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Bearing witness to the  
unwatchable: expressing  
compassion from afar through a  
visual art practice

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
At Massey University,  
Wellington, New Zealand.

## Abstract

Photographic images depicting the death, destruction, and chaos caused by armed conflicts are alarming and are being transmitted across the globe at an astonishing rate. The tragic consequence of these conflicts is a humanitarian crisis of mass displacement, as we witness domicile on an unprecedented scale.

My photcollage-paintings are made in response to news reports and media photographs of certain of these conflicts and the immense suffering they inflict on civilian populations. I consider the mediating effect of the screen on the ways we see events from a distance. How can I address these horrors for a longer period than the short moment they appear on my screen? I actively question the entangled ethics and aesthetics of using art as a tool to express my response, and ask what my practice can offer.

# Acknowledgements

To Toi Rauwhārangī Massey College of Creative Arts staff and technicians—thank you for sharing your knowledge and skills.

To my studio cohort—thank you for the shared critiques and chats.

To my supervision team, Martin Patrick and Simon Morris—thank you for your wise words and guidance, particularly when I doubted myself. I know I was needy.

To all my friends—thank you for your encouragement.

To Ani and Don—ditto combined with the many, many sustaining lunches.

To Marina—thank you for listening, sharing and laughing.

To Adam and Emma—thank you for being my on-the-spot cheerleaders.

To my sister Kerry, my husband Jim, and my children Sam and Allie—thank you for your unwavering and unconditional love and support.

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# Preface

*War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins.*<sup>1</sup>

In February 2022 I watched media images of Ukrainians, mainly women and children, boarding buses and trains to escape the start of the Russian invasion. In safety on the other side of the world, I could only imagine the shock and fear of being forced from my home to protect myself and family; of being displaced to a different region; possibly an unknown country; and the inherent loss of anything familiar.

At the same time as I was seeing these images I was reading the associated reports about how many people were being displaced around the world and I found the numbers staggering. In 2022, 110 million people had been forcibly removed from their homes globally, some by natural disasters, others as a result of armed conflicts; now there are an unprecedented 123 million displaced persons<sup>2</sup> and much of this humanitarian crisis is a tragic consequence of more than 110 armed conflicts active across the

world, with those in Palestine, Sudan, and Ukraine being among the largest contributors<sup>3</sup>.

The majority of the background research for my visual art practice has involved reading media reports and viewing associated images from these three main areas of conflict, initially Ukraine, followed by Palestine and Sudan. Some of these reports contain first-hand accounts of the violence and devastation. Many—indeed most—of the reports have been harrowing, and it is understandable that for many people they are unreadable, and the images unwatchable.

The images I was seeing, and continue to see, were the catalyst for my creative practice of the past four years. My works are made in response to reports and media images of current conflicts across the world. I am questioning how I can address these horrors for longer than the short time they are on a screen. In making my work I have been looking at the absence of humans, and referring to their displacement by looking at the journeys people are forced to make and at the spaces, the homes, where they have been, and where they can no longer expect to be<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Global Trends,” *UNHCR*, April 6, 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>

<sup>3</sup> Geneva Academy, “Today’s Armed Conflicts,” [geneva-academy.ch](https://geneva-academy.ch), 2024, <https://geneva-academy.ch/galleries/today-s-armed-conflicts>

<sup>4</sup> Author

# Introduction

In her foreword to the catalogue of the 2017 *Graphic Witness* exhibition held at the Drawing Room in London, Kate McFarlane refers to:

the notion of the ‘graphic witness’ as a term that harnesses the power of drawing to challenge and question the status quo, to record and reflect protest, as well as to bear witness to social injustices and the horrors of war.<sup>5</sup>

When discussing the work of artists such as Americans Nancy Spero and Leon Golub, and Lebanese artist Mounira Al Solh all of whose works were included in the exhibition, McFarlane suggests that their drawings “mediate the act of observation” as they are sometimes less explicit than photographs and therefore can allow a re-engagement of the viewer with “horrific subject matter”. Their interventions can make the unwatchable, watchable.

I believe the same can be said of the screens via which we currently receive images, they mediate our seeing. In this digital age photographic images are ever-present; Eva Respini considers the difference between amateur and professional creators is becoming

less discernible; with the knowledge that any narrative can be supported by image manipulation—how can we trust what we are seeing?<sup>6</sup> Respini is specifically referencing the work of Walid Raad which she posits “questions the authority ascribed to legitimate sources of information (the newspaper), the arbiters of history (the historian) and the tool that often bears witness, the camera.” I understand the need to question, however, I believe that the old adage that ‘journalism is the first draft of history’<sup>7</sup> still stands when assessed across a broad spectrum of sources, particularly when world events are developing so quickly. It is for this reason that I consider there is a need for some further mediation of the images, beyond that of the screen itself<sup>8</sup>, that allows for slow contemplation and consideration of what we are actually looking at.

My current studio practice has taken the photograph as the starting point, as an object, which is then significantly transformed by my photocollage and painterly interventions.

As I navigate my own practice and grapple with the challenging subject matter and its aesthetics, I acknowledge that my responses come from a position of relative privilege—of White, middle-class

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<sup>5</sup> Kate Macfarlane, *Graphic Witness* (Drawing Room, 2017), 5.

<sup>6</sup> “Walid Raad,” *The Museum of Modern Art* (MoMA, 2015), 33 -35  
<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1493>

<sup>7</sup> Jason Lee Guthrie, “Revising the First Rough Draft: On Journalism, History, and Journalism History,” *American Journalism* 40, no. 4 (October 2, 2023): 500–505, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2023.2264233>

<sup>8</sup> Hito Steyerl, *Hito Steyerl : The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin, Germany: Sternberg Press, 2012).

affluence—in a country ranked third in the world for safety,<sup>9</sup> and physically distanced from active armed conflicts on the other side of the world. A country which has itself been subject to armed conflict and internal displacement of indigenous Māori as a result of British Colonisation, and which as a consequence aligns itself with the ‘Western’ world.

There is further tension for me, as my intention is for the artworks to have a considered aesthetic, to evoke some qualities of attraction, to draw people in, likely before they realise upon closer inspection exactly what is being portrayed. I do not consider this a trope but a valid mediation strategy for both myself in making the work and to encourage viewer engagement.

In this exegesis, I reflect on three areas which broadly encompass my practice: that of Bearing Witness—I am seeing; The Unwatchable—I am not turning away; and Compassion from afar—I am showing “*this is how it was.*”<sup>10</sup>

To explore these concepts further, I have researched other artists’ approaches to confronting themes—and explored the ethical and aesthetic questions raised by their practices. Given the focus and

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<sup>9</sup> “Military, Media, Geopolitics and the Increase of Conflict Risk: Launch of the Global Peace Index 2025 - Institute for Economics & Peace,” Institute for Economics & Peace, June 16, 2025,

<https://www.economicsandpeace.org/event/militarization-media-geopolitics-and-the-increase-of-conflict-risk-launch-of-the-global-peace-index-2025/>

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Marzorati, *A Painter of Darkness : Leon Golub and Our Times* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1992), 32

scope of this exegesis I cannot note them all nor elaborate on all of their practices. However, of particular inspiration are works by: Alberto Burri (1915 - 1995); Salvatore Scarpitta (1919 - 2007); and Pablo Picasso (1881 - 1973) who are discussed in Chapter 1—Bearing Witness.

