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**"An exhibit tests the limits of what words can express:
'Ever After' examines 9/11 at Creative Alliance"**

By Glenn McNatt
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In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, many artists attempted to translate into images the physical and psychic trauma inflicted on the nation by those terrible events.

Their efforts produced many interesting works but - perhaps not surprisingly - few that rivaled the raw emotional impact of the blurry photographs and grainy videos taken by the news professionals and anonymous amateur shutterbugs who witnessed those shattering events.

Sept. 11 so far has produced no iconic image that sums up the tragedy and loss of that day in the way that Goya's *The Third of May* condemned Napoleon's occupation of Spain or Picasso's *Guernica* memorialized the victims of Fascist aggression.

Perhaps in an era of global mass media, in which televised images of mass death and destruction are flashed around the world instantaneously, no conventional artwork can ever discharge the obligation of moral narrative once performed by the great history paintings of the past.

Consequently, the deeply moving exhibition *Ever After: Assemblies for Tales (Series 1 & 2)*, on view at the Creative Alliance at The Patterson through Saturday, points toward another way of envisioning tragedy in our image-absorbed world, a way that requires re-imagining the significance of words themselves as expressive signs.

Ever After, a collaboration between Baltimore writer David Beaudouin and artist Julia Kim Smith, consists of a central installation-assemblage of emergency response materials and 18 large, framed poster images, each made up of words that are deeply implicated in our instinctual response to Sept. 11 - jihad, horror, hijacker, defense.

The words, set inside symmetrical grids that divide each poster into quadrants, are printed in white or black against a colored background, lending them the impersonal, exclamatory authority of traffic signals.

Beaudouin and Smith have paired groups of words that refer directly to the Sept. 11 attacks - assassin, soldier, suspect - with other terms that invoke the psychic mechanisms often used to describe the unconscious meanings of folk tales and dreams - anxiety, wish fulfillment, conflict.

The linking of these two kinds of words makes explicit the connection between the dark forces of traditional fables such as the Grimms' fairy tales and the contemporary clash of good and evil embodied by Sept. 11.

This is a difficult exhibition to describe, since it depends on a translation of remembered images into words that function not as language but rather as picture-signs. These "loaded" signs are visual abstractions that the mind immediately translates back into pictures - of jets colliding into buildings, of stunned, fleeing crowds, of unspeakable devastation and carnage. In the process, the horrific images embedded in the "loaded" words are, in effect, amplified by the very fact that they are never depicted directly.

Ever After is a stupendous achievement of minimalist, conceptual art that ought to forever lay to rest the idea that such work is no more than a dry intellectual exercise. This is art of unflinching intelligence, great passion and overwhelming emotional impact.

Ever After is on display at the Creative Alliance at The Patterson, 3134 Eastern Ave., through Saturday, September 13, when a closing reception will take place at 6 p.m. For more information, call 410-276-1651 or visit www.creativealliance.org.

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