITH MATTHEW ROSE

MATTHEW ROSE: You'd been taking care of an artist, photographer Peter Hujar. You've told me he has recently died of AIDS. How has that affected you and your work?

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ: ...When he got this disease it gave me a terrific sense of mortality. You walk around and have these abstract notions of death at some point way in the future. You don't think about it much day to day. When something like this happens with someone that close, the inevitability of death . . . it shook my work. I've been involved in the same struggle for a personal kind of honesty, in what I do and how I see things...trying to get to some clear point in picture making, photographs or writing. Now I feel there's no time for the excess stuff.

MR: Your work seems to cut across many different current camps of art now. Why do you think so?

DW: Originally the early stuff I did was very simple. I was trying to bring art back from its "elite" nature, the artist as a special creature, an elite person. The show at Gracie Mansion last year brought people from different art camps. I was surprised--they were responding to it.

MR: Is there an AIDS art, a school dealing with it? Ross Bleckner and others are dealing with it as an image.

DW: Ultimately this disease has affected people in general, and homosexuals who may be making art. These artists do have a greater sense of mortality, and it's affected what images they've selected. I know for myself it's been profound. Every few months, I feel like I'm taking out a lease on my life...I say, "Oh I'm still okay, I'm still alive." It's a sense of pressure. In approaching art five years ago, I still viewed AIDS as this abstract thing, I guess it was denial on my part; I just didn't want to acknowledge it. The whole world is a totally different place than it was three years ago. My feelings about time are different, things have much more meaning. I was telling a friend that whenever I was to go off travelling, the last week in New York before I left was almost as if everything in my life opened up. Life became easier. Wonderful things seemed to take place just before I left. Now I'm feeling that on a continual basis. It's like I'm cutting out what's not necessary.

MR: Does it take you a long time to finish a painting?

DW: I do a large painting over a period of time and I'm usually working on many things at once. I started this last show with notebook ideas, images, basic concepts of things. I used to paint directly--whatever came into my head. When I started the work with the four elements--*Air, Earth, Fire, Water*--the first images that occurred to me I knocked down, whether it was in words or drawings. I tried to push toward their references, their hidden meanings.

MR: Give me an example.

DW: With *Fire*, I would write out a series of ideas and associations relating to fire. Fire could be everything from the elemental fire to heat, anger, weaponry or impulses. With lists of these associations, I'd come up with thirty images, then I'd pull out maybe seven.

MR: Did you know what the final piece would look like?

DW: A general idea of structure, yes. I narrowed down the images and allowed myself emotionally to put it together.

MR: How long would that take you?

DW: Emotionally, the piece would determine its own direction and time. Up to that point I avoided the emotional part of it as much as possible by mapping out all these associations.

MR: Your work is some kind of journal, then.

DW: That's one way of looking at it. It's as if I'm mapping out the world as I see it.

MR: How is that?

DW: One specific idea is that the world is a place we're born into with a preinvented existence, where everything's been laid out. Perhaps the most radical thing you can do, then, is use your imagination. With all these different indicators seeming to press on you wherever you go--stopping for a traffic light,

walking on the sidewalk instead of the middle of the street, the imagination, too, is shaped somehow. But I still think there are keys that can unlock it, you can break through a lot of things...like socialization.

MR: Are you hoping to bring this set of limited choices to consciousness? The idea of limited possibilities, limited choices in what could be an unlimited world but isn't? I know your work was political, or at least the work approached the world in a political context.

DW: I never really viewed my work as political because, for one, I don't know politics really well. I think nations tend to exchange one rhetoric for another and none are ultimately life-embracing. Most of my work is about social reaction to the things around me. Anybody who thinks they are going to change the world with one painting is wrong. You end up giving people a focal point for different kinds of energy or ideas, and usually people are repelled or attracted to it. Sometimes, in the process, they can find themselves.

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MR: What is the art world for you?

DW: Well, I haven't ever felt the art world is really about art, but about things that look like art...People love to pick up what they recognize already or what's been recognized for them as art. That's why you have these flurries of groups rushing off to find the next new style. It's never really anything about the art itself but what's turned up at the moment, so it must be art.

MR: But at the same time, you're willing to go about pursuing your own ideas and submit them to a society that doesn't understand what your paintings are about, or perhaps doesn't really care.