In Chapter 2—The Unwatchable I look at Théodore Géricault (1791-1824) *The Raft of the Medusa* 1819; Alfredo Jaar (1956) and how he makes sense of the unwatchable; and Kurdish refugee Bîstyek (1996) who has a lived experience of displacement.

Lastly, Arcangelo Sassolino (1967); Studio Claire Fontaine (2004); and Gabriele Micalizzi (1984) are discussed in Chapter 3—Compassion from afar.

Other artists whom I have researched but are not discussed in depth here are Martha Rosler (USA 1943) and her photomontage works *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967-72) highlighting the atrocities of the Vietnam War<sup>11</sup> and Gerard Richter, (Germany 1932) whose paintings over large scale photographs mediate and obscure the images they depict, of which the *Birkenau Cycle* 2014 is a significant example<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Martha Rosler, “House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home (1967-1972),” martha rosler, accessed January 20, 2024, <https://www.martharosler.net/house-beautiful>.

<sup>12</sup> Agata Pyzik, “Painting the Unpaintable: Gerhard Richter’s Most Divisive Work Returns to Auschwitz,” *The Guardian*, March 5, 2024, sec. Art and design, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2024/mar/05/painting-the-unpaintable-gerhard-richters-most-divisive-work-returns-to-auschwitz>.

When discussing the role of art in making sense of the world, Anne Bogart makes the point that “Art can expand the definition of what it means to be human,”<sup>13</sup>. What I am attempting to do is bear witness to what is happening, and to make sense of it for myself. This is a different stance than purporting to speak *for* anyone else and their experiences, as I have no right to do so. On the contrary, I am creating my artworks as personal responses to what I am seeing.

I understand that some people choose to express their response actively within a given situation by working or volunteering in the conflict zones. Others respond by being politically involved, organising rallies or fundraising, and attending protests to demonstrate their support— as Martha Rosler said “*that’s* the role of activists—that’s their life. The “artist as activist” designation is different,”<sup>14</sup>. I chose not to attend protests as I do not cope well with crowds or confrontation and I am not aligned with any particular organisation or group; instead I offer my support by way of donations and by trying to make sense of what is happening by employing visual art as a tool, as a means to express what I feel as a fellow human. To my mind there is no justification for ‘othering’ in society - we are all human.

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<sup>13</sup> Anne Bogart, *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World* (London: Routledge, 2007), 1–6.

<sup>14</sup> Cara Ober, “Martha Rosler: Art as Activism, Democratic Socialism, and the Changing Role of Women Artists as They Age,” BmoreArt, July 4, 2019,

<https://bmoreart.com/2019/07/martha-rosler-on-art-as-activism-democratic-socialism-and-the-changing-role-of-women-artists-as-they-age.html>.

## Chapter One – Bearing Witness

*With no promise that the resulting work will change anything, a painting can bear witness – that is how (the painter) can confront the abuse of political power. A work of Art can say: this is how it was.*<sup>15</sup>

Men have been waging war for millennia and the outcome does not change—lives are destroyed on both sides. Susan Sontag opens her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* by quoting from Virginia Woolf's lengthy essay *Three Guineas* in which she discusses the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 and the twice weekly photographs published by the Spanish Government:

This morning's collection contains the photograph of what might be a man's body, or a woman's, it is so mutilated that it might on the other hand be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children, and that undoubtedly is the section of a house. A bomb has torn open the side, there is still a bird-cage hanging in what was presumably the sitting room.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gerald Marzorati, *A Painter of Darkness : Leon Golub and Our Times*, 32

<sup>16</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* quoted in Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 2003).

As an author Woolf used prose to understand what she was bearing witness to, and to express her thoughts and her emotional response to the war that she was seeing from a distance.

Pablo Picasso was also seeing the same war at a distance when he used painting, as his tool, to react to images of the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica in April 1937. He created his monumental work *Guernica* (Figure 1) as a very immediate response to what he was seeing. Monochromatic and painted at a large scale (3.49 x 7.76 metres) to emphasise the suffering of innocent civilians—you can almost hear the screams—*Guernica* remains one of the most iconic representations of anti-war sentiment in the 20th Century, offering “a generic plea against the barbarity and terror of war”.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Paloma Esteban Leal, “Guernica,” *Museoreinasofia.es*, 2025, <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collections/artwork/guernica-0>



Figure 1. Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937.

I first looked at artists Alberto Burri (1915 - 1995) and Salvatore Scarpitta (1919 - 2007) as they both chose to work in the abstract rather than figuratively, as did I earlier in my practice, and they also employed materials as a metaphor in their art practices—as a mechanism to assist in processing the trauma they experienced in World War II.

As a medic and former prisoner of war, Alberto Burri saw the violence and destruction of conflict firsthand. His use of heat to transform red plastic, which assumes an organic almost bodily form, is redolent of the deep wounds of his experiences. (Figure 2).

By contrast Salvatore Scarpitta who fought in the Italian Resistance and was one of the ‘Monuments Men’<sup>18</sup> chose to represent healing in his post-war work by wrapping canvas ‘bandages’ around and through the openings of the ripped canvas as a means of repair and protection, *Ammiraglio (Admiral)* 1958, (Figure 3). At the time, abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning opined to Scarpitta, “Burri creates wounds, but you heal them!”<sup>19</sup>

Unlike me, they were of course, both trying to process and make sense of the trauma of their lived experiences of war, rather than responding to mediated photographic images or reports.

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<sup>18</sup> “Monuments Men and Artworks in World War II,” Metmuseum.org, 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/provenance-research-resources/monuments-men>

Figure 2. Alberto Burri, *Rosso Plastica*, 1963.

<https://www.labalenabianca.com/2016/10/19/il-pilota-automatico-riflessioni-su-filosofia-e-terrorismo/alberto-burri-rosso-plastica-1963-1024x829-1/>

<sup>19</sup> De Kooning quoted “De Bello. Notes on War and Peace,” Gresart671.org, 2025, 161. <https://gresart671.org/en/activities/de-bello-notes-on-war-and-peace>

Unfortunately, we are still receiving reports of conflicts and seeing photographs showing the mutilated bodies of civilians and buildings ripped apart at the seams, exposing fragmented scenes of ordinary life now devastated by war. Palestinian-American writer Sarah Aziza echoes Woolf's sentiments, the only difference is the images she is seeing are delivered daily via her WhatsApp screen:

In the mornings, as others stumble toward their coffee, I wake and gather news of the dead...Watch, I tell myself. I see what must have been a building, though all that remains is a smoking hill of sharp debris. Watch, I tell myself, as thin men in sandaled feet rush into the frame. They begin pawing at the slabs of cement, rebar, brick. Shouts ricochet. The camera moves closer. My ears begin to ring. I long to click away. Watch. These are your people. I force my eyes to stay.<sup>20</sup>

