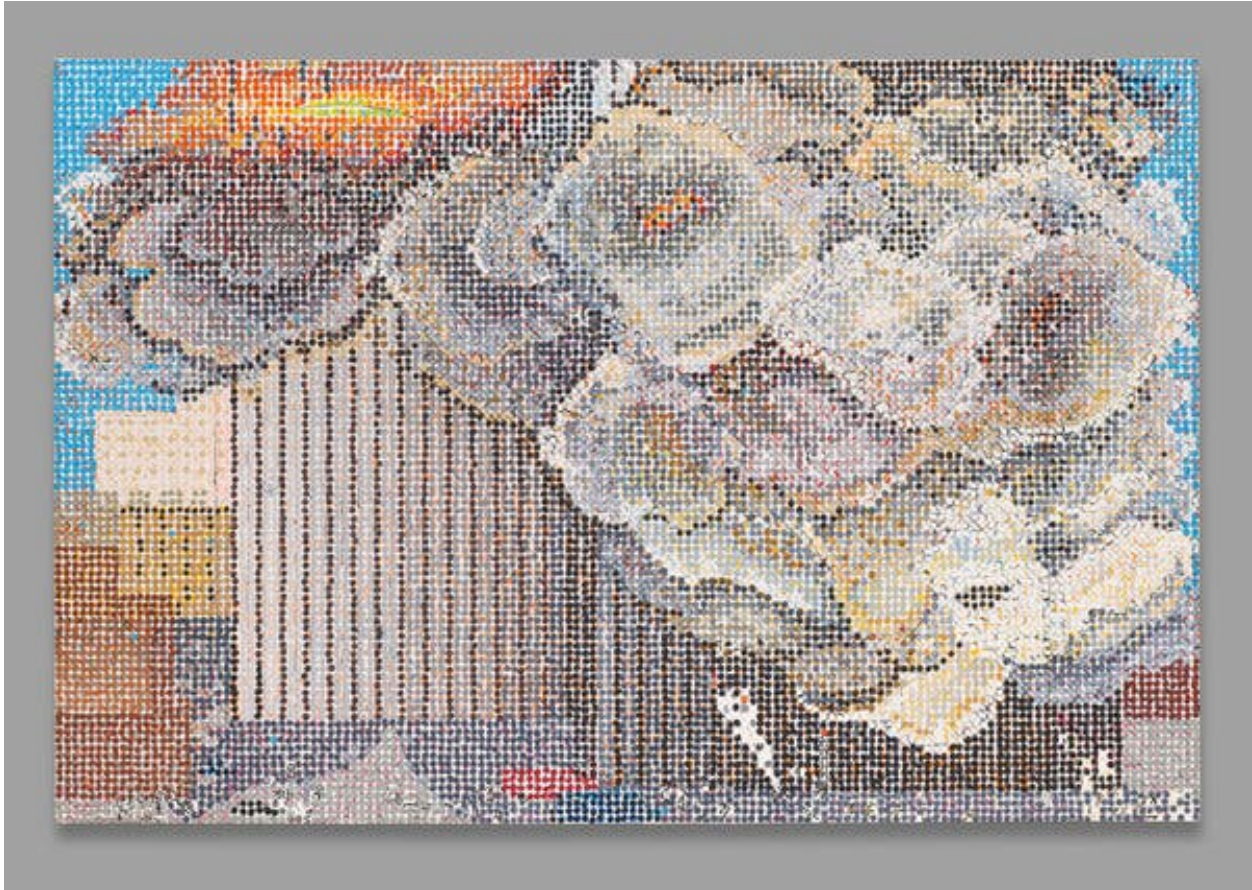


# The New York Times



The painting “Goodbye Bill,” by Jennifer Bartlett, from 2001, is titled in honor of Bill Biggart, a photographer who died beneath the collapsed north tower on Sept. 11. Credit: Jennifer Bartlett Trust, Marianne Boesky Gallery and Paula Cooper Gallery; Yale University Art Gallery

## Why Art Struggled to Address the Horrors of 9/11

By: Jason Farago  
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Weeks after the towers fell, Jennifer Bartlett started painting. She had watched them collapse from her roof that September, and in her studio in the West Village she began depicting what almost no one wanted to depict, in her style of solid dots daubed into a grid of little squares. Toward the edges the dots are that distinctive cloudless blue, but most squares she overlaid with two dots, or three, the gray of the smoke superimposed on the red or saffron of the fireball. The dots became embers of exploded airplanes, or TV screen pixels (we had no smartphones then); they were papers raining down on the financial district and the Battery. Across two squares Bartlett placed a figure, stylized like in a cave painting, feet over head. A diver.

By year’s end Bartlett had completed “Goodbye Bill” (2001) — titled in honor of Bill Biggart, a photographer who rushed downtown and died beneath the collapsed north tower — but she never showed it in New York. For just days after the catastrophe, American culture became a culture of prohibitions: a disciplined terrain where testimony was discouraged, and interpretation actively discredited. You could not look at the divers;

Richard Drew's photograph of a man falling headfirst from the north tower, for The Associated Press, appeared in The Times and other publications on Sept. 12 and then became taboo in American media for years thereafter. You could not invoke the attacks through metaphor, even accidentally; "Leaving on a Jet Plane" was pulled from the airwaves. On "Politically Incorrect," Bill Maher had disputed President George W. Bush's declaration of the terrorists as "cowards," to which Ari Fleischer, Bush's press secretary, retorted that public figures "need to watch what they say, watch what they do." The show was canceled by May.



