

A Consideration of War. A Series of Paintings

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the Master of Fine Arts in Painting.

March 14, 2021

Artist Statement

My most recent work has been exploring my own experiences as a combat medic/flight medic and my own relationship to traumatic injury, war, and death. I desire to show the hopeless futility of the never-ending cycle of human conflict and suffering. I want these images to hold up plain and visible the reality and nature of such things and to make the viewer consider whether or not they believe the cost of such actions to be an acceptable price. Though they are designed to make the viewer uncomfortable it is not out of any malicious desire on my behalf. I choose to show these uncomfortable images because they are an uncomfortable reality that is all too easily dismissed by western society. For many of us war is a problem for somewhere else to somebody else. Death in war in Western society is often romanticized, and depicted as heroic. Death is not heroic, nor romantic. Death is ugly, dirty, and plain. The dead lay twisted, and deformed, their mouths agape, pants soiled. They cry for their momma's and writhe in agony before they die. I wish to show this to the viewer so that they may choose if the goal of war is worth the human cost. I believe that the least a society can do if they choose to participate in such acts is to have the courage to look upon the dead and acknowledge that it is their will for it to be done. Though I am not so naive as to imagine a world devoid of war; I do however, believe that if the effects of war were viewed by all there would be fewer wars.

Process

I begin with inspiration from art history or popular art pieces and attempt to draw from them the aspects that inspire me and to use those forms and ideas to create new pieces that incorporate my own experiences from war coupled with my enthusiasm for art history. In preparation to paint, I construct my own stretcher frames and stretch my own canvases. I size the canvases with rabbit skin glue and then lay a layer of tinted oil ground. I tint my oil ground with reconstituted paint sludge from whatever painting was previous to the one I am currently working on. To me, using the remnants of my old paint sludge brings a continuity of soul to the work, and makes sure no paint is wasted, no speck of it is without use. On some of the pieces, I then layer thick paint on with a pallet knife to obtain a desired textural quality to the underpainting. Before beginning on the actual painting, I create multiple compositional sketches to study form and value, and the occasionally, I make a color study. Once the underpainting is dry, I set layers of paint on the canvas with brushes and pallet knife in multiple layers, responding to the image as I work to build up the paint, making adjustments as I go. Most of my paintings have a significant number of layers, refining and adjusting colors with each subsequent layer until a desired effect is realized.

Research

I feel that the mixing of genre, styles, and historical and philosophical references frees me to communicate through my own personal voice, as well it further gives me a set of tools that help bypass the barriers of communication with the viewer. For aesthetic research, I look towards

several sources. In Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*,¹ Sontag illustrates the relationship between images of war and violence and the viewer. When discussing violent imagery, she states that, "One can feel obliged to look at... [images] ...that record great cruelties and crimes. One should feel obliged to think about what it means to look at them, about the capacity actually to assimilate what they show."² In this way, I am interested in recording my own experiences in war with the hope of confronting the viewer and forcing them to consider what might normally be subject matter unpalatable in the normal scope of a day.

*The Clinic of Dr. Gross*³ by Thomas Eakins (1875), and *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp* (1632)⁴ by Rembrandt Van Rijn were inspiration for all of the images in this series, as the overall theme includes the utilitarian decisions of triage. In part, all of these images mean to ask the question "whom do you save and whom do you ignore?"

In *Defaced the Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages*,⁵ Valnetin Groebner asks "How can... [we] ...give the disfigured back what has been taken from them by violence—quite literally their faces, the possibility of being acknowledged as people?"⁶ Though it is impossible for me to find the specific people depicted within my artworks, (as I never knew the names of many, nor shared a common language) it is my intent to give the injured and dead some form of identity to those whom would view them as 'other' or nondescript or lacking in relatable identity. I seek to have the viewer see those injured and killed in far off lands as just as human and relatable as those people known to them.

¹Sontag, Susan. 2003. *Regarding the pain of others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

² *Sontag* p.95

³ Eakins, Thomas. *The Clinic of Dr. Gross*, 1875. Oil on Canvas. 240 x 200 cm. Philadelphia. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

⁴ Rembrandt, Van Rijn. *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*, 1632. Oil on Canvas. 216.5 x 169.5 cm. Mauritshuis. The Hague.

⁵ Groebner, Valentin. 2009. *Defaced: the visual culture of violence in the late Middle Ages*. London: Zone Books.

⁶ *Defaced: The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages* pg. 155

I am also interested in the notion of abjection and how it relates to a person's interaction with artworks that depict the dead and dismembered in war. For insight into this I refer to Julia Kristeva. In *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*⁷ Kristen states "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."⁸ It is cultural and political practice in the United States to hide the dead from war, or to discourage talk of such things as being inappropriate or uncouth in civil interactions. This inappropriateness could be argued to be due to such images not respecting the normative rules of American society.