Aziza is bearing witness to the events unfolding in Gaza in the aftermath of the Hamas-led 7 October 2023 attack in southern Israel. She asks us to bear witness too, and questions "what does all this looking do?". I think all this looking helps us to see. However, as visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff notes, I can only see from the outside, from a distance. He is speaking specifically about Palestine, but this is true for all the conflicts I am seeing. I am on the outside and seeing from a distance, from afar. He argues that to see Palestine is to see the world, albeit a different kind of seeing; it

Figure 3. Salvatore Scarpitta, *Ammiraglio*, 1958.  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/DPJAolXDCLH/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/DPJAolXDCLH/?img_index=1)

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<sup>20</sup> Sarah Aziza, "The Work of the Witness," *Jewish Currents*, January 12, 2024, <https://jewishcurrents.org/the-work-of-the-witness>

is “to see in the dark”. It is to acknowledge “one’s own blindness and render visible one’s failure to see”.<sup>21</sup> I too am trying to see in the dark in order to make sense of what it is I am actually seeing.

In making my first works I was reflecting upon the absence of humans, and referring to their displacement by looking at the spaces—the homes, the workplaces, the schools, the hospitals—that they once inhabited and congregated within, which are now destroyed or uninhabitable. Further research has informed me that what I am seeing is ‘domicide’, that is to say the “deliberate destruction of home by human agency in pursuit of specified goals, which causes suffering to the victims” - the killing of home.<sup>22</sup> I aspire for my artworks to bear witness to the domicile I am seeing and to show, “*This is how it was*”.<sup>23</sup>

I started to spend time with some of the photographs I was seeing and to question how can I as an individual, as an artist, face the horrors of the world? I was interested in how I could make artworks through deliberate consideration of the press photographs I was looking at, and the ways that photographs themselves create a layer of distance from the original subject.<sup>24</sup>

As the starting point for *Dnipro* (Figure 4a-e), I sourced the photograph captioned:

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<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, *To See in the Dark* (Pluto Books, 2025), 1-36

<sup>22</sup> J Douglas Porteous and Sandra Smith, *Domicide : The Global Destruction of Home* (Montréal ; London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>23</sup> Marzorati, *A Painter of Darkness : Leon Golub and Our Times*, 32

*Consequences of a Russian missile strike on medical facilities in Dnipro, the Dnipropetrovsk region. Photo from Serhii Lysak, Head of the Dnipropetrovsk Regional Military Administration*

I spent time enlarging the photograph on my computer screen, trying to imagine what the view *in through* and *out from* the windows might have been prior to the bombing; medics checking in on patients, family visitors sitting quietly, staring out the window while their relatives slept. While my contemplation of the photograph was slow and considered, my actions in making the work were not. Initially, I painted with my homemade mixture of ground charcoal, gum arabic and water directly onto the canvas—emphasising the empty blackness of the windows and jagged outline of the bombed building (Figure 4a). Although I felt the painting talked to an absence, it also felt too remote and calm; I wanted to disturb that, there is nothing calm within the images I am seeing. The scenes they depict are brutal. I had no desire to create anything tidy.

<sup>24</sup> Vija Celmins quoted in Tate, “Explore the Art of Vija Celmins—Look Closer,” Tate, accessed May 2, 2024, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/vija-celmins-2731/explore-art-vija-celmins>



Figure 4a. Helen Pinson, *Dnipro*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 4c. Helen Pinson, *Dnipro*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 4b. Helen Pinson, *Dnipro*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 4d. Helen Pinson, *Dnipro*, 2025. Process/work in progress.

I recalled Vija Celmins' comment: "I treat the photograph as an object, to scan and re-make in my art".<sup>25</sup> I decided that I too would treat the photograph as an object.

I made multiple photocopies of the original photograph, enlarging and fragmenting different areas, which I glued to the canvas, sometimes sculpturally, sometimes flat, to re-create the burning building of the original photograph. Originally, I intended to leave the window spaces black, but as I worked I decided to recreate the fire burning within them too.

I finished by re-painting the windows and the building's fragmented outline over the top with my charcoal paint.

I had used PVA glue to apply the paper to the canvas however, this did mean the work, which I am choosing to call a photocollage-painting, was left with a shiny, varnished finish which seemed incongruous given the subject matter.

Despite that, the second iteration of the work (Figure 4e) is, for me, more redolent of what is actually happening in Ukraine. It reflects the destruction and decimation of so many residential buildings and key civilian support infrastructure that have been, and are increasingly being, targeted by Russia in their domicide of the past four years.

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<sup>25</sup> Tate, "Explore the Art of Vija Celmins – Look Closer".



Figure 4e. Helen Pinson, *Dnipro*, 2025.

As the Israeli offensive continued, the extent of the domicile in Gaza became more evident when images were circulated at the first ceasefire in early 2025. In creating *Rafah* (Figure 5a-j) I focussed on a photograph captioned:

*Palestinians walk past the rubble of buildings destroyed during the Israeli offensive, amid a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. REUTERS/Hatem Khaled. 6 February 2025.*

I wanted to increase the size of my work, I wanted to work at a human scale—at a size relative to me as the maker and relative to the people subject to this domicile. Rather than using canvas, I taped and stretched cartridge paper directly onto the studio wall. This required more physical effort than I expected.

As with *Dnpro* I treated the photograph as an object and made multiple photocopies of the original image, enlarging the different fragmented areas. This time I applied them with cellulose rather than PVA glue to avoid the shiny finish of *Dnpro*.

I used repetition of the fragments, and variations in scale to create an image reflecting the original photograph. Initially, I stuck the photocopies flat to the paper ground, and also went beyond its edges rather than adhering neatly to the straight lines of the substrate. There are no straight lines, no neatness, in the images I am seeing; there is only destruction, fragmentation and rubble.

I made more copies and scrunched them to overlay the foreground areas of the work, this gave texture, and explicitly referenced the rubble of destruction within the image.



Figure 5a. Helen Pinson, *Rafah*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 5b. Helen Pinson, *Rafah*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 5c. Helen Pinson, *Rafah*, 2025. Process/work in progress.

<sup>26</sup> Mirzoeff, *To See in the Dark*, 62.

That rubble, according to Mirzoeff, is an anomaly. “It belongs to the past, in which it was whole, the present in which it is what it is, and the future when it will all have been cleared away.”<sup>26</sup> And the rubble is everywhere. I sought a way to allow a viewer to acknowledge the human scale of this tragedy. To assist the process of imagining themselves in the situation depicted within the work. Artist David Thomas applied rectangles of glossy black paint for a related purpose in his photo-painting *Amid our own Narratives* 2006, where the painted area over his photograph acted as a reflective mirror, placing the viewer both within the narrative and as observer, “showing that an image without somebody to look at it, is in a way not there”<sup>27</sup>

Using A3 photocopies of the photocollage-painting, I experimented with placing various figures and groupings from within the photograph in different positions and using different media. Having decided to replicate the two figures from the foreground of the image using my charcoal paint, I tested different positions and sizes of the figures by cutting out silhouettes and placing them over the collage, from which I realised they needed to be close to life-size. They needed to be at the same scale, placing themselves alongside us, the viewer. I painted the figures with charcoal, then washed back the paint, such that the figures are barely there, almost transparent, allowing the underlying images of the rubble of this domicile to be seen.

