

VISUAL ARTS

Bridging the gap between war's myth and reality

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Art and war may make strange bedfellows, but artists have long explored the emotions provoked by war and documented its realities. Canada has long recognized the link between art and war, stretching back to the pioneering War Memorials Fund of 1916, which was established by Lord Beaverbrook. The fund sent more than 100 artists, including members of the Group of Seven, to record Canada at war. A.Y. Jackson said of his experience: "It is logical that artists should be a part of the organization of total war, whether to provide inspiration, information, or comment on the glory of [its] stupidity."

The digital revolution has forever changed our experience of war, yet Jackson's statement remains true. In an ambitious, two-venue exhibition at the University of Toronto entitled *Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War*, 17 contemporary artists from 12 countries - including Iraq, Yugoslavia and Israel - offer their perspectives on what curator Seamus Kealy calls today's "global war machine."

"I wanted to bring the audience inside the minds of those who have experienced war," he says.

Video works dominate the show, along with sculptures, drawings and sound and installation pieces. They range from personal accounts to perspectives filtered over generations and across continents; significantly, there are few images of actual combat zones.

"By not nestling up to catastrophe," Kealy says, "people can approach the idea of war and maybe its realities."

This curatorial approach succeeds in part because it acknowledges how we experience war, and in part because it shows how war's mythologies are perpetuated by the news media and the state.

As Boris Groys notes in the exhibition catalogue, today's terrorist records his own actions - think Osama bin Laden's video statements - while the news media's use of such footage puts the Western public into an unusual position, where the more familiar we become with the television images, the more distanced we are from war's meaning. The best works in the show comment directly on this distance.

The first part of the exhibition, at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, begins with a video, *Double Bubble* (2001) by Maja Bajevic. The Bosnian artist wanders through vast, empty buildings, repeating statements that attempt to justify - in the name of religion - atrocities committed during Yugoslavia's civil war. As she gazes into the camera, her voice is projected over top as if in prayer. Using displacement to expose the power of language isn't new, but it's particularly effective here, as the warrior's justifications echo against stone walls. It gives a sense of war as theatre.

A piece by Israeli artist Omer Fast, *A Tank Translated* (2002), features four subtitled videos, each showing one member of a tank crew matter-of-factly describing his job. One draws on a cigarette as he describes the bleak landscape visible through the tank's hatch. Fast knows that we dull our senses to war by believing the myth, and he denies us that luxury. He further underscores his point by slowly erasing random words and letters from the subtitles. It's a devastating piece that disrupts our reading in a sombre echo of the subject's false bravado.

The piece that comes closest to depicting the reality of war is a video by South African artist Kendell Geers. *Time Withheld (Rock)* from 1992, installed on the gallery floor, shows a human beating by a lynch mob. Paired with a voice-over by surrealist painter René Magritte musing on his work, the video itself seems surreal. It's accompanied by an explanatory text in which the artist bemoans the way the news media perpetuates the idea that "terror" began on Sept. 11, 2001. While the piece tries to strike a contrast between reality and imagination, it's out of place here. For many viewers of this exhibit, our experience of war is surreal.

The exhibition continues over at the Blackwood Gallery, where an enormous, reflective white road sign, printed with the phrase "You have left the American Sector," dominates the entrance. It's a strong piece by Vancouver artist Ron Terada, but is unfortunately upstaged by *Untitled* (2004) by Iraqi artist Abdel-Karim Khalil. This small nude sculpture is hooded in the manner of detainees from Abu Ghraib prison. What could have been a rather obvious piece is revolutionized by the power of history and cultural significance.

One of the most unique perspectives on war is a brilliant work by Toronto artist Kristan Horton. *Drawing of A History of the First World War*, (2008) comprises three large spiral drawings that illustrate the artist's attempt to depict the trajectory of the First World War as recorded in three volumes of an audio book by John Keegan. Horton, whose work often involves a laborious process, crams historical scenes inside the narrow spiral as if to suggest that - for those who haven't directly experienced war - there's room in our collective memory only for the main events.

Along with Khalil's sculpture and Horton's drawings, the installation *A Short History of Conscription in Canada*, by local artist Annie MacDonell, speaks volumes about our experience with war today. The piece consists of a pole mounted with speakers that project historical speeches and parliamentary debates by the likes of Mackenzie King and Robert Bourassa recited by University of Toronto students. As the speeches echo through the foyer of Hart House near the Soldiers' Tower War Memorial, the psychological and emotional distance between our daily experiences and war becomes an abyss.

Despite being heavy on video, the exhibition is an important one. Not that it tells us anything new, but it forces us to acknowledge what we already know: War, as it's presented to us, is a terrifyingly potent myth.

Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War runs until March 2 at two University of Toronto venues: Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, 7 Hart House Circle, Toronto, 416-978-8398; and the Blackwood Gallery, 3359 Mississauga Rd. N., Mississauga, 905-828-3789.