Trauma Studies theorists such as Debra Jackson discuss that one of the difficulties of traumatic experiences is that the person who experienced the event is often placed secondary to the event in its retelling, where the person becomes the object of their own story rather than the subject.⁹ This secondary role within the story removes the person's ability to have a fundamental control over the story and thereby the narrative of their own life.¹⁰ The problem with the subject-object relationship within the subject of the traumatic experience is further exacerbated by the fact that traumatic memories of these experiences are often made fragmentary within the subject's recollection.¹¹ Trauma theory then aids us in understanding these kinds of works as a re-subjectification of the artist within their own narrative. This line of thinking also provides tools of analysis in other regards as well. For instance, a traditional formal analysis of these images would ascribe the partial abstraction of forms and gestural style to emotive effect and historical

⁷ Kristeva, Julia, and Leon S. Roudiez. 1982. *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁸ *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* pg. 4

⁹. Debra, Jackson. *Critical Trauma Studies : Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*. Pg.210.

¹⁰ Debra, Jackson. *Critical Trauma Studies : Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*. Pg.210

¹¹ Debra, Jackson. *Critical Trauma Studies : Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*. Pg.210

positioning, however as analyzed through Trauma Theory one could argue that the abstraction of forms could be an accurate depiction of a fragmented memory. A tightly controlled and purely representational image would not encapsulate a fragmented memory as well as one that eschews exact detail in favor of highlighting the aspects of the fragmented memory that are kept within the artist's recollection. Debra Jackson further argues that literal language usually is viewed as incapable of properly describing traumatic events by victims of trauma.¹² This line of thinking lends itself to the analysis of visual imagery because, it is not by any means a stretch to compare lexical language to the purely representational in visual imagery, and in like measure, to compare linguistic hyperbole with visual forms that are partially abstracted. Through retelling of one's story through narration (or in this case visual art), the teller reclaims their own story and their own identity through its retelling.¹³ Though the person needs to reconstruct this narrative in order to regain a subjective place and thus regain self-agency, it is not enough to simply create the narrative within oneself; the narrative must be communicated to others.¹⁴ This public recounting of the narrative with the teller as subject of the story and the traumatic event as happening to them within the narrative of their own story, gives the teller control over that story and themselves, and requires an empathic witness to confirm the horror of the event.¹⁵ The witness acts as a kind of anchor for the subjectivity of the person who experienced the traumatic event. By witnessing, the empathic other responds to the narrative and thus offers the storyteller a path to re-

¹². Debra, Jackson. *Critical Trauma Studies : Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*. Pg.210

¹³. Debra, Jackson. *Critical Trauma Studies : Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*. Pg.211

¹⁴. Debra, Jackson. *Critical Trauma Studies : Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*. Pg.211”

¹⁵. Debra, Jackson. *Critical Trauma Studies : Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*. Pg.211

possessing their own subjectivity. through empathizing with themselves via experiencing the empathy of others.¹⁶ When empathizing with themselves through the mirroring of an empathizing other, the person is able to analyze their own experiences from the vantage point of the other and gain the ability to fully realize the trauma that they experienced in a more cognizant manner.¹⁷ Through this re-subjectification the person who experienced the traumatic event is capable of not only transforming their own subjective position they are also able to create a social phenomenon where they are able to convey the horrors of their experience into a form of content that is able to allow for social reconsideration of that event and effect greater change.¹⁸

Greater social change and consideration is the primary focus of this series by asking the viewer to consider the human cost of war.

Paintings

The first painting in my series is *4TH of July BBQ (Fig. 1)*. It is a depiction of a woman presenting the viewer with a dead child as if to ask for help, though the child is obviously beyond medical care, but she has not yet accepted this reality. For this image, I chose to try to emulate in some ways the stylistic characteristics of Käthe Kollwitz, most notably I took inspiration from

¹⁶. Debra, Jackson. *Critical Trauma Studies : Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*. Pg.212

¹⁷. Debra, Jackson. *Critical Trauma Studies : Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*. Pg.212”

¹⁸. Debra, Jackson. *Critical Trauma Studies : Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*. Pg.213

her drawings *Woman With a Dead Child* (1903)¹⁹ and *Death Seizes a Woman* (1934.)²⁰ Kollwitz slightly abstracts her images changing proportions just enough to place emphasis on the emotive body parts and physical gestures, she couples this with a strong control of what is resolved with detail and what is not. These two skills combined with her gestural mark making create highly emotive works of art.

