

## **'bare life' and the traumatic landscape : la conchita mon amour**

Christina McPhee in conversation with Amy Wiley \*

This interview was first published on [virose.pt](#) July 2006, and subsequently as a [contribution by ~~empyre~~ for the documenta 12 Magazine Project, 2007.](#)

*To live with the slide is to live in 'bare life'. But can 'bare life' be archived or even represented?*

On January 10, 2005 a devastating mudslide took ten lives and left a huge mass of fallen mountain in the middle of the town, and buried 10 men, women and children. The survivors continue to live there with the evidence of disaster in the middle of their built environment and with the certain knowledge that there will be more debris flows, potentially massive and fatal, in future winters. They have constructed shrines and memorials to the dead on and around the slide, which covers several blocks, leaving ruins of houses amidst rubble and the encroaching weeds and grasses. The town occupies a narrow strip of coastal littoral and sea cliff above successive strips of beach, highway and rail bed, including the main coastal freeway north of Los Angeles. Rising marine temperatures in the process of global warming, affect the frequency of sudden winter storms that bring the heavy rains likely to trigger debris flow. The facing rincon, or slope, above the town's narrow strip of land, is laced with internal springs. Built over the Red Mountain fault, which may deliver as much as an M 7 tremor, the village is also sited on an ancient sea cliff that formed from a landslide in Holocene times. Debris flow mobilizes at regular intervals according to a century of recorded observations, dramatically changing the topography of ravines and slope from year to year. A 1995 debris flow onto La Conchita is thought to have released only ten percent of its potential mass, and that possibly, the 2005 flow is a remobilization, or sequelae to the 1995 flow. The complex natural process is met with an array of improvised responses in the cultural landscape. Residents resort to lawsuits, vernacular building projects, memorial festivals and grass roots political efforts. They recount stories of the lost ones, they say that the slide doesn't matter, or that they cannot leave. To live with the slide is to live in 'bare life'. But can 'bare life' be archived or even represented?

Recently, the Documenta 12 Magazine Project editors put forth a question – "What is Bare Life?" Bare life "...underscores the sheer vulnerability and complete exposure of being. Bare life deals with that part of our existence from which no measure of security will ever protect us. But as in sexuality, absolute exposure is intricately connected with infinite pleasure. There is an apocalyptic and obviously political dimension to bare life (brought out by torture and the concentration camp). There is, however, also a lyrical or even ecstatic dimension to it – a freedom for new and unexpected possibilities (in human relations as well as in our relationship to nature or, more generally, the world in which we live) Here and there, art dissolves the radical separation between painful subjection and joyous liberation. But what does that mean for its audiences?"

In the following conversation, the artist reflects on double consciousness involved in performative documentary and installation. As a witness, she is creating work while both inside the aftermath horror of catastrophe, and in absentia, on the edge of amnesia. She scouts the landscape of trauma using figuration that derives from her experience of post traumatic stress visualization in the aftermath of violence.

This conversation itself represents a kind of overwriting of narrative, performance, and experience. The original exchange took place impromptu on July 22, 2006. Christina then recreated the conversation from memory, and finally, Amy reworked the text. As such, it represents not a clear, "truthful" documented experience but, instead, a representative performance of shared memory as consciously constructed, mutually mediated narrative.

CM From the beginning, La Conchita was seductive, a quick flash on the freeway north of Los Angeles in 2004. Then the mudslide happened at La Conchita in January 2005, I didn't want to go there. I was too afraid to go experience the slide in the middle of the town. Afraid of what I might feel about it and pretty sure that I had some kind of call to study the site.

AW: And yet, it drew you to it, almost compulsively, it seems. How did you introduce yourself to the site? Did you jump in with both feet, or did you allow yourself to approach it gradually?

