

MARK LOMBARDI: CASINO RESORT DEVELOPMENT... AND CHARLES KEATING... (1995)

JULIE LANGSAM

This text is an edited version of the audio commentary recorded by Julie Langsam as part of the Zimmerli Art Museum's audio guide for the exhibition *Art=Text=Art: Works by Contemporary Artists* (September 4, 2012 – January 6, 2013). No passage of this text may be reprinted or quoted without permission from the author. To obtain permission, please contact Marilyn Symmes at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey: msymmes@zimmerli.rutgers.edu.

I first saw Mark Lombardi's work during the late 1990s in a group show at The Drawing Center in New York City. I remember being immediately struck by the physical beauty of his drawings: the intricacy of the image; the delicacy and specificity of the line; the elegance of the overall web-like form. I also remember the jolt of excitement I felt when I realized that the labyrinthine arrangements of interconnected nodes and links were diagrams of the complex and often opaque recorded relationships between the rarefied worlds of banking, arms trade, finance, and politics.

Take a close look at *Casino Resort Development in the Bahamas c. 1955-89 (fourth version)* and *Charles Keating—ACC-Lincoln Savings Irvine CA—Phoenix AZ ca. 1978-90 (fifth version)*, both of which Lombardi completed in 1995. Each of the elements in this web refers to a real person, company, place, or relationship—all based on information that the artist gleaned exclusively from the public record. In their historical accuracy and grand scale, Lombardi's works allude to the academic tradition of history painting exemplified throughout art history by artists from Raphael to Géricault. From 1994 until his death in 2000, Lombardi created many drawings like the two on view in this exhibition, yet the grand scale of the series takes nothing away from the individual relevance of each drawing. In fact, in some ways, the specificity of the information included in each piece lends a sense of both timeliness and timelessness to the work. These are all the same scandals—just called by different names.

Each time I view Lombardi's work, I feel like a co-conspirator in Lombardi's exposé of deceit, cover-ups, and corporate and government malfeasance. I am a voyeur observing Lombardi as he draws; in deciphering and

displaying this information, he untangles a knot. The process is slow, painstaking, detailed, and laborious, yet ultimately fulfilling. In viewing these drawings I experience a sort of self-satisfaction, as if I am somehow taking part in the exposé. The corrupt Machiavellian networks and associations that Lombardi reveals are seductive in their complexity and their familiarity.

Language plays an interesting role in Lombardi's work in terms of both his subject and his image. Words like *intrigue*, *scheme*, *tangled*, and *convoluted* describe the subject of the drawing but also refer to phrases such as “spinning a web” or “weaving a plot,” which in turn refer to the work as a whole image. This circling around and doubling up of meaning functions in much the same way as Lombardi's network mapping, creating maze-like scaffolding on which the information rests. Likewise, words like *strategy*, *systems*, and *hierarchy* explain the nature of the content as well as the process by which it is visually organized.

That these “narrative structures” (to use Lombardi's term) describe the nefarious interactions between myriad political, social, and economic forces does not interfere with the formal beauty of the drawings. Through the quality of the line, each drawing commands attention in a reserved, quiet, self-possessed manner. The images resemble abstractions of celestial diagrams or some form of archaic cartography. The obsessive nature of both research and process is evident; here, the artist acts as a filter for a vast quantity of esoteric data. In the end, the confluence of Lombardi's single-mindedness and attention to detail, coupled with his subtle and sensitive handling of material and image, ultimately forms the basis of the stories he tells us—narratives that unfortunately never grow old.

Julie Langsam, Assistant Professor at Mason Gross School of the Visual Arts at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, is a painter whose work addresses issues of style, beauty, and idealization by combining images that reference the romantic sublime of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century's utopian ideals of High Modernism.