

The Fate of Poetry: Alice Leora Briggs



Alice Leora Briggs, *The Ship Has Sunk*, ink, acrylic and collage on paper, 16" x 42".

"The fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world, in spite of History," said poet and playwright Derek Walcott (1930–2017) in his 1992 Nobel Laureate Lecture. The same words emblazon *The Fate of Poetry*, a mixed-media work by artist Alice Leora Briggs, bisecting the vertical composition into a dark, claustrophobic bottom half and a light-filled upper portion. Below, human skeletal remains sprawl motionless in a grave. Above, two skeletal feet dangle over the grave. History is rife with endings. In *The Fate of Poetry*, a combination of acrylic painting and sgraffito, Briggs suggests

that the foundation of art, like that of poetry, continues despite death, despite endings. And while everyone who walks above the world's cemeteries inevitably meets the same fate, still they persist in their attempts to indelibly imprint themselves on history.

"What Walcott meant, and what I mean by using his phrase, is that everything inevitably breaks, unravels, falls to pieces: our bodies, our cultures—and someday, no doubt, the entire world," Briggs says. "But we're always in the process of trying



to glue things back together. To paraphrase [art critic] Dave Hickey, any attempts to reconstitute the past are akin to reassembling a branch thrown through a woodchipper.”

This understanding of the futility of re-creating the past—especially as, of course, we are always working with incomplete knowledge—is not intended to be bleak. We select from the past, from memories, and create new meanings, new narratives.

After a hand-painted ceramic tile made by her daughter shattered on the floor, Briggs reassembled it. “It was a little bit askew and a little less complete,” she says, “but it contained a great deal more love than when it was intact and taken for granted.”

The Fate of Poetry is also the title of Briggs’s June exhibition at Evoke Contemporary, which uses words and imagery to explore death as reality and as metaphor. *Massacre of the Innocents*, for instance, makes references to several mass killings, including the 1994 Rwandan Genocide; the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting, in Newtown, Connecticut; and the 2022 Robb Elementary School shooting, in Uvalde, Texas. While some words and phrases inscribed on the text-filled composition appear to be from news reports relating to these bloodbaths, others



Alice Leora Briggs, *The Fate of Poetry*, sgraffito and acrylic on panel, 22" x 14".



Alice Leora Briggs, *Estampas I*, sgraffito and gesso on panel, 10" x 49".



Alice Leora Briggs, *La Familia*, sgraffito and acrylic on panel, 16" x 61".

are musings by the artist, who contrasts the slaughter of innocent schoolchildren with her own mother's 101st birthday, suggesting a bitter irony.

Briggs is known for works that comprise provocative amalgams of classical and contemporary imagery that illuminate the narcotic-trade-driven violence of Ciudad Juárez. Her new work includes more recent images that "are an examination of my own history and that, hopefully, manifest some larger meaning."