DW: I agree with you, but I think there are people who do, although they're hard to find. And there are people who use their own judgment and their own honest reactions to what they're looking at and attempt to deal with the work...the whole process is sort of a joke and at the same time, it's not.

MR: What don't you like about the art system?

DW: Spotlighting one art over another. As a society we consume things at an enormous rate. Something that appeared a few days ago, instead of gaining some kind of support, everybody jumps on it, consumes it, spits it out and asks, "What's next?" There's a constant need for the new which is disturbing.

MR: What do you find when you finish a series of paintings?

DW: It's more what I find in the process. Understanding more about the source of my images, why they occur, their relation to my childhood. I'll look at things in a natural environment and small things like ants. In *Earth*, there are ants, timelessly pushing the earth around. I began to think about tractors, which do the same thing...

MR: Ants can haul 48 times their own weight. They create these great civilizations like Mayan temples, and they all go into that same hole; or in larger colonies there'd be a park of these hills. As a child I remember a stray ant, a kind of scout out in the world, checking things out in the forbidden zone. Maybe I'd step on him thinking, "Well, he was a sacrifice to the cause, that was his job."

DW: Those are the chains of thoughts I like to follow. Those Mayan temples are somehow mirroring something larger.

MR: Rauschenberg, I understand, used to go outside and walk around the block a couple of times and find things, traces of a civilization...trash with the quality of artifact, pieces of a world already risen and fallen. The pieces were reintegrated into whatever had surfaced...a kind of skin.

DW: For the last few years I've worked with the personal obsession of the unseen bomb that's existed since the 1940s, and in that time I was trying to map out very clear things--like the abandoned and damaged buildings down by the East River, and thinking of them in terms of caves or caverns; thinking of structures that have existed in the past and how they are now, how things fall into ruin in a short period of time. On some level I pretended, that if I were a primitive, these details would be of a world ended. I took some of them and complicated them, but I wouldn't go beyond one surface image. Then I put three or four images together and would build from there.

MR: Why is collage such a dominant feature of your work?

DW: I've always loved preprinted material, things found on the street, whether it was advertising or whatever. You are constantly projecting more than one image onto another as you walk on the street, so in terms of memory, you can turn and see some bum or some image of decay and then turn again and see some restaurant where it costs \$40 for a meal. So you're constantly superimposing images upon images and sandwiching them. TV, magazines, information, memory, grocery store signs--and there's all this suggestion of consumption...of images. I did war paintings on top of supermarket advertisements; war is a daily thing for some people on this planet. For most Americans, it's an abstract thing. Body-counts, newspaper accounts, never anything real. People become so numb to that, they just don't view it as a real thing.

MR: So you're trying to come up with a stronger image out of the two, rather than the Pop version which is to repeat it, massage it; dilute it.

DW: Yes, subverting it in some way. In *Fire*, I use "Wanted" posters. They are a set of information that stops in a particular place; photographs stop life, abstract a moment. I added related elements like anger, something that involves crime. Then I added weaponry, an ape carrying a stick; a match--a containment of fire. Then this neon gun, a photograph I took in a ghetto in Florida. All, a set of dead information. The head in the jar is a kind of jail. My feeling is that jails are a part of this culture that at some point, through education and realization, they won't be used, at least to the extent they are now. And so I painted a fragment of a Greek statue as an artifact that previews the jail as an artifact of our culture.

MR: You mentioned you lived with ex-convicts.

DW: When I came off the street I lived with several ex-convicts in a halfway house for about two years. I had run into someone in Times Square who took me in to his room in a hotel there. At some point he wanted to get rid of me because I was turning his house into a menagerie, shoplifting animals from pet shops.

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MR: You slept in doorways?

DW: I slept in doorways in Times Square. I managed to find my way--a place to sleep, something to eat. I was taken care of by different people. I found a job at this halfway house and met people coming out of prison--people who went around passing bad checks, stealing left and right. One guy who got me into the halfway house presented himself as a psychologist; he was a fake. But once in, I had a certain amount of structure where I could kind of repair the damage and get off the streets, find work, live a regulated lifestyle for a couple of years. And it worked, because one thing I discovered living on the streets is that you can't change it. People yell, "Get a job," but you can't get out of it; you carry a certain amount of energy that no matter how good your clothes are, you're surrounded by this energy and people pick up on it right away. They see it in your eyes. It took me close to a year when I finally got off the streets to find some janitorial job in a warehouse.

