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Talk Back: The Work of Undoing

Shira Brisman

Allison K. Young's article on the panoramas of Regina Agu identifies two abolitionist strategies to counteract what she calls the "scopic regimes of imperialism." One is the curatorial practice of planning alongside an exhibition whose European and American landscape paintings promote such a regime the work of a contemporary artist who depicts the Middle Passage. The other abolitionist strategy is the artist—Agu's—refusal to participate in forms of representational capture that enabled visual command over landscapes.

I recently reread Young's article as an antidote to the disturbance I felt in encountering a New York Times piece entitled "Beauty in the Aftermath," published on February 18, 2023. In it, critic Will Heinrich and the curators he interviews compare Petty Officer Tyler Thompson's photographs of a fished-up spy balloon shot down by the Air Force to Winslow Homer's 1885 painting, "The Herring Net." In doing so, they indulge in a facile, worryingly apolitical comparison. Images produced by the military-industrial complex might better be contrasted with the work of artists who have drawn attention to the threats to civil liberties posed by the competition between surveillance states.

The work of Beijing-based Deng Yufeng, for example, has both exposed and tried to evade the Chinese government's data gathering on civilians. Another pertinent contrast might be to the work of the Czech artist Jakub Geltner, who deliberately positions clusters of cameras in manners that resemble flocks of birds. Perched on sea rocks or huddled on the sides of idyllic gothic buildings, these installations are meant to interrogate the reasons why our landscapes are littered with tracking devices. To give a final suggestion for a substituted analogy, the research assembled by the Center for Land Use Interpretation has interrogated the proprietary claims made by nations on air, space, and sea that licensed the downing of the balloon in the first place.

In failing to name the violence that Thompson's "lyrical" photographs justify, Will Heinrich and his interlocutors abdicate any claim to an art history worth the name, and do so, regrettably, in a forum that reaches a wide public. The discipline has, in fact, developed a set of useful resources for diagnosing and disputing the claims to power asserted by images that heroize and aestheticize the role of global superpowers. Curators and critics should wield these tools against, rather than in sympathy with, institutions like the Navy.

Shira Brisman is Assistant Professor in the Department of the History of Art at the University of Pennsylvania.