



Andrea Bowers, *No Olvidado (Not Forgotten)*, no. 1-21, 2010, installation view

## ANDREA BOWERS

Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

ANDREA BOWERS makes art about activists. Inspired by their bravery and dedication, she memorializes their commitments to issues and causes by making drawings and video installations that explore the political themes they embrace. With issues ranging from AIDS to abortion to the environment, Bowers engages with each cause or individual, does extensive research and transforms her findings into compelling and evocative artworks that radiate global issues without ever being didactic.

For the exhibition "The Political Landscape" she takes on

environmental issues, juxtaposing two discrete works — a single channel video and a drawing installation — whose area of focus is the American West. For Bowers the American West is an expansive location and her aim in this exhibition is to expose some of the human and environmental degradations that occur there.

The *United States vs. Tim DeChristopher* is a single channel video in which Bowers interviewed Tim DeChristopher, a student activist. In December 2008, just before the Obama inauguration, DeChristopher disrupted a government auction in the state of Utah where plots of land near Arches National Park and Labyrinth Canyon were being auctioned for oil and gas drilling. In an attempt to save the landscape DeChristopher bid on and won 14 parcels of land that he did not have the intention nor the money to purchase. Once the authorities understood his bidding was an act of civil disobedience he was arrested and is now on trial, facing a sentence of up to 10 years in prison and a \$750,000 fine.

In Bowers' video she interviews DeChristopher, who appears as a talking head against the cold winter landscape. His monologue — where he tells the story of the auction and thoughtfully articulates his motives, is interspersed with images of the snowy Utah landscape. In each of these sequences, Bowers appears far off in the distance, emerging from behind a bush or as a speck in the landscape, and moves purposefully toward the camera. She eventually fills the frame, and then reveals a small chalkboard on which she writes the parcel number of the area depicted. Bowers actively shows off the beauty and the expanse of the plots of land DeChristopher purchased. Bowers does not rely upon the traditional views of Utah's rich sunlit mountains and flowery canyons but rather captures the landscape in the dead of winter, suggesting that even in its snow-filled state it is not a barren wasteland but a place that should be protected.

Unprotected places and people become the theme of this exhibition. Sitting in the center of the gallery floor like a low headstone, is a pile of printed posters of Terrace Park Cemetery in Holtville, CA, where more than 700 unidentified migrants are buried. These giveaways picture the unmarked gravesites of those who have died while attempting to cross the border. *No Olvidado (Not Forgotten)* also includes a room-sized drawing made up of 23 120 x 50 inch panels, presented together as a floor-to-ceiling frieze that spans three gallery walls. The drawing simultaneously depicts a razor-topped chain-link fence blocking passage to an ambiguous expanse that suggests sky, and a list of names commemorating those who have lost their lives crossing the U.S. Mexican border. Compiled by the nonprofit organization Border Angels, Bowers' drawing identifies those who could be in the unmarked graves. The names and the outline of the fence are applied to the paper as vinyl decals, and then covered by hand with repetitive strokes of graphite creating a flowing pattern of light and dark reminiscent of a landscape. The vinyl is then removed leaving a ghostlike presence of white paper. Bowers drawing presents the chain-link fence as a metaphor for impossible passage something seemingly transparent but still impossible to cross. The fence as well as the names represent an absence; an unobtainable goal as well as the passing of life. The work suggests how the border has become a weigh station that denies passage to so many.

Bowers is always sensitive toward her subject and in this exhibition also donates a percentage of sales to the nonprofit organizations her exhibition credits. By exposing the plights of others, Bowers may be criticized for turning politics into art, but her commitment is not superficial. She chooses to make work about activists and their causes because she believes their voices can speak through her art and her voice as an artist can promote these issues. It's a reciprocal relationship, one that gives power to the act of creation as it draws from the act of protest. Bowers makes powerful works that resonate on multiple levels and in multiple worlds.

— Jody Zellen