



Dee Dee Faces the Abyss, But Still Imagines Utopia
Essay by Susan Noyes Platt
Included in DeeDee Does Utopia, Deborah Faye Lawrence, 2007

“Hope of a secure and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists who are dedicated to Justice, Peace and Brotherhood.” Martin Luther King, *Strength to Love* 1963

“Utopia is racial, gender, sexual, class equality and justice ...” John Jota Leños 2004

Dee Dee Does Utopia speaks to our disrupted and despotic world, offering possibilities for another future. When George W. Bush received a second term as President in 2004, Deborah Lawrence alleviated her despair by sending an e-mail query “what does utopia look like to you?” Almost 100 people suggested ideas such as libraries, beaches, well-fed children, happy pets, equality, tolerance, joy, and women’s rights.

Paired with these hopes, Lawrence presents the dark realities of neoconservative war mongering and torture.

The artworks incorporate quotes from her email query combined with utopian and post-utopian thinkers like Thomas More, Jorge Luis Borge, Aldous Huxley and Alfred McCoy (a writer on the history of CIA torture). Words collaged from large individual letters frame some images like ransom notes. In others, words inhabit thought balloons, circles, swags and waves. They encircle and entangle the collages in layers of ideas forcing us to read and think as we look at the imagery.

Subtly composed of thousands of sources, Lawrence's collages include complex compositions, brilliant color, and a wild sense of humor and fantasy (as the Hindu god surfing in *Beachtopia* or the monk watching television in *Bibliotopia*). In addition, there are deadly facts. *Psychotopia* is a hellishly orange work including Lyndie England at Abu Ghraib, the blindfolded lady of Justice, and details from the nightmarish scenes of Hieronymous Bosch. *Super Macho Jingtopia*, in contrast, declares its hyper-masculine center, reinforced symmetrically by two alpha males against the crowds of mindless sycophants and the texts of war-mongers.

For many years, Lawrence has combined political concerns with humor in her sophisticated art. She is a direct descendent of artists like German Dadaists Hannah Hoch and John Heartfield. Like them, she cuts up the magazines of capitalism to comment on the ills of society, or to present alternatives. She frequently uses tin television tray as a surface for collage. Their cultural overtones, including passivity and oppression, fit well with her social commentary.

Deborah Lawrence uses her power as a visual artist to speak up against injustice and fascism. As she opposes the demonizing language and imagery that dominates our contemporary culture, she offers us a dizzying array of alternatives.