MR: How did you fall into the art world?

DW: I was in a band. I wasn't playing traditional music, but using tape recordings of street sounds and conversations and playing them as percussion behind the band. At the same time I was painting posters with spray paint and sticking them up in the street where we were playing. They would disappear immediately and eventually I had to do them directly on buildings. Somebody took notice of them and asked me--when he found out who I was--to be in a group show. Not long after I was having my own shows.

MR: When was this?

DW: In 1981, 1982, that's about how long I've been painting.

MR: Did it surprise you that people would buy or regard your "street signs" as art and hang them in their homes?

DW: Early on I had done a series of things on gallery doors--painted a burning house, a person recoiling, and a bomber plane. At that time I thought galleries were a joke, that they would never touch anything this real or address issues like that. So I never conceived that I could show in galleries. Artists were such-and-such people and I wasn't particularly an artist.

MR: Were you angry at the galleries?

DW: No, I did that work just to give people something different to look at on the way in, something that would balance their view of what I thought was inside.

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MR: So anyway, you did these installations before you became a painter. Pretty strong approach.

DW: Yes, I liked that approach. At the time, the early 1980s, I also had an idea for a series of photographs. I would have firing squads in front of Macy's or in the middle of Woolworth's with five guys wearing some sort of militia uniforms, carrying rifles, but with everything concealed until a prearranged time. The firing squad could then quickly set itself up and with someone blindfolded perform the execution. The idea being to have something senseless in the middle of all this activity.

MR: Herald Square would be a good place for that...what did you want to document?

DW: I wanted to photograph the reaction. This is reality in other parts of the world. A friend, however, persuaded me not to do it because someone might really get shot, by a policeman. But at that time I was interested in a very direct confrontational event that people could participate in whether they liked it or not...but this was too dangerous. I ended up going into painting. But the idea of bringing those ideas, questioning the safety zone--sitting and watching violence in other parts of the world--dragging the reality of those images out of the abstract has stuck with me.

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MR: How about artists?

DW: That's a tough one. When I started painting I began to go to galleries, but what I found was that my work didn't come out of an art-world context. And the more I looked at art, the more I realized that kind of information never fueled my work. Like I said, I don't think the art world is really about art. My art is about my relationship with the world, my daily life and it never included art galleries.

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MR: Do you have assistants?

DW: I've thought that having assistants and secretaries that most artists making money start having, gets you further and further away from what's real and original in your work. I think you have to go through the work of making those things yourself, putting them together...it's part of the process, and the more you remove yourself from the process, the more your work becomes a commodity but has no real blood in it. It's a pain in the ass to put together those boards, but in the process, it's doing something for me.

MR: What do you get for a painting?

DW: It depends. A piece 6' by 8'...the price is \$20,000.

MR: Do they sell?

DW: They do and they don't. There's a thing that's been happening to me in the last year and a half, part of my own responsibility since I dropped out and pulled away from the art world. I was in the Whitney *Biennial* a couple of years ago and there was such an unreal pressure for work from me. The way I work, with writing, making films, I paint for a couple of months a year, so it's very confusing to people in the art world. They can't manage more than one thing at once. Are you a painter or a writer? Until some

critic writes an essay saying it's okay that this guy writes and paints. So, it was difficult to do what was expected of me.

MR: Why did you drop out?

DW: Basically, so I could reorient myself to my priorities. I wanted to write, travel, make photographs and I just stopped painting for a period of time in order to do that. The pressure was so great that people would buy anything as long as I was the one who did it...it was totally unreal. "So and so has a Wojnarowicz, and we need to have one too." That's how the art world works.

MR: But years later when you've come up with these very considered paintings, can people follow you...do they know it's still your work?

DW: Well, for a while there was talk of my demise...there was an article that came out in *The New York Times* to that effect. But that was a line I crossed. I'm not trying to sound like an angel where people think I'm so honest about what I'm doing...but it created some pretty powerful enemies.

MR: But at the same time, you're obviously in a better position than some others whose work is not in as great a demand.

DW: I don't want to have time to worry if tomorrow I don't sell another painting again. My life is going to continue like the world is going to continue.

MR: So it was never your idea to come off the street to become a famous painter.

