

FOREWORD

It is a distinct pleasure to present Emily E. Erb's solo exhibition, *Loosely Loaded*, at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond. The silk paintings displayed in the True F. Luck gallery presents the artist Emily Erb's investigations into history, poetry, culture and what it means to be American.

The Visual Arts Center's mission is to engage the community in the creative process through the visual arts and this summer we will have over 1600 children learning all forms of artistic media from fashion design, to cartooning to wheel throwing in clay. While creating this exhibition, we learned that Erb took classes at the Visual Arts Center as a young girl. It is an exceptional opportunity to invite Erb back as a professional artist to show in our galleries and to inspire our students with the possibilities that lay in their creative pursuits. Knowing that Erb started this way years earlier, it is exciting to think we might one day see one of these young artists showing on our gallery walls.

The exhibitions presented in our True F. Luck Gallery, which focus on the ways artists are innovating artistic processes and materials, are an important part of our programs at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond. By looking deeply at the ways contemporary artists are working, we hope to inspire visitors and further instruct the students exploring various creative mediums in one of our fifteen studios.

Because of this, we are delighted to present the work of Erb who has focused intently on both perfecting and pushing the boundaries of painting on silk. The twelve meticulously detailed works in this exhibition use repurposed images from vintage books that are rescaled and relocated to create the artist's own visual language. Using a resist technique that leaves little room for error, Erb displays not only the craftsmanship of her work, but a boldness in taking on these large scale tableaus.

The Visual Art Center would like to sincerely thank the National Endowment for the Arts and Altria Group for supporting this exhibition. Related educational programming is supported by grants from The Windgate Charitable Foundation, The Windsor Foundation Trust, Wells Fargo Foundation, Dominion Foundation, MeadWestvaco Foundation, and The Fan District Association. We also thank the Virginia Commission for the Arts and CultureWorks & The Arts and Cultural Funding Consortium: City of Richmond, Hanover County and Henrico County for ongoing support of our programming and operations. I also extend appreciation to Amanda Dalla Villa Adams for curating this inspiring exhibition and to Robert Barrientes for a beautiful installation and, finally, to Emily Erb for returning to the Visual Arts Center to share her artistic process and achievements.

Stefanie Fedor
Executive Director
Visual Arts Center of Richmond



THE STORIES WE TELL

“You don’t want to define yourself too much because then you limit yourself. But I need a structure to be inspired. I need a story that gets me going. I’m a collector of images. I think stories are created just by putting two images next to each other.”¹

— Emily E. Erb

Painter Emily E. Erb takes up the complex task of uncovering forgotten stories by considering the testimony of people through historical documents and images. Erb’s paintings depict the weighty subjects of gun violence, inequality, and environmentalism. Yet she records these narratives not as written words on paper but instead as collaged images onto yards of delicate silk. For each painting, Erb mines historical information in order to tell an alternative story: her own biography, American and global history, Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* (1980), nineteenth-century American currency, *Life* magazines, *World Book* encyclopedias, Martin J. Dougherty’s

¹All quotes from conversations with the artist, February – June, 2016.

Visual Encyclopedia of Small Arms (2013), poet Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* (1905), Ken Burns’ documentaries, and current events.

Erb then takes this melting pot of information and sifts out raw images, which she then collages and traces onto silk, for her large-scale silk paintings. While the finished product seems to present the visitor with a beautifully rendered representational painting on a delicate surface, that is but one layer. Rather, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that Erb manipulates, foregrounds, and questions time itself through the task of critically examining the process of storytelling.

Erb’s preoccupation with time is both

physical and conceptual, like the dialectical title, *Loosely Loaded*. The title describes the heavy imagery and the silk material, which is both delicate and durable, as well as the duality of the exhibition that pairs two series: *Narrative* (2014 – present) and *Iconic Symbols* (2015 – present). Using the technique of traditional Indian silk painting, her work values the time of production while conceptually alluding to history. “I like works that you can see time,” says Erb. “Whether it took time to make that piece or to get to that point.” In one example from the *Narrative* series, *Crumbling Empire* (2015), which juxtaposes the Great Temple of Ramses II, a series of burning oil derricks, and a child talk-

Installation, *Loosely Loaded*, Visual Arts Center of Richmond



ing to a man who is seated in a 1960s-era car, Erb points out, "There is a conversation happening between these images." She goes on, "I like the connections that can be made between vast stretches of time."

Furthermore, each silk painting erases time by combining images from different eras that have, what Erb calls, a "timeless quality." It is unclear whether the images are representations of the present, five decades prior, or a thousand years ago. Thereby this flattening of time is subtle, like the way the surface of the silk fabric only slightly sways when someone walks by.

Diamonds are Forever (2015), a silk painting from her newest series, *Iconic Symbols*, is an almost monochromatic, pictorial timeline of women's education. Since 2015, Erb has investigated what she calls, "iconic symbols," which have shifting cultural significance: the Christian cross, the biohazard sign, a diamond, and the ouroboros, a circle in the form of a snake eating its tail. On the far left of *Diamonds are Forever*, an allegorical female appropriated from a nineteenth-century American dollar bill passively sits with her hand delicately raised.

Her forefinger points into the distance. On the far right, a robed female scholar stands under a sign that reads: "End of Improvement. Thank you for your patience." A young woman standing at the top of the diamond, dressed in a short, pink dress looks down to survey the situation in between of mostly women: reading, raising their hands, standing at attention, pushing baby carriages, and staring into microscopes. While there seems to be a progressive linear improvement from left to right, the sign at the end is intentionally ironic. Rather than an end, it brings focus to the ongoing plight of women's rights internationally.

Erb's latest work, *The Neverending Story* (2016), is a commentary on gun violence, both domestically and globally. At 207" in length, the painting features thousands of handguns arranged chronologically from 1000 AD to the present. The guns are contained within the outline of an aurn, an emblem from Michael Ende's novel *The Neverending Story* (1979). Based on the ancient ouroboros symbol, the interlocking aurn, for Erb, alludes to the cyclical and interconnected nature of history, as she explains: "History

Crumbling Empire, 2015, dye on silk, 53" x 69"

makes me feel included in a way in this never-ending story that we're all a part of." Moreover, the knotted snakes reference the daily news cycle of another mass shooting, round of violence, or gun-related tragedy. Even more broadly, *The Neverending Story* points to a history of warfare and conflict perpetuated across the globe throughout time. Similar to the cannibalistic aurn, Erb's painting documents a nation and a world that continuously falls prey to destroying its own flesh.

From across the gallery, *The Neverending Story* seems to present the viewer with an allover arabesque pattern of densely packed guns. Like the incessant 24-hour news cycle, the sea of multiple handguns on an enormous scale desensitizes audiences and silences any real initiative for change. However, when the viewer looks closely at the painting, the individual weapons come to the surface along with the words "9mm" or "Smith Wesson." Rather than just a broad definition of gun violence, the viewer is asked to consider the specific. Thereby, Erb invites viewers to become part of the solution by offering a chance for constructive conversations.

Likewise, the question of existentialism

and human nature figures prominently in her *Narrative* series, inspired by Rilke's book and its significance to Erb's family: Erb's great-grandmother, one of the first women in Europe to complete a Ph.D., corresponded with Rilke, a personal friend, after she escaped Nazi-occupied Germany for Iceland; Erb's recently deceased grandfather kept a copy of Rilke's poems by his bed; and Erb's own copy of the book came from her grandmother's bookstore, Book People in Richmond, VA. "I consider it my most personal work," says Erb. "It's my take on this thing I am connected to because of my family." In each of the eight paintings, Erb tried to visually communicate her emotional response to a phrase or line from one of the poems in a way that drew from German-Expressionist artist Käthe Kollwitz's ability to use a single line to capture pure, raw emotion.

