

Essay by John Corbett

October 2007

For *Fragments in a Fractured Space* at the Hyde Park Art Center

One of the structuring assumptions in pointillism is that the scene being depicted has some sort of integrity. The object or objects reassembled out of all those points constitute a sturdy reference conjured through the cumulative effect of different colored dots, all awhirl, but coalescing in the definite impression of an image.

What then of the pointillist attempting to depict something not so steady, not so fixed or solid? How can the blown-apart be enlisted to represent the blown-apart? Is an artist of the fragment consigned to images of the whole?

On 9/11, scraps of paper fell like confetti over a large radius of lower Manhattan and neighboring boroughs. Fragments of innumerable lives and businesses, an explosion of personal and public affairs, post-it notes and affidavits, top secret files and today's menu, all atomized, turned into points of color.

Long before 2001, artist Alice Shaddle had been using tiny fragments of color to create glorious, dizzyingly constructed collages. With nothing but bits of colored vinyl – pieces cut from scraps of wallpaper – and Liquitex adhesive, she assembled resplendent images, some of them consisting of trees blowing in the wind, almost daring the leaves to come apart and disintegrate the referent. Stunning mirages, the cumulative effect is like that of a cloud of gas coming together to form a distinct picture. The particular – the particle, that is – conspiring to create a general impression.

For Shaddle, the televised images of 9/11 hit hard. They somehow related to what she'd been working on, the interest in particles, fragments, the world blown apart and then blown back together. But where her visual vocabulary had been quite open, not un-optimistic, organized, and rather breezy, this was a horrific, terrible place, a zone of complete disorganization and destruction. Unlike Shaddle's collages, at Ground Zero the whole was ultimately less than the sum of its parts.

Shaddle didn't visit the site, but she says that in the body of work that emanated from 9/11, which constitutes the series exhibited in *Fragments in a Fractured Space*, the particles got even smaller than usual. "I thought more of dust," she says. *Street Scene* imagines her home base in Hyde Park as it might be if such a catastrophe happened there. A studio in ruins, the image is more of a shambles than her magical treescapes, more disorganized, opaque, and thoroughly mysterious. She thought of falling things, debris, the occasional object swirling midair. *Blue Bull* is a reference to Picasso's bicycle seat turned into a bull's head, paying homage to the particle in all its incarnations. "The particle is there, whether conscious or unconscious," says Shaddle, and indeed a fragment of a bicycle suddenly speaks as a bovine face. But looking at the finished *Blue Bull*, the artist saw something interesting in a subsection of the collage and blew it up further, concentrating on a detail of it in *Red Pony*. "I

saw fury in it," she explains. This is, of course, quite a convoluted: to make an image based on a fragment of a piece itself already constructed out of fragments.

Shaddle delights in the moment when something abstract becomes representational, that metamorphosis that occurs when the most opaque image suddenly snaps into view and becomes recognizable. This is perhaps most evident in her difficult piece *Faces*, which she says represents "mental sickness, the residue of horror." Here the impenetrable particularity of the parts, the incommensurable singularity of the fragments, gives way to an overall impression, a recognizable image. In the end, it is the cumulative, rather than the particular, that interests Shaddle. "They are accumulations," she says, summarizing a series of works that embrace both the terror of a world blown apart and the wondrous act of pulling the parts back together.

– John Corbett, Chicago