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# **Distant painterly perspectives**

## **War, atrocities and the suffering of others**

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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New Zealand.

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## Abstract

Inspired by my desire to act in some way against the injustices of atrocities, this research sets out to establish how a socially motivated painting practice can operate to activate its audience to acknowledge the suffering of others due to atrocious events. It investigates the role that the mediated imagery of photojournalism and other sources, play in our encounter, as distant spectators, with the suffering of others.

With concentration on painting, this research aims to analyse the socially motivated art practices and artworks, of artists responding to thematically similar issues in their work. I will attempt to locate my art practice in response to the culture of the spectacle in which I maintain, we currently reside. I explore the counter arguments as to whether spectatorship is a passive or active role, in order to establish what that brings to the experience of viewing a painting. I will also look into where ethics and aesthetics intersect, and how this crossroad impacts upon both the artist's realisation of their work, and the viewer's reception of the artwork.

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## Introduction

This research is motivated by my desire to acknowledge the suffering of distant others from the perspective of being a spectator of the atrocities that caused their suffering. Looking back, my past artistic projects were certainly a precursor to this, as they dealt with topics that were socially considered. In the year prior to undertaking the Masters programme I had sought to investigate, through my practice of painting, the genocide that had occurred in Rwanda in 1994, to me an exemplar of the callousness humanity is capable of. This research seeks to build on that exploration for the purpose of establishing greater understanding of the complexities of an art project that deals with this topic.

In response to our contemporary climate, Griselda Pollock (2003, n.a.) framed the situation like so:

*The legacies of the 20th Century have left humanity itself wounded, wounded in ways it can't digest, that's what trauma means. It means something in the extremity has occurred of which we have no means, individually, to metabolise it. We are left with a kind of haunting-ness that something dreadful has happened, but we don't know what it is. And the same can be said for cultures, we have no means to fully grasp what it was that happened. And philosophers, and theologians, and others have been trying to say what was it that happened, when the solidarity of all that bears a human face, was fundamentally breached as it was in the 20th Century ... (para. 1)*

For me her words illustrate eloquently and so poignantly the sense

I have for the state of our contemporary society. Before our eyes, through the veil of images, brutal acts of intolerance, warfare and genocide pepper our contemporary global history yet, in many respects, we are blinkered to the suffering of others. We see, but we aren't necessarily enabled to act.

I recognise that we are in the position of being a spectator to distant horrific events, yet we often feel helpless to make a difference. The images are often horrendous, certainly unpleasant. At first we are drawn to the spectacle but then turn away, it's just too difficult and we'd rather not have to think about it. When I observe these mediated images of atrocities on humanity, I feel helpless to make a difference yet compelled to act or, at the very least, engage. As Susan Sontag wrote, "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action or it withers." (Sontag, 2003, p.101). I am a painter, and it is through painting and figuration that I decided to make work in response to this appalling aspect of our global society. This making is my action. My desire was to engage an audience who I saw as being passive viewers to the atrocities of the world, and I wanted to explore how I could achieve this through painting, this is my journey.

## In the beginning

I started down the path of trying to address an imbalance I perceived existed between the suffering of distant others and the lack of engagement of the distant spectators to this suffering. My initial intention was for my artwork to function as a way of reengaging an audience, whom I considered, had become numb

to the actual suffering and brutality reported on by the media, and evidenced by photojournalistic images. It is through this channel, as distant societies, that our awareness of these tragedies is often established. My test was to see whether painting held any alternate properties, in contrast to media images, that could then actively engage a media saturated spectator. Consequently, I came to learn, through the process of painting, to question the expectations I had of how my work should operate.

The first significant test I did, provided me with a way in which I could attempt to interpret the grief and suffering of others without applying pressure on myself to create my own 'Guernica'<sup>2</sup>. Without the rigid constraints of a preplanned composition, or fixed physical format, I let the format grow and the composition evolve. Although this was a test piece, I was still full of the ideological aspiration to awaken some sense of empathy or activity in the audience. I gleaned my references from newspapers, websites, and video footage. I used these images as a starting point to render representations of grief, suffering, and brutality; anything associated with the atrocities I was a spectator to. I had chosen to use oil paint on heavy paper, which was a method that I'd explored in past artworks and I was familiar with how the paint and surface interacted. When thinned, the paint enabled me to work quickly and gesturally. Depicted in a single colour, figures dominated this work, generated mostly as line with limited areas of tonal rendering.

I referenced images from different wars, genocides and massacres, but restricted the material I sourced to events that had occurred since the Vietnam War. This access point is important to my work

for many reasons. The Vietnam War coincided with my entry into this world, and I wanted to limit the atrocities I referenced to those that have occurred within my lifetime. This entry point was also important to my line of enquiry, as it was the Vietnam War that is attributed as being the first war to be broadcast by the media, via the television, right into the homes of the viewing public (Hallin, n.d.). What is relevant about this, is that the broadcasting of the Vietnam War on television, represents a pivotal point in the distribution of images of war and conflicts through the media. It is as a spectator of these images and reports, that my relationship with distant atrocities has been established. In some respects, the decision to work within this framework homogenised the events I depicted into one, rendering it difficult to determine what events or geographical location they represented. Upon reflection, this mirrors the effect of viewing the conflation of media represented events.

While working on this piece something unexpected happened that would prove to be an important revelation. I was painting a person, referenced from images of a massacre in Sudan, he was not identified by name or any other means as the image offered no further information. I recall the act of painting his feet, and while doing so, I started to wonder about what he might have been to someone, a father, brother, or husband; for that moment he became a 'someone' to me. I was able to assess from this, that as the physical act of painting is a laborious and time-consuming one, it can thus facilitate the opportunity for contemplation of the subject matter. As with my painting of the individual from Sudan, this can lead to unexpected empathetic connections with the subject.

