Susanne Slavick
Pittsburgh

Susanne Slavick brings a painter's sensibility to her recent work based on appropriated photographs. *R&R&R*, her 2008 *Artist of the Year* exhibition, features many works on paper and a few large paintings [Pittsburgh Center for the Arts; September 12-November 2, 2008]. Slavick has long created oil and acrylic paintings on multiple panels that incorporate details from Christian iconography re-contextualized on a larger abstraction, such as a map. This new series pits photographic information against imaginative detail, framing a question about the nature of artifice by way of a confrontation with ongoing violence in the Middle East.

She alters grim digital photographs and stills of bombed-out infrastructure from recent conflicts in Iraq and Lebanon, by hand-painting miniatures borrowed from the culture of those countries. The artist states that this is her way to take the Army's short hand for "rest and relaxation" and recast it to more reflective words like "reveal," "regret," and "restore." Stylized details of Islamic architecture along with birds, tigers, clouds, trees, and flowers, all drawn from Persian illuminations, are strategically placed atop monochrome images of blasted city streets and twisted urban wreckage. Some of these works — such as *Rebirth: Eve's Escort*, 2007, where a vibrant Peacock preens triumphantly on a burning car in the middle of a wasted roadway —, speak directly to the aggression of war. Others are tinged with humor. A group of brightly colored camels, viewed through the charred windows of a gutted car, pass without a glance in *Roam: Riding on Remorse*, 2008.

The largest and smallest works prove most effective. In them Slavick's decisions about scale are essential to the work's success. A group of four sixty-six-by-forty-two-inch prints is particularly arresting. Each image employs the same photograph of a bombed-out building in Beirut. The structure runs the full height of the paper. There is no sign of life in the photograph, nor in the artist's tiny additions painted in gouache with mixed media. These reinforce the building's ruination. In *Red Balcony II*, 2008, the photo is printed in blood red with circular Band-Aids and painted lines of radiation added as both targets and patches to cover the building's wounds. In the somber *Remorse: White Curtains*, 2006, a few billowing white curtains are painted in the blown-out windows, now printed in deep black. The contrast between Slavick's miniaturist's hand in the details and the bulk of the modernist structure contrasts human touch to the building's anonymous Western style.

The smallest works are the simplest, avoiding the sometimes cartoon-like quality of the ones with brightly-colored animals. A pointed, filigreed screen rendered in white tumbles off the porch of a ruined low structure in *Restoration (Threshold I)*, 2006. A stylized and expressionistic wave from an illustration by fourteenth-century master Ahman Mūsā surges up from a large pavement hole in *Rehydrate I*, 2008, and *Rehydrate II*, 2008.

Slavick's series is an unselfconscious attempt to repair the damage documented in these photographs and restore cultural identity. But there is no naivety here. The regret that is so palpable in the better of these prints is partially an acknowledgment of the impotence of art to ever effect such change in the world. The artist insists on adding her painter's touch to these appropriated and often anonymous images, in order to reclaim and re-imagine them. Within the confines of these works, order is established through composition. Though the fiction of such artifice is left readily apparent, it is reassuring to have the chaos of the world held at bay — at least temporarily.

Kristina Olson