

Protest perfect for artist seeking history

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Sun Art Critic

It was an unlikely place for history to play out: a ragged forest clearing far from the world's capitols. But opposing armies had thrust and parried across its narrow stage, and soldiers from each side were gathering there again in the early morning mist.

A government, dedicated to preserving order and the rule of law, pointed its weapons at its own citizenry, who were equally committed to calling that government to task. Capitalism arrayed itself against environmentalism; legal process against civil disobedience.

And in the faces of the combatants that day shone certitude, purpose, fury, acceptance, calm resolve, anxiety, fear, exultation and a host of other deep emotions.

In the popular consciousness — in the electronic mind's eye of the media — another hundred protesters were of-

fering themselves up for arrest in Clayoquot Sound; but to Vancouver artist Ian Wallace, the forces engaged in that damp, grey lens were vastly more epic in proportion.

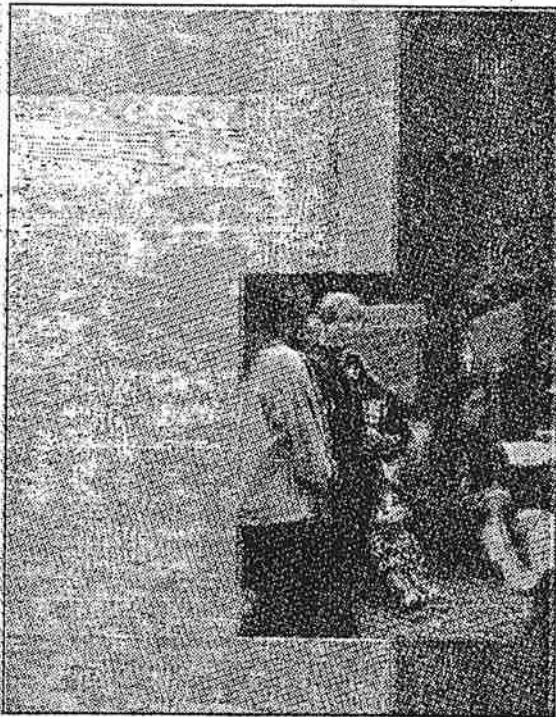
"I had been in Europe, struggling with the idea of how representations of history carry social meaning," Wallace says, of the intellectual path that leads to his current exhibition of work, *Clayoquot Protest* (on now until Dec. 17 at North Vancouver's Presentation House Gallery). For years, Wallace has been deeply interested in the notion of "history painting," the monumental genre of painting that the Western imagination ranked the noblest form of art for most of the 18th and 19th centuries. These vast canvases — think of *The Death of Wolfe* by Benjamin West, or *The Coronation of Josephine* by Jacques-Louis David were political, as much as historical tracts.

The West painting, for instance, in depicting the death of Gen. James

Wolfe as a kind of martyrdom, attempts to convince viewers of the legitimacy of Britain's victory on the Plains of Abraham.

That quality of art merging with ideology is what led Wallace to Clayoquot Sound in the summer of 1993. He wanted to witness and record an historical event, and use those images as the basis for further art-making. (Earlier that summer, he had travelled to New York for Yasser Arafat's address to the United Nations address, but was disappointed with the resulting material.)

"I was looking for a history event," Wallace explains. "And suddenly here was one taking place in the part of the world where I live." The photographs he used to shape the nine giant canvases in this exhibition show hundreds of protesters who were waiting to be ar-



HISTORY ART: Clayoquot Protest VI, 1993-1995, by Ian Wallace


subsequent interning of prisoners in waiting buses — is happening just outside the frame of the photographs, infusing the images with a heavy sense of expectation, of danger lurking just around the corner.

Wallace took three large-format photographs that day — two in color, and one in black and white — and then further selected two details of each to produce a total of nine canvases. The images themselves, drawn from 4x5 format negatives, are blown-up to near life size: photographic prints two metres high and three metres long. Laminating the photos onto canvas, Wallace proceeds to mask and disrupt their surfaces with panels of oil paint, transferred as monoprints from the irregular surface of construction-grade plywood.

rested that day for blocking a disputed logging road.

The central event — the arrests and

Please see WALLACE, C2



WALLACE: Skeptical of logging practices

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Seeing the images in *Clayoquot Protest*, the overriding sense is one of wonder at the deep emotions Wallace's camera has managed to record. In the short-hand of modern life, a hundred protesters arrested in the rainforest is a news brief; so many woolly-tuqued environmentalists and a couple of rogue politicians for good measure. But in an extraordinary example of life imitating art, the protesters' faces in these huge images present a catalogue of the gestures, expressions and spatial arrangements that the great history painters of the last century commonly used.

These are characters caught in a moment of epiphany, deciding to remain standing and avoid arrest, or to sit down in the roadway and be hauled off to jail. Their faces are open and for the most part grave, caught in attitudes of great pensiveness. Here is a young native man, for instance, already sitting down, his head bowed into his hands in weariness; a dark-haired woman in a bright blue sweatshirt, hugging her knees to her chest, her head tilted in rhapsody; an elderly man in a white windbreaker, standing, his face clouded with confusion.

