

## **Pretty Pictures: Problematizing Aestheticized Images of War**

As an interdisciplinary exhibition that blurs the boundaries between news journalism and contemporary politically engaged art, *War At A Distance* presents the multitude of ways in which technology intercedes the representations of trauma, conflict and violence in the media. Using sound, photography, video, wallpaper installation, and crayon-based animations, the group show examines the plethora of ways in which technology mediates, displaces, and translates the varied experiences of war including those of civilians, soldiers, combatants and insurgents. In effect, the curatorial team of Roger Simon, Karyn Sandlos and Blake Fitzpatrick places an enormous focus on the notion of distance, examining how it is created and how it collapses in re-contextualized spheres. In this way, a clear dichotomy emerges between what is known/knowable and what is unquantifiable or unknown. The works, themselves, reflect this attempt to represent the multi-dimensional and fragmented nature of war. But, in essence, the exhibition problematizes the aestheticization and spectacular rendering of traumatic and violent images of war as mediated by spatial and temporal distances. Both Francesco Simeti's *Watching the War* and Stephen Andrew's *The Quick and the Dead* examine how the adornment of violent imagery implicates war in a complicated relationship with consumer culture as it enters a civilian or domestic domain.

It is difficult to gauge how increasingly aestheticized images of war and violence affects its proliferation in media and visual culture, especially when such images are linked to consumerism and capital. Francesco Simeti's wallpaper installation entitled *Watching the War* is an apt example to determine how these elements co-exist since the work enlists the viewer to dissociate from conventional renderings of devastating images by portraying them as beautiful; thus, voiding the image of its immediate and affective content. This is achieved in Simeti's work by use repetition of strikingly beautiful elements. For instance, the mushroom cloud and wisps of smoke now become decorative shapes, patterns and colors. This effect ironically forces the images to function much like modernist paintings in their ability to create an overwhelming aesthetic experience. In effect, the work fades into the background as decoration or ornamentation. The very nature of wallpaper suggest it is a product that can be bought, sold and consumed by the meter; and by extension, so can the subject matter that it depicts. But how can war, an unknowable, unquantifiable and painful experience be sold and exchanged as a product in a capitalist market driven system? The curators of the exhibition play with this limitation of representation as they challenge the "relation between what can be known and considered and what remains both unknown and unthought." (Fitzpatrick, et al 2) In this instance, Karen J. Hall's analogy of toys and television can be useful in determining the meaning of war as spectacle that can be consumed. Hall explains, "When entertainment technology capable of producing such a direct physical and emotional response is linked to concerns of national security, citizens

literally pay to consume the ideological mechanisms that prepare them to be citizens of the US Empire.” (99) Although in this instant, Hall is referencing the consumption of Hollywood combat films, the same theoretical dialogue can be applied to Simeti’s work.

Furthermore, as the title implies, *Watching the War* is also a piece that embodies heteropathic identification as a means to recognize and sympathize with at a distance. The image depicts passivity along with being literally and physically at a distance as the carnage of war ravages a landscape. However, the work engenders a problematic representation of ‘enemy’ civilians as they are depicted in a submissive role. Empathy and pathos now become an intricate part of the work’s affect; possibly foreshortening critical dialogue concerning its representation as the viewer feels for the “other” too readily. Pathos can be seen as a suspicious representational trope used too readily for enemy civilians; seen only to be victimized or subjected to passive roles of bystander. This juxtaposed with Simeti’s hyper ornate image hollows the traumatic imagery of its inherent spectacular nature. However, the very installation of the work contradicts this despectacularisation as the space suggests passivity and domesticity in a scenario geared towards entertainment. Installed with a LCD video screen and a pair of chairs, the setup is reminiscent of a domestic interior space where one can sit and watch the news with some semblance of comfortability. However, there is a clear history of images that harkens back to the idea of war infringing on domestic or civilian space. Picasso’s *Guernica* [See Image 1] is an iconic, albeit classical, image of such suffering that examines how civilians become witnesses to the

acts of war that extend beyond the battlefield.

Similarly, Stephen Andrews' *The Quick and the Dead* aestheticizes violent images of a war-related automobile crash. A viewer experiences the work primarily through its aesthetic beauty and the materiality of the medium. Using a crayon frottage process mimicking the CMYK dot matrix printing, Andrews veils the trauma with an intricate elaborate hand-drawn frame by frame animation that bewilders the viewer as they then become horrified by its content. Andrews is giving this unseen, officially ignored imagery and material process a physical presence. But, again a visual and metaphorical distance is created here, as the violence is mediated and skewed by the artist's hand and the animation process. In a way, this mediation and visual distance created by both Andrews and Simeti's work may be necessary to experience such atrocities without being too overwhelming for the viewer. His imagery offers a biting critique of mainstream media that obscures or obfuscate rather than enlightening or informing. In addition, the animation also does not possess any audio components. This dearth of sound incorporated into the piece heavily emphasizes a silence that is loaded with tension and fraught with affect. Using the words of Sholem Krishtalka, "Silence equals death, and Andrews gives the awful truth a human voice."

To conclude, the exhibition, as a whole is intent on re-examining the limitations of representation, particularly with images that embody the spectacle and 'beauty' of war and

violence. Using Nina Berman's photograph from *Homeland*, Mary Panzer illustrates in her address at the symposium, the charged distances from which we see war in civilian spaces.

[See Image 2] Parallels can be drawn between Simeti's and Berman's work, as they both demonstrate the interference of spectacle and warfare in quotidian life. What is common throughout the work (and what is essential the crux of the exhibition) is the reoccurring problem of visual, physical and emotion distance created by mechanisms that attempt to record and present conflict in a hyper-decorative or aestheticized way.

## Images

[Image 1]

Pablo Picasso

Guernica, 1937, Oil on canvas, 349 cm × 776 cm (137.4 in × 305.5 in)

Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid

[Image 2]

Nina Berman, [Homeland](#)

## Works Cited

Fitzpartick, Blake, Sandlos, Karyn and Simon, Roger I. "War at A Distance: Visual Culture and Framing of Public Conversations about Canadian Forces in Afghanistan" [Gallery TPW](#), 2009.

Hall, Karen J. "False Witness: Combat Entertainment and Citizen Training in the United States." [The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture](#). Wallflower Press: London, 2007.

Krishtalka, Sholem. "Beauty, beast & brains." [Xtra!](#). September 14, 2006.