

Timekeeper: A Claude Van Lingen Retrospective

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Claude Van Lingen's show, *Timekeeper*, explores the memorialization of the past and his ideas for the future. This exhibition, a retrospective of his life's work, is emotional both in presence and in the raw memories that his works invoke. Van Lingen's retrospective documents national tragedies, political events, and natural disasters seen throughout the past. And, he alludes to the future through projections of life in abstract sculptural and minimalistic paintings, whose dates of completion unrealistically span the next thousand years.

Van Lingen leads the viewer to contemplate the past on both a local and national level in a series specifically focused on disasters and is aptly titled *Disaster Series*. These works cover natural disasters, acts of terrorism and political controversy. Works in this series are interspersed throughout the exhibition space amongst others, like, his *Millennium Series*, and some of his earlier works.

Covering natural tragedies in America from floods to forest fires, Van Lingen investigates, through his images, events that have devastated communities and permanently altered many lives. This series is comprised of a total of nineteen works, which vary in size, only slightly, all being around 27" x 31". Displayed in a way that is reminiscent of the struggles that the victims are faced with, the works tower over you. Arranged sporadically on the wall and extending far above eye level, this series imparts a feeling of inescapable doom. Each piece is similar in essence, all being done in darker shades of natural grays, blacks, and browns one might find in nature. Van Lingen often utilizes debris, which he gathers from the specific sites of devastation that he is representing—such as twigs, dirt, broken pecan shells, and leaves. Occasionally, Van Lingen incorporates fire in his imagery by burning specific sections of the work. In doing so, he further communicates the intensity and sometimes unrecoverable nature of these disasters as portions of his images are burnt away, leaving only void.

Despite the works in this series being composed of unrefined materials, the images are not chaotic, but carefully arranged compositions. Wild gusts of wind are almost made visible by the intense sweeping gestures of debris covering the page. In others, a sort of stillness presides over the image, like waters that have recently receded leaving only an idea of the rushing currents that once were.

In stark contrast to the arrangement of the pieces of this series focused on acts of god, his works that focus on political controversies and acts of terrorism are arranged methodically. Piece by piece these images are laid out in a timeline. While some of these pieces are recognizable given a context, others seem more personal to Van Lingen, expressing his emotions toward and about these events.

Van Lingen's piece titled *9/11 World Trade center, 2012-2014* consists of two panels, each reaching 9 feet high and only 1.5 feet wide. Each uses only intense charcoal scribbles to create, through their density towering rectangular forms situated within the frames. These towering, dark, rectangular forms imply the structures of the World Trade Towers that were destroyed on 9/11, and appropriately, have a ghostlike quality. Near the top center of each form the paper disintegrates under the pressure of the scribble marks, leaving frayed edges of paper and revealing a second layer beneath the first, which is equally as dark as the rest of the forms. A wavering inch of white space surrounds each of the figures.

This work appears to be very plain at first glance, and perhaps the forms themselves are, but what is enticing to look at is not the forms in their grand scale, but what is seen upon closer inspection. It is as though each discernable scribble stroke carries a weight of consciously directed feeling. While some are wild and heavy back and forth strokes down the page, others are light and swiftly falling. In a way, these gestures communicate the intensity of, and multiplicity of, the reactions one could have of an event such as this, he draws the gestures of emotion that in their entirety make up the form. Although from a distance these large rectangular shapes appear to be solid black, when up close, the details of each individual mark is clearly discernable and can be tracked across the image.

In another piece titled, *God is on My Side*, Van Lingen uses text to create his image. This piece is 3 x 2 feet and placed in a frame with a glass covering. The top of the work is roughly at eye level, and using text to create the image, commands the viewer to regard it in the same way one would read text on a page, from left to right and top to bottom. Using only graphite on paper, Van Lingen repeatedly writes the same phrase over and over, "God is on my side" in cursive. This phrase, initially, is written very large and takes up the entire top half of the page. Scanning the image in this way, the text appears smaller and smaller as it descends and begins to overlap sporadically to create a dark mass that culminates in an event that occurs off the page. The intensity of his statement reaches a blackness and shatters the glass covering above it. The glass, is not shattered in fragments with exposed shards, but exposes a thin web of cracks emanating from one contact point, the final, "God is on my side."

The works in the *Disaster Series*, are simplistic in the forms and the materials used. But, this simplicity only serves to compliment the dark, bleak circumstance that, in turn, evokes complex and intense emotions. Forced to revisit these impactful events brings to mind not only the past but thoughts about the future, and what our world will look like in years to come as disasters reshape the world we live in. Van Lingen's work, as part of the *Timekeeper* exhibition, serve as reminders of the vulnerable nature of our environments, our political circumstances, and our place in our communities and in the world. In this remembrance, however, I am inspired to fully live in this moment, to cherish the present, and to enjoy what I have right now. No one knows for how long these things will last.

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