CM It was not until around September 2005 that I started to go there every few weeks, to photograph and make videos of the site of the mudslide. Since then people keep putting up shrines to the dead and then maintaining the shrines, building gardens on the mudslide, renewing the posters and photographs in laminated plastic sleeves, refreshing votive candles, leaving little scraps of letters or prayers to the dead. I feel I move in a trance like attentiveness. I return every month. I document changes around the 10 acres of debris flow remnant, a pile of mud and rock, right in the middle of this little beach town, and underneath there lie the dead ones who

can never be recovered. I resonate to 'hole in the world,' inside me, inside this place, a double overtone. The shock of what has happened, it's been erased and not erased at the same time. In the beach town of La Conchita, getting up and leaving on the freeway for work in Santa Barbara or Carpinteria. Stopping off at the town's one retail spot, the gas station and convenience store. Kids play in the street after school. Dogs and cats hang out; the seller of avocados, oranges and sweet shrimp opens and closes. People seem to be trying to have an ordinary life in the middle of the aftermath of catastrophe. And even though they know there will be more mudslides. The traumatic event is not just in their past but in their present and future. It's like they are living in a state of suspension or even exception, such that the ordinary rules of life are mimicked. But it can never be ordinary life there. It's like a state of 'bare life'', to borrow loosely from Giorgio Agamben. I think it's important for me to visit the town again and again, in regular intervals, with time away to reflect, to edit the images, to make drawings. These are in their way aftereffects or aftershocks, I guess.

AW: So you move slowly, to introduce yourself to the experience narratively rather than reiterate the traumatic event per se. Not that narrative can be avoided--narrative is always part of some system. As soon as you think about how to describe what happened you are already part of the community voice, the narrative of lived experiences. There's a convergence between what you're talking about and how you're talking about it that I find compelling.

CM When I am there, shooting, talking with people, moving in slow motion through the alleys, in the shade of the banana gardens, I feel an absencing, or, a phenomenology of absence. I feel checked out, robotic, ecstatic. I work well with my cameras in this state. I learned how to observe like this through trying to recoup pain and abstract it. Like, remaining able to stand the pain of emotional and sexual assault. You will put yourself up on the ceiling, like a fly on the ceiling and watch what was happening to your body, so that you will separate your soul from your body; so in a sense to stay conscious you have to anaesthetize yourself against the pain. If you experience the pain directly, without absencing, you are, you become, 'bare life', you become speechless, more than aphasic, really gone. The you of your body feels gone. Your mouth doesn't work. You can't form words. You can't breathe a word. You can never say 'what happened.'

AW So the experience of pain is pulling you out of the narrative. Out of ordinary time and the everyday illusion of flow. Outside the system of community. In almost every other situation, outside of trauma or pain, narrative is always already part of the community of meaning, because as you are doing these things in your daily life -- going to the store, making a salad, - you also planning to assign meaning to them, so you are not as one with or part of the moment. It's analogous to the situation in which you are not really listening to another person because you already anticipate what they are going to say, your mind is racing ahead to form the words of what you are going to say in a moment. So you aren't present to it in the way you'd be if you were experiencing it as such.

