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Back From Port-Au-Prince

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In this body of work I aim to bring the possibility of intimacy and empathy to a city reeling from recent devastation. Before last year's earthquake, Port-Au-Prince had been famous for its bright splashy colors; vibrant shades coated the homes, shacks, buildings and buses. But everything lost its color when it crumbled. The ubiquitous gray rubble is a constant reminder of the immense human suffering that the quake set into motion: death, displacement, and disease.

As an artist volunteering in Haiti I sought a way to respond to this place. I decided to embellish some of the concrete ruins with monochrome swaths of paint, with the assistance of my Haitian translator and a number of his friends. I see this graffiti as a way of honoring the fallen buildings – and the people that they once housed – with one last moment of hued radiance. These pieces are memorials, they are abstract paintings, and they are collaborative public performances. Like most street art they simultaneously adorn and vandalize. They are temporary pieces that I have documented in photographs. Hopefully the rubble will soon be removed and they will disappear.

My work is both formalist and activist. I think Americans often experience compassion fatigue from the constant onslaught of media images which compel us to look away; I want to use beauty to encourage viewers to look again. I want to give Haitian audiences and American audiences a common aesthetic object to consider in order to create a simple bridge of experience between us and them.

My portrait photos also aim to connect. I began taking portraits and printing them on my portable digital printer as gifts for my Haitian friends. When I discovered how much the people appreciated getting their photos taken I offered my photographic services to people at various places I visited in the neighborhood where I stayed.

Showing these portraits to American audiences is fraught with dilemmas that make me uneasy. I am concerned with reinforcing stereotypes and naturalizing inequities. I fear usurping the voice of people I wish to empower.

I have written on top of the photos in order to dramatize my concerns. The unequal power dynamics inherent in my work are emphasized by the text, which can be seen text unfolding in the video. It is readable at first, but as the layers accumulate and get smeared it becomes less legible.

The text functions as both graffiti and chalkboard instruction; it simultaneously obliterates and elucidates. It is like a voice trying to hear itself, trying to make sense of something, but ultimately stumbling into meaningless gibberish.

Visually the words are a performance that deface and decorate the figures. Like many foreign aid efforts, they threaten to injure the very people they are trying to help. The letters almost recapitulate cascading rubble. But the figures remain visible underneath the scribbled tangle of chalk and charcoal. They refuse to be negated, and emerge strong and steadfast in the end. That is my hope for Haiti.

Kerry Rodgers