Cady Noland / MATRIX 130
June 16 - August 18, 1996

MY AMUSEMENT, 1993/94. Photo: James Dee

MATRIX is supported by funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, and the LEF Foundation.
“...there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them by seeing them as they have never seen themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder — a soft murder appropriate to a sad, frightened time.”


Using found objects, images and texts, Cady Noland transforms the discarded and often overlooked aspects of our daily experience into a frankly disturbing portrait of American life in the late twentieth century. In recent years, Noland has been widely acclaimed for a series of highly-charged installations that probe the back alleys of the American psyche. She is, as the noted critic Peter Schjeldahl has written, a “dark poet of the national unconscious.”

Exploring the physical and emotional debris of our collective cultural landscape, Noland’s installations and silk-screened tableaux highlight the ways in which public life is often constructed around ritualized images of pain, violence, and shame.

The need to pin down the particular characteristics of the so-called American experience has been a critical preoccupation since the United States was founded. From Alexis de Tocqueville to Rush Limbaugh, there has always been a sense that the great democratic experiment has produced peculiar individual excesses and unique cultural values. While the forms and meanings of ‘American’ culture have, in fact, been at the center of Noland’s project, her perspective is by no means limited to our own national identity. From the violence of the Roman Coliseum, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Salem witch trials, to the sublimated violence represented by contemporary television talk shows and sporting events, Noland is fascinated by what she sees as an age-old need to invent socially-accepted norms that allow for the public release of deep-seated frustrations.
Various cultures in various epochs act out these rituals differently. In contemporary society, we seem compelled to witness the violation of individual privacy as the personal lives of public figures are played out under the glare of media spotlights. "Boundaries are always being explored and exploited," says Noland. "At this moment privacy is our version of the Western frontier."^2 In part, this may be the legacy of Vietnam and Watergate. Our profound distrust of public figures seems to be linked directly to the revelations of the ill-conceived and self-serving political and military strategies that guided the actions of many of our elected officials. In this post-Watergate era, we now feel obligated, even entitled, to seek full disclosure from anyone in the public eye.

The way we view individuals in public life has changed dramatically as a result. Even political choices are reduced to mere consumer options. Noland explains the ways in which these changes have shaped her approach to art-making: "There is a method in my work which has taken a pathological trend...I became interested in how...people treat other people like objects. I became interested in psychopaths, in particular, because they objectify people in order to manipulate them. By extension they represent the extreme embodiments of a culture's proclivities; so psychopathic behavior provides useful...models to use in search of cultural norms."^3 Clinical psychologists have described in detail the objective detachment and the absence of moral and ethical reasoning that define psychopathic behavior. For Noland, the function of the contemporary tabloid media is directly analogous to this 'psychopathic' objectification of human life.

This MATRIX installation presents an opportunity to focus, in art historical terms, on Noland's particular take on the idea of portraiture. The distinguished historical collections of the Wadsworth Atheneum, which include, among many noteworthy objects, the earliest dated American portrait, Elizabeth Eggington (Anonymous, 1664)^4, provide an engaging foil for Noland's explorations in this enduring genre. The work in MATRIX consists mostly of oversized aluminum and steel sheets onto which the artist has silkscreened enlarged images and archival texts appropriated from wire services. Some works are free-standing, others obstinately lean against the wall, refusing to perform as 'normal' museum objects. Ironically, the artist transforms excerpts from otherwise valueless
and ephemeral source materials into carefully-crafted objects of considerable weight and durability that claim for themselves the status of art. Often, Noland’s silkscreened tableaux consist of multiple parts. As works of art her creations are flexible and open-ended, resisting the art market’s preference for finished, static, and discreet objects. Always, Noland implies meaning through her unusual materials and methods of assembly. Says the artist: “A good way to decipher my pieces is to look at how they ‘behave’.”

Today, a seemingly endless array of celebrities — movie stars, politicians, business moguls and their spouses — fill the pages of tabloid newspapers and mainstream magazines. In the constellation of individual names and faces that populate Noland’s work, the artist draws little distinction between outlaws and heroes, criminals and victims, losers and winners: Martha Mitchell, Burt Reynolds, Vince Foster, Peter Holm, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Betty Ford, Lynette (Squeaky) Fromme, Wilbur Mills, and Thomas Eagleton. Despite the distinctions of each individual’s particular life and circumstances, when considered together their commonalities begin to blur their crucial differences.