CM For Agamben, 'bare life' is exposed by the actions of democratic states, as they suspend their own rule of law, in the name of war against terrorism. The state itself has declared a suspension of its own rule of law in the name of a state of exception, in a status of permanent emergency. I have felt that an analog condition plays itself out at La Conchita. People there have to live in a permanent state of emergency. Nothing is happening to 'fix' the geologic landscape: some think that it can be fixed, that it is the fault of government or the avocado growers. Actually though there's no way that the site is ever going to be safe. Yet people persist in living there. They endure this suspension of ordinary life by living in 'bare life' and at the same time they try to forget about the pain in order to go on living everyday life. So what I wonder about is how there could be an analogy in to the state of exception Agamben describes. It would appear, so far, that government services are not available to clean up the site or to help people move elsewhere. They cannot leave. They cannot sell their houses. They are stranded. The hope of a continuing social contract, between the state and the citizens, that in times of disaster, we can expect some disaster relief, flies in the face of the evidence that this landscape, at any rate, is not going to get help. And what has happened here can happen to many coastal towns in many places around the world, with the advent of rapid climate change in combination with geologically generative and inherently unstable forces. Victims of disaster try to get on with their lives. I feel like I am like them, both in pain and 'checked out''. Simultaneously anaesthetized against pain by the surface paradise of southern California, and in shock from the pain. When I shoot photographs, it's always inevitable to anticipate and then to confront, at the turn of a corner, down the long view of an alley, the shock of the slide. It persists. When Ventura County put up an ineffectual chain link and 'keep out' / 'danger' signs around the mudslide, within a few days after January 10, La Conchita residents quickly retaliated. They breached the fence and set up a sprinkler system so that they could make a memorial banana garden on top of the slide. The rebellion but also the chain link itself bears witness to a breakdown of the relationship of trust that underpins the rule of law. La Conchita is not viable, never will be viable, never will be safe, indeed it is hazardous on even days of moderate rain. La Conchita flies in the face of the California dream of paradise living. Or maybe paradise is off the edge, in a bare life zone where the future doesn't matter anymore. Maybe the only thing that matters is the presence of the dead. The people of La Conchita are

defiant towards the perceived indifference of government. I wonder if they sense that the state may never help them and that their gestures to get media attention are just a way of branding their disaster. Landscape of trauma is another media moment. It recalls Bjork's song: "State of emergency/ that's where I want to be/" I feel like I too am implicated in this breakdown. I can't help them either. Or can I?

AW. And yet, that kind of apparent rupture is essential to the system as a whole. A hegemonic system always makes space for an element of resistance to the system within it, and this validates the dominant narrative by negative example. The PRI in Mexico used to fund the Communist party so that they would control it. Things that appear to be acts of rebellion against the state are always already part of the system, continuing in the same hegemony. Althusser described exactly that kind of self-perpetuating system in his writings on what he called the Ideological State Apparatus; in this case, it sounds as if the institutions are trying to regulate not the people but the people's relationship to the governmental institutions through the "meaning" of the land itself. The ineffectual chain link fence you describe seems like a reminder of the government's inability to control the earth's narrative and simultaneously, a reminder that the people need those institutions to help them narrate the traumatic event. How are the residents themselves attempting to regulate or narrate the mudslide?

CM At La Conchita, lawsuits by the residents are proliferating against whomever could be identified as a culprit in 'causing' the mudslide, such as the county of Ventura. People are trying to assert their rights, their property rights, and their sense of having been wronged. They believe that the state of California participates in the neglect of their situation. They're trying to build a story of La Conchita, to attract the attention of the governor and the press. Some have approached me to hire me to make a film about their story. They want to use the film to make the case for the town's comeback. They want to disprove that La Conchita's site, built over a major fault, is subject to the delicate balances of an unstable sea cliff, itself the remnants of an ancient slide. There's no way to be safe there. But to recognize this as a fact would make the harsh truth that they can't sell out and leave, insupportable. The shock of what has happened there makes it impossible to deal with it except in a series of delays. People stay in some kind of cycle of forgetting because of the shock of what they saw on that day.

AW Trauma, shock, pain.... The way you get out of a system would be akin to the experience of pain. Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* really drove this point home for me: that pain is a purely physical experience out of time and narrative, I mean. And her ideas echo very strongly what I hear you describing about the people's experiences of the mudslide: pain, the rupture of narrative, just is, and that's all it is at the moment in which it occurs. The space of the pain has no meaning. On the other hand, fear is the anticipation or memory of the loss of narrative or meaning, and that makes me think of narrative itself as the attempt to alleviate or displace fear. But pain itself pulls you outside the system into a zone of pure experience. Does the experience of your art reproduce a similar rupture of narrative to that of pain, or does the making oscillate between rupture and reincorporation through narration?