In reference to this contemplative space I recall a statement made by artist and psychoanalyst, Bracha Ettinger. Ettinger said “Art then, is a time, place, duration body; where you dwell beside others and the cosmos and they dwell inside/outside you” (ita, n.a.1). She goes on to refer to the act of wit(h)nessing. Griselda Pollock (2010) explains that Ettinger’s is proposing an aesthetic wit(h)nessing:

*a means of being with, and remembering for the other, through the artistic act and through an aesthetic encounter. Art becomes a keeper of historical memory for the injured other, by creating the site for a novel trans-subjective and transhistorical process that is simultaneously witness and wit(h)ness. (p.831)*

I generated two painted drawings as a result of my emotional dispatching, which I chose to join to make one piece. This measured just over 7 metres long and 1.4 metres in height. The scale and surface material of the work offered alternatives to simply hanging the work on a wall as one long linear piece. To facilitate an opportunity for ‘active’ spectatorship, by the viewers of this piece, I decided to install the work as a cylindrical piece with an opening to enter into the work (Fig.1). The aim of presenting the painting in this way was to attempt to immerse the viewer in the work. This raised questions for me; what would that then offer an audience in their experience of the work? Was taking a painting off the wall (its traditional place) going to encourage an alternate form of engagement that I was seeking from my work?

The shape enveloped the viewer with an array of portrayals of pain and suffering. The feedback on the work was encouraging,

and I saw potential in this format of presentation as providing an immersive environment. For some, it was a difficult space to be in as they were repelled by these depictions of suffering. Conversely though, there were also feelings of indifference from those having seen images of suffering before; and there was anger towards re-appropriation of media images for no perceived greater gain. These reactions caused me to contemplate ethical questions pertaining to this field of art practice. In response to this, I reflected on my act of referencing photographs generated in a situation of loss and



Fig. 1. Rebecca Holden, *installation view*, 2012

suffering, and I asked myself was this contributing to a secondary violation of those depicted? I acknowledge that reproduction of these in any recognisable form has the potential to do so, especially if the identity of the person depicted is recognisable to potential viewers of the work. I believe however, that in addressing these visual documents, my artwork is not trying to deny knowledge of the trauma recorded. It is seeking an encounter with this trauma. It is attempting to address the violation of forgetting.

What happened in-between this and my next major work was a small but not inconsequential experiment. I had been researching the artist Marlene Dumas whose work addresses topics of death, violence, sex and birth. She paints mainly figures which she often references from media imagery, and I was intrigued by the painterly technique she used. At the same time I was wanting to test how I would react if I were to place myself out of my comfort zone, and paint something I thought was unpaintable. I chose to paint a picture of one of my children based on the photographic portraits taken by the Khmer Rouge of their prisoners before they were tortured and executed (their prisoners included children). This made me feel uncomfortable but I wanted to test how this would affect me, and my desire to try Dumas' technique offered a good opportunity to do this. Using Dumas' method I flooded turpentine on the surface then worked oil paint into this wet ground. Painting my own child, evocative of the Khmer Rouge photographs, was emotionally too much for me to bear. Although I completed it, and hastily I might add, the act left me feeling physically ill. I had not anticipated the intensity of my reaction. Once again I was left to consider just how affecting the act of painting could be on me

as an artist. This recognition left to percolate under the surface of my conscious thought would present itself again later in my explorations.

## On art and war and suffering

At times I found it challenging, trying to come to terms with my distant association with horrific events, whilst attempting to interpret this relationship in my artwork. Aware that these events I was a spectator to did not effect me directly, but troubled by them all the same. In order to come to terms with this relationship and where my artistic practice is located within the context of thematically similar work, I set out to understand the varied associations that artists have with what they depict, and how they resolve this in their work.



Fig. 2. Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon at the St. Bernard Pass*, 1803.



Fig. 3. Peter Howson, *Serb and Muslim*, 1994.

As a painter I am certainly aware of the long association painting has had with the representation of war, suffering, and human brutality. From such distant spectrums as the heroic depictions of valiant leaders as in Jacques-Louis Davids' *Napoleon at the St. Bernard Pass*, 1803 (Fig. 2) to examples of the gross realities of conflict portrayed by Peter Howson<sup>3</sup> (a British war artist to Bosnia) as in *Serb and Muslim*, 1994 (Fig. 3).

As patronage passed from church and state to secular middle-class, artists increasingly assumed the role of social commentator. Often reflecting, through a variety of media, the darker aspects of their contemporaneous time. As these examples (Figs. 4a and 4b) of Francisco de Goya's series, *Disasters of War*, 1810 – 20<sup>4</sup>, show. They serve as a grim reflection of Goya's witness to the atrocities of war. Comparatively, for German artist Otto Dix, the impact of his time as a soldier in WWI is apparent in the series of works simply titled *Der Krieg (The War)*, 1924 (Fig. 5). Theodore K. Rabb (2011) described these works as “unrelenting” and “gruesome”, and went on to claim that Dix's castigations of war, “were so savage that it was difficult to apply to them the aesthetic judgements that art usually does.” (Rabb, 2011, p.191). The consideration of aesthetic judgement in the reception of such works, proved to be an important consideration in the interpretation of my chosen topic, and is something I investigate later in this exegesis.

Artists, such as Dix and Howson responded, through their artwork, to their direct association with conflict, which accords their work a unique perspective. Then there are artists who, from a position of indirect association, have interpreted, in a variety of ways, a personal



Fig. 4a. Francisco de Goya, *Great Courage! Against the Dead*, Plate 39, *Disasters of War*, 1810 – 1820.



Fig. 4b. Francisco de Goya, *Bury Them and Be Quiet*, Plate 18, *Disasters of War*, 1810 – 1820.



Fig. 5. Otto Dix, *Wounded soldier – Autumn 1919, Bapaume*, Plate 6 from *Der Krieg (The War)*, 1924.

response to their abhorrence to events of conflict and suffering. As it is from this perspective that my practice is situated, it was important to me to evaluate the work of artists who have dealt with thematically similar topics in their work, but who come from a place of distance.

### **The painter and the atrocity**

Picasso was in Paris in 1937, when he learnt of the recent German bombing of the Basque town of Guernica, during the Spanish Civil War. The tragedy affected him so strongly that he was moved to paint a momentous piece dedicated to the horror, destruction and suffering caused by that event, which he simply named Guernica (Fig. 6).

Picasso, like many in Europe, probably learnt of this event through the newspapers, and in the painting we can see a subtle reference to

this through Picasso's rendering of rows of dashes, simulating rows of printed text (Sharma & Condie, 2006). The grey colour palette used by Picasso in this work is also reminiscent of the newspapers of the time. As I observe in this the seething pain and anguish of those depicted, I am moved by the power a painting can exert, and from that, encouraged by my choice of medium.

