

Deborah G. Nehmad

b.1952, Brooklyn, New York, lives in
Honolulu, O'ahu
exhibited in *Biennial VI*

Wasted, 2010

graphite, scraping, beeswax, pyrography, thread on
handmade Nepalese paper

Wasted addresses the issue of gun violence in America. The holes represent the number of children killed by handguns in the years 2003 (left panel), 2004 (center panel) and 2005 (right panel). Red crosses indicate homicides, black X's suicides and holes left bare are accidents. *Wasted* is dedicated to Rodney "Bobby" Orr, who was killed in a drive-by shooting in Omaha, Nebraska on December 11, 2006. Bobby was 15 years old at the time of his death.

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Ritual, endurance, repetition, obsession—these qualitative aspects are often ascribed to the art of Deborah Gottheil Nehmad, whose works on paper are vehicles for a complex and sustained narrative about the body and, in particular, about what it means to reside in a body that must perpetually negotiate the consuming experience of pain. While it is important to know this about Nehmad and her work, it is also important to acknowledge that the work ultimately transcends its source of corporeal anguish, just as the meditative making of it may provide distance if not total release for the artist herself.

Nehmad has had a longstanding interest in art. Her father was a commercial photographer who agonized about not having time to do what he truly wanted to do, and she was aware of the compromises he had to make. As a politically active student at Smith College in the restless early 1970s, Nehmad made a conscious choice of a commitment to public service, pursuing law as a career, hoping to make art an avocation. She received her JD from Georgetown University Law Center in Washington D.C. in 1982. Her work eventually brought her to the islands, where she has been a resident since 1984.

After sustaining a serious injury in 1985 that left her with chronic back pain, Nehmad continued to work in law for a few years, but eventually had to stop. To combat depression, she turned to painting, and

began working at home. Feeling a need to change her routine, Nehmad first took a course at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, then later applied, after several years as an unclassified graduate student, to the graduate program in art at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, where she received her MFA in 1998. She acknowledges that the transition was a difficult one, having to go beyond therapeutic diversion to a more serious commitment, developing the capacity to focus and articulate her concerns. She particularly credits faculty members Anne Bush with issuing a productive challenge, and Allyn Bromley with continuing support.

Her eventual concentration in printmaking was the result of an intuitive choice. She felt that painting and drawing were too direct but found that work in etching, with Ward Davenny and Helene Wilder, provided a kind of intervening or mediating process, as well as a liberating one. She liked being able to make mistakes, where mistakes were often much more successful than conscious efforts; she also responded to the visceral, even violative aspects of processes such as drypoint and acid etching.

Nehmad found herself looking at the work of artists for whom process was/is important; "...that is the work I respond to, and seek in my own experience; it comes out of a need to find something that could get me away from what I dealt with every day." Her early work included etchings

with raw incised marks, and photo-etchings of ambiguous body fragments. She also developed an interest in the possibility of incorporating text or other systems of notation. A chance reading of a book of tattoo images led her to consider two rather different numerical corollaries in her own cultural heritage: the numbers tattooed on Jews in concentration camps, and the magic number squares in the *Kabbalah*, an essential mystical concept in Judaism.

Seeking a kind of surrogate process to tattooing the body, Nehmad discovered metal number punches that could be used to mark leather, wood or soft metals, akin to the printmaking process of embossing or debossing. This discovery proved to be the crucial catalyst in her development of what has evolved into a mature and subtle visual language. Numbers may be used and understood in so many contexts; for Nehmad, two in particular have emerged as important. With the sequential nature of numbers, she can evoke a calendrical or diaristic narrative, and feeling-states associated with duration and the endless nature of things. With the quantitative nature of numbers, she makes reference to the diagnostic tool, a scale from one to ten, used to calibrate the intensity of a person's perception of pain. Nehmad has noted that "Physical pain is a powerful and isolating experience. It shatters one's ability to communicate effectively through traditional language." Numbers, then, provide an

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NEHMAD (continued)

alternate mode of communication about that which is in many ways indescribable.

If numbers provide a potent conceptual matrix for Nehmad's work, her process of working provides an essential physical counterpart. By heating a metal punch, then stamping it onto/into a sheet of paper (a process for which the term pyrography has been coined), she effectively brands the substrate, searing the fibers, occasionally causing a small halo of flashing. She notes, "To me, paper is like skin, and by extension, the body itself. Both the processes I employ (I repetitively burn, etch, scrape, score, stamp, puncture, type and draw) and the materials I incorporate (heat, paper, gut and metal) are metaphors for my experience." In an important sense then, Nehmad's work is about displacement or transference, shifting the locus of the pain.

Much of Nehmad's earlier work has been field- or grid-oriented, producing overall expanses of varying density that seem, by extrapolation, to be part of a much larger, possibly infinite plane. Well aware of the risks of having the work be perceived as too calculated or formulaic, she has consistently explored variations in scale (her work has ranged from a few square inches to a scroll some thirty feet long) and form (including books and sculptures combining paper with metal armatures.) Taking advantage of the fact that some numbers (like the zero) burn through and cause small areas of paper to drop out, Nehmad has also backed some works with richly colored paper, adding another layer of visual stimulation. Other experiments with process include burning

through several layers of paper simultaneously, running sheets through an etching press to transfer a ghost image, and even taking rubbings from the plywood sheets she uses as a base when burning the paper. These ongoing explorations may be understood both as a search for formal variations and as a quest for a language that strives to express that which is, in the artist's estimation, ultimately inarticulable.

In her newest work, Nehmad has moved significantly from field to form, consciously allowing the imprinted numbers to concentrate in geometric shapes, or coalesce along an implied horizon line. Three works also pay homage to artists for whom she has particular respect and whose work has affected her on a deep level. A narrow wedge-shaped space is flanked by graduated sections in *homage to Barnett* (Newman), while *homage to Richard* (Serra) consists of an extremely dense oval form centered on a large sheet. Two other works allude subtly to the grid-based works on paper of Eva Hesse. *Homage to Eva* (vii) is especially nuanced in its modulation of small circles as a result of the variations in the heat of application; here Nehmad used as a primary mark-making tool the screws that were taken out of her own back. A large circle and a triangle appear in separate works as negative shapes within a dense ring of numbers—*inside out* (i) and *inside out* (ii)—and appear again, along with an irregular pentagon, in the *objectification* series as dark bristling forms.

Nehmad's superb handling of a process that can guide but never fully control the elements of risk and uncertainty is evident in the series *analytic impressions*, in which three-, four- and five-sided shapes appear in overlapping configuration, each layer a different value or density; the intimations of a different and more perspectival kind of space are clear. A consideration of environmental space is also suggested in *infinite*, a softly contoured circle subdivided into quadrants in such a way as to suggest earth/mass below the horizontal, and sky/space above. That expanded spatiality comes to full expression in *(1 - 10) x 6*, in which six panels of paper, each differently imprinted, come together in a luminous panorama, the foreground inflected with a pattern of loose rings of numbers.

Nehmad will continue to explore and experiment, and although she makes notes of ideas for future reference, process will always be more important than a preconceived agenda. Will she cannibalize or recycle old work with sewing and collage? Will she create a wall-work of small fragments? Refine the incorporation of gut elements into the works on paper? If Nehmad's work has evolved as something intensely personal, it may also be read as political, as the artist's social conscience is asserted and she states, "...my commitment to obsessively hand-worked pieces comments on and responds to the encroachment of computer technology in our society in general and in the arts in particular." In Nehmad's hands, the work of the body moves toward a new and more meaningful level of aesthetic integration.