CM Optical observation is constantly being overwritten by a haptic, visceral response to repetitive shots of the ruins. The half buried houses are cloaked in spring flowers, then choked in noxious weeds, or engulfed in fresh shoots of willow, quick-drawn, captured and released, seized and spent. I shoot hundreds of digital photographs using a Nikon digital SLR, along with dozens of medium format photographs. It seemed right to start making a database of straight, Magnum-style documentary transparencies from the film shots. I saw, when I scanned them into the computer, they were tending to mimic something out of sixties new wave cinema. I had an instinct that I must desaturate them and intensify the contrast. Semantics desired, especially, from Renais. Hiroshima mon amour inspires montage of obsessive repetition of image fragments in a visual relentlessness that forces delays, jumps starts, and returns da capo al fine; and the way that the main characters in Duras' story admit to the necessity of amnesia. "I will forget you." The love carries the forgetting. I love the 'little shell' and in the same moment I wish to forget her. Maybe I do participate in the town's obliteration, its 'oubliette', by desaturation and image manipulation. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze speculates that the digital information images [only] have the power to turn back upon themselves. A process of decomposition of the photographic images into long arias or arrays with much ambient black zoning, often in the middle of the tableau makes it not possible to grasp things altogether, rather with peripheral sensing.

AW I've noticed you also make drawings, conceptual drawings, of the debris flow—but there's so much more of the hand than the apparatus in those. How do those fit in?

CM I make those not on site but in the studio, away from the site. Those debris flow drawings are in pencil and black ink on creamy fine sheets, a sensual, skin-like quality, as if the drawings are tattoos. They might be stop action animation stills. They look to me like they could be the moment-by-moment fall of the slope above La Conchita. I leave the paper pretty well unscathed except for the falling lines.

AW So the debris flow is like the split in consciousness. You seem to show in them how you split from the body in order to avoid the experience of pain. Fragmentation becomes atomization. The

debris flow drawings retrofit the energy of the split, the energy produced by diverting away from consciousness. Negative energy. When the angle of repose is superseded, the debris flow occurs.

CM They give me some relief from the inarticulate, the hole in the world.

AW They hold an energy produced by absences, unlike your strike/slip seismicity drawings, wherein energy that is produced by contact—a metaphor of the transform faulting, along the San Andreas Fault in California. The drawings look and feel like the experience of a psychic split; the drawings are about the attempt to absent oneself. Your process of drawing requires you to go to the place of observation and simultaneous unconsciousness.

CM Abstracting it, taking it apart, fragmenting it into study sheet after study sheet, second by split second. The drawings imply the next moment, and the next, and the next but in a repetitive cycle as if not being able to turn away from seeing the moments unfolding. The slide never completing.

AW This way you can bear witness to the traumatic event. But the wonderful thing about this — about art, any art—is that this can be healing thing because the drawing is in fact a kind of reintegration or reorganization. The drawings represent what you've been through and what you want: reintegration—but at that paradox of location. The consciousness is attempting to achieve balance by absenting itself—the psychic split represented by the debris flow itself—and, at the same time, reordering itself relative to the memory of pain. Though these drawings, you communicate, or actually, perform the destruction and construction of meaning at the same time. In terms of performance, however, there's a fundamental problem that erupts again and again: How can you communicate (re- present) trauma and the experience of violence without reinscribing it on the audience, or even re-experiencing it yourself?

CM There's no way you can know La Conchita's trauma by studying it as an exemplar. Nor can you understand it just by having a look around. Even though the mudslide is right there decorated, amongst flowers and crosses and Buddhas.

AW Usually there's some kind of critical apparatus or function a way of interpolating the experience into an already accepted structure for meaning.