### **The artists, the conflict and the media**

Martha Rosler, is an American artist and was an anti Vietnam War advocate, in her inaugural series of *Bringing the War Home – House Beautiful*, 1962-72, (Fig. 7). Rosler used photomontage to juxtapose images from the Vietnam War with images of fashion models, scenes of American interiors, and suburban bliss. As discussed earlier, the



Fig. 6. Pablo Picasso,  
*Guernica*, 1937

Vietnam War was the first war to be televised. These broadcasts bringing the war right into the living rooms of the American public. Analysis of this work indicates to me, an artist not only choosing to respond to her feelings about the Vietnam War, but also choosing to signal that the association we have with an event such as that is often through media imagery, and subsequently the media's role in our interpretation of such events.

Interestingly, Rosler repeated this theme in 2004, in response to America's war in Iraq (Fig. 8). She used similar photomontage treatment of disparate images that she'd employed in her earlier series. The repetition of this concept points to a strong connection that still exists, between conflicts and our association with them being via the media.

Rosler saw her work as a form of agitation and social commentary, her artworks often blending activism and aesthetics (MoCP, n.d.). Rosler had not intended the initial series for the art-world audience but instead, for distribution as printouts in the public realm. Coincidentally, early on in my artistic enquiry I had considered whether my artwork should take the form of activism. There is no doubting the motivation for my project is political. But my ideas concerning the political still operated within the context of painting. I considered taking the work to the streets, either as a temporary or permanent painting. But because I see my practice first and foremost as a painter and not a Relational artist, the context of the street did not feel like the appropriate surroundings for my work.

Chilean artist, Alfredo Jarr, expressed his response to the genocide



Fig. 7. Martha Rosler, *Bringing the War Home – House Beautiful*, 1967–72.



Fig. 8 Martha Rosler, *Bringing the War Home – House Beautiful*, 2004.

in Rwanda in 1994, through his many works in the *Rwanda Project*, 1994-2000. Of particular interest to me, was the work *untitled* (*Newsweek*), 1994, which he presented in different iterations. One was as a performance piece, in which he would read out what had occurred in Rwanda in a given week during the genocide, whilst simultaneously displaying the corresponding Newsweek cover of that week, thus providing a comparison between the horrors occurring in Rwanda and what story Newsweek determined was cover story material. In another iteration the work was presented as an installation of these same Newsweek magazine covers accompanied by text about what was occurring in Rwanda at the time (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Alfredo Jaar, (*untitled*) *Newsweek*, 1994. at ARCO 2009, (photo Richard Rhodes).

The work was an expression of Jaar's incomprehensibility (Creative time, 2010) at the fact that, although the genocide began in early April 1994, it wasn't until August the 1<sup>st</sup> that year, did Newsweek dedicate a cover story to the atrocity. This piece, to me, is not simply representative of Jaar's horror of an event, but confronts the role the media plays in the viewer's/reader's interpretation of the importance, or relevance, of events such as the genocide in Rwanda.

From my perspective, as a distant spectator, Rosler and Jaar's work resonates with me because of the parallel discourse that operates alongside the artist's abhorrence to the event they depict, and the role the media plays in our reception to it.

From my investigations into these practitioners I was able to find conviction for my own conceptual approach. They showed me that the events represented by the artists affected them on a personal level, even though their involvement was indirect or perhaps *especially because* they were not directly involved. This approach is reflected in my own personal motivation. Being a distant spectator to such events is an important component to my artistic interrogation of these events, for me, it is that *so many* of these atrocities occur.

## The spectator and the spectacle

In our fortunate position of being distant from atrocities, but a remote spectator of them, we receive information of these events through the media. Photojournalists provide us with images of war, conflict, and atrocities as visual proof of what has occurred. Or as is becoming more prevalent, visual evidence is streamed online, in real

time, from the civilian 'cellphone' reporter, to offer their own proof to those of us who view from a distance.

What makes our reception of this visual information a contemporaneous experience is multi-faceted. Not only is it the instantaneousness, and the sheer volume of images made available for our viewing, but also that these images are not viewed in contextual isolation. They are often interspersed with advertising and other unrelated visual stimuli. In response to this experience, we are at first drawn in to the spectacle of the atrocity, but then it becomes too much to deal with and we are inclined to turn away; we have other visual distractions that aren't nearly so difficult to deal with. We are in the privileged position of being able to turn away without apparent consequence.

The context in which this imagery is viewed is often a visually rich and stimulating environment, and the evidence of the atrocity presented to us is left competing with its surroundings. Also, fictional films and computer gaming that replicate real events, further act to modify our responses to actual atrocities. In these mediums the atrocities that are portrayed effectively engage the viewer, but largely for the purpose of providing entertainment. The more closely these portrayals mimic the real, the greater the potential for them to dilute the impact of actual events. They, in turn, add to the confusion of 'the real' with the realm of entertainment.

I would like to posit too, that stylistically, the images of different atrocities portrayed in the media are presented to us in such a

way, that in the fleeting context in which they are viewed, often renders one event indistinguishable from another. This challenges the viewer's to be able to differentiate between the different footage they are seeing. Of course, there are always those stories given greater emphasis based on the criteria determined by those organisations who control the distribution and presentation of the news footage.

Many theorists, such as Jacques Rancière (2007), would criticise the influencing role the media plays in determining our interpretation of events, through the selection and presentation of these images. As Guy Debord (1967) conveys in *The Society of the Spectacle*, this production and commodification of images attributes to the mass conglomeration of spectacles<sup>5</sup>.

### **The spectator**

I explore the role of the spectator in my next paintings, representing the spectator as the principle subject, rather than what they were spectators of. I decided to work on two separate pieces for this subject matter, continuing on the heavy brown paper I'd been favouring. The works this time, were composed in a large vertical format with more focus given to the use of symbolism, rather than the work being intended as a physically immersive artwork. Unlike the first test had done by surrounding the viewer, my intention here was to test whether the subject matter, and the symbols employed, could provide an emotionally immersive experience. I introduced areas of colour, where in previous renditions I'd left the work quite monotone. I also experimented with leaving some areas as sketchy underpainting to contrast with the more tonally complete areas.



