

## BORDER views



left: Susanna Heller, *Ghost Tower*, 2003, oil and rice paper on canvas and linen, 72 x 57" each, 144 x 57" overall. All photographs courtesy olga korper gallery, Toronto.

right: *Up into Thin Air*, 2003, oil and mixed media on canvas, 48 x 48".

### Site Requiem

In 1998 New York artist **Susanna Heller** was awarded a 15-month residency to work in a studio on the 91st floor of the World Trade Center. From that majestic site, the streets below seemed to her a marvellous Petri dish. "When I was making the big 'Tower' drawings I would stand with my nose against the glass and look down. Vertigo is the most melodramatic description of space you can have—it's the baroque of space—and to make the work I needed to experience that vertigo."

Heller couldn't have known that only a year after leaving her studio in the clouds, her melodrama would be transformed into realism. On September 11 the first plane struck Tower One on the northwest corner, the last place she had been working. "It's like it was two seconds ago. What I saw, the videotapes, it all gets mixed up together in this nightmarish feeling. For months in the morning—not dreaming but not quite awake either—I would see myself on the 91st floor with the plane coming and I'm about to die."

The day after 9/11 she smuggled herself across the 14th Street line by borrowing documents from friends who lived there. "I'm not an engineer, I'm not a doctor, I don't know construction. Drawing is what I do and I had to go down there." The authorities wouldn't allow anyone to take photographs on the site, but drawing was permitted and Heller became a regular, sitting in the ruins where the massive buildings had been, attempting to put things back together in her own head. "I pulled out my pencil. I was thinking about what to do next. I mean, as human beings, how do we pick up the pieces, how do we build something from a place of violence and absence?"

The paintings that came out of that place are astonishing. (Heller's 9/11 work was on exhibition at Olga Korper's Toronto gallery through January 17 of this year.) They can be dark; *Black Cloud, Explosion*, 2003, combines a roiling sausage of black cloud with a sooty atmosphere; *World Trade Center Tower 1 – Disintegration*, 2002, shows a surrogate for the building as it collapses. Like all her work on 9/11, the painting delivers the unexpected. The tower appears to be falling up, as if a vortex had been reversed. In *Up into Thin Air* she has created a space that Tiepolo would admire, an airy blue and grey piecemeal world. "I wanted it to be similar to an





# MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

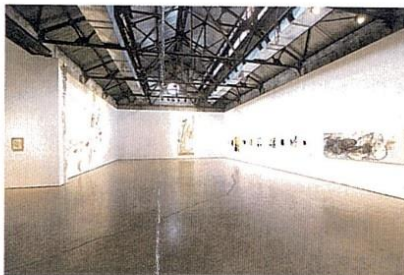


oratorio—when there's a tragedy, there's a choral sweeping up. I played Mozart's *Requiem* a lot in the first year after 9/11." These paintings are a patchwork of oddments and scumbled surfaces, as if a Bower bird were a painter on an extremely ambitious scale.

There is something magnificent in Heller's damaged architecture. Her buildings seem to be breathing,

reminding us that cities are living things. "To me the city is a body, that's why it's in motion. You make art to try to help people share in that memory. You want people to remember in a complex manner, not in a simple and vicious way. Memorials with nationalism attached end up being generators of hatred, and that's America right now." ■

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top left: *Occulus*, 2003, oil on wood, 17 x 16".

top right: installation, olga korper gallery.

left middle: Wanda Koop, *Green Zone (Satellite City Grey)*, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 8 x 10". All photographs by William Eakin.

below: *Green Zone (Sentinel)*, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 36".

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