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Frank Selby: We Weren't Never Here
By Greg Lindquist
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Frank Selby, *Hollywood Forever 2008* 2008 graphite on polyester, 9 x 11 inches (2 sheets)
Courtesy of the artist and Museum 52

Frank Selby's meticulous drawings and paintings investigate the relationships between image and text, photograph and subject, absence and presence. Separating text and image from Civil War historical sources, Selby at once expresses formal and intellectual expressions of memory. "We Weren't Never Here," Selby's exhibition at Museum 52's new Lower East Side location, examines the inherent distance and disconnection resulting from photographic and textual documentation of an event.

Uncovering a sense of presence through an implied absence, these drawings and paintings explore a peculiar, discontinuous narrative. Selby's images largely depict the aftermath of and moments encircling—not the actual battles—the Civil War. While this choice reflects Selby's interest in absence, it is also dependent on the available historical sources that in contradistinction to modern war photography have little record of battle scenes. In compensation for this lack of documentation, photographers often found solutions in dragging bodies across battlefields, composing and constructing images.

In *Hollywood Forever* (all works 2008), a pair of roughly legal size graphite on polyester drawings, Selby depicts mirror-image Civil War graveyards, installed as a diptych. Faint, delicate and ghostly, the polyester has the appearance of vellum, suspended in a floating frame. The reflected image recalls a photograph printed from both sides of a negative. The thematic thread of symmetry and reflection runs through Selby's work in imagery and text alike. In *Tilicho Lake*, an ink and watercolor painting on polyester, an expanse of trees are mirrored below in the body of water. In the ink and watercolor painting on polyester, *Monumentnemunom*, Selby playfully nods to Ruscha's palindromes in his title while depicting an arch constructed for Civil War victims. The lack of specific information linking these drawings to the Civil War is characteristic of Selby's work. Just as the graveyard could seemingly be anywhere and anytime, the silhouetted figures in *Stare into the Lake Astonished*, appear anachronistically placed within seeming suburban houses in the background even though this drawing has the atmospheric, Romantic appeal of a David Caspar Friedrich scene.

Selby cites as influence the work of the logician Charles Peirce, who began writing on the theory of sign relations in the 1860s, curiously contemporaneous with the Civil War. Developing a triadic notion of signs, Peirce understood logic as a formal semiotic. One of Peirce's modes, the index, involves a sign that establishes its relation to the object through an actual connection and physical relationship. Smoke coming from a building is an index of fire, a footprint an index of the foot and a photograph an index of the physical imprint of light on photosensitized paper. In this sense, the index implies the original object or event through its residue and, ultimately, its absence. If the photography, by this logic, is an index also of an experience (specifically the Civil War), then for Selby, these drawings are an index of the photographs. In this daisy chain of logic, the drawings are that much more a distanced representation of the original experience.

In the drawings of text, Selby's process is one of subtraction, removing words and image from pages in his final renderings. It's Damned Bad, is sprinkled one quarter of the way down an otherwise blank legal size sheet of polyester; in Mexico, Selby excises blocks of illustration and text, leaving jagged chunks of text. Although the polyester resembles vellum, it is important to note that these are not tracings, even in the drawings composed of simply text. Not only does the polyester's opacity not allow it, close inspection of the drawings reveals minute errors in copy and translation from the original photographic and textual sources.

The distancing through photographic source in Richter's October 18, 1977 series come to mind with Selby's use of historical material, while Selby's craft evokes Vija Celmins' drawings. Conceptually ambitious and formally accomplished, Selby's drawings and paintings engage a wide range of ideas. One might ask whether these combinations of text, image and concepts are an idiosyncratic amalgam, in a way similar to Luc Tuymman's recent Chelsea exhibition that addressed the legacy of Disneyland through indiscernible, almost abstracted depictions of its obscure and obscured signifiers. One would hardly recognize the subject of any of those paintings as Disneyland without the didactic press release. In Selby's case, without knowledge of the conceptual grounding and historical context, the work strongly stands on its formal merits, leaving question of the purpose of disjointed image and text.