Fig. 10. Rebecca Holden, *untitled (so, entertain me)*, 2012

In response to this spectacle-rich environment, one of the works featured a man reclined in his seat staring out of the picture plane at the viewer, head tilted to the side, as if to say ‘so, entertain me’ (Fig. 10). With this work I wanted to address the notions around our demand to be entertained by what we visually consume, regardless of whether it is a purely fictitious event or reality. This environment enables us to detach from the actual suffering of others. The painting purposefully eludes to a certain passivity on behalf of the spectator portrayed, his aloofness hardly conveys any sign of action. This implied passivity is at odds with the desire I had for the spectator of the painting to be active, and the work was attempting to highlight this difference. In the end I rejected the work for being too didactic. Though what it did do, is it encouraged me to contemplate whether the act of viewing a painting was a passive or active act.

With the other painting, *The Absent Spectator* (Fig. 11), I was keen to address the notion around the ease with which we can be consumed by immaterial things whilst ignoring harsh realities. This work also portrays a spectator staring out of the picture. The woman depicted is not looking directly at the viewer as she is absorbed by something that has caught her attention outside of the painting’s edge. So distracted is she, that she is oblivious to the raven (referencing the messenger of death) on her shoulder pecking at her fingers, and the game her child is playing. The child is caught up in a game of toy soldiers, but his game has a modern twist; in the game are not only toy soldiers, but a suicide bomber and his burnt out van, portraying a modern day aspect of conflict.

With this painting I also wanted to draw a correlation between a distant art historical piece, by Pieter Bruegel the elder, and our contemporary time. The 16<sup>th</sup> Century work *Triumph of Death*, 1562 (Fig. 12) by Bruegel, has for me, some striking parallels with our modern time and I was keen to acknowledge this. In his painting, Bruegel sets a complex scene of an army of skeletons attacking and killing people as they went about their daily lives. When Bruegel painted this piece, Europe was in the grips of plague and warfare so death was ever present. In reference to this, people (from popes to peasants) were often depicted dancing with skeletons and corpses. This 'Dance of Death' or 'Danse Macabre' featured in many works of art of the time. In Bruegel's painting, he features a skeleton on horseback charging over the bodies of those it had slain. This reminded me of images of the Janjaweed<sup>6</sup>, I had seen from the recent conflict in Sudan. Janjaweed, when translated, means 'devils on horseback'. In my painting I wanted to reference this with a contemporary association to Bruegel's historical waring skeleton, by re-appropriating this scene, and replicating his skeleton as a Janjaweed militiaman.

When the painting was completed, the reception of it was mixed. Where in my earlier work the physical immersion of the viewer had been well received, this piece came across as trying to deal with too many themes at once, in a sense muddying what I was trying to convey. So instead of being a painting that the viewer could be immersed in, it was thematically confused. Discussion of the work though, took an unexpected path as aesthetic analysis of the rendering of the work took over. This discussion proved to be fruitful for later works, as it drew to my attention that the hints of working



Fig. 11. Rebecca Holden, *The absent spectator*, 2012



Fig. 12. Pieter Bruegel, *Triumph of Death*, 1562

and reworking, evident in small areas of this piece, was a favourable aspect of the work.

### The spectacle

I mentioned before, Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. I consider that Guy Debord's theory on the *Society of the Spectacle* is as relevant today as it was when it was formulated in the 1960's. Its creed mirrors the nature of our contemporary society. Debord argued that "The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord, 1995, p.12). He was arguing that society's interpretations of society as a whole, are based on the consumption of images

representing society, rather than interaction with others. As John Harris (as cited in Walter, 2012) asserts, the society of the spectacle is about the way of modern living, about sitting back and consuming instead of being an active individual. Harris also argues that the main use today, of 'The Society of the Spectacle' is not a book that tells you how to rebel against this modern human condition but how to understand it. Meghan Sutherland (2012) also puts to us:

*Debord's concept of spectacle may hold the greatest importance for a discussion of the big ideas of today because it serves as an emphatic reminder that unless we take pleasure in thinking dynamically about the role spectacles play in shaping our social existence, we will find ourselves as extras in whatever scene they establish. (para.7)*

So how does art, in particular painting, operate in a different manner in an environment full of spectacles? In conversation with writer David Levi-Strauss (2003), artist Leon Golub agreed that we live in the society of the spectacle, concurring with Harris that the consumption of these spectacles was a passive act. He argued however, that the experience of viewing a painting differs from other forms of spectatorship, such as watching a film. In their discussion, Levi-Strauss retold a statement of Golub's, saying, "you go to the cinema and sit down and watch, but painting operates quite differently than that" (2003, p. 153). Golub said that painting has a capacity to send out signals, which you may be attuned to at a particular moment. He described painting as floating in front of you,

it challenges you or is evasive. Golub supported the posit of David Levi-Strauss that a viewer of visual stimuli, such as cinema, risks becoming a spectator whereas a viewer of paintings cannot, because a painting doesn't move, the viewer therefore has to, and in Golub's words "get off your ass".

In regards to spectating art, philosopher Jacques Rancière (2009), in his argument for the emancipated spectator, supports the view of Golub, claiming that the spectator plays an active role. Jeremy Spencer (2010) interprets Rancière's emancipation of the spectator, as being the moment in the act of viewing where the spectator is actively transformed and is offering their own interpretation of what they see, which is not necessarily what the artist determines they should. Rancière (2009) also proffers that :

*The artist should be more like 'the ignorant schoolmaster' who does not teach his pupils his knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified. (p11)*

I was able to determine from this investigation, that the photographic image plays an evidentiary roll, as well as providing a spectacle, in the media's representation of atrocities; and that we live in a society where the spectacle in part forms, and in part informs, our daily lives. This investigation also establishes for me, that the act of spectatorship is not necessarily a passive one, that the spectator can be active in what they are viewing, especially

in the act of viewing art. But that the artist cannot expect the spectator to take from the work what the artist envisages of it.

