

# San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Saturday, September 25, 2004

## Christoph Draeger's jigsawed photos of tragedies give viewer lots to puzzle over

- Kenneth Baker



A disconcerting piece by Christoph Draeger, "Wreckage of TWA Flight 800, Long Island, NY 1996," shows the fuselage of the destroyed 747 in a hangar, partially reassembled from recovered debris. Photo courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery

Critics constantly get requests to boost events. But the announcement of Swiss conceptual artist Christoph Draeger's exhibition at Catharine Clark Gallery elicited a voice-mail message from a Seattle collector who asked me to condemn Draeger's work and the gallery for showing it.

The announcement reproduces Draeger's "PSA Crash, San Diego, CA, 1979" (2004). It shows the photograph on which he based his piece: a shot of a flaming passenger airliner on its way down.

The reproduction fails to convey a crucial detail about Draeger's piece that every visitor to the show notices immediately. Rather than simply reuse an appropriated image, Draeger enlarged it and printed it on a jigsaw puzzle.

This treatment, which he also gives to pictures of the Great Fire in Chicago, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the 1991 Oakland hills fire and other calamities, might read as merely redoubling the cynicism his choice of images suggests. Instead, it gives form to the complexities of our response to these media-borne pictures that might never come to consciousness otherwise.

In "Wreckage of TWA Flight 800, Long Island, NY, 1996" (2003), the assembled puzzle rhymes directly with the contents of the image: the fuselage of the destroyed 747

sitting in a hangar, partially reassembled from recovered debris.

The jigsaw print foreshadows our justified astonishment at the FAA investigators' forensic feat of reconstruction. The format also expresses the wish to understand what went wrong and the impossible dream of seeing the accident's harm repaired.

At another level, the jigsaw treatment objectifies the power of mediation to fabricate responses for us, perhaps postponing or precluding us from knowing what, if anything, we actually do feel in reaction to catastrophes we take in from a distance in space or time.

Can we -- or do we unknowingly -- fabricate emotions we deem appropriate to horrific events, if we happen not to feel them? How could we make such an uncomfortable discovery? These and related discomfiting questions underlie Draeger's seemingly flippant use of painful material.

Of course, people who have lost loved ones to the disasters may respond to Draeger's references with plain, understandable outrage.

One of Draeger's largest pieces, "Terrorist Attack, WTC, New York, Sept 16, 2001" (2003), brings these issues to a

head with a puzzle-cut image of smoldering ruins in lower Manhattan. Here the puzzle format suggests a particular political view -- of the twin towers massacre as a monstrous crime, still only partially solved, rather than an act of war, the opportunistic reading imposed on it by the warmakers on our side.

In his use of the puzzle format, Draeger no doubt makes conscious reference to the early '90s puzzle prints of the influential American conceptualist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996).

But Gonzalez-Torres used the puzzle as a metaphor for the desire to know the whole story behind a fragment of public information or private expression. Draeger sets the triviality of the picture puzzle against images of dreadful events to evoke the pull between cold curiosity and instinctive recoil that such events trigger.

Fluctuating emotional and analytical engagements also characterize Draeger's video piece "Schizo (Redux)" (2004). It also consists wholly of borrowed material, an overlapped, synchronized projection of Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho" and Gus Van Sant's verbatim remake of it. Van Sant's color version matches Hitchcock's black and white original almost shot for shot. They pace each other so closely that certain line readings sound in unison, with only occasional details indicating the decades that separate them: a car window lowered automatically rather than by hand, \$400,000 stolen by Anne Heche replacing the \$40,000 with which Janet Leigh absconds.

That most viewers have seen Hitchcock's version but not Van Sant's displaces the movie's suspense into second-by-second comparisons between the original cast's and the replicators' performances and between divergent details of cinematography and set design. Can Heche project the inner squirm of guilt that Leigh does on the lam at the wheel of her car? Will William H. Macy outdo Martin Balsam in the role of the intrusive private investigator killed while searching for Norman Bates' missing victim? Can Vince Vaughn at any point approach the unforced creepiness of Anthony Perkins' Bates?

"Schizo (Redux)" complicates films' inherent power to position us with one foot in the now, the other in a then. Here the viewer ricochets continually among standpoints in time.

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Appleby, Nakada at Anglim: Visitors in need of soothing after Draeger's confrontations can cross the street to Anne Appleby's show at Gallery Paule Anglim.

Continuing to base color-field abstractions on studies of the Montana wilderness where she lives, Appleby has turned in a group of paintings inspired by spring.

Facing an art public that knows her work well, she risked the accusation of having produced a "spring line" too much in the same vein as the work that preceded it. Using no forms except monochrome panels, Appleby must struggle often with the potential problem of repetition.

But the new paintings achieve a freshness and distinctness that persuade a viewer that she means each one. It is as if she has learned to translate energy of intent directly into radiance of color. The nuanced quality of her color helps, especially in the larger pictures. Layered hues produce an inner light, one color shining through another, grading into chromatic subtleties that have no ready names. Occasionally she offsets these fugitive effects with a quotient of flat-out lushness, such as the magenta element in the six-panel "Red Rose" (2004).

In the small room at Anglim, Bay Area painter Tomas Nakada shows a series of abstractions on paper made at a residency in New Hampshire.

Nakada used to flirt with allusion to microbiology in his oil and wax paintings, but the present series in oil, acrylic and asphaltum studiously avoids obvious reference.

These pieces hew to a tough, take-it-or-leave-it aesthetic that asks us to find richness in the dissonance of media that mix unhappily, if at all.

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Christoph Draeger: New Landscapes: Puzzlecut photographs and video. Ruben Lorch-Miller: The Forget Room: Installation. Through Oct. 16. Catharine Clark Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 399-1439, [www.cclarkgallery.com](http://www.cclarkgallery.com).

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