



WELLS&BARNES: *SEATS OF POWER*

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Recent works by Gayle Wells Mandle
and Julia Barnes Mandle

April 21 - June 18, 2016

GreaterReston**ArtsCenter**

Front cover image: Wells&Barnes, *Portrait of a Revolutionary One*, 2012, photograph, 21" x 14"

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Experience hath shewn, that even under the best forms of government those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny.

— Thomas Jefferson

The remarkable works on view in *Seats of Power* are the product of a unique collaboration between a mother and daughter, parted by an ocean but profoundly connected by social and aesthetic concerns. Working under the moniker Wells&Barnes, Gayle Wells Mandle and her daughter, Julia Barnes Mandle, have produced a body of work inspired by the Occupy protests, Arab Spring and other recent groundswells of resistance. Based in Massachusetts, Gayle Wells Mandle produces evocative mixed-media paintings that incorporate text and collaged elements. Julia Mandle is based in the Netherlands, where her work recently received support from the prestigious Mondriaan Fund. Trained as an artist and art historian, Julia Mandle has a background in performance art and produces sculpture and embroidery. Together, the two artists collaborated on the production of a series of



Gayle Wells Mandle, *Balancing Act* (detail), 2012
Multimedia acrylic painting on canvas, 60" x 44"

photographs, sculptures, and a large installation piece entitled *Study for a Monument* that serves as the linchpin of this exhibition.

These works have their roots in the recent history of the Middle East and in particular the uprising known as the Arab Spring (2010), as well as the global Occupy demonstrations of 2011, which protested economic inequality. These populist rebellions inspired the artists to consider the balance of power—or lack thereof—in the modern world. The individual and collaborative works produced as a result reflect the artists' concern for the powerless, and the struggle of the (so-called) 99% against the privilege and power held by the remaining 1%. As Gayle Wells Mandle plainly puts it, "Can we ever create a fair balance between the haves and have-nots?"

The relevancy of Wells&Barnes' work has only increased in the four years since the last presidential election in the U.S. The current election cycle has revealed deep social and economic divisions within our country, manifested in the widespread support for candidates from the far left and far right of the political spectrum. There is a sense of volatility in this state of affairs—a sense that middle ground, and the stability it represents—is increasingly difficult to locate.

The artists explore power struggles through the motif of chairs, ranging from the plainest stool to the most ornate throne. In the massive installation titled *Study for a Monument*, dozens of charred and distressed ordinary chairs are piled upon one side of a seesaw, an object that manages to embody both childhood innocence and the challenging struggle for equilibrium. The artists have referred to these chairs as "portraits of revolutionaries," symbolizing the lives sacrificed in the global fight against inequality. The massive pile of damaged structures elevates the far end of the seesaw—upon which sits nothing at all. Surrounding *Study for a Monument* are additional chairs depicted in photographs, embroidered onto canvas, conjured in paint and charcoal, and cast in the round as "trophies." Ranging from ornate thrones

signifying the powerful elite, to scruffy mundane folding chairs for the less privileged, the chairs retain a ghostly memory of their users.

The subject of power—whether political or socioeconomic—has a long and compelling pedigree in the history of art. For centuries, art has been used to uphold power, from the commanding busts of Roman emperors to the grandiose paintings of kings and queens centuries later. Artists were often employed by royal courts or high-ranking clergy to craft compelling public personas in a pre-digital age. Conversely, since at least the time of the French Revolution, artists have also utilized their art to criticize or undermine corrupt governments. In fact, the function of art as a subversive tool, aimed at inciting strong feelings and communicating independent thought, continues to underpin much contemporary art today.

In the visual vocabulary utilized by Gayle Wells Mandle and Julia Mandle, there are no images of brutal despots, corporate tyrants, or corrupt politicians who occupy the seats of power in our world. Their absence is what is provocative. Through the repeated manipulation of images of empty chairs, these works take on a significance that transcends a single period, government, or nation. It is a universal statement—a heady warning of the perils of imbalance that have marked human history, and continue to threaten peace in our modern world.

Holly Koons McCullough

Executive Director/Curator

Artists' Q & A

Gayle Wells Mandle & Julia Barnes Mandle

Q: What inspired you to create *Study for a Monument*?

Julia: Our world has been recently dominated by uprisings. The predominance of these acts of resistance, both on a large-scale and small scale, is very remarkable in our time.