Neapolitan Ice Cream in Body Bags (Fig. 2) is the second image in the series. This piece consists of three body bags that do not resemble the shape of a person completely as they have been reduced in form. Their bodies have lost their overall rigidity and the volume normally possessed of a human being, one that is filled with fluids and supported by unbroken bones. For historical reference within this piece I considered Francisco Goya's series *The Disasters of War* (1810.)²¹ I find that when making art about my own personal experiences in war it is difficult to distill the narrative of the events into something succinct enough to be viewed without an accompanying written explanation. Goya effectively describes the events of his experiences and creates moving art that reads fully within the image without the need for further elaboration beyond a simple title. With this piece, I attempted to make the image subordinate to the title, though where Goya uses honest description, I have chosen to use the sarcastic laconic gallows humor common among soldiers. So, the title is meant to humorously describe three soldiers whose bodies have been so mangled and destroyed within a common space that much of their parts have been become indistinguishable, leaving three body bags each commingled with one another inside.

¹⁹. Kollwitz, Kathe. *Woman With a Dead Child*, 1903. Print. 39 x 48 cm. Washington D.C. National Gallery of Art.

²⁰. Kollwitz, Kathe. *Death Seizes a Woman*, 1934. Print. 50.7 x 36.8 cm. New York. The Museum of Modern Art.

²¹. Goya, Francisco. *The Disasters of War*, 1810. Print. New York. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Self Portrait with no Skin (Fig. 3) was in part inspired by Renaissance flayed man imagery like *St Bartholomew Flayed* by Marco d’Agrate (1562)²², and *A Flayed Man Holding his own Skin* by Gaspar Becerra (1556)²³. I was further inspired by Ernst Kirchner’s *Self Portrait as a Soldier* (1915)²⁴. Kirchner’s painting could be interpreted as the intentional subduing of one’s emotions required for a soldier, juxtaposed with the necessary use of those emotions in order to be an expressionist artist and his difficulty in restoring those feelings and utilizing them in his artistic practice. Likewise, I have chosen to depict myself with my skin flayed away in a violent and painful act with a pair of scissors. This symbolic act is not unlike the pain of exposing one’s emotions through art after years of attempting to repress them.

For the painting titled *Madonna and Child of Kunduz (Fig. 4)* compositional inspiration was taken from Andrea Mantegna’s *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1480)²⁵. Mantegna’s foreshortened cadaver is of particular interest to me, with the soles of Christ’s feet visible and the strong perspective angles emphasised within the composition. For this painting, I have considered a former patient who chose to refuse treatment in order for a younger patient to receive more focused care, resulting in the death of both patients.

Death Rattle (Fig. 5) is an image, that was inspired by the German expressionists like Ernst Kirchner, who depicted the dark horrors of war and death, with bright contrasting complementary colors. I have depicted a soldier moments after death, his final breath shuddering from his corpse. The body’s mouth is agape and his unfocused eyes roll lifelessly back into his head. I wish to communicate to the viewer that we look upon a corpse that once held a man.

²². d’Agrate, Marco. *St. Bartholomew Flayed*, 1562. Sculpture. Milan. Cathedral of Milan.

²³. Becerra, Gaspar. *A Flayed man holding his own skin*, 1556. Print. 21.5 x 15cm. London. Royal Academy of Arts.

²⁴. Kirchner, Ernst. *Self Portrait as a Soldier*, 1915. Oil on Canvas. 69 x 61 cm. Oberlain. Oberlin College.

²⁵. Mantegna, Andrea, 1480. Tempera on Canvas. 68 x 81 cm. Milan. Pinacoteca di Brera.

He Cried for his Momma (Fig. 6) depicts a soldier dead laying in a field on a sunny day. His corpse not yet retrieved by his comrades; temporarily forgotten in the urgency of war. I referenced Otto Dix's *Wounded Soldier* (1916)²⁶. Dix uses drastic value shifts and definitive hard-edged line shapes to give his wounded soldier with an abdominal evisceration a wild eyed and frantic demeanor, that creates a work with a tangible sense of urgency, but also a grim fatality of the soldier's end.

The final piece is *Untitled* (Fig. 7) and shows a single man beset with wounds, dying. In this image I sought to show an undignified and unheroic corpse killed by violence. The figure is constrained within a tight space, roughly the size of a coffin.

Conclusion

Though I have no serious expectation of ending war or even effecting its practice significantly within my lifetime, I believe it is possible to utilize art to affect the greater understanding of humanity towards a better future. The purpose of this series of paintings is to not to show atrocities of sinister foreign evil actors, but rather to point towards the atrocities committed by us and people like us. Hence, one of my primary objectives is to bring home and confront the viewer with things that are held at a distance, and are viewed as someone else's problem, somewhere else, and therefore non-concerning and to make these occurrences concerning. A painting may be viewed as an insignificant thing, a feeble gesture with no great effect upon the world, especially when confronting something as great and terrible as war. However, if through this feeble gesture I can work to dissuade even one person from contributing to aggressive war and needless

²⁶. Dix, Otto. *Wounded Soldier*, 1916. Print. 19 x 29 cm. New York. Museum of Modern Art.

destruction, or even to help the viewer expand their sense of empathy, then I will consider the work successful.

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Images



Fig. 1

Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