Noland manages to distill the tawdry, tragic essence at the heart of our media peep-show. Together her portrait subjects account for a host of transgressions, ranging from the superficial to the profound. The list is based not on deeds but on perceptions, and includes everything from being labeled a bad dresser to substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, political failure, criminal behavior, mental illness, and suicide.

The cumulative effect of the installation in MATRIX is one of “a newspaper morgue file writ large, a walk-in scrapbook of various crimes, misdemeanors and scandals that have made headlines in American newspapers over the last quarter of a century.” It is important to note, however, that Noland condemns neither the individuals represented nor the newspapers and magazines which cover their stories. In fact, her work candidly acknowledges, even embraces, the prurient pleasures inherent in following these stories.

The development of United States museums in the first decades of the nineteenth century can be traced, in part, to similarly sensational impulses. Our early museums were a loose amalgam of scholarly and scientific institutions that sought to balance the ‘noble’ goals of
education with more accessible forms of entertainment. The early evolution of the museum as a ‘cabinet of curiosities’ reached its apex with P.T. Barnum’s aptly named American Museum, which opened in 1841 on Broadway in lower Manhattan. The main attraction was the human freak show, which — as cruel and exploitive as this may seem now — occupied a legitimate place in mainstream society at mid-century.⁸

Noland’s MATRIX installation at the Wadsworth Atheneum, one of this country’s oldest public art museums (founded in 1842), consciously references this historical tradition. In Noland’s ‘cabinet of curiosities,’ however, physical malady has been replaced by psychic trauma. Some of Noland’s subjects continue to weigh heavily upon our collective imagination while others have faded into obscurity. At the heart of Noland’s particular genius is the subtle, poignant sensibility that defines all of her choices.

THE POSTER PEOPLE, (Detail), 1993/94. Photo: David Stansbury
Conceptually, the exhibition is framed by two sculptural pieces, **MY AMUSEMENT**, and **SHAM RAGE**, both from 1993/1994, and by a pair of aluminum bleachers which were selected specifically for this exhibition by the artist. These three objects firmly ground the exhibition in a notion of public space. **SHAM RAGE**, is a sculptural unit based on the form of a pillory or stock. This piece extends the terms of Noland’s discussion of American cultural life into the earliest moments of our national history. Indeed, the artist considers the stocks to be the first public sculptures in colonial America. For Noland, the stock directly references the ceremonial rituals of public humiliation and shame that occupied both the moral and geographic center of civic life. While the old town square may conjure a wholesome image of a quaint, white-washed village and the formative values of our democracy, Noland’s **SHAM RAGE**, reminds us that the public pretense of accountability and the spectacle of punishment were fundamental organizing principles of these early communities. Today, the popularity of our stylized and highly theatrical daytime talk shows (the “electronic town square”⁹) are an exaggerated but pointed reminder that we continue to construct our sense of public space around the proverbial stock.

Noland extends these troubling metaphors of public sculpture and spectatorship into the more contemporary vernacular of the athletic field or sports arena. In **MATRIX**, Noland has replaced the traditional museum benches with two sets of anodized aluminum bleachers. The function of the bleachers within the gallery is both utilitarian and conceptual. On one hand, they provide ample place for museum visitors to sit and inspect the other works in the room (many of which include text). On another level, the bleachers, exhibited along with **SHAM RAGE**, make connections between the past and present functions of recreation, public space, and violence.

**MY AMUSEMENT**, further elaborates Noland’s understanding of leisure-time activities and recreation. The suspended tire is evocative of the pure pleasure and freedom of swinging — “being taken for a ride with little or no effort.”¹⁰ Like the stock, however, the surface associations belie a darker reading. In regional and historical terms, the eighteenth-century Puritan stock finds its equivalent in the nineteenth-century gallows of the mythical ‘Wild West’. **MY AMUSEMENT**, mirrors the
physical structure of the gallows — noose and all.