"Tribute in Light" as seen from New Jersey on the 10-year anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks.  
Credit: Damon Winter/The New York Times

I was 18. To anyone 18 now, having grown up in an America so polarized that even a lethal virus has no shared significance, it's hard to convey the jingoistic unanimity that descended on American culture in the shadow of no towers. That first year admitted little beyond minimalist placeholders for grief, or trite odes of national resilience — "the kitschification of 3,000 people's deaths," as Philip Roth bewailed in 2002. Ambition like Bartlett's was rare; at best we got spare memorials like "Tribute in Light," which reinstated the absent skyscrapers downtown as spotlights, or John Adams's "On the Transmigration of Souls," a requiem backed by a recited list of the dead. It's an open question whether these genteel elegies were any more substantive than the tawdry 2002 Super Bowl halftime show, where Bono rasped "Where the Streets Have No Name" before a curtain with the victims' names, wearing a jacket lined with the Stars and Stripes. Either way: By 2003, when the Iraq War finally impelled American culture to rediscover its full civic purpose, it would be too late to bear witness to Sept. 11 on its own terms.



In "The 25th Hour," directed by Spike Lee, Edward Norton plays a drug dealer in grief-stricken New York who is preparing to go to prison for seven years. Credit: Walt Disney/Everett Collection



For a long time it was safer to go small. In December 2002, Neil LaBute's play "The Mercy Seat" boiled New York's mutilation down to the minimum: just two adulterers, in a Tribeca apartment with a view of the pile, ready to use 3,000 murders to escape their marriages. That same month Spike Lee's "25th Hour," the closest thing we have to a great Sept. 11 movie, used a mobster's last night before jail to plumb a wounded New York that had violently discovered its real place in the world. Paul Greengrass's "United 93" and Oliver Stone's "World Trade Center," both chastised as "too soon" even in 2006, narrowed their scope to just a few hours of dread. Were these not just disaster pictures, with jihadist terror serving the same narrative ends as an alien invasion, or a hurricane?

Though by 2006 Claire Messud could stretch past September to write "The Emperor's Children," the most humane of a spate of novels from the second Bush term set in the New York of a bewildering new century (see also: "Netherland," "Falling Man," "Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close"). It was a comedy of manners, with three friends grappling up the vines of Manhattan media, until, nine-tenths of the way through, one watches "the second plane, like a gleaming arrow, and the burst of it, oddly beautiful against the blue." Sept. 11 would change your life, but unpredictably, mundanely — your magazine launch is canceled, your boyfriend dumps you. On Sept. 14, two of Messud's heroes travel to Fort Greene in search of a missing relative; they look at the brownstones and think: *investment opportunity*.

The unrelated war in Iraq we prosecuted in the name of the dead animated American culture as Sept. 11 never did. Dixie Chicks denounced the rush to invasion; Green Day's "American Idiot" denounced our media's complicity. Muslim American playwrights faced down the country's prejudices; the characters in Wajahat Ali's "The Domestic Crusaders" and Ayad Akhtar's "Disgraced" appeared as alienated from their own families as from the country that had turned on them. Nas and Eminem, also Dead Prez, even Jadakiss flayed the administration, and American rappers redoubled their ire after the drowning of New Orleans.



"The Domestic Crusaders," a family drama by Wajahat Ali, played at Nuyorican Poets Cafe in 2009; from left, Monisha Shiva, Imran Javaid, Abbas Zaidi, Adeel Ahmed and Nidhi Singh. Credit: Chad Batka for The New York Times

But a Hollywood nominally opposed to Bush kept celebrating war as revenge: first through the counterterrorists of "24," who reportedly gave new inspiration to our interrogators at Guantánamo, and then in the appalling torture apologia "Zero Dark Thirty," which peddled the falsehood that "enhanced interrogation techniques" led us to the Abbottabad safe house. And even in the more skeptical views of war from the 2010s, whether the satire of "Vice" or the disillusionment of late-season "Homeland," those who died and those who remained in Lower Manhattan were only shadows. On our screens as in our lives, Sept. 11 had become the undercard for Iraq; in that, at least, the administration succeeded.

Terrorists create images as well as carnage; even as the horrors of Sept. 11 unfolded, they were being compared to a movie. It was the job of the artists who safeguard our culture to give us better images, ones to dissolve the Manichaean derangement that descended like ash, of good and evil, of a global caliphate and a

global “war on terror.” On the evidence it would seem they failed, though in the rubble of this century there are still a few survivors. Neil LaBute has returned to lovers jolted by catastrophe, though this time it’s a pandemic that does it. Spike Lee has a new documentary, not uncontroversial, on New York from the attacks to the lockdowns. In a show last spring, Jennifer Bartlett showed a smaller painting: a lone fireman in an abstracted street scene, perhaps New York, perhaps downtown, the dots diffusing the skyscrapers into vapor. George W. Bush is also still painting.