The series also interrogates communication through the act of translation by drawing the viewer's attention to the gaps or confusion that occurs when translating a text from one language to another. In contrast to her great-grandmother and grandfather, both German speakers, Erb read Rilke's German poems



Diamonds are Forever, 2015, dye on silk, 53" x 108"

The Neverending Story (next page), 2016, dye on silk, 120" x 207"



as English translations. Removed from her family members by time, she is isolated a step further by their shared language that she does not know. Translation and the passing of time underscores her disconnection while shared genetics and repeated oral stories ensure a connection to her family. The two are kept in a perpetual tension with each other, like the relationship between life and death itself, which she examines in *Live (die) Be* (2015), a series of four human skulls that transform into a crouching human figure.

She Who Reconciles (2015), however, best illustrates this strained relationship of disconnection and connection. The title comes from a longer line from one of Rilke's poems: "She who reconciles the ill-matched threads of her life, and weaves them gratefully into a single cloth." Erb chose her images from *World Books* encyclopedias from the 1960s, a technique she also used for *Just As It Is* (2015), a collage of African

children, white men, and a series of houses in front of a blue mountainous landscape.

In one interpretation, the 14 ft. long textile is a commentary on global labor. There are Danish men inspecting glass vases, head-scarfed Indonesian women standing in line, Russian laborers out in the field, and European advertisements for home goods. The title suggests that the central focus might be the darkbrown woman who stands over a tapestry, her left arm draped over the fabric while her right arm pulls the thread through, optimistically weaving together the disparate threads of industry from the left with the rural agrarian culture on the right.

Yet *She Who Reconciles* has another layer, one of disconnect. To reconcile is to restore, to reunite, or make one account consistent with another. Reconciliation brings credibility to a story because it exists in harmony with the testimony of multiple witnesses.



She Who Reconciles, 2015, dye on silk, 50" x 168"

Live (die) Be, 2015, dye on silk, 53" x 69"



Furthermore, reconciliation of the “ill-matched threads of her life” erases time and flattens differences in order to create a “single cloth,” like the horizontal line that stretches across the textile. However, through the process of reconciliation the reality of disconnection amongst people is magnified as seen by the polarity between industrious and agrarian societies. Here, Erb underscores advanced societies disconnect from the Earth while pointing to the main culprit: industry. Is economic advancement a line of progress or one of regression?

Similarly, *In God We Trust* (2015) and *Biohazard* (2016) both critically interrogate economical success and American

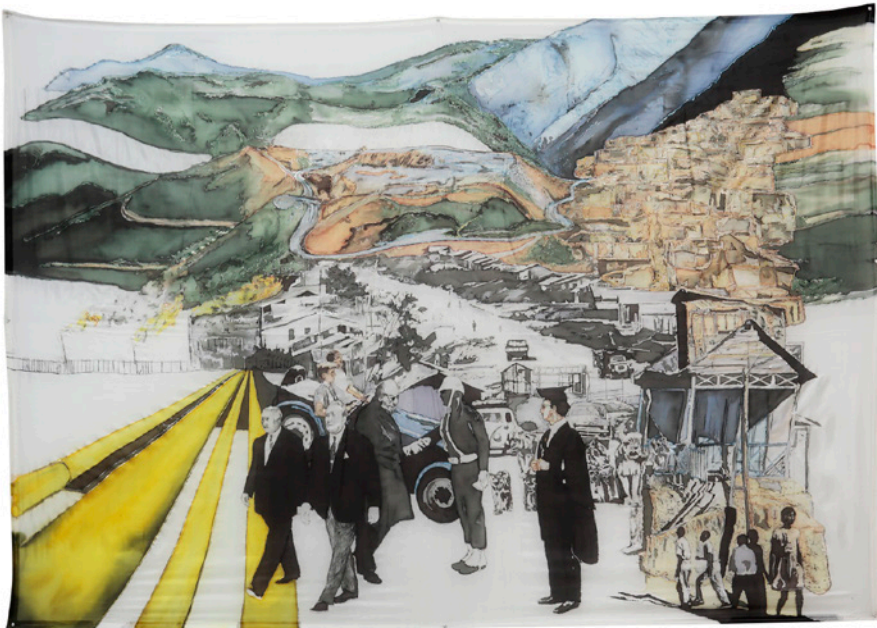
identity. Each collage culls its source material from nineteenth-century American currency. “These pieces speak to the influence of Christianity on how the dollar is spent in America and the role the dollar plays in environmentally harmful decisions from companies, like Dow Chemical Company, who designed the biohazard symbol in the 1960s,” explains Erb. In both, Erb manipulates the natural symmetry of the bills to recreate symmetrical compositions of trains and steam engines, or symbols of industry, alongside pioneer families, slaves, and Native Americans, or symbols of agrarian life. Religious images, like the baptism of Pocahontas or the pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock

In God We Trust, 2015, dye on silk, 104" x 70"

In God We Trust (left, detail), 2015

Biohazard (next page), 2016, dye on silk, 104" x 80"





Luncheon in the Grass, 2015, dye on silk, 53" x 69"
Just As It Is, 2015, dye on silk, 53" x 72"

May What I Do Flow Like a River, 2015, dye on silk, 53" x 69"
Mother Nature, 2015, dye on silk, 53" x 69"



and praying are intertwined. Yet the main subject matter relies on allegorical images that inculcate American nationalism: Columbia, the female representation of America; bald eagles; the landing of Columbus; portrait heads of Abraham Lincoln or Samuel Morse; and repetitious names of America.

Another important thread running through *Loosely Loaded* is the importance of environmentally-conscious decisions. Erb more often shows the negative effects, pairing factories, oil derricks, and workers with people who picnic, continue with their day, or pursue scholarly studies: *Luncheon in the Grass* (2015), *Just As It Is* (2015), and *May What I do Flow Like a River* (2015). She is more optimistic in *Mother Nature* (2015), a portrait of a woman framed in a dark silhouette with a brightly-colored blue butterfly in one corner of the fabric and a line of young boys in the other.

Nonetheless, underlying all of these works is the hope of redemption. While Erb highlights the effect poor decisions can have on the Earth, there remains a moment of rebirth. Like *The Neverending Story* that serves as an invitation for conversation, these environmentally-concerned works encourage recognition of the problem and a response.

Finally, in her first public art project *Climate Change* (2016), Erb has literalized the passage of time. Set to hang for two months, with each rainfall, the background of the diptych textile is meant to slowly fade away. Made concurrently with *The Neverending Story*, but commissioned by the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, it also examines environmentalism. The outdoor-installation pairs two textiles, each featuring one slightly larger than life-size male: a nineteenth-century Native American from N.C. Wyeth's painting, *The Hunter*

Climate Change (Day 1), 2016, dye on silk, 108"x 207"



(1905), and a twenty-first-century white male from Shutterstock.com. On one textile, the Native American is dressed in a loincloth with a dead goose draped over his back. He holds a bow in one hand by his thigh while his other hand holds the feet of the goose. He looks contemplatively into the distance.

On the other textile, a bearded white man, dressed simply in blue jeans, an open button-up dress shirt, T-shirt, and sneakers has one hand on his hip and the other holding a cell phone. He looks down at the phone. Surrounding both figures is a loosely painted rural landscape composed of earthy tones and soft pastels. By offering a figure from the nineteenth century alongside one from the present, Erb underscores our disconnect from the Earth while elevating people's connections in the past to the land.