<sup>27</sup> Dr Wolfgang Zumnick, quoted in Lesley Harding and David Thomas, *David Thomas* (Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2022).



Figure 5d. Helen Pinson, *Rafah*, 2025. Process/work in progress.

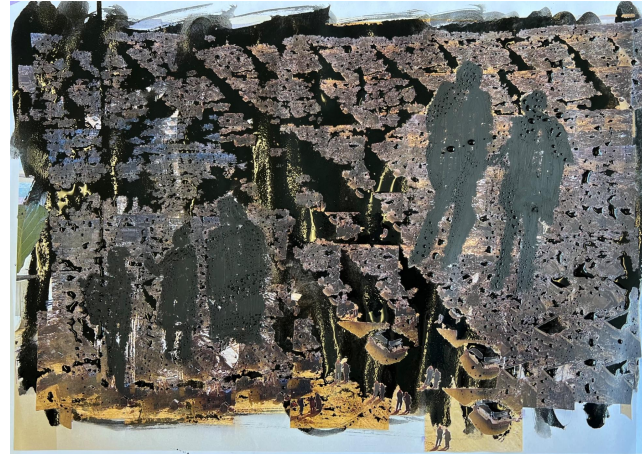


Figure 5f. Helen Pinson, *Rafah*, 2025. Process/work in progress.

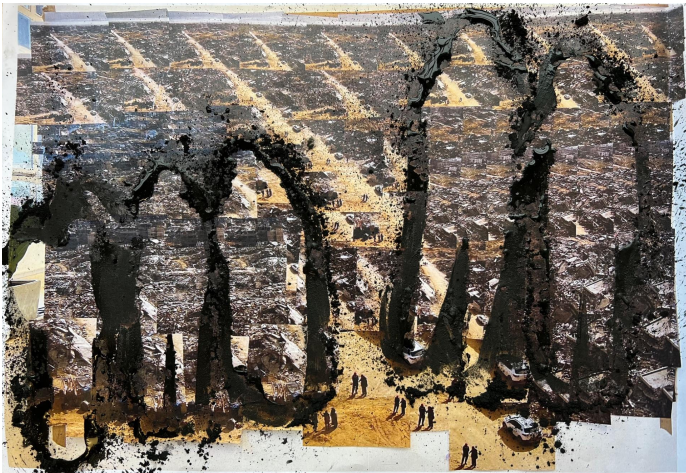


Figure 5e. Helen Pinson, *Rafah*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 5g. Helen Pinson, *Rafah*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 5h. Helen Pinson, *Rafah*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 5j. Helen Pinson, *Rafah*, 2025.



Figure 5i. Helen Pinson, *Rafah*, 2025. Process/work in progress.

## Chapter Two – The Unwatchable

*Our culture today is marked by the ever-growing presence of images, and because their rate of circulation also keeps going up, we are increasingly discouraged from engaging in critical reflection on the individual image.*<sup>28</sup>

What are the images of armed conflicts that we likely see on a daily basis depicting? Many mainstream media outlets preface their reports with a content warning: ‘some viewers may find the following images distressing’. What sort of person would not? But there is a dilemma. While there may be a desire for images of the violence, death and destruction from conflict zones to inspire a call to action in denouncing the perpetrators of such aggression, or for fundraising to support those suffering from it, there is a danger associated with the circulation of humanitarian photography.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Helen Westgeest, *Slow Painting : Contemplation and Critique in the Digital Age* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Lilie Chouliaraki and Richard Stupart, “Between Morality and the Market: The Circulation of Humanitarian Photography,” *International Journal of Communication* 19 (October 12, 2023): 306–21, <https://doi.org/1932-8036/20250005>.

<sup>30</sup> Azoulay quoted Chouliaraki and Stupart, “Between Morality and the Market: The Circulation of Humanitarian Photography,” 308

Photography “acts in and on the world”<sup>30</sup> and images of the wounded, dying and dead are intended to confront the viewer with another’s suffering. But these images can dehumanize and ‘other’ those shown within them.<sup>31</sup> It is for this reason that Aziza is wary of “mass dissemination of our grief”<sup>32</sup>. She should be. There is the possibility that viewers will, rather than fulfilling their side of the social commitment—to engage, to react, to be appalled—when seeing images of suffering, that they recoil and respond instead with aversion and numbness.<sup>33</sup>

We are viewing the disasters and horrors of the world at a distance, and of course, sometimes, it is overwhelming, and we find the images unwatchable. However, I think it is not so much the aversion or recoil that might be evoked by watching, but the feeling of helplessness and inadequacy to do anything to save those involved or change the situations that induced the suffering. The shrugging of shoulders and acceptance of ‘there’s nothing I can do’ so no point in watching. Indeed, to watch in those circumstances, when the suffering may have been aestheticised to grab attention, can feel voyeuristic and exploitative.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Dean quoted Chouliaraki and Stupart, “Between Morality and the Market: The Circulation of Humanitarian Photography,” 308

<sup>32</sup> Aziza, “The Work of the Witness”.

<sup>33</sup> Azoulay quoted Chouliaraki and Stupart, “Between Morality and the Market: The Circulation of Humanitarian Photography,” 308

<sup>34</sup> Chouliaraki and Stupart, “Between Morality and the Market: The Circulation of Humanitarian Photography,”

We do not want to feel that way, so we don't watch; in order to avoid a perpetual state of mourning, we disengage, and dissociation and inaction ensues.<sup>35</sup> And of course the perpetrators of the violence do not want us to watch. They do not want us to see.

Russia tries to interfere with and control communications and internet connections along the active war front, and within its occupied territories of Ukraine. Getting information out of Sudan is difficult as both sides of the Civil War try to control the narrative and there are frequent communication blackouts. Once Israel started its retaliation for the Hamas-led attack on 7 October 2023, it banned foreign journalists from entering Gaza. Since then, an unprecedented number of journalists, 248, have been killed within Gaza, many specifically targeted by the Israeli Defence Force (IDF)<sup>36</sup>. Just recently, the Iranian Government created a total internet block as they do not want the rest of the world to see the violence of its repression of the civil unrest developing within the country.

