

**Prairie Smoke**

by Victor M. Cassidy

Here are two Chicago artists with very different goals and professional lives.

**Wordless Conversations**

"Art is a way of having a conversation without limiting ourselves to words or language," says Dolores Wilber. "Words fail us everyday and they are not necessarily the best way to express complicated idea or feelings -- or thoughts that defy everyday language and description."

Wilber calls herself "a Chicago artist who deals with the ties that bind us together, our physical bodies, psychological/social violence -- and how to say what we mean and mean what we say." She often collaborates with others to create multi-media works that she writes and directs. She also creates individual works in video and visual art.

Wilber says she feels "a loss of home and a place in the world." "We don't know, she tells us, "where we belong, nor do we understand what kind of faith and desire we can have in the face of such loss." Her work, which she terms "serious, baroque and over-the-top, but never ironic," explores "what happens to human beings in an unsteady world."

In Nov. 2004, Wilber, along with long-time artist collaborator Julie Laffin and ecologist Liam Heneghan, presented *Monument: Bodies on Foreign Soil*, an elaborate performance installation in the Grand Army of the Republic Hall at Chicago's Cultural Center. The GAR Hall was the ideal place for this performance, says Wilber, because it commemorates some of the bloodiest battles of the US Civil War.

*Monument* seeks to start a conversation about why nations constantly get into tragic wars and then later build memorials to the bravery of the combatants that celebrate "untoward and unwanted death and destruction." The performance employed 40 used military blankets, fused with photographs printed on cotton featuring images of hands, feet and navels. Some blankets were provided with hidden mechanisms that simulated breathing. In an adjacent dark room was a video of ethereal leaves blowing on a US Army blanket. Performers, including Wilber and Laffin, performed the symbolic gesture of stripping bark from two invasive 25-foot-tall buckthorn plants that had been pulled out by the roots.

To advance her work, Wilber founded Wholesale Chicago, a collaborative that "initiates all manner of artistic investigations," as she puts it. In March, Wholesale Chicago staged the multimedia performance *Mountains Clouds Turbulence Coastlines* at a local interdisciplinary arts festival. In the complex symbolism of this work, two men who are "headless," decapitated or who simply have lost their (cast polyurethane) "heads" investigate the making of a hand grenade. A ten-year-old boy in video projection ponders a Scoutmaster's ruminations on the merits and problems of 'Impertinent Punishment.' A hand-wrestling duel takes place repeatedly, and suicide bombers' longing for death is staged to excessive music. "Losing one's head is like losing one's soul," the artist explains, enigmatically.

Forthcoming this fall is a site-specific installation, destined for the Cultural Center, building on the themes in *Mountains Clouds Turbulence Coastlines*. For this project, Wilber is photographing cast reproductions of real heads and working with a found handwritten diary entitled "Vadja 1942" that she discovered in a used bookstore in Estonia. The next performance promises to be just as mystifying and provocative as its predecessors.

The artist has a background in sociology and expert knowledge of digital technology, which she uses to montage photographs. In *Chest* (2002), she integrates a crumbling building façade onto a man's bare chest to suggest personality disintegration. *Belly*, another layered photo image, shows a man's uncovered stomach with a door on it that's held shut with wire.

*Chest Bashing* (2004), a video, comments on male aggressiveness and bonding. We see the bare chests of two men who puff themselves out and crash repeatedly into each other, audibly grunting and groaning. This video, which cannot be entirely serious, never shows the faces of the none-too-bright belligerents.

Wilber teaches at De Paul University and often travels abroad. Working with Chicago sculptor Frances Whitehead, she emptied an abandoned Estonian root cellar of old liquor bottles and junked farm implements, cleaned everything and put it all back. Next, the artists installed a laptop computer in the cellar that played a narrative titled "We Need Heroes," commemorating Russian scientists who laid down their lives for biodiversity during the Siege of Leningrad in 1942. Trapped in the Vavilov Institute in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), these scientists starved rather than eating carefully preserved seed bank specimens of rare plants.

This work was one section of a three-part installation called *Unmaking the World*, which incorporated 300 vinyl globes, 60 feet of foam, six-foot weather balloons and eerie video projections of an animated circus replica, bubbling mud and squiggling insects.



Dolores Wilber

*Monument: Bodies on Foreign Soil*  
(2004)

Installation view, Grand Army of the Republic Hall, Chicago Cultural Center



*Monument: Bodies on Foreign Soil*  
2004



*Mountains Clouds Turbulence Coastlines*  
2005



*Mountains Clouds Turbulence Coastlines*  
2005



*Chest*  
2002



*Chests (Video)*  
2004

ALAN  
KOPPEL  
GALLERY  
CHICAGO



PETER  
HUTCHINSON  
THE EARLY WORK  
1968 - 1972  
FREDERIEKE  
TAYLOR  
GALLERY

Abstract  
Paintings  
TOBEY  
FINE  
ARTS



ARTSYSTEMS  
The Tools  
of the Trade

AAF  
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MARGARET  
THATCHER  
PROJECTS

Melanie  
Comber  
The Fine Art  
Society

Andrew  
Mummery