With both *Loosely Loaded* and *Climate*

Change, Erb's approach to history and time is Romantic and nostalgic in the best sense: while she points longingly to the past while highlighting the evils of previous generations and acknowledging the cynicism of the present, she holds real hope for the people of the future. In each textile, Erb plots out an alternative history through her collaged images to remind people of the weight of their decisions. Rather than being didactic, Erb's silk paintings provide the viewer with the tools to create their own story afresh each time they encounter the work. The stories told in each silk painting ensures the importance of individual testimony and memory—the stories we tell—while erasing the possibility of forgetting or apathy.

Amanda Dalla Villa Adams

Climate Change (Day 14), 2016, dye on silk, 108"x 207"

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are given in inches, height by width by depth

Biohazard, 2016
dye on silk
104 x 80

The Neverending Story, 2016
dye on silk
120 x 207

In God We Trust, 2015
dye on silk
104 x 70

Diamonds are Forever, 2015
dye on silk
53 x 108

She Who Reconciles, 2015
dye on silk
50 x 168

May What I Do Flow Like a River, 2015
dye on silk
53 x 69

Live (die) Be, 2015
dye on silk
53 x 69

Luncheon in the Grass, 2015
dye on silk
53 x 69

Just As It Is, 2015
dye on silk
53 x 72

Mother Nature, 2015
dye on silk
53 x 69

If Only, for Once, It Were Still, 2015
dye on silk
53 x 59

Crumbling Empire, 2015
dye on silk
53 x 69



Installation, *Loosely Loaded*, Visual Arts Center of Richmond



BIOGRAPHY

A Richmond native and graduate of the Henrico County Center for the Arts, textile painter Emily Erb (b. 1982) has lived and worked in Philadelphia, PA since 2001. In 2005, Erb completed her BFA in painting at the Tyler School of Art and later earned her MFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art in 2012. Although she was first introduced to silk painting while an undergraduate, Erb honed her skills while traveling to Madagascar for three months from 2005-2006; afterwards she switched to painting exclusively on silk. In 2012, Erb was nominated for a Joan Mitchell Grant. That same year, Erb received the Mabel Wilson Woodrow Award from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art and People's Choice Award from the Delaware Center for Contemporary Art for her reinterpretation of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and her *World Map* painting (2011). Erb has exhibited her work at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, AR; the Telfair Museum in Savannah, GA; the Minneapolis Institute of Art in Minneapolis, MN; the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts in Wilmington, DE; and the Museum of American Finance in New York, NY. This summer, Erb completed her first public art project, a large outdoor textile for the University of the Arts on Broad Street in Philadelphia, PA, which will be on view from June to August, 2016. Her work has been purchased by the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and is in a private collection in New York, NY.

Solo Exhibitions

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| 2016 | <i>Loosely Loaded</i> , Visual Arts Center of Richmond, Richmond, VA. | 2013-2015 | <i>Legal Tender</i> , Dupont 1 Gallery, Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, Wilmington, DE; Museum of American Finance, New York, NY. |
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Selected Group Exhibitions

2014-2016 *State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now*, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN; Telfair Museum, Savannah, GA.

2014 *Inclusion/Exclusion: Poetics of Cartography*, Yell Gallery, Philadelphia, PA.

Two-Person Exhibitions

2011 Emily Erb and Nakima Ollin, *Earthy Delights*, Pagus Gallery, Norristown, PA.

Invited Lectures

2015 "The Value of Silk," TEDxRVA, Carpenter Theater at Richmond CenterStage, Richmond, VA.

Bibliography

Lyne Goldman and Stefanie Waldek, "Contemporary Works Inspired by Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights," *ARTnews*, July 3, 2014.

Becky Huff Hunter, "Emily Erb," *Artforum.com*, 2013.

Edith Newhall, "Little Berlin show devoted to art and writing," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 22, 2012.

Michael Paul Williams, "Richmond native's art: A 'Loaded' Perspective," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, June 17, 2016.

Guide photography provided by David Hunter Hale and Emily E. Erb.

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