Gayle: Our decision to call it *Study for a Monument* is in particular to call attention to and honor all the brave ninety-nine percent who are standing up currently to challenge the unfair imbalance toward the powerful and wealthy one percent of our population. We can envision this sculpture being later cast entirely in bronze and placed outdoor as a kind of memorial. But then again, the struggle still goes on, therefore, we feel it's important to underscore that



it's a study, an unfinished memorial. The monument is not yet 'set in stone'...

J: We have also been especially interested in the collective and the binding together of small acts of resistance that compose a large movement. Certainly Gayle and I spoke a lot about catalysts and people like Mohammed Bouazizi who immolated himself in Tunisia in 2010 and literally ignited the Jasmine Revolution. But there are so many moments and sacrifices. Here, my thinking is influenced by the writing of historian Howard Zinn who regards revolutionary times in history as the result of a collection of small acts of bravery.

G: We made large portraits of each part of our *Study for a Monument*. We want to highlight each of the smaller elements: their heroic grandness but also fragility and banality. These are our *Portraits of Revolutionaries*.

J: We also decided from *Monument* to create the miniature sculptures as sort of prosaic 'trophies.'

Q: Is this the first time you have collaborated on artwork?

G: Yes, this is the first time we have collaborated on the actual artwork. Our past three mother/daughter exhibitions have juxtaposed our individual work. However, this is the first exhibition that includes photography and sculpture we have made as collaborators.

During the development of this exhibition, we also made work individually- Julia created new embroidery and drawings and I created my mixed media paintings.

J: In my individual works, I allowed myself to reflect upon my own sense of confusion over our time. I constantly ask myself: Where are we heading in this chaos? Are

we rising up or falling down? Is “Dissent is the mother of ascent,” as Ralph Nader proposes? Each day has a different prognosis.

In regard to our new depth of collaboration, I would add that this change evolved very naturally. We have always been very open with each other during our individual creative processes. We constantly offer each other critique and suggestions. It amazes me to think back to how organically we moved into creating work together. We easily slipped into each other’s mind during the co-envisioning process of the main sculpture.

G: We were able to work together in our minds and also in materials. We conceived, questioned, disagreed and agreed. But we also got our hands equally dirty: together we found, torched, ripped, tied, documented, collected, designed, disfigured, and assembled each part of the main and miniature sculptures plus the related portraits.

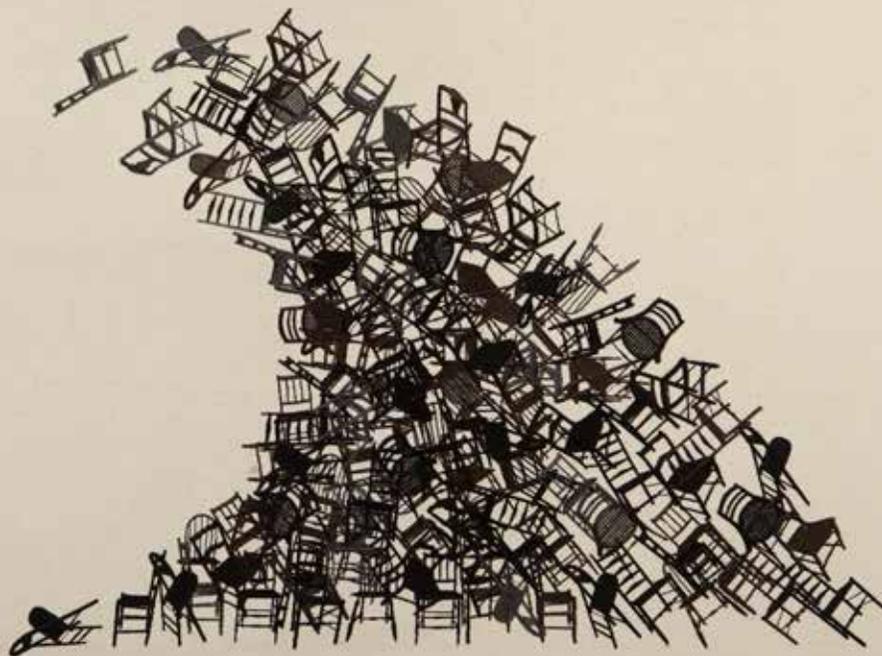
Q: What was the context for your other joint exhibitions?