DW: Well, I wanted very much to do things and be supported in doing them or at least engage people in a dialogue of some sort. When I was living on the streets as a petty criminal and I was coming out of the halfway house and into daily society, I was speechless for years. I didn't talk to anybody. I carried this stuff on my shoulders for years. I was at a party, with some people involved in the arts or whatever, and I sat there and was silent the entire time because I never found a method of communication that could begin to touch on the experiences I'd had. Most people were living fairly normal lives. I'd seen things that were so horrifying...I was almost killed two or three times living on the street. And coming out of these experiences you need to find an entry point into a dialogue with people, and there isn't. You can't just say, "Hi." So I started writing.

MR: What did you write?

DW: Bad poems, stories, very direct explicit things about the experiences I gained on the street. That's what I try to do with the painting but using more imagination.

MR: Was art the way out?

DW: It was the only thing that continually made sense. The reason I couldn't talk about being a child prostitute or a thief or a runaway was because there was never anything or anyone in that environment--a contact point--that would help me step out of it. I wrote a piece on image, real and psychic violence in *The East Village Eye* (now defunct) a couple of years ago, and I went into my adolescence on the streets.

MR: Who taught you how to paint?

DW: Nobody, just myself. And I'm still learning.

MR: You began with spray paint.

DW: Impulses have led me to different methods of handling paint. There's an emotional trust to how I handle material which determines what I use and how I use them. I never wanted to get caught in any particular style--I felt that would be really restricting or boring.

MR: But I can see elements and a consistent style in much of your work.

DW: Yes, but I have heard people at a show say, "Oh, is this a group show?"

MR: Do you have any kind of relationship with your collectors?

DW: No, not really. I've been invited to a couple of parties...some of which I've gone to. I obviously appreciate that they've supported me, but I get a little wary about it. It's like when people looking at your work think they know you because of your work. They don't.

MR: Looking at the work, it seems as if you appreciate technology, at least to give your paintings structure.

DW: Well, at some point "nature" was invented and it put a distance between us and anything we consider natural. We are nature, as much a part of nature as ants or bees. Technology is an extension of nature.

Air is structured with associations of wind. The background is from a diagram of a nuclear reactor I found in a handbook from South America on how to build one. I took segments of the diagram, abstracted them and structured it across the frame. I tried to deal with the idea of disease and extinction in terms of homosexuality--images of homoerotic culture that are rapidly disappearing. All this was balanced with some artifact from pre-culture.

MR: Where does the image of the infant come from?

DW: The baby crying comes from a dream I had concerning a friend I hadn't seen or spoken to in a year. I woke up screaming. I've never had a dream like that and wrote him a letter and asked him if he was okay, told him about the dream and found out his child had died--stillborn, the day I had the dream.

MR: The piece is about death; most of the elements seem to point towards death.

DW: My associations with death are--I don't particularly believe in the afterlife--come from different cultures, from the Mayans, the Egyptians. One of the strongest feelings I have about death is that it's a time when the energy we carry is dispersed and becomes a part of everything. I painted a parachutist about to jump from an airplane; he's emerging through a portal, like being born but more conscious. I was also thinking how when wind was used as a tool--birds' feathers. The bird wing itself is a copy of a Direr painting my close friend with AIDS had showed me, he was going to have it tattooed on his arm.

MR: Getting back to culture and nature, I've always thought nature was culture...and that *second* nature was some interesting perversion of our attempt to be natural using a fork or a tea cup.

DW: I just feel that somehow in abstracting ourselves from the natural world we separated ourselves from whatever's out there; it's always us and it, and that's how we've managed to kill it off.

MR: Earth seems to reveal something about technology and nature....

DW: Earth is about the idea of architecture coming from an unconscious impulse. It's the same thing I said before about preinvented existence where the imagination is formed by all these signifiers we're surrounded by. And that's where I think the most radical thing lies: inside that imagination where we can leave that pre-invented world. That's where real freedom is.

MR: I find these paintings very dark, but also very funny.

DW: That's about the last thing people pick up on. There is a dark humor in most of the work. Like the devil...he's hilarious. He's based on this little rubber doll. I was thinking about our culture's expression of evil. We don't have that history of culture that the Mayans do...my feeling is that evil is present, but we don't have many mirrors to reflect what evil is about, outside of horror movies and newspaper stories. And in dolls; perhaps that's where kids handle evil--that early point in their lives.