Wallace is quick to point out that he is not necessarily unsympathetic to the logging companies ranged against these protesters. "I am not against logging," he says. "There's nothing wrong with cutting down a tree — although trees are certainly fabulous things; beautiful things.

"I am very skeptical, however, about the kind of logging practices that go on in British Columbia."

Just as there are no police evident in Wallace's images; there are no loggers, with one exception. The only person in any of the works to make eye contact with Wallace, and thus the viewer, is a middle-aged man in sunglasses peering suspiciously out of the crowd. Wallace assumes he was a logging company employee, helping police identify recidivists.

By panning his camera to take the photographs, Wallace overlapped images; offering fragmented evidence of time passing. A woman standing in one frame, clapping her hands in impulsive agreement with a speaker, is seated in the next, wide-eyed with apprehension, a hand swept up to her mouth in alarm. Wallace's 210-mm lens produces a light telephoto effect, launching us forward into the picture plane. The line between painting and photography becomes increasing hard to trace: photographs blown up so large and then laminated on canvas start to seem like patient brushwork.

"This is part of Canadian history," Wallace says of the events he recorded two years ago, "this is my own history. I grew up in West Vancouver. I played in logging slash for most of my young years.

"It's hard not to be blown away by how people — ordinary, law-abiding people — will put themselves in the face of the law for what they believe.

"I am routinely described as an 'extremely intellectual' artist. I am serious, yes. I am an intellectual. But this is a work of art about people. For people."

Sanitized Snaps Turn Clayoquot Protest into Depersonalized Art

VISUAL ARTS

Ian Wallace

Clayoquot Protest

At the Presentation House Gallery
until December 17

• BY PAULA GUSTAFSON

If you have nothing better to do—tidy your undies drawer, water the plants—drop by the Presentation House Gallery and take a look at Ian Wallace's Clayoquot Protest exhibition. Only a few minutes to spare in a busy life? You still have more than enough time to spend with these 18 photo-based works. They are not the most complex attempts at imagery. They're not even very interesting, unless you happen to have been one of the protesters at the Kennedy Lake Bridge on August 9, 1993. Even then, I suspect, recognizing your face in these crowd photos would not evoke a moment of pride. By his sophistry, Wallace has purged every last shred of emotion from these dawn confrontations, turning active resistance into an anonymous experience as bland and depersonalized as a Pop Tart.

All of the works in the exhibition are based on three photographs. Two are in colour; one is in black-and-white. For his mural-sized images, Wallace has laminated enlarged prints onto canvas after extracting rectangular segments of the photographs. In the spaces left by the missing portions, he has inked mono-prints of the wood-grain surface of plywood in shades of sage green, red, and black.

According to Wallace's artist's statement, "These abstract elements form compositions that refer simultaneously to the formal limits of representation (painting and photography), the support (figure-ground relations); and to the subject of the protest itself (the industrialization of natural materials)."

By way of further explanation, Wallace adds that "this emphasis on absences and displacements in the image provides the primary rhetorical device which leads the spectator to resuture through an interpretive reading the abstracted fragments back into their natural order in the original scene."

Either Wallace has misreckoned viewers' interpretive abilities, or the images are as simplistic as they appear. The series of photos in the gallery's main entry seems to confirm the latter opinion. Here, Wallace frames a documentary scene of a group of environmental activists, then accompanies it with a second print showing a blown-up view of one individual in the crowd. A third photo presents that person in a fuzzed close-up portrait.

Wallace, an art-history instructor at the Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design since 1972, has an international reputation as a photo-conceptualist. His work is consistently included—along with that of fellow travellers Roy Arden, Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, and Jeff Wall—in European exhibitions. Works in this Clayoquot Protest exhibition previously formed a component of *Notion of Conflict: A Selection of Contemporary Canadian Art*, a group exhibi-

tion recently shown at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

By design, Wallace's Clayoquot photos do not show anyone dramatically posturing or gesturing, nor do they contain any indication of the RCMP making arrests on that August 9 morning. He admits: "There is a further issue specific to this case which is not apparent in the images: that is the unresolved claims that the aboriginal peoples have to this land which was expropriated by the government and sold to the forest company for a pittance." As if an apolitical stance is a virtue, two of the key factors in the turmoil, and the ever-present news-media crews, are neither depicted nor referenced in Wallace's views.

Like Solomon, Wallace stays above the fray, justifying his camera angle by suggesting that "what is compelling here as political content is that of the image of individuals who have collectively positioned themselves in defiance of the law on the basis of ethics." Through this lofty attitude he advocates responsibility for choosing sides or distinguishing between right and wrong. Like a consummate spin doctor sweeping away all the controversial bits, Wallace constructs images so sanitized, they could be marketed in disposable blue plastic pouches.

(If you want to see photo-conceptualism of the kind that's guaranteed to bubble ideas in your mind for months to come, do make time to see *Photography and Beyond in Japan: Space, Time and Memory* at the Vancouver Art Gallery before it closes December 10.) ■