For the artist, the arena of the stocks and gallows has yielded to the media as the site of ritualized public humiliation. In this exhibition, an untitled work examines the media allegations and subsequent suicide of White House Counsel Vince Foster in 1993. The accompanying text panel references Foster’s suicide note, which read in part: “I simply was not meant for the job or the spotlight of public life in Washington. Here ruining people is considered sport.”

The Vince Foster case and more recently the circumstances of Naval Commander Admiral Jeremy Boorda’s suicide, are compelling but strangely familiar examples of the potential consequences of relentless media scrutiny. As Noland reminds us, the names change, but the stories remain the same. Several other works in the exhibition trace the history of this increasingly invasive brand of journalistic exposure. THE JOINT ON THE HILL, (1993/4) features an image of Senator Thomas Eagleton engulfed by reporters. Eagleton, a young Senator from Missouri selected by the 1972 Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern to be his running mate, was forced to resign from the presidential ticket following the disclosure that he had been hospitalized for psychiatric treatment in the 1960s. The text panels that accompany the piece document the devastating repercussions of Eagleton’s exposure to the media feeding frenzy.

For an untitled silkscreen, Noland has appropriated an early prototype of a 1972 campaign poster for a proposed presidential bid by Arkansas Congressman Wilbur Mills, a widely respected and effective legislator. However, his political aspirations were dashed and such posters rendered useless when Mills was apprehended by Park Police on the National Mall in Washington D.C., inebriated and in the company of a stripper named Fanne Foxe. For Noland, the idea of a public figure cavorting amidst the imposing facades of Washington’s national monuments is especially poignant.

The variety of women represented in this exhibition all share the distinction of being identified by the artist as “political wives.” Located precisely at the point where politics intersect with the cult of the personality, these women — Martha Mitchell, Betty Ford, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, even Charles Manson’s ‘girls’ — were each regarded as mere appendages to the ideological positions of their respective spouses. All of them,
ple is considered sport.”

**SURROUNDED!!!** (Detail), 1993/94. Photo: David Stansbury
however, met with skepticism or scorn when they stepped outside of their conventional roles.

In **HORROR ON THE HILL** (1993/4), Martha Mitchell, wearing conspicuous sunglasses and clutching a bible, emerges from a lawyer’s office into a crowd of waiting *paparazzi*. Mitchell, the wife of Richard Nixon’s Attorney General John Mitchell (who eventually went to prison for his role in Watergate), had long been discounted for her intemperate, loud-mouthed, partisan behavior. Surprisingly, she broke ranks with the Nixon administration when she spoke early and shocking truths about the Watergate investigation. She was quickly muzzled, and soon thereafter, institutionalized.

An untitled work from 1994, based on a widely-reproduced newspaper photograph from the early 1970s of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and the noted fashion
designer Valentino (whose face has been rubbed out by Noland), provides an instructive and valuable point of comparison to the Athenaeum’s *Early Colored Jackie* (1964) by Andy Warhol. While Jackie was one of Warhol’s most famous and glamorous celebrity portrait subjects, Noland depicts Jackie as an icon transformed. After her marriage to Aristotle Onassis, the one-time American princess fell from grace. Here, she is photographed sightseeing, barefoot on the Isle of Capri, looking vaguely bored. Now an expatriate, she has abandoned her quiet life of patriotic duty for a more hedonistic life as a member of the international jet set. Secretive, elusive, and even at this point in time morally suspect, Mrs. Onassis is rendered as a self-absorbed fugitive from American media culture.

