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Seeing the Bull in Red: A Conversation with Susan Scafati about Art and Bullfighting

July 25, 2016 | Alie Cline

If you've visited the Blanton's latest exhibition Goya: Mad Reason, you might have heard audio recordings

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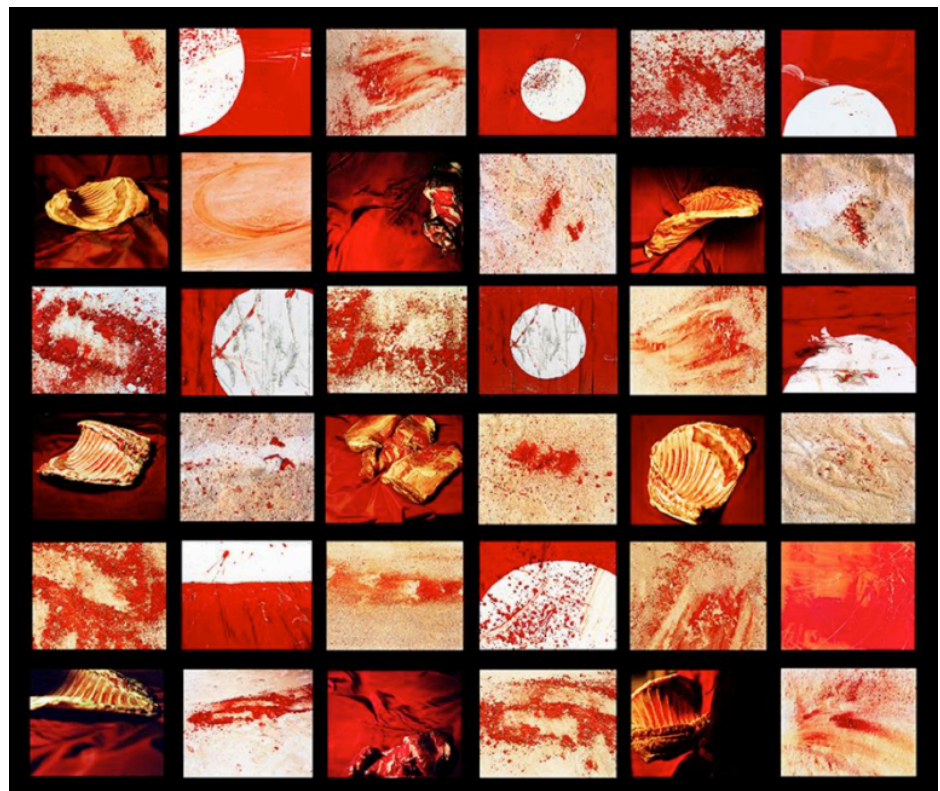
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scattered around the galleries that juxtapose modern reflections on themes in the exhibition with words by Goya and his contemporaries. One of these recordings feature both the words and work of Susan Scafati, an Austin-based American contemporary artist.

Exhibition curator Douglas Cushing sat down with Scafati to discuss her work and the visual culture of bullfighting, both in Goya's time and today.

Cushing: In 2004 you began making bullfighting images in Southern France, where the Spanish style is performed. You titled your 2010 installation of thirty-six chromogenic prints from this body *Taureau Noir*, or “Black Bull.” Yet, the living animal is absent from the work. Instead you offer indices of the bull: blood in the sand, horn marks on the walls of the ring, and butchered meat. What prompted you to choose bullfighting as a subject and what meanings does it carry for you?



Taureau Noir, 2004, (2010 installation view), thirty-six chromogenic prints composed in a 6 x 9 ft installation.

Scafati: Part of what drove me to make art about the bullfight was photographing for the New York Stock Exchange. I was fascinated by the antiquity surrounding the financial markets' bull symbolism. That epitomization of the bull being almighty, wild, and sacred permeates our culture: in game-playing, fighting, hunting, eating, entertainment, superstitions, and from Wall Street to Air Jordan "toro bravo" sneakers. My work led me to a shoot at the World Trade Center for the few weeks leading up to September eleventh, and my experience that day and as part of the recovery effort planted seeds that continue to inform my work. These include notions of right and wrong in our collective global conscious, the way meaning is organized and subject to change, and life's ability to transform so rapidly that your mind is unable to simultaneously rationalize what you see. Those experiences and iconography shaped a narrative in my work that is inherent in the bullfight, and an award from the International Center of Photography granted me the opportunity to explore it.

Cushing: How did you reflect upon the ethics of bullfighting throughout your project and how do you situate this work within the greater history of bullfighting's representations?

Scafati: I resonate more with a cultural anthropologist's position than that of a social activist. I aim to observe and record without judgment. Of course, the work reflects my discretion in how it's edited, printed, and curated. Perhaps my most significant decision was to remove the bull and

bullfighter altogether. Before my project, I met Andres Serrano, whose abstractions of milk, blood, urine, and semen, challenges viewers to confront their preconceived notions of beauty. Similarly, I stripped away the cultural ornament of bullfighting, revealing its raw artifacts: blood, sand, and meat. This gesture broadened the dialogue beyond bullfighting alone, accessing broader culture and human experience. Sometimes first-time viewers of Taureau Noir say, “wow, these paintings are beautiful,” and then they realize what they are really looking at, and they must ask themselves if they still think it is beautiful. It was my objective to create an installation that evokes simultaneous, polarized reactions like the bullfight does, because there are different sides to any story.