CM Traumatic landscapes are phenomena at the edge of visual memory structures. La Conchita attracted me because it seems to play out a series of displaced references. The ruins topography at La Conchita are displacements, a series of delays. For one of the videos for La Conchita mon amour, I've integrated the still photography into standard and HD animated video just so as to move the time in a remix of four strands of video and stills. La Conchita mon Amour (TAO) privileges the strange voice and electronic composition of Kyong Mee Choi, to be the carrier of a movement forward: the soul of the place in agony, ironically 'tao' -- implying balance or evenness. For the visual editing, in late 2005, I first went to the Experimental Television Center in upstate New York, last winter (November 2005) . There, I worked with their special analog sequencers, to destroy the continuity of four lines of video signal (all of which were either standard video shot at La Conchita, stills or geologic and topographic visualizations). The mechanical rhythms of oscillation and recursion opened up images hypnotically.

AW What you've done in this is to find a way through representative echoes, phenomenological echoes, to reproduce the energy of the event and still walk the line, between making it into many fragments (via the critical function), and the experience of the moment of pain itself.

CM Yes: La Conchita recalls the appearance and disappearance and reappearance from the underworld performed by Persephone, the daughter of the earth goddess, Demeter, in Greek myth. Persephone goes to the underworld, where Hades, who has made her his wife, has captured her. Demeter, left alone above ground, nearly dies of grief. Since she's a goddess she can't die, but the earth turns to winter. All the plants die and the animals and people starve. Finally she strikes a deal with Hades to let her beloved daughter return every spring. The promised one returns. She is always en train de something else, becoming someone and never totally actualizing as someone, a slippery girl. Deleuze refers to this figure as becoming-girl. In and out of the ground, her back and forth movement unfolds a virtual topography like a fugue. Recursive themes, like the coming slope collapse next time, like the return of the town, and the return of me and the cameras, reinforce congruence, or adaptive codependence, between the act of photography and the vernacular shrine making. I wonder if the documentary remit must forget that its own action is part of the same impulse to make a memorial. Performing its own becoming, and at a remove. Is shooting the evidence, like the hanging of a thing onto another thing, like a prayer flag with a heart onto a chain link fence at La Conchita?

AW A memorial is another type of double experience, like the traumatic memory. It is a spatial representation of a moment of absence, and, it echoes with that sense of meaning at a distance, at a remove but itself does not produce meaning. Memorials mimic the process of creating meaning, but there is no meaning because there is nothing there in the place of trauma. Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial turns black walls into sites of concentrated emotion, doesn't compensate for the loss,

and doesn't put it into any meaningful structure because you cannot justify that loss. Her design instantiates the experience of pain and violent loss but under cover of a meaning that isn't.

CM Perhaps there are no terms of rapprochement with La Conchita's ineluctable future, yet people keep trying to make it right, to make it a place of life, a place that matters. As do I, following in their trace. This paradox reflects on documentary art as ritual act. Ritual involves actions through intentions to nurture a belief or value of something that you hold precious. As an action of retracing the action, one further maintains that belief: it is through the recursion of the action that the ritual holds power.

AW You know, as you describe them, the shrines at La Conchita seem to desire stopping the perceived flow of time. The La Conchita memorial privileges the past. The memorials nullify what has happened and that also makes it seem as if it's over, as if there could be a frozen moment in the continuum that might be preserved. La Conchita wants to keep time away; to keep away the inevitable moment in the future when the debris flow will return. La Conchita is trying to stop time. The afterlife of the dead buried under the mud lives on in snapshots hung on the fences. The concept of paradise or heaven is itself another La Conchita, the dream of time as an integrated whole. Suicide bombers blow themselves up to make themselves meaningful. To stop time is to enter heaven.

La Conchita mon amour opened as a multimedia installation of photography, digital video, HD video and drawing at [Sara Tecchia Roma New York, New York in October 2006](#)

\* Christina McPhee is a California-based artist working across media with psychogeographic topologies. <http://christinamcphree.net>

Dr. Amy Wiley is a scholar of performance and narrative. She earned a PhD from the University of California-Davis in comparative literature. She teaches English and comparative literature at California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo.