

HEADS EXPLODE

interview by Bud Navero

ARTIST DIANE BUSH FIGHTS THE WAR ON "ERRORISM"

ong a politically provocative, technically virtuosic and slyly witty catalyst on Buffalo's photography scene, Diane Bush returns to town with a show worthy of the time we've spent awaiting her re-arrival. Her new show, including *Warheads* and *Talking Pictures*, is at the Burchfield-Penney Arts Center through July 12. Bush also recently published a substantial book of the *Warheads* images with KuDa Editions.

A Kenmore native, Bush, like many Americans, experienced the horrors of war for the first time in the evening news footage from Vietnam. She graduated from high school and emigrated to England with a draft dodger, where she became well known for her starkly brilliant portraits of working-class life.

Upon returning to the US, she taught college photography classes, contributed to group shows and concentrated on form and technique, while absorbing the technologization of modern America, especially the emergence of the video screen as the new heroic vista, and its consonant flattening of attention, perception and reaction in an increasingly sleep-walking culture.

The ongoing status-quo of the Bush wars, begun in Desert Storm and carried into today's news, forced a response. Her current show displays a portion of that ongoing project. It is at once, witty, sad, angry, instructive and, hopefully, stimulating, so that anyone who experiences it will leave with a renewed sense of the need for an active participation in the world we share with the rest of humanity. We got together at SPoT Coffee, where she let me pick her brain.

Bud Navero: *Warheads* and Bush. I think part of the real achievement of this show is that you don't fall into the trap of most political art—the strident sledgehammer ideology that gets one's eyes to rolling and glazing over. There's a lot of humor here.

Diane Bush: It's probably the only way to do it. Look at Jon Stewart's success with *The Daily Show*. If I am ashamed about the present conflict, I am proud to live somewhere that people can still joke about it. Let's hope that freedom endures.

BN: Your work has a very pop feel to it, a tinge of lunacy lurking at some very serious edges.

DB: War is a big part of our pop culture. I remember being horrified, like so many others, by the television images of the Vietnam War, seeing those images come right into the comfort of our living rooms. Suddenly, television screens usually full of harmless, comfy images were terrifying us with what we saw.

Warheads is definitely an extension of that Vietnam experience.

When the [first] Gulf War started, I was stunned. I thought it was going to be like the present war, another prolonged Vietnam. I couldn't go to the front lines as a traditional photojournalist, so I created a body of work called *Suppose They Gave a War and Nobody Had Cable?* where I photographed images from television for all 43 days of the war, including shots of the television talking heads with distorted faces. I was so outraged by this latest Iraqi War that I decided that I had to express that outrage through photography, or leave the country again. Leaving



was not an option. I'm not 18, and I have too many ties here.

For the *Warheads* series, I knew I wanted to use images to show the violence of war, to shock people out of their complacency. So I took previously shot footage and violated the surface of the print with my favorite photo tool: potassium ferricyanide [bleach], creating these unexpected emulsion explosions. I ended up with images of insulated, glamorous, dashing newsmen and dolled-up female anchors in the midst of an explosive fiery mayhem. You know, somewhere it should make you think of the juxtaposition of these people in a studio with lattes and makeup artists presenting Hollywood gossip as real news, suddenly invaded by the horrors they should really be reporting. The least I can hope for is that people are a little unsettled.

BN: What I love about this show is how you reconstitute the television image. Because even horrific war footage doesn't get our attention anymore.

DB: I think you are right. Plus, it seems so far away, something that is happening to someone else. That's why I like the illusion of the destruction happening in the TV studio, not half the world away. These TV anchors have become our friends, and now they are being [symbolically] blown up.

BN: There's an inevitable curiosity about the actual process you use to create these images, how you transform the omnipresently banal television screen into something immediate and startling.

DB: I shoot with a macro lens so I can isolate a single pixel and let it bleed, in a way, as the image spreads out. Hal Leader at Printing Prep did a great job making new *Warheads* prints here in Buffalo for me.

BN: *Talking Pictures* presents a different kind of grabber.

DB: *Talking Pictures* is a bit lighter—or perhaps not lighter, just the absurd side of the coin. It allows us to laugh at some of the almost indescribable stuff swirling around us. It's more interactive. After all, we're all in this together. The audience gets to create their own chaos!

BN: I notice that President Bush makes an appearance.

DB: That's the most recent piece. The images are mounted so that they look like a bank of monitors. Each has a button you can push to activate the sound. You can hear each frame individually, or have many going at a time—often with surprising, funny or pathetic results. Like the soap opera piece where the ditzy babe loses it on the phone, screaming, "You stole my baby! How could you, Amber? How could you do that to me?"

BN: Pound said the artist's responsibility was to "make it new." The age-old purpose is to "teach and delight." In the midst of so much ongoing disturbance, thanks for doing all those things.

DB: Sure. My reward is watching people laugh as they play the *Talking Pictures*, and if the *Warheads* strike a nerve, I am very pleased.

BN: So, what would please me, and I'm sure others who come to see this show, would be to know where I can see the full portfolio of *Warheads*.

DB: Easy. That's why God made Web sites. She posted mine at www.diane bush.net. Enjoy!

