

Flash: September Eleventh
by Jennifer Karey



In 1986, John Boak created a painting that depicts the horrible event that took place in Cripple Creek, Colorado, in the early morning hours of June 5, 1904. An explosion destroyed the Independence train depot in a matter of seconds, killing thirteen men and injuring twenty others. In Boak's work, that horrific moment is captured as if looking up at the patchy night sky as the debris and people seem to fall down to earth. While Boak's intention may have been to portray this event accurately and capture it in time, this intended message is lost in the aftermath of September eleventh. The image no longer represents the image of a small town explosion almost a century ago, but rather rekindles recent memories of the events that shook the country only one month ago.

While 2001 has proven to be a year of fear, anger, uncertainty and terrible destruction, the years between 1893 and 1904 were equally chaotic for the small mining town of Cripple Creek, Colorado. Tensions began to grow between mining companies and workers over their long hours and low wages. In response, John Calderwood, a former coal miner, established the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) in 1894. Calderwood and five hundred men formed a union in February of that same year. Their demands were simple:

three dollars' pay for an eight-hour day. The conflict went on with neither side willing to compromise. Non-union workers and union workers competed for jobs as companies refused to fulfill the WFM's demands (Sedivy). Soon, simple conflict escalated into bloody violence.

Harry Orchard, a former member of the WFM, decided to take matters into his own hands. Armed with dynamite, Orchard intended to rig the Independence train depot so that as the train arrived carrying the evening shift of non-union workers, there would be a massive explosion and all those aboard would be killed. So, on June 5, 1904, Harry Orchard, aided in part by another miner named Steve Adams, planted two boxes of dynamite under the depot's loading platform (Langdon 308). The dynamite would be detonated by acid vials when a wire was pulled. At 2:15 a.m. the Florence & Cripple Creek train pulled into the Independence station. By mistake, Orchard pulled the wire too early, missing the train but wiping out the station almost completely (Sedivy). The explosion illuminated the night sky. The terrible sound awakened the entire town, and within a short time the scene of the horror was surrounded by people. The awful circumstances that brought the crowd together combined with the dim early morning light produced a scene of almost indescribable horror.

The men who had been waiting at the station were blown in all directions, and some of them were so horribly mutilated that identification was extremely difficult. Aided by flickering candles, the mangled remains were gathered together. Arms and legs and other portions of the mangled miners were picked up after the explosion several hundred feet from the station (Langdon 308). The groans of the injured mingled with the cries of the men, women, and children who stood around them. Some of these were relatives of the dead and injured miners. Emma Langdon, a resident of Cripple Creek at the time of the explosion, is

quoted as saying, "their grief was pitiful to behold" (Langdon 308). The station itself was completely destroyed. Emma recounts that

All windows of the depot were broken, the large foundation posts sprung and the entire front of the west end of the structure blown in. The entire basement was a mass of broken timbers. The roof was pierced in many places, huge pieces of time were thrown hundreds of feet in all directions, the houses in the vicinity telling a sad tale of confusion and flying missiles.

(Langdon 308)

Soon, government officials began searching for a suspect, a probable cause, and ultimately a good reason to eradicate the Western Federation of Miners. The investigators accused the WFM of violent and anarchistic behavior (Jameson 228). The WFM denied having any part in the explosion of the depot. No distinct evidence was found and no one was caught and blamed for the explosion until 1905.

More than a year after the devastating explosion occurred, Harry Orchard confessed that he had murdered Frank Steunenberg, the governor of Idaho, on December 30, 1905. In his confession, Orchard also alleged that the inner circle of the WFM had hired him to set explosives at Independence depot. "Orchard's is a complicated story which lies probably as much within the provinces of psychopathologists as in historians and amateur detectives" (Jameson 229). Orchard may have told the truth and may have concocted the plan independently. The truth will never truly be known.

John Boak captured this moment in history. He depicted an event that is largely unknown and that had never been captured before. There are no pictures of the event, only of the aftermath, and it is not something that is described in textbooks. As Mr. Boak notes in

his August 14, 2001 e-mail to me, "I thought I would explore some colorful incidents from my own background."

The elements of his painting of the Independence explosion drew heavily upon various elements of modernist abstraction. Boak says,

It is part of a long-term project of using early modernist visual systems in the service of literal imagery. The foundation of modern art, Cubism, is essentially 'realist' in its impulse. I am drawn to the vision of the cubists. It lies between an art of observation and reporting of the world, and an art of reconstructing the world using the mind. Cubism is the art of simultaneous multiple perspectives.

In addition, Boak uses a system of diagonals, breaking up the picture plane of the scene.

"Unlike most broken-picture-plane paintings, I have not abandoned deep space perspective: the landscape recedes in the middle of the night sky blue diagonal of the painting. I do not repeat the distant range of mountains, to keep up the shattering effect even in the deep-space portion of the painting," Boak says. The idea of multiple perspectives and deep-space diagonals is very clear in *Harry Orchard Blows Up the Independence Colorado Train Depot*. The perspective shown is one that is very uncommon. The two bodies, the detached hand, the leg that may or may not be attached, fall towards the viewer as though the viewer is lying on his/her back looking up at the sky. The perspective is amazing and original and draws you to the painting. In addition, the foreground triangles of imagery, upper right and lower left, consist of abstractions built of supposed building parts into which whole objects are placed: three whole people, a detached hand, a leg which may or may not have a body attached to it, a clock, a train engine, and a door. The objects are whole to give them focus amongst the debris. Boak says this is "patterned story telling, not naturalism." It says, "this is what got

blown up," and not "this is what the blowing up looks like." Boak's objective is to construct a painting that is a visual calm and overshadows a tragic event.