Even though I found that analysis of the spectator and the spectacle, assisted me in coming to terms with the complexity of my topic, and the difficulty involved in trying to connect with the viewer of my work. I didn't feel that the spectator, as subject matter, was the focus my artwork needed. In a quandary, I began to question my moral quest to reengage an indifferent audience to the suffering of others, through an aesthetic medium: painting. What place did my ethical quest have in aesthetics? And in relation to this, does the audience of the work bring ethical assessments to it?

*It might be true that we have to choose between ethics or aesthetics, but it is also true that, which ever we choose, we will always find the other one at the end of the road – Jean-Luc Godard (as cited in Sontag, 1987, p.147)*

## **Ethics and aesthetics**

Here I was, taking a moral stance against the occurrence of, and the indifference toward, atrocities. My intention was, through the medium of painting, to get under the skin of a disengaged audience, an audience who I perceived to be emotionally distanced from the suffering of others. But of course I had to consider just what place this moralistic campaign had in the field of art.

Experiencing art requires aesthetic judgement. According to Levinson (1998) this judgement takes the form of perceptions of beauty and taste. We, as viewers, judge the work based on certain

criteria we assign as individuals as well as a society. Aesthetic judgement also informs the artist's decision making process when creating the artwork, in the form of choices such as, medium, composition, and subject matter. Art also has the potential to elicit an ethical judgement of itself in concurrence with the aesthetic judgement. If we refer back to Rabb's opinion on Otto Dix' work, *Der Krieg (The War)*, that the work was so unsettling you could not apply the usual aesthetic judgement to it. In stating this Raab is making an ethical judgement of the work while also referencing commonly held views on beauty and taste. According to Carroll (1998, p.136) "...some art may be absorbing exactly because of the way in which it engages, among other things, the moral life of its audience." Carroll elaborates by saying, "... just because we value art for the way it commands our undivided attention does not preclude that some art commands our attention in this way because it is interesting and engaging cognitively and/or, for our purposes morally."

Can art elicit a moral action that in the light of my practice, activates the viewer against distant suffering, conversely, is it arts place to do so? There are multiple positions on the place of ethics in aesthetics. There is the ethical position of the artist which is presented by an aesthetic means, then there is the position of the viewer who brings their own aesthetic judgement to the work influenced by their own ethical position. The artist may demand the work present an ethical position, but like Ranci re's ignorant schoolmaster, it is not the artist's place to teach his pupil his knowledge, instead, allow the work to create in the viewer their own set of assessments. Some of these assessments will be aesthetic and others ethical.

I began to ruminate on the place of my ethical viewpoint in my art practice, or perhaps more pertinently my desire to impart my viewpoint on others. I investigated the following artists, in order to establish a better understanding of the place of ethics in aesthetics from the point of view of the artists and also from those that have investigated their practice. In reference to the works Gerhard Richter painted of the Baader-Meinhof Group<sup>7</sup>, *18 October 1977*, 1988 (Fig. 13), Danchev (2009) asserts that painting, for Richter is a moral act, in the consideration as to what is deemed paintable or unpaintable. When asked which pictures remained unpainted, Richter replied:

*The ones that weren't paintable were the ones I did paint. The dead. To start with, I wanted more to paint the whole business, the world as it then was, the living reality – I was thinking in terms of something big and comprehensive. But then it evolved quite differently, in the direction of death. (as cited in Danchev, 2009, p. 18)*

Artist Alfredo Jaar argues for the position that ethical and aesthetic values are bound together (Jaar, 2009) meaning that one cannot separate the two, I would say that they exist both in the position of creating the artwork and in the reception of the artwork. Richter's choice of what photographic images to paint from and his decision when to show them were all intentional choices. But what Richter was unable to control was the aesthetical and ethical judgements made by the viewing public on his ethical and aesthetic decisions. According to Danchev the showing of these works was both untimely and scandalous<sup>8</sup>.



Fig. 13. Gerhard Richter, *18 October* 1977, 1988.

Artist Matthew Rana (2010) puts to us that thinking through ethics requires a certain level of reflexivity, but that this reflexivity makes contrary demands: ethics, he claims, has aesthetics and aesthetics can have ethics. He goes on to propose that for artists in particular, we shouldn't try to artificially resolve moments of uncertainty (ethically or aesthetically and anything in between) but that we would do better to investigate them.

Then from the position of *viewing* works of art, philosopher and cultural critic Raymond Tallis (iai, n.a.2) argues that very few great works of art operate on us ethically. He maintains that artworks can not shift our moral stance. Tallis maintains by experiencing a work of art your ethical position is not changed by this interaction. I agree with him, but I would argue that artworks can present to the viewer a reflection of the viewer's ethical beliefs. Whether it is the abhorrence

of brutality or simply the realisation of something beautiful, and that experience of the artwork can work to stimulate acknowledgement of this ethical belief. This is validated in the position that Carroll (1998) asserts when he argues that art can become a circumstance for us to deepen our understanding of what we know, and can offer an opening for us to develop our awareness and understanding of the moral knowledge and emotions we already hold.

This is supported by Danchev (2009) when he claims that the primary function of the arts is to make us cognisant of ourselves, and the world around us. He states "I do not know if such awareness makes us more moral or more efficient: I hope not. I think it makes us more human, and I am quite certain it makes us more difficult to deceive." (Danchev, 2009, p. 4).

If we are to consider that art can use its aesthetic position to function on an ethical level, then at that intersection it has the potential to transform. This is signalled by Griselda Pollock (iai, n.a.1) when she said:

*... there is still an incredibly important function for this level of thinking about what it is that we call the aesthetical, which is not just to do with what is beautiful or what is called art, but what catches these levels of encounter, sensation, perception, sensibility; that can be organised through the kind of material processes that we call art. That can then lead, as we engage with it, to a sense of understanding as a sense translated to a different language – the ethical. (n.a)*

She builds on this with the idea that you, as the viewer, have been encouraged to perceive a different kind of thinking because you have been transformed by an aesthetic experience.

This philosophical exploration was pivotal to my consideration as to the ethical position of my artwork. Although it certainly raised more questions than it answered, I felt I was able to establish that it was unavoidable for me not to present my own ethical position, not to do so would render my work empty. But the biggest challenge was based around reconfiguring my mindset to have my work impart a moral message to an audience, to instead allow my work to simply interpret my ethical position. I had reached the same position as held by Rancieré, that it was not for the artist to impose their knowledge, and, I had confirmation through Carroll that there was certainly a place for ethics in an aesthetic medium.