Taureau Noir, 2004 (2010 installation detail; blood on sand), one of thirty-six chromogenic prints composed in a 6 x 9 ft installation.

Exploring the bullfight in art inspired me to remove the bull and bullfighter, which are so prominent in the

works of Goya, Picasso, Pedro Almodovar, Lucien Clergue (who was a mentor), and others. The man-bull relationship is always moving and primal, but it's not what I am interested in. After a few bullfights I realized that I am interested in the elements informing the central action. I fall closer conceptually to the sentiment I see in Rineke Dijkstra and Bruce Conner's artworks referencing bullfighting. I've mostly seen Dijkstra's Bullfighters portraits presented with her New Mothers portraits, which strike me altogether as rooted in contemplations of ritual, trauma, and gender, while Conner's avant-garde film REPORT pivots around those themes surrounding the spectacle.

In my art I explore universalities that connect us around the world and throughout time. My visual language breaks down conceptual and physical elements of my subjects and reflects patterns and interconnections that emerge. Driven by a personal meditation on life's constant flux, a stanza from Rainer Maria Rilke comes to mind: "let everything happen to you, beauty and terror, just keep going, no feeling is final." Photography as a time-based medium is a tool I use to process change and impermanence.

Cushing: "Story" is a compelling word here since the bullfight unfolds as a three-act condensed epic with a prescribed arc. How do you think the bullfight's aesthetics help audiences access these philosophical, spiritual, or mythic questions?

Scafati: I'm glad you brought up the number three! It's fitting that Goya chose thirty-three images for his Tauromaquia. I also based my Taureau Noir, a grid of six images by six images, on a factor of three. Six is important since in one corrida three matadors fight

two bulls each; the fate of six bulls unfolds at one sitting.

Goya depicted the evolution of bullfighting's cultural constructs masterfully over his series, taking his sequence from nature to culture. I hadn't realized how similar my own impulse was to Goya's—considering fighting within the context of nature and mythology—until seeing this exhibit. His last Tauromaquia image, depicting the death of Pepe Hillo, strikes me as a link back to the beginning in a cyclical pondering of why we fight. I always want to go back to the first image again and look at the more innocent, freer time. The increasing embellishment of the spectacle's costuming, staging, and theatrics, combined with the reactions on the audience's faces, establishes a critical framework with which to consider bullfighting as a stylized, operatic drama where one can tap into existential questions. Contrastingly, my work removes culture and returns to nature. Presenting all parts together as one, *Taureau Noir* functions as synecdoche. The performance is absent yet the theater remains.



Taureau Noir, 2004, (2010 installation detail, meat), one of thirty-six chromogenic prints composed in a 6 x 9 ft installation.

In terms of the visual devices that constitute bullfighting's aesthetics, I have to start with the bull. Toro bravos—the species used in the Spanish-style corrida—weigh no less than a thousand pounds. It is startling to see a human next to this huge animal. I think of the Cave of Lascaux, which contains the largest animal painting ever found in cave art: depicted at seventeen feet in length and in motion, its immensity is overwhelming. There is something primal in our relationship to the bulls that the spectacle of the bullfight triggers: they are large; they are moving quickly; I have fear and I need to conquer it.

The presentation of the torero/a and toro also signifies a socially ingrained story of boyhood passing to manhood. The first time I saw the bullfighters Sebastian Castella and Cesar Jimenez they were both just twenty years old. Their slender frames alongside

the aggressive bull were provocative, and their slow, controlled, elegant techniques reminded me of New York City Ballet performances

The ring's circular form is echoed in the targets on the arena walls, the curve of the bull's horns, and the tradition of pulling the bull's body around the sand in a big circuit, leaving a trail of blood in a loop. The circle is symbolic, referencing the cycle of life and death.



Taureau Noir, 2004, (2010 installation detail, target on arena wall), one of thirty-six chromogenic prints composed in a 6 x 9 ft installation.

Lastly, red is the color of the arena walls, the muleta, the blood. It is seen before you enter the arena in advertisements, throughout the demise in each corrida, and in displays of meat in the butcher shop windows. It is a lush, seductive red that harkens to Caravaggio paintings and the way blood looks in sunlight. The significance in my Taureau Noir installation of the “black” bull being presented in

sanguine reds is a reference to that spectacle. Yet, the bull is color-blind. The red is for us.

Goya: Mad Reason is on view at the Blanton through September 25, 2016.

Susan Scafati is an Austin-based American contemporary artist. She has been featured as an emerging artist by jurors Cindy Sherman, Adam Fuss, Jack Pierce; award recipient from International Center of Photography, Lucie Foundation, Silvermine Guild Arts Center; and top pick by Hammer Museum, Austin American Statesman, Photo District News online. Clients have included New York Stock Exchange, JP Morgan, Bloomberg News, Port Authority, Archer Hotel, New York Fashion Week, Pasqual Maragall Presidential Campaign, among others. She is a member of Lakes Were Rivers, which has won awards and accolades—including recently as commissioned artists in The Contemporary Austin's Strange Pilgrim exhibition which received a Critic's Pick (Artforum) and Best Museum Show (Austin Critics' Table Awards). Scafati currently teaches at The Contemporary Austin museum and was formerly the Art Talks Chair for Art Alliance Austin. To see more of Scafati's work, visit her website.

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