G: The first exhibition (1980’s) was in memory of my mother, Julia’s grandmother Alice Welsh Jenkins. The show was entitled *Alice, Gayle and Julia*. Although Alice painted beautiful landscapes, she selected rather political subjects. Alice often illustrated tragic local news, such as flooding and the mining disasters in her native Pennsylvania. Our second exhibition (1990’s) was Julia’s and my reflection on the homeless population in Washington, DC using detritus we found on the street. Our last exhibition (*GAME I*, 2010) was at Leila Heller Gallery uptown. Julia’s work focused on the ravages to children from the cluster bombs dropped during the Iraq War. My paintings highlighted the human rights issues, along with the culture I observed while living in the Middle East.

Q: What inspired you to create this body of work?

G: We constantly step back from our work and our world and question it. Sometimes everything seems like a game, including the art world. During the development of this project, Julia and I focused in on the theme of the political playground, especially considering the recent American election.

Julia Mandle, *Rising Tide*, 2012
Embroidery on canvas
23" x 37"



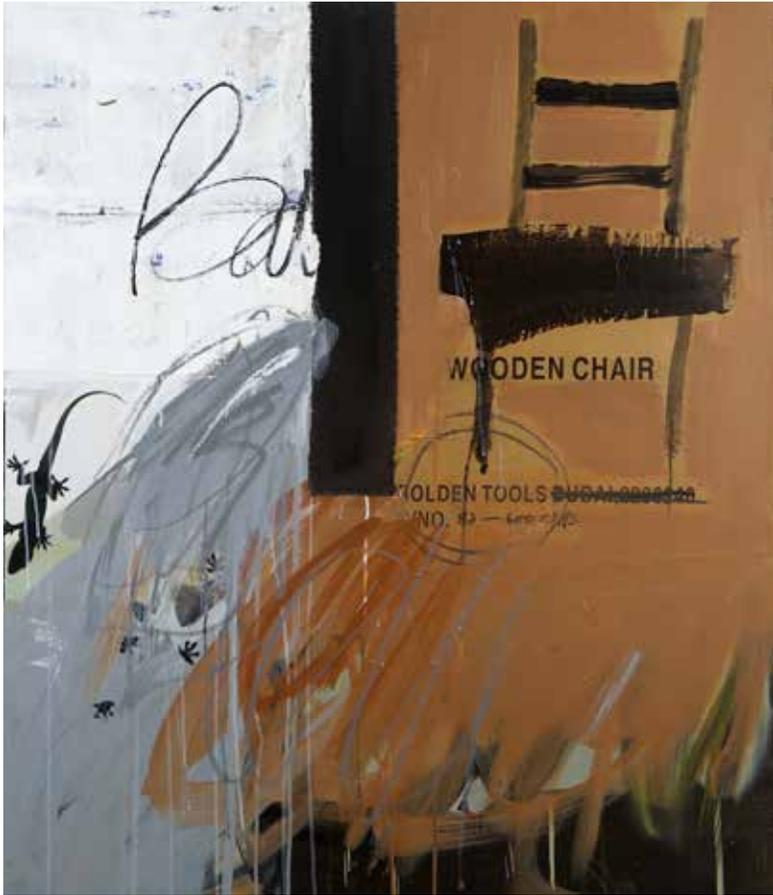
Gayle Wells Mandle



Libro D'Oro, 2012
Multimedia acrylic
painting on canvas
60" x 48"



Stacking the Odds, 2012
Multimedia acrylic painting on canvas
60" x 48"



Teeter, 2012
Multimedia acrylic painting on canvas
47" x 39"

Julia Mandle



Unraveling (detail), 2012
Embroidery on fabric
28" x 18"



Rising and Falling, 2012
Embroidery on canvas
39" x 18"



In de War (Confusion) Two, 2012, charcoal on fine art paper, 42" x 29"

Wells&Barnes



Portrait of a Revolutionary Four, 2012
Photograph
14" x 21"



Study for a Monument (detail), 2012
Wood, steel, cloth and paint
Variable dimensions



Group Portrait Three, 2012
Photograph
84" x 44"



Trophy Four, 2012
Miniature bronzes and fabric mounted
on custom wooden pedestal, 4"



Study for a Monument (detail), 2012
Wood, steel, cloth and paint
Variable dimensions

The mission of the Greater Reston Arts Center is to enrich community life by promoting involvement and excellence in contemporary visual arts.

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