As these concepts, and earlier revelations, were percolating through my consciousness other aspects of my practice were also coming to the fore. In order to connect with an audience through my artwork, I had to allow the artwork to speak on behalf of me, in the first instance. Only then will the sentiments I've been exploring have the potential to take on a form that could be empathetically recognised by an other. This is because it would be coming from a deep-felt place rather than driven to target an audience. I had got caught up in a quest and had lost sight of the potential that is unique to painting. I had been using the technique of 'illustrating' the horrors, not letting the act of painting express my incomprehensibility of that horror.

For me this marked a distinct difference in my way of thinking and affirmation of this gave me the freedom to let go of the audience, and re-evaluate what it meant to paint. It was a poignant moment and gave me room to reflect on a comment made by Jaar. He said "art is communication – and never forget that communication does not mean to send a message, to send a message is not communication." (2009, p. 98).

## The painting

I identified the only way through was to get the brushes out and just draw and paint. I was only too aware of the complexity of this topic so I decided to simplify the process by not loading the representation with some innate reading. Put simply – just paint; paint from the images I had gathered and without expectation of a desired outcome. Free from any preconceived ideals I had previously demanded of myself and my work, I let the process lead. It was frustrating because I couldn't identify where I was going with it, yet freeing at the same time. It was an important journey to go on, as it gave me the licence to face the atrocities from my personal perspective. It made me feel vulnerable in a way I hadn't expected, but in hindsight recognised from the painting I did of my son as a Khmer Rouge prisoner. Through this process I was able to be more self-reflexive about what I was, and was not, allowing myself to do.

By allowing myself to pull away from the purely representational figuration I'd been enlisting, I felt empowered to immerse myself in the act of painting. For what was to become part of my final piece, I layered the paint and scraped it back, pushing and pulling,

building layers on top of other layers on the surface of the paper. I am reminded about a Palestinian/Israeli documentary I saw recently, *5 Broken Cameras*<sup>9</sup>. In it director and cameraman Emad Burnat spoke of wounds forming on top of old wounds, sometimes without the first having healed. As if replicating this aspect of conflicts, my painting started to take form, there was history beneath the layers. The act of removing layers was sometimes harsh, and to me evocative of the brutality I was a spectator to. The act of painting, certainly at the large scale I was working, was physical and demanding, engaging my whole body not only the hands.

This is something Leon Golub (UChicago, 2011, July 15.b) had spoken about in regard to painting his large works, he described the process as very physical; as such large works necessitate the use of large gestures. I was aware that Golub had preferred to work from photographs too, which he gathered from various media and other sources. His works like the *Vietnam*, *Mercenaries*, and *White Squad* series are large and imposing, the characters came over as testosterone pumped, menacing figures. He had described his technique as rough and brutal (UChicago, 2011, July 15.b) which I think is fitting for the characters he portrays. I admit, when I was first introduced to Golub's work I felt somewhat indifferent. I remember my response to the strong masculine feeling in the work, was that the figures portrayed appeared quite wooden. I certainly didn't appreciate what the works were doing for me, but there was enough of a spark there to encourage me back. The more time I spent contemplating his work the more I could see in it, from the directional brushstrokes to his purposeful gestures captured on the painted surface.

The experience of seeing his work *Vietnam II*, 1973 (Fig. 14) in person at the Tate Modern forced me to stop in my tracks I was so taken by it. I could feel how imposing the work was, not simply for its sheer size, but also for the violence he rendered in his treatment of the paint and surface. What he had managed to do, with the different characters he portrayed, was convey multiple aspects of the disparity evident in humanity. Golub once described himself as a machine for producing monsters "and I keep producing 'em", he said "but my production of monsters is really minuscule compared to the real production of monsters." (UChicago, 2011, July 15.a). I agree with his sentiments, I can't help but notice that, what he has done with his antagonists is hint astutely at aspects of a person that you might know, tapping you on the shoulder as if to say 'hey, they're just like you and me'.

Like Golub, I found the physicality of the process appropriate for my treatment of this brutal topic, but then, I also found myself contrasting this treatment of the paint with a more tender approach. I became conscious of the constant pull of engagement, on an empathetic level, with those I was portraying; and then the push of disengagement as I had to separate myself from this emotional tug in order to protect myself. Curiously these actions, through painting, seem to be mimetic of those of the distant spectator when witnessing atrocious events.

This work proved to be a breakthrough for me and I recognised the potential in continuing to explore, and push, my treatment of paint. I decided as well, to revisit successful aspects of my first major



Fig. 14. Leon Golub, *Vietnam II*, 1973

test piece by making use of the scale I had engaged in that work, to enable this new piece the potential to be immersive also. I took the painting I was currently working on and joined this with earlier works to make a long continuous piece, eventually measuring 12m in total. From a practical point of view I considered working on just portions of the work, with the areas I wasn't attending too left rolled up. This had the potential for unexpected happenings in the work because decisions made in some places couldn't be easily reconciled with other areas. I decided instead, to wrap the work around the movable walls in the studio space. This enabled me to test how changing it's configuration would alter the painting, while also allowing me to work on sections of the painting in isolation. It was like working on multiple paintings at once.

Here was a work that had traces of past attempts, failures, and successes incorporated into one large work. This evidence of trace became yet another valuable conceptual component of my painting.

As many who have travelled are aware, the trace of past conflicts can still be visible on the land and the buildings, even decades after the conflict has ended. I recall a recent visit to the Tate Britain, the building's exterior still marked with the permanent reminders of damage caused during WWII. There is also the trace of the many past (and present) violations in the people who populate our world. The scars of past traumas passed on from one generation to the next, the anguish still felt strongly even decades after the event that caused it.

I continued the process of filling the work with more layers of paint and striping away others. Figures disappeared and reappeared in different renditions. Protagonists sit alongside victims in an uncomfortable arrangement. Dogs walk the picture plane as chief antagonists, their inclusion there to represent the parallels between dogs as pack animals, and perpetrators being enabled to act brutally because they are part of a pack. Bosnia, Cambodia,

Uganda, Rwanda, Sudan, and Syria (to name only a few), are represented as a medley of figures. They corroborate in their association with atrocities, but refuse to give a direct reference to their particular conflict. This composition, reflective of the way we receive information of atrocious events in the media. The scenes of pain and tension became chaotic, so areas of relative calm were introduced into the painting, offering a place of rest from the onslaught. The painting exhibiting an atmosphere less like Golub's *Vietnam* scenes, rather more reminiscent of the angst evident in Picasso's *Guernica*.