I am watching and I am trying to see. I have been principally working with images associated with news outlets or first hand

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<sup>35</sup> Mirzoeff, *To See in the Dark*, 16

<sup>36</sup> Irene Khan and Francesca Albanese, "States Must Stop Israel before All Journalists in Gaza Are Silenced: UN Experts," OHCHR, September 4, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/states-must-stop-israel-all-journalists-gaza-are-silenced-un-experts>

<sup>37</sup> Chouliaraki and Stupart, "Between Morality and the Market: The Circulation of Humanitarian Photography," 306-21

accounts, rather than those circulated for humanitarian fundraising; the reason for which was twofold—I wanted to highlight the loss of home—domicide—by using images of destroyed buildings which tend to be more highly circulated by news media, and I did not want to use any images which may contribute to their subjects' loss of agency or create otherness.<sup>37</sup>

Before the advent of photography, societies relied upon artists to provide images of conflict and war—they were tasked with making them watchable, depicting the victors as conquering heroes. Paleolithic artists painted hunting and battle scenes on cave walls with a view to being seen by others as witnesses<sup>38</sup>; religious iconography and ancient frescos made spectacles of "gruesome scenes" aestheticising violence;<sup>39</sup> although when Leonardo da Vinci instructed his assistants to have the courage and the imagination to show war in all its glory, he was suggesting that the image "should appall" and present a "challenging kind of beauty".<sup>40</sup> It seems entirely bizarre to consider war as glorious, but that was how battles were generally depicted; created for the victors, paintings were monumental and celebratory "those instances of sublime self-sacrifice that are the glory of religion and of patriotism".<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Kristine Stiles, *Concerning Consequences : Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 5. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/10.7208/chicago/9780226304403.001.0001>

<sup>39</sup> Nicholas Baer et al., *Unwatchable* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

<sup>40</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 75.

<sup>41</sup> Annales du Musée quoted Christine Riding, *Shipwreck, Self-Preservation and the Sublime*, *Tate.org.uk* (Tate, 2013).

However, when Théodore Géricault painted his monumental *The Raft of the Medusa* (Figure 6) in 1819, he wasn't recording or celebrating a battle scene per se but a devastating consequence of the conflict and power imbalance between the colonial slaver and the enslaved. Géricault was enlisting art to express his dismay at the dreadful treatment of the survivors of the shipwreck of the Medusa. The hapless French Captain and dignitaries used the lifeboats while everyone else was abandoned to their fate on a makeshift raft. Only 15 out of 150 survived. He so accurately rendered the decomposing flesh, the writhing agony of the dying, and the desperation of the survivors waving at a ship on the horizon, that viewers continue to be confronted by the scene 200 years later.

Géricault was making a political statement on the horrors of colonialism, slavery and cronyism; he also wanted the unwatchable to be seen - his art was showing "*this is how it was.*"



Figure 6. Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819.

Chilean contemporary artist Alfredo Jaar (1956) realises the power of the image and has employed varying strategies to understand and interpret the politics of photographs; one of which is “reprogramming the shock dynamics of trauma and substituting the aesthetics of the wound with the ‘document’, which contextualises and integrates image and event beyond and against the politics of global information.”<sup>42</sup> When trying to process the conversations he had with survivors, and more than 3000 photographs he took, following the Rwandan Genocide, Jaar found he had an “incapacity to represent it in a way that made sense.”<sup>43</sup> So much so that for *Real Pictures* 1995, he chose to entomb the images within black boxes, and use descriptive narrative upon the lids rather than risk an empathetic response to the “pathos of visual suffering.”<sup>44</sup> He doesn’t completely eschew visual imagery though, rather he turns it upon us.

Rwandan Gutete Emerita experienced the brutality of the murder of her husband and two sons as she stood next to them and was one of the survivors with whom Jaar met and “whose experience of the impossible he can only fail to understand, let alone represent”<sup>45</sup>. But actually he did, with *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* 1996 (Figure 7a-b) the viewer is not faced with horrors of genocide but with the gaze of one the survivors who is a “witness to

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<sup>42</sup> Olivier Chow, “Alfredo Jaar and the Post-Traumatic Gaze – Tate Papers,” Tate, 2008. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/09/alfredo-jaar-and-the-post-traumatic-gaze>

<sup>43</sup> Alfredo Jaar quoted Chow, “Alfredo Jaar and the Post-Traumatic Gaze – Tate Papers.”

something that it is impossible to bear witness to,”<sup>46</sup>. He used 100,000 photographs/slides of Gutete Emerita’s eyes, her gaze staring above a white neon absence.

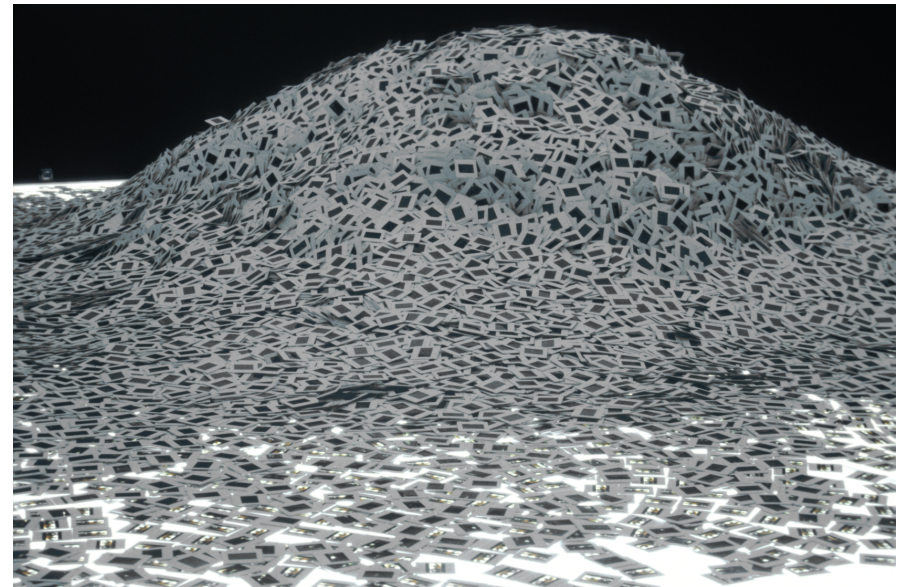


Figure 7a. Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, 1996.

<sup>44</sup> Chow, “Alfredo Jaar and the Post-Traumatic Gaze – Tate Papers.”

<sup>45</sup> Chow, “Alfredo Jaar and the Post-Traumatic Gaze – Tate Papers.”

<sup>46</sup> Giorgio Agambam, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 13 quoted in Chow “Alfredo Jaar and the Post-Traumatic Gaze – Tate Papers,” Tate, 2008.

