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art

Investigating Imperialism With Julian LaVerdiere

Empire of Signs

by **C.Carr**
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"This is the Vegas Napoleon": LaVerdiere with his trio of *Imperial Dragsters*. (photo: Robin Holland)

The symbol at the back of the gallery looks like it could kill you. An eagle, five feet tall and seemingly made of iron, swings from a ceiling crane like a wrecking ball. The gallery had to hire an engineering team to install it and then put up a floor-to-ceiling cargo net to keep spectators safely at bay.

Artist Julian LaVerdiere explains that this kinetic piece, *The Lost Cornerstone*, is an exact replica of a sculpture removed from the original Penn Station when the building was demolished in 1963. So many layers of meaning revolve with the eagle. It's an artificial artifact, actually made of urethane, but at 250 fast-moving pounds, harmful enough. It's also a casualty—no, a survivor—of the conflict between neoclassicism and modernism as it played out in the city's architectural history. LaVerdiere points out that his neoclassical eagle now happens to be tumbling through a modernist space, Lehmann Maupin Gallery, designed by Rem Koolhaas. (Nothing is square.) But above all, the eagle is an icon of imperial power, used first by the Roman Empire and appropriated by subsequent empires.

LaVerdiere's show, "Goliath Concussed" (at Lehmann Maupin, 540 West 26th Street, through May 24), is about our current state of imperium and "the historic state of delirium we find ourselves in right now." America could be either giving or receiving the concussion—maybe both. The other pieces in the show are three *Imperial Dragster*s, each a half-scale replica of Napoleon's tomb set atop an SUV chassis. Then there's the *Lantern Shuttlecock*, hung horizontally from the ceiling to resemble a bomb in flight. Its exterior replicates the light fixtures on New York's neoclassical municipal buildings, while the interior is modeled on the great mosque at Cordova, Spain. Built on the ruins of some ancient Visigoth structure, the mosque was converted to a cathedral during the Renaissance, demonstrating "the volley of ideological power shifts between empires," says the artist.

He's always interested in such paradigm shifts, even those turning points born in folly or disaster. For example, he's made a whole body of work (photos and sculpture) about the first transatlantic telegraph cable crossing. (A failure. The cable snapped.) He's especially interested in the industrial revolution, its hubris, its imperialism, its crude but revolutionary science. And that, of course, was the golden age of neoclassicism. In New York, says LaVerdiere, "this period of civic architecture applied classical form as a means of creating artificial historic foundations and municipal authority." The lantern he replicated was the signature style used by McKim Mead & White, the firm that built many of New York's courthouses, police stations, and libraries, along with the much lamented Penn Station, which was modeled after a great Roman bathhouse.

Napoleon's tomb was based on Caesar's tomb, and LaVerdiere decided to reconstruct it for an American context by adding the SUV base, specifically the Lamborghini LM002, the prototype for all SUVs and a design influence on

the military Hummer. He finished the three *Dragster*s in metallic versions of the tricolor—the red, white, and blue of France, Britain, and America. But while critiquing grandiosity, he admits to some awe. That footage of soldiers in Hummers blazing across the desert in the first days of the war: "Vulgar, yet you couldn't take your eyes off it," says LaVerdiere. "Those gestures need to be examined. It's about the artifice, too, the way we relate to mediated experiences. As Americans, we're so far away from it. Most Americans are comfortable observing history by going to Las Vegas to see the wonders of the world, and these are those. This is the Vegas Napoleon."

The common denominator in "Goliath Concussed," says LaVerdiere, is that the eagle, tombs, and lantern "all reference symbols and icons established by the Greek and Roman empires. These particular icons have been so well applied to every empire over the last 2,000 years that they will never hold a root meaning. The eagle is no more American than it is German or Roman—or Iraqi, for that matter. I'm fascinated by how and why these symbols still resonate with authority even after all the cultural erosion."

LaVerdiere, 32, was one of the artists who designed the *Tribute in Light* at ground zero. He and artist Paul Myoda were in residence on tower one's 91st floor until spring 2001, working on a bioluminescent beacon they intended to install atop the radio tower. LaVerdiere says the beacon would have been "a real bioengineering stunt." The artists were working with dinoflagellates, phosphorescent single-cell organisms about as big as the tip of a needle. They designed a tank with a cockpit for a single cell and a light sensor that could pick up the tiny creature's emanations and translate them into an electronic impulse to send to the radio tower. The beacon atop the World Trade Center would be blinking in sync with it. "The idea was to elevate this lowest member of the totem pole to the highest position available," says LaVerdiere. The Port Authority, then the landlord, was all for it.

LaVerdiere and Myoda had been working on the project for three years, even doing a residency at the American Museum of Natural History's invertebrate lab to cultivate strains of dinoflagellate powerful enough to monitor, but after September 11, they abandoned it.

Anne Pasternak at Creative Time, the arts group that commissioned the bioluminescent beacon, recommended the artists to *The New York Times Magazine* when its art director began looking for responses to September 11. LaVerdiere and Myoda submitted *Phantom Towers*, two hazy beacons of light (created digitally) emanating from ground zero, and it ended up on the cover. Creative Time put the image on their Web site and got 13,000 unsolicited responses. As LaVerdiere described it at the time: "It's an emotional response more than anything. Those towers are like ghost limbs. We can feel them even though they're not there anymore."

Meanwhile, architects Gustavo Bonevardi and John Bennett had come up with virtually the same idea, except that theirs called for the lights to be set on a barge in the Hudson. When the two teams heard about each other, they got together to do the *Tribute in Light* proposal. Architect Richard Nash Gould, who had a similar idea, joined later. Giuliani immediately nixed the idea, but Bloomberg OK'd it. LaVerdiere says he and Myoda have been approached about working on the permanent memorial, and "we're considering it."

"Pre- and post-September 11 is such a clean, decisive stroke in the way I address the work that I want to make," says LaVerdiere. "It's definitely

helped give me a focus." Now he has "the desire to bring a message to people, even if it's still something of a riddle. I try to steer clear of didacticism. Although I want to make my symbols very recognizable, I'm not trying to make my conclusion recognizable."

While working on the *Tribute in Light*, LaVerdiere met a team of engineers and architects using laser range scanners to measure the volume of ground zero's bathtub. They were connected to the team that scanned the Statue of Liberty and other landmarks in case they were ever destroyed by terrorists.

LaVerdiere asked the team to scan Penn Station's last cornerstone eagle, now sitting in the courtyard at Cooper Union's engineering school. September 11 had inspired him to revisit that demolition, he says, to better understand "the importance of the symbology of our iconic buildings as well as the multiple trajectories of American imperialism."

Because he deals so often with the science and architecture of the past—the whole history of "progress"—much of LaVerdiere's work is about memorializing, about building reliquaries for lost technologies and obsolete belief systems. At his studio, he showed me a piece he made in college, an armillary sphere illustrating Ptolemy's system, a universe with the earth in the center. "I liked these Enlightenment-age models that would try to rationally illustrate these irrational systems," he says. Other pieces have incorporated 19th-century patent medicine bottles, which he collects. He's still interested in the "snake oil" phenomenon, the way something can be packaged to charm and bamboozle the public. "An ideological WMD," he says, describing a drawing in "Goliath Concussed" of his neoclassical lantern, much enlarged and mounted on a missile launcher.

LaVerdiere also collects safety lamps once used in uranium mines. Three appear in the show—one red, one white, one blue. They were given to miners who thought they were ill because of mine gas. Of course, the miners were actually suffering from radiation poisoning, and the lamps detected methane gas, not radiation. LaVerdiere has replaced the wicks with tiny pawns.

After the Fall

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