**THE POSTER PEOPLE**, (1994) appropriates a publicity image of Betty Ford in her official capacity as First Lady receiving visitors in the White House. The text on the piece tells us that the poster child for the American March of Dimes, seated next to Ford, was born without eyes. As the viewer is confronted with the child’s unfortunate circumstances, Betty Ford is seen throwing her head back in laughter, presumably making light-hearted small talk with the girl and her adult companion. Noland points to the ways in which Ford’s public persona masks private pain, beginning a cycle of repression and avoidance that eventually leads, in Ford’s well-publicized case, to multiple chemical addictions. In recent years, Betty Ford herself has become the ultimate icon of recovery, a pioneer in our culture of talk-show confessions and a vocal spokesperson for a variety of maladies. Most notably, she is the namesake of The Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage, California. The former First Lady recently observed: “People will say, ‘You know, we share the same disease,’ and then thank me for what I’ve done...I often wonder which disease they’re talking about — alcoholism or breast cancer or arthritis.”12
There is at the core of Noland’s work a sense of certain definitive American myths that have somehow gone horribly awry. In SURROUNDED!!! (1993/4), for example, the idea of the American nuclear family, central to our collective cultural ethos, is displaced with a disturbing alternative. Here, two of the notorious Manson Girls are depicted staging a sit-in outside of the Los Angeles County Courthouse during the trial of mass murderer Charles Manson. While they are evocative of the disturbing evil at the heart of the Manson family, these two young women can also be read as once wholesome American ‘girls next door’ who have been transformed into satanic, witch-like creatures. Here the dysfunctional family has escalated to an entirely new level. Addiction and violence are, for them, the ties that bind. In fact, Noland suggests that the strengths of these bonds are, perhaps, even more powerful than those to which we traditionally pay homage.

Noland’s particular take on the contemporary American portrait charts the downward spiral of the public icon in American life. Ultimately, however, the artist is more interested in the broader sets of values, behaviors, and structures reflected in and constituted by the media than she is in the individual stories themselves. As critic Jan Avgikos has described Noland’s approach: “Let it bleed. Put your finger on the problem; tap the phobia; feel the malaise; work the twisted sordid junk — the oppression, the pain — we all carry around with us. Feed off it. Fetishize it. Flaunt it. Make no apologies for your difference, but don’t claim privilege for it either. Make it into art.” This is the dark, insightful heart of Cady Noland’s work.

James Rondeau
Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art

Andrea Miller-Keller
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art

4 Anonymous, Elizabeth Egginton, 1664, oil on canvas, 36.25” x 29.75”, Gift of Mrs. Walter H. Clark.
5 “Supermarket tabloids virtually define the word ‘trash’ — sensational, excessive, gossipy, stereotyped. They are so undervalued that they are completely ephemeral; loyal readers may keep favorite issues and stories, but libraries shun them.” S.
Elizabeth Bird For Enquiring Minds: A Cultural Study of Supermarket Tabloids
University of Tennessee Press (Knoxville), 1992, p. 201.
6 Cady Noland, as quoted in Jeanne Siegel. “The American Trip,” Arts Magazine
(December 1989), p. 43.
7 Roberta Smith. “Dark Side of the American Psyche,” New York Times, April 8,
8 Robert Bogdan. Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and
9 Philip Monk. “Cady Noland: Tabloid Outlaws,” The American Trip: Larry Clark,
Noel Goldin, Cady Noland, Richard Prince (exhibition catalogue) The Power Plant
(Toronto, Canada), 1996, p. 22.
11 Cady Noland, in conversation with JR, June 2, 1996.
12 Betty Ford, as quoted in “Perspectives,” Newsweek (November 27, 1995) p. 25.

PLEASE NOTE:

Andrea Miller-Keller, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art, will give a gallery talk on the exhibition on Tuesday June 18, 1996 at noon. James Rondeau, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, will give a gallery talk on Noland’s exhibition on Tuesday June 25, 1996 at noon. Both events are free with museum admission.

Works in MATRIX:

Cady Noland
Born in Washington, D.C., 1956
Lives and works in New York City

SHAM RAGE., 1993/94, wood stock and bench with aluminum hardware, stock: 59 3/4” x 57” x 22 5/8”; stool: 20 7/8” x 22” x 14”.

MY AMUSEMENT. 1993/94, aluminum over wood, steel plates, chain, and whitewall tire, 120” x 96” x 30”, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund.

SURROUNDED!!!. 1993/94, silkscreened black ink on steel sheet, 60 1/4” X 96 1/4”, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund.

HORROR ON THE HILL., 1993/94, silkscreened black and blue ink on honeycomb aluminum: 6 panels, overall dimensions variable; Panel 1: 37 3/4” x 13 1/2” x 2”; Panel 2: 20 1/2” x 49 3/4” x 2”; Panel 3: 27 3/4” x 21” x 2”; Panel 4: 60” x 82 1/4” x 2”; Panel 5: 26 1/4” x 23 1/4”
x 2”; Panel 6: 82 1/4” x 14” x 2”.

**MR. GUY.** 1993/94, silkscreened black ink on aluminum, 84” x 60” x 3/8”.

**UNTITLED.** 1993/94 (Vince Foster), silkscreened black and blue ink on honeycomb aluminum, 4 panels, overall dimensions variable; Panel 1: 14” x 46 1/4” x 2”; Panel 2: 53 1/16” x 50 1/2” x 2”; Panel 3: 31” x 12” x 2”; Panel 4: 77 1/2” x 21 3/4” x 2”; Collection Davidson Aluminum and Metal Corporation, Deer Park, NY.

**THE JOINT ON THE HILL.** 1993/94, silkscreened red ink on honeycomb aluminum, 84 1/8” x 60” x 2”.

**UNTITLED.** 1994 (Wilbur Mills), silkscreened red, white, and blue ink on honeycomb aluminum, 51 3/4” x 1 1/2” x 39 3/4”.

**JOAN, IS THERE ONE LAW?**. 1994, silkscreened black ink on steel, 60” x 96” x 1/16”.

**THE POSTER PEOPLE.** 1994, silkscreened black and white ink on aluminum plate with stand, 68” x 10 3/4” x 6 1/2”, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund.

**UNTITLED.** 1994 (Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis), silkscreened black ink on aluminum plate with stand, 72” x 60” x 6 1/4”, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund.

On view in Avery Court:

**BLUEWALD.** 1989/90, silkscreen on aluminum with flag and stand, 72” x 48” x 3/8”, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund.

All works are courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.
Selected One-Person Exhibitions:

White Columns, NYC ‘88; Westersingel, Rotterdam, The Netherlands ‘88; Galleria Massimo de Carlo, Milan ‘89; American Fine Arts, NYC ‘89; The Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, PA ‘89; Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London ‘89; Luhring Augustine Hetzler Gallery, Santa Monica, CA ‘90; Paula Cooper Gallery, NYC ‘94; Museum Boymans-van Beuningan, Rotterdam ‘95.

Selected Group Exhibitions:

Washington Square East Galleries, NYC 5th Annual Small Works Exhibition ‘81; Exit Art, NYC The Gallery Show ‘86; Nature Morte, NYC ‘87; Galerie Hans Meyer, Dusseldorf, Germany Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information ‘88; John Gibson Gallery, NYC Artists and Curators ‘88; Diechorhallen, Hamburg, Germany Einleuchten ‘89; Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT The Elements: Sex, Politics, Money, and Religion ‘89; Richard L. Feigen and Co., NYC Filling in the Gap ‘89; Galerie Barbara Farber, Amsterdam, The Netherlands A Climate of Site ‘89; Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles Just Pathetic ‘90; XLIV Biennale di Venezia, Italy Aperto ‘90; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA New Work: A New Generation ‘90; Zilkh Gallery, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly ‘91; Palazzo delle Alberbe, Museo Provinciale d’Arte Contemporanea, Trento, Italy American Artists of the Eighties ‘91; Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art, Japan Strange Abstraction ‘91; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC 1991 Biennial Exhibition; Internationale Kunstaustellung, Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin METROPOLIS ‘91; Kassel, Germany Documenta IX ‘92; FAE Musée d’Art Contemporain, Pully/Lausanne, Switzerland Post Human ‘92 (Traveled also to Castello di Rivoli, Torino, Italy ‘92, Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece ‘93, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, Germany ‘93, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem ‘93); Le Consortium, Dijon, France 1968 ‘92; Gallerie Susanna Kulli, St. Gallen, Switzerland Ecart ‘93; Heiligenkreuzerhof, Vienna Live in Your Head ‘93; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark New World Images ‘93; Dallas Museum of Art, TX Encounters 5: Cady Noland and Doug MacWithey

**Selected Bibliography about Cady Noland:**


Cone, Michele. “Cady Noland,” (interview) *Journal of Contemporary Art* vol. 3 no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1990), p. 22+.


Kremer, Mark and van Winkel, Camiel. “Metal is a major thing and a major thing to waste: interview with Cady Noland,” *Archis* (Amsterdam) no. 1 (January 1994), p. 75+.


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