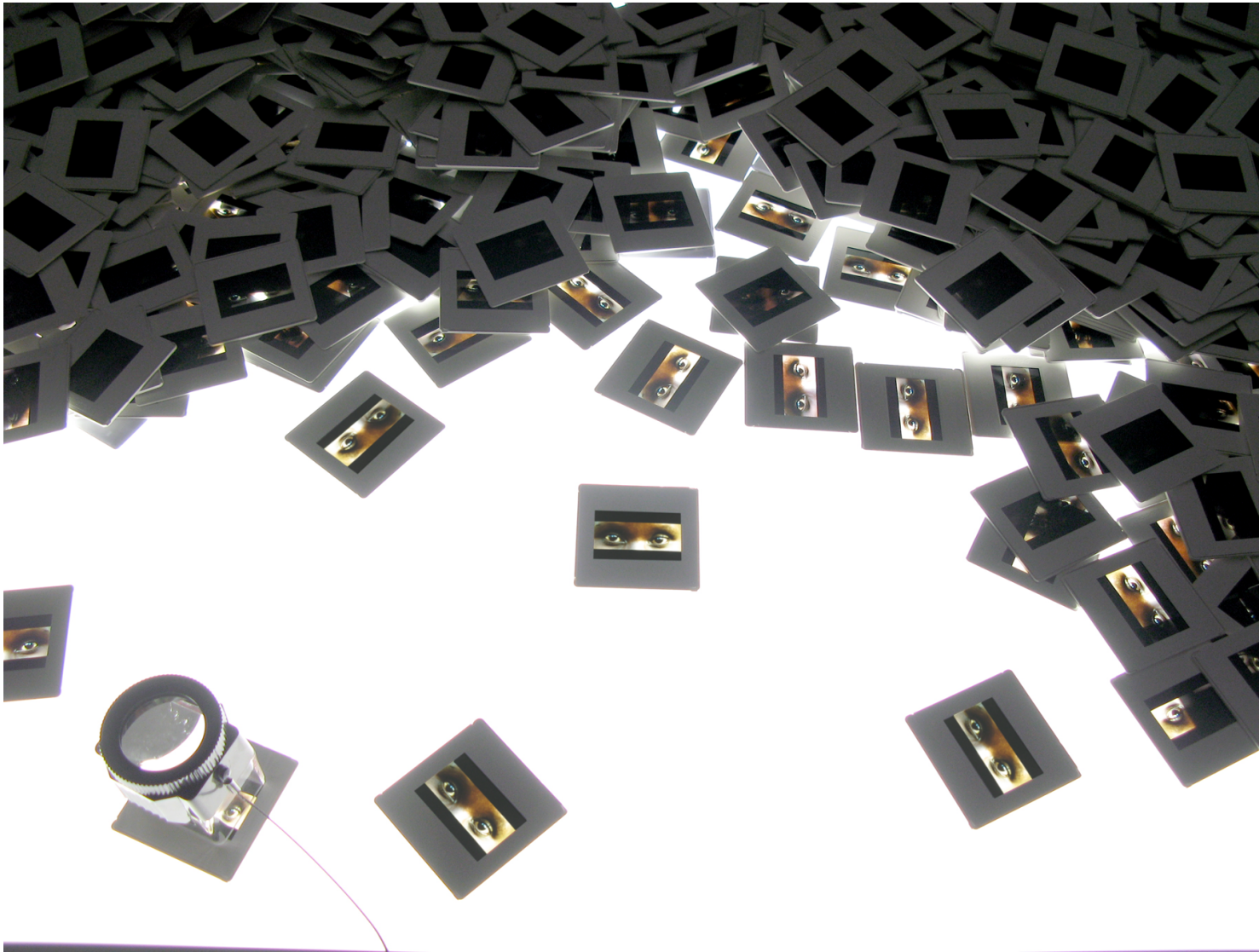


Figure 7b. Alfredo Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, 1996.

In April this year I began to see images of an attack on the Zamzam refugee camp in Sudan shown on mainstream media. I had been reading reports about the Civil War within Sudan since its inception but there had been very few images circulating until then. More than 12 million Sudanese have been displaced since the latest conflict started in 2023.<sup>47</sup>

Aid agencies had already been struggling to provide medical assistance and food into the Zamzam camp, which was home to c. 400,000 people, as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) had blocked access prior to their sustained attack between the 13 and 15 April.<sup>48</sup>

The reports and the images were distressing, the first-hand reports particularly so. I was not able to find any photographs of the destruction, the domicide of Zamzam camp itself, only those showing the people subject to it. I decided that I would therefore address what was happening by showing the impact of their enforced displacement.

Up to this point I had referred to single images as my starting point for my photocollage-paintings but for *Tawila* (Figure 8a-d) I combined aspects of three:

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<sup>47</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Global Trends,” *UNHCR*, April 6, 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>

*Hundreds of thousands of people are thought to have fled in the attack on the Zamzam camp. Photograph: Courtesy of North Darfur Observatory For Human Rights.*

*People who fled the Zamzam camp rest in a makeshift encampment in an open field near the town of Tawila in Darfur. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images; and*

*A makeshift camp near Tawila after the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) attack on the Zamzam refugee camp in Darfur, Sudan. April 2025.*

I studied the three photographs. I read the reports, which included firsthand accounts of the brutality of the attack. They were horrific. I made multiple copies of the three photographs - enlarging, reducing, fragmenting different areas within them. Once again I stretched cartridge paper directly onto the studio wall—this time I needed another pair of hands as I was increasing the length from my previous work. I wanted to tell the story of the displacement and distress caused as a result of the attack. I cannot know the trauma that such an experience must cause, but I wanted the work to reflect the scale and enormity of what is happening, of what I was seeing from a distance.

<sup>48</sup> “Video Evidence of Atrocities Emerges as Sudan’s RSF Seizes El-Fasher,” *Al Jazeera*, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/video/newsfeed/2025/10/28/video-evidence-of-atrocities-emerges-as-sudans-rsf-seize-el-fasher>.



Figure 8a. Helen Pinson, *Tawila*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 8b. Helen Pinson, *Tawila*, 2025. Process/work in progress.

As I worked, positioning and pasting the layers of collage, I realised when I stepped back that I was creating what looks like a colourful landscape. It is not until one draws nearer that the situation of the individual people, mainly women and children, is evident, and meet their gaze as I meet that of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* and feel the “‘painful mystery’ tied up with what it is to be human”<sup>49</sup>.



Figure 8c. Helen Pinson, *Tawila*, 2025. Process/work in progress.

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<sup>49</sup> John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler, *Tragedy* (Routledge, 2014), quoted in Chow, “Alfredo Jaar and the Post-Traumatic Gaze – Tate Papers.”



Figure 8d. Helen Pinson, *Tawila*, 2025.

Kurdish refugee Bîstyek has a lived experience of displacement. When he paints he recalls events from his childhood in Syria followed by seven years with his family in a refugee camp in Lebanon. The need to paint allows him to express the traumas he and his family suffered (Figure 9). "When I'm painting something sad, I will be sad," he says. "When I'm painting something that hurts, while I'm painting it, I'm getting hurt. But with all that I enjoy it - when I paint, I feel that I need to paint, and I also want to finish it. When I finish it, I really want to share it."<sup>50</sup> His work embodies the emotions of his resilience and by sharing them, the viewer may glean some understanding of what he, and far too many refugees, have had to overcome.

I have been lucky and have never experienced the trauma such as Bîstyek nor any displaced person has endured, and in my own practice, I consider my work merely reflects the emotional response I personally have to the reports I read and photographs I am seeing. Shock. Sadness. Anger. Compassion.

