

## **Aesthetics of Tragedy**

### **Ming C. Lowe Explores September 11**

**By Bruce Fessier**

Ming C. Lowe didn't think of herself as a serious photographer when she happened to chronicle 9/11 with a camera.

Lowe, 58, is a serious painter and pastels artist. For more than 30 years, she has isolated herself in the back roads of Palm Desert and Pinyon Crest working on her art, having occasional exhibitions and playing host to visiting artists and musicians like Gertrude Stein in 1920s Paris.

Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Famer Eric Burdon said in his 2001 autobiography that Lowe's home and studio are "a refuge from the madness of Hollywood; a great meeting place for artists and travelers attracted to the desert."

Lowe was planning to do things artists often do in Washington, D.C., when she visited her birthplace for the first time late Sept. 10, 2001. She awoke so happy the next morning, "I was actually dancing in my room."

She was staying in the Hotel Washington across from the White House. It was steeped in history, but noisy. A lot of sirens were going off. Then she looked out her window and saw smoke coming from a building.

"I turned on CNN and saw the Twin Towers," she said. "I thought it was a Schwarzenegger movie and I had the wrong station. I started changing channels and I said, 'Oh, my God.' "

Downstairs in the lobby, she heard someone exclaim, "Oh, my God. It's the Pentagon!"

Lowe had come east looking for things to paint. She had planned to visit foundries and factories in New England for an industrial series. She didn't develop her own photographs, so she viewed her photos as basically sketches for her real art.

But she was evacuated from her hotel on Sept. 11 and not allowed to return until 6 p.m. Then she turned on CNN and heard President Bush was flying to Washington from Florida. She looked out the window and saw his helicopter. Instinctively, she grabbed her 35mm camera and photographed it flying past flames near the White House.

This week, that picture is the centerpiece of her exhibition, "Here and There, 9/11," at Artspresso Gallery in Idyllwild. But back then, Lowe didn't know why she decided to take it. "It just sort of happened," she said from her house off a dirt road in Pinyon. "I wish I had 'decided' because I would have been much more diligent. I would have gotten better photographs and more of them."

Lowe was scared when they evacuated her. "I felt like a baby that was thrown in the middle of the ocean and couldn't swim," she said. But the really scary experience came the next day. Someone had seen her taking a picture of Bush's helicopter. "They came to my room and told me I had to close my curtains and I wasn't allowed to take any more photographs," she said. "They came in full combat gear and it was very frightening. Apparently, they had been scoping me. I went down and asked the manager later if they went to anybody else's room and he said, 'No.' I never saw anybody dressed like that again."

Lowe still took two photographs of guys in combat gear on the White House roof from her window. They're also included in this exhibit. But Lowe wasn't thinking about an art exhibit when she took them. "I took them because they were interesting," she said. "I'd never seen a photograph of the roof of the White House with a bunch of guys dressed in black with guns on tripods." Lowe stayed eight days in Washington before going on to a granite foundry in Barre, Vt. In one day, she visited several factories and got "just amazing"

stuff. But when she went south to New York, she was drawn to Ground Zero. A guard gave her access to a restricted area and she visited the decimated Twin Towers daily. But, after seeing the factories of Vermont, her emotional reaction fused with the aesthetic sensibility of her original mission.

"I think it was the aesthetics that was pulling me to take the photographs," she said. "When I first got all the way in, I looked up and I thought, 'This really is hell.' The second thing that came to my mind was it was like the Coliseum (ruins). It was pink and gold. I thought, 'This is so beautiful' -- aesthetically. An artist would understand.

"The other thing was, I didn't have reactions I thought I would. When you have a camera in your face and you're working to get photographs, you don't feel emotions. It's a strange thing. You're a machine. As bad as this was, I didn't really have feelings. But when I'd go back to my hotel room and lie down, I'd still have the smoke in my nose. And I'd start crying. I felt I was breathing in the people. The smell doesn't go away."

Lowe didn't see the artistic significance of her photos until this year. She had them developed at a store and they caused a local buzz. But they weren't printed as she envisioned them. Finally, after learning to print photos, the local fire chief came by to inspect her house. "I had a couple of the snapshots lying around to see how they would print up and he said, 'We were going to buy some for the fire house,' " Lowe said. "I started printing them myself and they became what I think are historical photographs."

She didn't want to do a just 9/11 retrospective. She had other photos she had taken and saved that somehow fit together. She had visited Morocco and Egypt in the 1990s and shot Muslim cultural life. She had covertly photographed St. Francis of Assisi's tomb as a young woman. To these she added her photos of an Idaho militia in an abandoned prison, a poster of missing 9/11 loved ones, the National Cathedral and Lincoln Memorial. She discovered they created an interesting juxtaposition with the White House and Ground Zero photos.

"I have a gallery in Idyllwild that lets me do what I want and I thought this could be a way of presenting some photographs I had been very fond of," she said. "You can see here and there, 9/11. Here and there would be Morocco and Egypt and then the roof of the White House and Ground Zero -- it just came together that way." Lowe would like to display her work at an East Coast gallery, but she wants people to appreciate the art, not the journalism.

"This is not a political statement," she said. "If someone comes in and they walk away with a certain feeling about it, then good. But that wasn't my point. It's just aesthetics."

-Bruce Fessier