

Michael Wilkinson Reflects on Repression, the Boston Bombings, and Pink Floyd in China



Michael Wilkinson introduces his exhibition at Pearl Lam Galleries, Shanghai

Courtesy Sam Gaskin

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Michael Wilkinson's "Lions After Slumber 11", etched mirror, 2013

[***Click to view images from "Michael Wilkinson: En Attendant".***](#)

SHANGHAI — In the late '70s, **Malcolm McLaren** and **Vivienne Westwood**'s punk culture store Seditonaries was decorated with wallpaper depicting Dresden after it was firebombed by the British during World War II. **Michael Wilkinson** drew inspiration from the wallpaper for his "Dresden" series, which, despite the name, shows images of his native Liverpool after it had been bombed by the **Luftwaffe** in 1944.

In a sad coincidence, the day that "Michael Wilkinson: En Attendant" opened at **Pearl Lam Gallery** in Shanghai — Monday April 15 — was also the day of the **Boston Marathon** bombings.

In his works, Wilkinson, born in 1965, brings figures from the margins of history into the foreground, focusing on small images taken during big events. "I've been interested in looking at the event from the perspective of these people, not the people who write the history books," he says.

In the show's title piece, Wilkinson blows up an image of a horse and carriage taken from a 19th century photograph of the **Hotel de Ville**, Paris, to near life size. [The original image](#) shows the building in ruins after it was set on fire by the **French Commune**, an early proletarian uprising, in 1871.

The exhibition also includes several portraits taken from images of the May 1968 civil unrest in Paris that started with student protests and grew to involve 11 million people. The portraits depict figures so small in the original images that they are reduced to a few Ben-Day dots in the 122x110cm works, which Wilkinson creates by scraping the silver off the back of mirrors.

"History inevitably becomes abstract, and yet it's totally specific — these particular people were in these particular places," Wilkinson says. "My works focus on ordinary people in extraordinary situations."

Speculation about who is responsible for the Boston Marathon bombings, why he/she/they did it, and the broad cultural significance of the event has already begun, but alongside the beginnings of historical abstraction, many heartbreaking stories have already emerged of ordinary people in this extraordinary situation. There's **Emily Locher**, for instance, a 37-year-old lawyer who endured a double mastectomy, continuing to train for the race while receiving chemotherapy, before being snapped by Getty photographer **Alex Trautwig**, hands at her mouth, walking back down the race course to find a friend.

The Boston Globe published a chronological [slideshow of race day images](#) taken from Instagram, which shows the expectation and enjoyment of the event giving way to confusion and desperation. These images might appear to be something like found Mark Wilkinson works — ordinary people



entering the margins of an event's historical record. (Of course, the people in the pictures are not *just* material for artistic appropriation, but neither were the victims of bombing in Liverpool and Dresden.)

Nevertheless, Wilkinson sees a marked distinction between the subjects of his works and images from the Boston Marathon bombings. "The violence portrayed in the images I use is mostly done by representatives of the state on members of the public or shows members of the public resisting that violence. I.e. the theme is that of repression. The only violence that I can think of in any meaningful way is that of resistance to an aggressor. I don't condone violence per se nor do I think the work I make spectacularizes the violent events it refers to. The images I use are iconic, they refer to significant moments in the history of struggle, the struggle of ordinary people to defend their interests. I can't see how this relates to bombing innocent people at a sporting event."

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