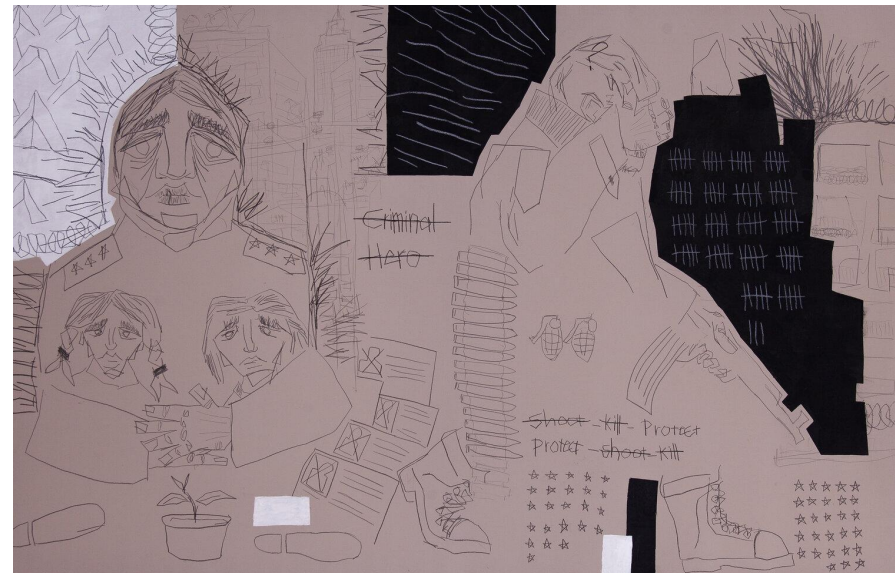


Figure 9. Bîstyek, *Untitled [ criminal-Hero ]*, 2019–2020.

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<sup>50</sup> Bîstyek, *When I Go Outside*, Film Documentary (Canada: Too Many Words, 2022), quoted Author

The war in Ukraine is now nearing the end of its fourth year, and is only back in the mainstream media headlines in September as American President Donald Trump sets Russia a new truce deadline. It does nothing to alleviate the bombing. The domicile in Ukraine continues.

*Bilenke* (Figure 10a-j) was made in response to three Images of a missile attack on Penal Colony 99 In Bilenke, Zaporizhzhia:

*The prison in Bilenke, which suffered a direct hit in one of eight strikes on Zaporizhzhia region. Photograph: Ukraine State Criminal Executive Service/AP.*

*“The Russians could not have been unaware that they were hitting civilians in this prison,” said Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Photograph: Ukraine State Criminal Executive Service/AP.*

*A view of the penal colony hit by a Russian air strike, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Zaporizhzhia region, Ukraine July 29, 2025. State Penitentiary Service of Ukraine/Handout via REUTERS.*

I planned to expand the scale once again. I rolled out secondhand photography backdrop paper the entire width of the studio—eight metres in length. I printed the photographs onto transparent sheets and using an overhead projector I drew the outline of the main areas onto the paper ground. As before, I made multiple copies of the three photographs—enlarging, reducing, fragmenting, and repeating different areas within them.



Figure 10a. Helen Pinson, *Bilenke*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 10b. Helen Pinson, *Bilenke*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 10c. Helen Pinson, *Bilenke*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 10e. Helen Pinson, *Bilenke*, 2025. Process/work in progress.

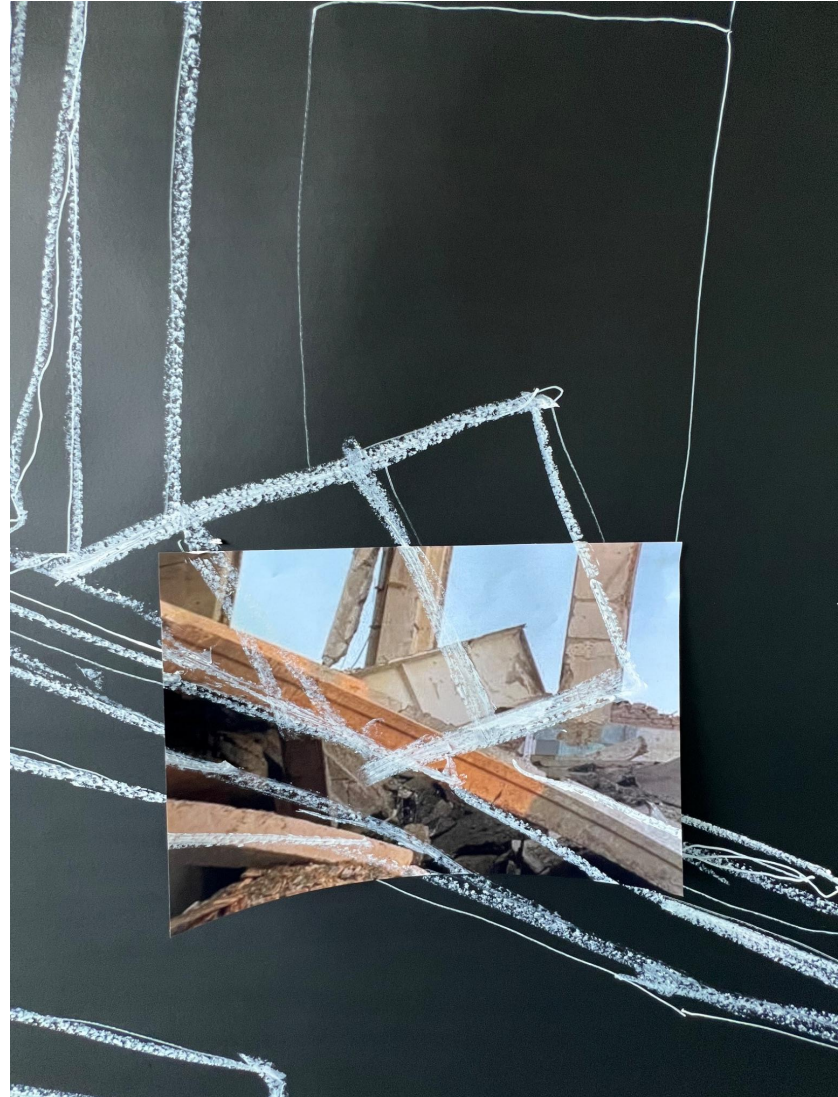


Figure 10d. Helen Pinson, *Bilenke*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 10f. Helen Pinson, *Bilenke*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 10g. Helen Pinson, *Bilenke*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 10h. Helen Pinson, *Bilenke*, 2025. Process/work in progress.

With my previous photcollage-paintings I completely covered, and went beyond, the edges of the paper substrate; but now I decided to leave areas uncovered and exposed, thereby creating some space within the work. I pasted repeated fragments of each of the three images, with variations in scale, to create a version of themselves, I then drew over the collage with white Posca pen to give definition to the main elements of the damaged structure; and to emphasise the rubble “of all kinds, moral, physical, political, visible.”<sup>51</sup> Once again the rubble is everywhere.

I consider that my process of artmaking is a strategy that allows me to work through my emotional response—it is a way of trying to understand the rubble. The repetition, the fragmentation, the large scale at which I am working, is all a means of dissemination and further mediation of the original information from media reports and photographs that is intended to open the way towards further engagement and investigation by the viewer.



Figure 10i. Helen Pinson, *Bilenke*, 2025.