At this stage, it was put to me whether I anticipated that the work would be in a 'finished state' for the final exhibition. This comment was generated from a conversation around concerns that by putting pressure on the work to look 'complete' may just inhibit the painterly approach that was being explored. But is that just letting me off the hook, allowing the process of the painting to exist beyond its apparent formal conclusion?

There is a certain unfinished quality to my work, areas have been purposefully left that way. Stylistically it provides a combination of drawn and fully painted, and refined areas of working next to loose renderings. This 'unfinished' aspect is not only representative of artistic choices, it also implies more than simply my aesthetic judgement.

It allows for the painting to be more than marks on paper, it lets those marks tell deeper stories than they might at first reveal. It allows for a greater level of engagement with those open to receive.

It reveals things about the painter in the moment those marks were made. Each cluster of marks tells you a little about the artist's state of mind when making those marks; angst, anger, incomprehension, it's all recorded there like a diary of experiences for the spectator to experience. As Hustvedt (2005) recognises, the painters hand leaves gestures for the viewer to recognise. I am thus allowing the painting to be 'complete' in the state of 'unfinished'. The potential in this rendering was recognised centuries ago, Chang Yen-Yuan (as cited in, Rubinstein, 2012) in the year 847 had this to say:

*...one should not fear the incomplete, but quite to the contrary, one should deplore that which is too complete. From the moment one knows that a thing is complete, what need is there to complete it? For the incomplete does not necessarily mean the unfulfilled. ( p. 82)*

Some of the general feedback about my work has made reference to film, and I pause to consider the similarities and differences between painting and film. At first I drew the conclusion that this feedback was reflective of our exposure to gratuitous scenes in films, and it was film not reality that my painting reminded people of. Perhaps it speaks of both film and painting as being fabrications, neither is real, but both can be dealing with subject matter referencing reality. Then I am reminded of another association which has more to do with the narrative nature of my painting and the narrative aspects of film. This highlights some important, yet discernible differences, in the two mediums in the way in which they function. The filmmaker dictates the pace at which you view the narrative; the painting allows you to absorb the

work at your own pace. In a painting you can return to bits you have passed without losing the train of the story, you can glance all over the surface and are free to come in close or stand back, that aspect is not directed.

I reflect back to the discussion between Levi-Strauss and Golub, contrasting film as a passive viewing act and painting requiring interaction with the viewer. Both the filmmaker and the painter place emphasis on different areas they want to draw your attention to, using different methods applicable to their medium. A painting allows for the viewer to read the work in whatever sequence the viewer decides, the painter may direct the viewer but it's direction is not pre-determined as is in a film. A painting allows the viewer to pause when they want, or move on, even return later to any part of the work without the work losing its thread. The painting is still, and it's stillness is its strength. As Siri Hustvedt confirms, "A novel, a symphony, a film, are meaningful only as a sequence of words, notes, and frames. Hours may pass but a painting will not gain or lose any part of itself" (2005, p. XV).

As I look at my final piece of work, I recognise that due to its scale your eye can move around without the anxiety that the painting will move on before you are ready. You can walk the length and return, cutting your own path. There is neither a continuous storyline nor is it representative of a passage of time, the work does not offer the viewer many clues as to what specific event/s it is depicting instead it is referring to a state of culture, a culture of our time – It is chaos.

## Further considerations

The other major aspect of this work, outside of painterly considerations was its installation. It was important to test how the configuration of the piece worked within a given space and to consider how the installation of it can alter your experience of the work. Expanding on this; how the work operates in different spaces, working with and against the architectural interior space, or by being taken off the walls, and creating it's own interior space (Fig.s 15a – c). As a cylindrical piece it makes a nod to the panorama paintings<sup>10</sup> of the 18th to early 20th Century. Though my composition is not descriptive of a particular place or conflict scene, as the early panorama paintings were, this format works well to immerse the viewer in a scene uninterrupted by corners. Wrapping the work around walls, in different configurations, gave greater emphasis to the parts of the painting that were protruding more, and pushed some areas back. This arrangement forcing interplay between different parts of the painting that were not in direct dialogue when installed in a flat linear plane. I enjoyed the possibilities available because the work was on a long roll of paper and not fixed like a mural. The painting could accommodate installation in different spaces, and in turn, the installation space could potentially contribute to different readings of the work. For the final installation of the painting I chose to have the work bridge perpendicular walls, with one quarter on one wall, and the remainder of the painting extending along the length of the other wall. I chose this layout as it allowed for the viewer to walk along the length of the painting.

When I reflect back on this Masters candidacy, chance and circumstance often played a hand in the direction my work took. I would like to wrap up with a comparatively inconsequential parallel, but one nonetheless I would like to draw attention too. Throughout this project, I found myself often reflecting on one particular aspect of the many complexities in this relationship between the distant spectator and the witness to the brutality and suffering of others. That is, the role that circumstance, and often chance, plays in the formulation and action entered into in these destructive events. Circumstance can be read in many different ways; the chance drafting of a young man into an army leading to actions that challenge his sense of what is right or wrong; the unsettling circumstances portrayed in the 2008 film *Die Welle (The Wave)* that lead to a group of teenagers forming a group reminiscent of the Hitler Youth, even when they were convinced such a thing could never happen again; the depravity of human kind witnessed by Victor Frankl (Frankl, 2006) in the German concentration camps, all influenced by chance and circumstance. And even the residual influence of a departed coloniser on a small, fragile African country like Rwanda.

