Memorial days

Arthur Danto curates a show in remembrance of 9/11. By Reena Jana

Three years ago, on the first anniversary of September 11, critic and philosopher Arthur Danto wrote an essay for The Nation describing an imaginary exhibition—his selections for "true 9/11 art." The choices were wildly disparate, even oblique: Audrey Flack’s watercolors of Montauk fishing boats, for instance, and Robert Zakanitch’s paintings of lace—but not one image of planes or burning buildings. On September 7, "The Art of 9/11" opened at Apex.

It’s more of an act of piety. In other words, rather than playing the role of a conventional curator, Danto sees his effort as an imaginative way for him, and the artists involved, to express their reverence for the victims and survivors.

Even the distinguished professor, although he’s now retired from his philosophy post at Columbia, Danto clarifies what he means by "an act of piety," relating the idea to a passage written by Ludwig Wittgenstein about the grief-stricken brother of Franz Schubert. After the composer’s death, he cut up pages of musical notation and distributed them to his brother’s anguished students. While this nontraditional act of mourning might strike some as disrespectful, Wittgenstein saw such spontaneous gestures as "pious" in the shadow of grief.

Danto compares such an intuitive, public mourning ritual to the creation of sudden shrines all over the city after the Twin Towers were attacked. In his curatorial statement for the Apex show, he writes that “people respond to tragedy with art... Artists, had they tried to do something in response to 9/11, could not have done better than the anonymous shrine-makers.” After the attacks, Danto began to informally survey his artist friends, asking how they responded to the event, directly or indirectly. Works in the show like Lucio Pozzi’s photographs of enigmatic forms, which evoke Minimalism more than terrorism, or Cindy Sherman’s photograph of a tragicomic clown may have some viewers scratching their heads. But Danto says of the pieces he chose, "it’s the context that infuses them with meaning."

Danto explains that his decision to include close friends, such as a former student (photographer Jeffrey Lohn) and his wife (painter Barbara Westman), is meant to illustrate how personal the experience of grief is. All of the artists he approached agreed to participate when informed he was turning his Nation piece into an exhibition, a fact that attributes not to his relationships with the artists, but to the integrity of the venue. "Apex Art is a nonprofit; if the exhibition were in a commercial gallery, I doubt they would all have agreed," Danto says.

The show’s location might also play a part. As Danto points out, Apex is located in Tribeca, not far from Ground Zero. But when asked about the fracas surrounding the Drawing Center’s proposed move to the International Freedom Center on the World Trade site and the ongoing debate about what art and architecture are appropriate there, Danto says that his exhibition is inspired only by his essay and that the timing is a coincidence, and not necessarily political.

So why stage the show at all, if Danto already made his point in 2002? "Steven Rand [founder and director of Apex] had been asking me to curate a show for some time, and this just seemed right," Danto says. He adds, "People will decide for themselves how to respond to the show. But the fourth anniversary of September 11 certainly marks a good time to reflect."

“The Art of 9/11” is at Apex Art through Oct 15 (see Elsewhere).