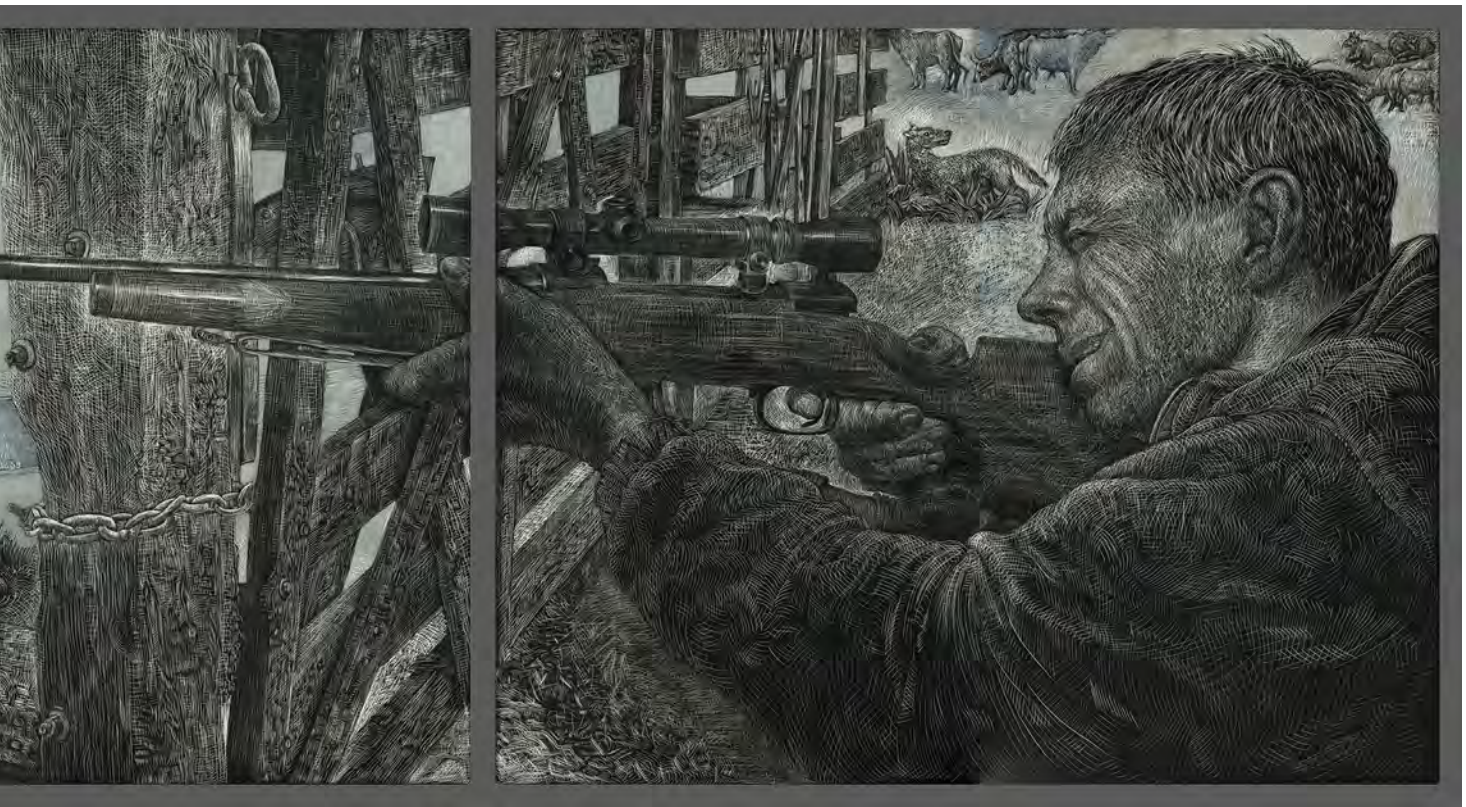
Briggs now cares for her elderly mother, who is cognitively impaired. "I'm in strange territory now," the artist says. "Instead of Mexico, I'm in 'Dementia'. But my work has always been about mortality. That's the overarching theme."

Briggs was born in West Texas and grew up in Idaho's Snake River Valley. A Fulbright Scholar and a 2020 Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellow, she now has work in major collections, including the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, in Bentonville, Arkansas; the Library of Congress; Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and

Manuscript Library; and the de Young Museum, in San Francisco.

Sgraffito, her main medium, was a popular art form in Europe with roots in antiquity. Briggs often works in large scale (*La Familia*, a triptych, is 17 by 62 inches) on wood panels reinforced with crossbraces. She scratches into panels prepared with layers of rabbit-skin glue or acrylic, kaolin clay, and a binder. The surface is then airbrushed with India ink. This creates a dark ground with light-colored clay beneath, which is revealed by incisions and ablations made using scalpels, X-Acto knives, sandpaper, steel wool, and other tools.

Unlike other forms of drawing, which are additive, Briggs's process is subtractive, or rather extractive, which seems ideal for her themes of mortality and history. Images are revealed as in an archeological dig and are rendered with fine detail. Take the hairs and musculature of the hapless, chained dogs in *La Familia*. Their fur billows and undulates, the subtle contrasts of light and shadow created by careful mixes of faint and heavy scratches.



The imagery, which includes many direct and indirect references to death, is not intended to convey a dour view of the world. Even in the case of searing, challenging works such as *Massacre of the Innocents*, the choice of subject questions, surveys, and seeks some point, some meaning, amid futility. In the grand tradition of art—and poetry—it seeks meaning in the patently absurd while evoking compassion and hope—and perhaps even change.

Despite the guns, the bones, and the piled corpses, tossed from a cliff in acts of genocide—or, taking a cue

from Walcott, despite History—a continuum stretches from art history’s ancient past to its present. *Memento mori*—reminders of mortality—are reflected in the mirror so that actions on our side of it might be meaningful, even worthwhile. Still, we’ll be mindful of each life’s impermanence.

“What an amazing gift this is,” marvels Briggs—“to be able to breathe, make work about this, and make some attempt to communicate it to other people.”

—Michael Abatemarco



Alice Leora Briggs, *Massacre of the Innocents*, mixed media, 13" x 33".