

North Adams Transcript

AUGUST 31, 2010

Profile: Maggie Mailer, *The Balloonists*

by JOHNSEVEN and [BERKSHIRE ARTS](#)

Painter Maggie Mailer's new work envisions a time of ultimate disaster and the absurd steps the human race might take to save itself by rising above it all — in balloons.

Her show "The Balloonists" is currently showing at Ferrin Gallery at 437 North St.

Mailer had previously visited a scene of global apocalypse in her work "The Volcano Sitters," but with "The Balloonists" she has coupled distress with humor and added jaunty hot air balloons as the human solution to extinction.

In each scene, Mailer presents a hot air balloon floating among a vague end of the world scenario, where the survivors exist possibly as 19th-century aeronautical gadabouts, just bobbing above the unpleasantness. It's like a tea party in the skies as the earth crumbles below.

"The show is really a fairy tale about adult problems and the way that our imagination is tethered by habit," Mailer said in a recent interview.

In her fairy tale, there is not necessarily a happy or sad ending, but an eternal present among the potential survivors. It's both fanciful and philosophical.

The narrative backdrop to Mailer's latest series sprang from the emotions behind the birth of her son and her feelings within that context of the disasters, both natural and man-made, that seemed to be spreading across the planet.

"I found that the painting was a way for me to deal with that reality on a personal level," she said. "I find that I have to justify a painting to myself on a regular basis, so I decided

that if I could think of the paintings as slightly magical objects — and slightly is the operative word because I don't want to sound 'new agey' — that there is in fact a practical use for the paintings. The conceit is that spending time with them might actually alleviate some sort of conflict in the viewer.”

Conversely, Mailer worried that diving into her paintings on the subject was possibly a method to avoid the very things that began to trouble her — a self-created escapism that diverted what might be direct action into a more evasive movement.

“After all, I'm choosing to spend my time making paintings instead of say, doing environmental or humanitarian work, and I frequently question such a decision,” Mailer said. “However, I always return to the conviction that the work I do has benefits that are impossible to track, and that if the world is in fact a dream, I am making an active contribution.”

Perhaps her role is as nurse, helping the devastated deal with the disaster by melding the reality into an absurd fantasy that provides fanciful escape from the horrors through balloons. The quaint and antiquated contraptions function as the centerpiece of limited escape in the narratives of the paintings, but they are also a representation of Mailer's own psychological experience in creating the works. They are a concrete image that sprang from the painting process itself.

“When I'm able to reach a certain level of concentration, there is the sensation of being suspended, weightless and outside of time,” she said. “The balloons are in part a metaphor for these moments of focused attention which occur while making the painting, and while contemplating the work, once completed.”

Balloons, as a mode of travel, become indicative of another mode of travel — your mind. Mailer's idea was that art in general and paintings specifically were forms of transportation in which the viewer becomes the passenger. This all came together for her thematically, as well as concretely, and set the series in motion as more than just a fanciful collection of images, but rather one of historical study and commentary.

“Once I decided to explore the theme of ballooning, I researched historical images of hot air balloons and the history of the design, including all the design attempts which

failed,” Mailer said. “The Montgolfier Brothers, who are credited with the invention of hot air balloons, are now starting to appear in disguised form in some of the paintings.”

She also found influence in the history of landscape painting — her residency at the Berkshire Museum last year afforded her the opportunity of studying this field through their collections. Mailer qualifies that history as an examination of humankind’s relationship with nature, one that began with the idea of humans having a very small impact on the earth, but has elongated into a more powerful imprint.

These old ideas of nature as captured in the canvases of the master landscape painters of the 19th century and before seem at times outdated, perhaps quaint — other times, they offer a very contemporary confrontation of the furious forces of the world around us. They all find their way into Mailer’s work.

“The possibility of transferring the energy and temperament of nature at it’s wildest— of storms and winds and volcanoes — into the physical form of a painting is an idea which fuels me,” she said. “My reasons for doing this probably have something to do with understanding my own temperament.”

She had no desire to make one single statement about humankind and nature, though, and her paintings alternately evoke escape and levity, sometimes upon the same canvas. To her thinking, both reactions might actually be the same one and as trapped in the moment of response — the action is the same; it’s the psychology of the physical that frames it as a reaction.

“On some level, regardless of personal action, we are always in a suspended state between two points, between past and future,” Mailer said. “There is an impossible logic here which implies that nothing ever actually happens, akin to certain strains of Buddhist thought in which we all exist in a field of pure possibility, and discrete events are illusions performed by the mind.”

Mailer thinks the real scenario she is attempting to portray in the paintings is not one of impending disaster but one pulled out from the constraints of the future. There is no linear timeline to create the coming fear, just moments upon moments that play a kind of psychological pinball as they connect with other moments, apart but with links.

“I’m interested in the way perception interacts with reality,” she said, “in the notion that on some level we construct our world as a dream. The real conflicts we encounter are existential ones, in which the world before us hinges on our momentary consciousness and choice.”

Mailer is also interested in the idea that redemption can come from horror, something that has been posited from the horrible realities of genocide on through the fantastical end of the world scenarios contained in science fiction. The idea is that — much to our dismay as a species — destruction may indeed equal growth to some degree. It certainly has defined our planet over the ages.

Given the inclusion of hot air balloons in an end-of-the-world scenario, it is tempting to frame Mailer’s paintings not only as science fiction, but also as a painterly entrance into the world of steampunk, a fictional and design movement that posits the future as being in the 19th century. Mailer acknowledges her attraction to that but doesn’t believe this was a conscious choice. However, in her own creative journey of creation, there are always surprises to be discovered past the horizons of her own imagination.

“I tend to shy away from labeling something as science fiction,” she said. “I don’t regard my work as either scientific or as fiction! Once a work exists in the world, the reality it presents can perhaps be as concrete as any other, and the possibility of shifting our view of the real is probably what drives most artists. But now that you mention it, I am a big fan of Jules Verne.”