It wasn't chance that influenced my desire to take on this topic, but by taking it on, there were the wonderful chance discoveries I made with paint as an incredibly expressive medium. It was circumstance that determined my distance from the reality of atrocities, for that I am thankful, and this position gave me a focus for exploration into a fascinating area of research. This kind of exploration, in parallel with the consideration of the relevance of ethically motivated artwork in

Fig. 15a, Rebecca Holden,  
*Installation test*



Fig. 15b, Rebecca Holden,  
*Installation test*



Fig. 15c, Rebecca Holden,  
*Installation test*





Fig. 16c, Rebecca Holden, *untitled – Detail (final installation)*

would activate some universal acknowledgement of the suffering of others due to atrocities. In the hope that reengagement would inspire action against atrocities. This initial focus of my inquiry was led by attempting to assume what would encourage a viewer to be activated by experiencing the painting. This research led me to identify that by attempting to employ painting as a tool by which to activate another – presupposes ignorance and passivity and does not allow the viewer to seek out their own engagement.

By letting go of that ambition I was able to facilitate in myself, an engagement in the potentiality of painting. This, in turn, enabled me to engage with the suffering of some, and brutality of others. By allowing myself to be vulnerable to the compassionate act of considering others pain, I was able to be absorbed in the

process of painting. One not leading the other but both working simultaneously. As a result my relationship with paint as a medium went to unexpected places, to which I am grateful. Now, because my painting reflects my personal feelings on this topic, and has simply been allowed to do so, it has been enabled with the potential to reach out to an-other.

As often is the case, there is still unfinished business to explore. Many areas of important consideration for a socially motivated art practice have been uncovered. Within this exegesis I have touched on the arguments around photography's association with the 'real' and it's role as visual proof of atrocities. This was relevant for a practice such as mine, which uses such imagery as reference, and also because it is through these that my association with distant suffering is established. I have reflected on our role as distant spectators to atrocities, and how our cognisance of these is influenced by the media through their evidentiary images, but then diminished by the spectacle they become part of. This situation enabling an environment that facilitates the ease at which we can switch off to other's suffering.

But this research reveals that this role of spectatorship is not necessarily a passive act as implied in certain interpretations of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. In comparison, Jacques Rancière argues for the emancipation of the spectator, calling for us to reconsider spectatorship as an active rather than passive act. What the viewer experiences in the act of viewing can facilitate them to acknowledge the impact of atrocities. This investigation thus enabling me to respond through painting in an interpretive way, rather than trying to use my art in a directive way.

The many theories and positions of the role of ethics and aesthetics at their intersection, will continue to provide me with stimulus. As touched upon in this research, there is the ethical as well as aesthetic considerations made as an artist as to what is paintable or unpaintable, and there are the judgements of both aesthetic and ethical persuasion that the viewer brings to the reading of the work. In consideration of my practice, it is possible that an aesthetic experience can lead us to an ethical understanding, as Pollock indicated. Acknowledging also, that the ethical intentions of the artist can not dictate the outcome of the experience of the viewer.

I have established that painting has dual possibilities. It can be a means by which an artist can explore and record their own expressions of concerns or anguish or even incomprehensibility. It can also, through the treatment of the paint and it's surface, in turn be interpreted by the viewer of the work. As history shows, painting has longevity (Picasso's *Guernica* comes to mind), even after the motivating reason for it's creation is gone, it can act not simply as remembrance but as a reminder of what humankind is capable of.

Injustices will always occur, delivered in all it's human guises of brutality, callousness, indifference and violence. It dwells within the capacity of our human nature. The level to how far we go to accepting these is the variable force that affects us as distant spectators. This is where we can chose to act or not, thanking the world for being where we are and not where 'they' are. My action, through painting, was to consider the suffering of others and the brutality we are possible of. I cannot deny how emotionally difficult this was at times. It required of me to reach in and consider some

of the darkest corners of humanity. But I believe it is better for them not to be blinkered away but brought out in the open no matter how uncomfortable or unpleasant acknowledgement of such acts is.

I do not presuppose that painting is the ultimate form by which to tackle social topics in art, instead I conclude that painting is a legitimate form of social commentary. It does this through it's potential to express, engage, enrage, provoke, and all the while being there, still, waiting for your engagement. My work embodies my personal feelings and point of view. You may interpret something similar to my intention in your viewing of my work, you may add to it or even diminish it, either way in your viewing you bring something to my work, and to the topic it discusses, and for that trade of experience I am grateful.



Fig. 17, Rebecca Holden, *untitled (final installation)*

## Notes

1. In 1994 in Rwanda under the guise of war, Hutu extremists went on a brutal campaign to rid the country of the Tutsi minority and any moderate Hutu's. Over a three month period 800,000 men, women and children perished in the Rwandan genocide ("Genocide", n.d.) (although other accounts put the figure closer to one million).
2. Ibid. p.6.
3. Peter Howson was the official British War Artist in Bosnia in 1993 his portrayals of brutality caused a lot of controversy around the role of the war artist ("Peter Howson", n.d.).
4. Goya's *Disasters of War* series were actually printed posthumously.
5. Debord also argued that those who controlled the images controlled the power because this then moderates our judgement (Debord, 1995).
6. The Janjaweed are a band of militant Arab horsemen responsible for attempting to "ethnically cleanse" South Sudan of black Africans ("Sudan's", 2004)
7. Baader-Meinhof Group also know as the Red Army Faction. Were an infamous group of German terrorists charged with kidnapping, hijacking and murder. On the 18 October 1977 (hence the title given to the series) the leaders of the group were found in their prison cells dead or dying (Danchev, 2009).
8. Danchev discusses the outcome of the opening of Richter's 18 October 1977 work, which he describes as being without fanfare, but not without spectacle. See Danchev, A. (2009). *On art and war and terror*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press (p. 25).
9. 5 Broken Cameras (2011) is a harrowing documentary about the people of a Palestinian village called Bi'l'in and their nonviolent resistance to their land being taken for an Israeli settlement. Filmed by farmer and co-director of this documentary Emad Burnat the title refers to the 5 cameras that were either shot at, or otherwise damaged by the Israeli army. It is well worth watching but bring your tissues.
10. Panorama painting or cyclorama as it was also called, is a large cylindrical painting it, "...includes a huge painting and its foreground, the surrounding building, and its meaning in history and modern society. In its original sense the panorama is a large cylindrical painting together with its 360 degree foreground, surrounding the spectator in virtual continuum. Thus a panorama creates the illusion of standing in the middle of a landscape and scene, while the depicted events were happening". ("Panorama", n.d., para. 4).

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