The intense colors that Boak uses are very much his trademark. He uses the colors in order to keep his paintings powerful and intriguing. On the subject of color, Boak says, "I keep my colors clean by keeping out canceling colors from areas where they might occur. That means no yellow in blue areas, no red in green areas, and no blue in yellow or orange areas." Boak goes on to say, "The colors, being thin films of air-borne paint, are basically transparent. The light enters the paint layer, passes through to the white background of the canvas, and bounces back to the viewer. Under bright gallery lights, the painting has powerful colors."

The colors not only provide intensity, but also provide a kind of appreciation of the event that is depicted. While most would think that a painting of such a tragic act of terrorism would be shown in dreary, real-to-life colors that would create a mood of sadness and horrifying tragedy, Boak does not. Instead he uses bright colors, such as vivid greens and yellows, to recreate the explosion. This would suggest to the viewer that the event is not so much tragic as it is memorable. It is an event that affected our nation and the people of this country in their fight for rights. Boak wants the viewer to remember the explosion in Cripple Creek the way we remember those lost in Vietnam, for example. The painting memorializes what happened in 1904 and the men who were lost. It is not something that should be upsetting or painful, but something that should be honored and appreciated. Between the use of whole objects, almost 3-D-like in appearance, and the use of powerful colors that catch the eye, the painting is intense and captivates its audience.

My first glance of *Harry Orchard Blows Up the Independence Colorado Train Depot*, prior to reading the caption that goes along with the painting, predetermined my perception and my

interpretation of the painting. Flash...September eleventh. I had never seen the painting before or even heard of the artist, but I was instantly attracted to it. Besides the alluring colors and the intriguing view the artist provides, images of what occurred on September eleventh flashed through my mind. Images of terrified people hanging out of smoke-filled windows, planes crashing into the World Trade Center creating a fiery inferno, American landmarks falling to the ground, people being chased by a tidal wave of dust and smoke, bounced against my cornea. I couldn't see anything except New York City. Firefighters, news reporters, President Bush, American flags, vigils, fliers of missing people, swirled in my head. I couldn't see a train wreck. I couldn't see an explosion that took place in 1904.

My perception was completely tainted by my own experience. I'm sure I am not alone. I am sure that any American who was presented with this painting within the last few weeks would share my reaction. My interpretation was one of extreme sadness. Regardless of the bright colors and vivid objects, the painting does not create a feeling of appreciation as Boak intended. The painting serves as a reminder of the disaster that devastated our nation:

Flames leapfrogged floors, and within minutes vast plumes of thick black smoke enveloped the gleaming steel-and-glass towers. Through smoke and debris, panicked workers could be spotted hugging and jumping from as high as the 80th floor. Some held hands. Some were on fire. 'Bodies splattered the pavement; you couldn't even get out of the building -- blood everywhere,' said George Dwarika, a janitor who crawled out of the basement. 'I saw a man waving a red flag for a minute, and then the guy just jumped into space.'

(Powell)

Michael Powell's description of the events that unfolded on September eleventh is strikingly similar to Emma Langdon's description of the devastation in 1904. Both describe such

horrible destruction and loss of life. America watched the towers fall, watched the second plane crash, saw the total destruction, and saw the horror of those trapped on the highest floors as the building collapsed beneath them. The loss of family members, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, the uncertainty of where people were, if people were okay, bombarded every American. The fact that I had friends in New York City, that my dad flies out of Boston all the time for business, that I didn't know if he was on business, all affected my perception of Boak's painting.

The images that are scattered throughout Boak's painting are very generic. There is no distinguishing feature that would date the event depicted as occurring in 1904. Therefore, the images are even easier to transfer and manipulate into what my experiences make me see. Through my eyes, I see the three bodies in his painting as people falling from the 110th floor of the South Tower. I see the broken debris and splintered wood as pieces of steel and glass collapsing to the ground, taking firefighters and innocent people with it : "A heavy cloak of chalky ash covers abandoned bicycles and doughnut carts and vegetable stands. And thousands of firefighters and police officers work ceaselessly as night turns to day, dusty ghosts moving through a moonscape" (Jenkins).

Nothing that Boak depicts in his picture is what I see. I only see September eleventh. The terrorist attack on the tiny mining town of Cripple Creek, Colorado, in 1904, and the massive terrorist attack on the very nation itself a little more than one month ago, may be different in scale and degree, but somehow share the spotlight in Boak's painting. The memories of September change the work's meaning. The events that I have seen, and that the nation has witnessed over the past month, were never conceived of when Boak created his painting. Boak says, "At the time I thought it was odd that Americans perceived terrorism as alien, executed by foreigners in distant lands." This perception would, however,

become a reality in 2001 when we would be attacked by those foreigners from those distant lands. Boak wanted to get across not only the point that this event was important and should be remembered, but also that terrorism can be internal. His point is lost, however, in the sea of current images of the World Trade Center and photographs of the Taliban and Osama Bin Ladin. The way in which Boak intended his work to be interpreted and perceived will be forever overshadowed, in my mind, by the terror that occurred on that warm Tuesday morning of September eleventh.

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