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<sup>51</sup> Mirzoeff, *To See in the Dark*, 51.

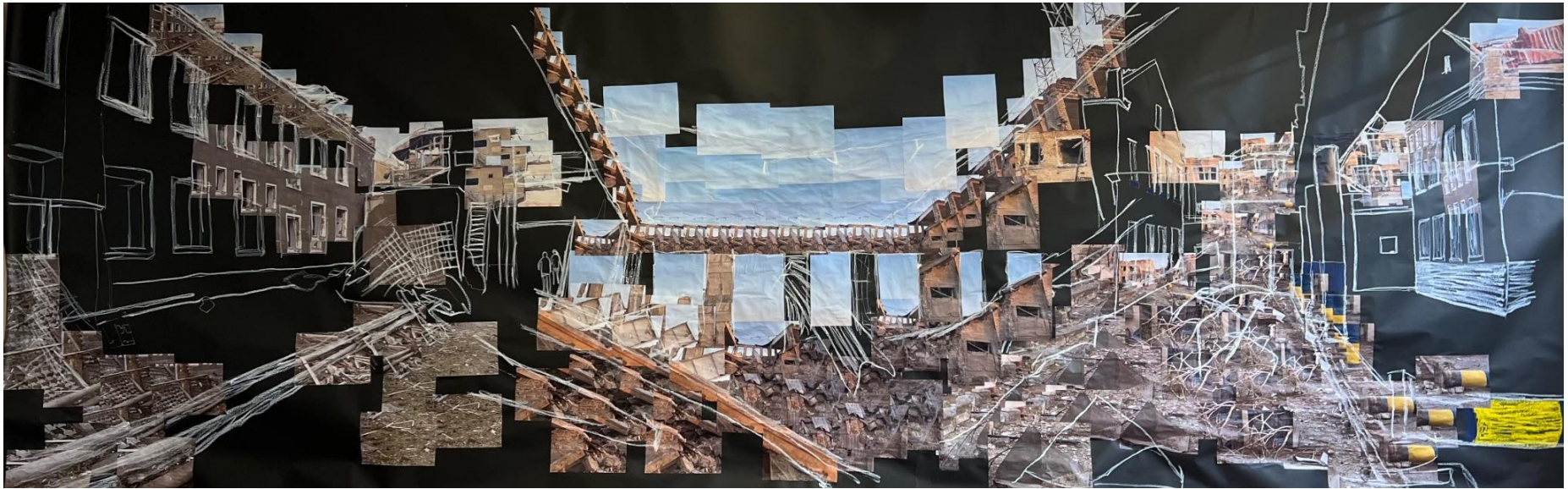


Figure 10j. Helen Pinson, *Bilenke*, 2025.

## Chapter Three – Compassion from afar

*Art can expand the definitions of what it means to be human. So if we hold ourselves to higher standards and make more rigorous demands on ourselves, then we can say in our work ‘We have asked ourselves these questions and we are trying to answer them, and that effort earns us the right to ask you the audience to face these issues too’.*<sup>52</sup>

Recently I attended *de bello: notes on war and peace*, a group exhibition in Bergamot, Italy, which “set out to portray war not only as a historical or political event, but as a human cultural, and universal experience {...} it addressed an urgent need to look at war through a different gaze.”<sup>53</sup> There was certainly no monumental glorification of war, instead the viewer was invited to reflect on how the experience of war shapes the emotions, perceptions, and sense of belonging of those who live through it.

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<sup>52</sup> Bogart, *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*, 1–6.

<sup>53</sup> Gresart671.org *De Bello. Notes on War and Peace*, 2025.

<https://gresart671.org/en/activities/de-bello-notes-on-war-and-peace>.

The exhibition consisted of five thematic sections (apparent peace, alert, war, ruins, and resistance) and many of the works within it were created by those with a direct experience of conflict.

As referred to above, historically, images of war have usually depicted the conquering heroes, but in this exhibition the consequences of war on people, culture and landscape are much more evident.<sup>54</sup> There were a number of artworks that particularly resonated—they encouraged me as the ‘distant’ observer to engage and associate with those affected by conflict.

<sup>54</sup> Gresart671.org, *De Bello. Notes on War and Peace*.

Arcangelo Sassolino considers that as an artist he is a product of his time, unable to escape the reality of that, he says that he is “not trying to represent the world, but I can’t help but reflect it”.<sup>55</sup> Sassolino’s *Anche sì anche no*, 2022, (Figure 11) was an apt metaphor within the opening section of ‘apparent peace’—for me it held such tension between the two incongruous components. I felt the heaviness of the anvil; I could feel the tension in the plate glass bowing under the load. I held my breath as I walked around the sculpture with the sense that even the weight of my exhaled air could shatter the fragile balance.

Figure 11. Arcangelo Sassolino, *Anche sì anche no*, 2022.  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/DO29jrTDKGB/?img\\_index=3](https://www.instagram.com/p/DO29jrTDKGB/?img_index=3)

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<sup>55</sup> Arcangelo Sassolino quoted Nicolas Vamvouklis, “Arcangelo Sassolino on Fluid Time and Sculpting the Present,” *Observer*, May 20, 2025.  
<https://observer.com/2025/05/arts-interviews-sculptor-arcangelo-sassolino/>.

In the same section, Studio Claire Fontaine's<sup>56</sup> *Ibis redibis non morieris in bello* 2006 (Figure 12) is a neon installation of nine words which light up randomly one after the other, which when read in sequence offer varying fates. The Latin phrase refers to an ambiguous, ancient prophecy given to Roman soldiers before they went to war. 'Ibis redibis non morieris in bello' translates as 'you will go, you will return, you will not die in battle' whereas adding punctuation 'Ibis, redibis non, morieris in bello' has the opposite outcome 'you will go, you will not return, you will die in battle'. For me, the random lighting sequence of the neon words emphasised the lack of control citizens and soldiers have over whether or not their countries engage in conflict and the arbitrariness and contingency of who bears the consequences.

Figure 12. Studio Claire Fontaine, *Ibis redibis non morieris in bello*, 2006.

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DliYfTWoTH7/>

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<sup>56</sup> Studio Claire Fontaine is a Paris based collective founded in 2004.

In the centre of the exhibition four large tapestries faced each other within a high-walled compound, with a collection of concrete rubble at their base (Figure 13). They were created by and from photographs by photojournalist/artist Gabriele Micalizzi who has experienced many war zones during his career. By translating the photographs into tapestries he intended “the images to go beyond their historic and documentary value”.<sup>57</sup> This is what I am aiming to achieve in making my own work. I admire Micalizzi’s bravery in working within active conflict zones, and that by doing so he is able “to witness a story in order to reach, through my images, the observer who very often is outside the facts and located miles away”.<sup>58</sup> He is asking us to engage from a distance, and associate with those who are subjected to the inhumane acts of armed conflict.

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<sup>57</sup> Gresart671.org, *De Bello. Notes on War and Peace*.

<sup>58</sup> Gabrielle Micallizzi quoted by Tiziana Castelluzzo in nall-about-photo.com, “Gabriele Micalizzi: A Kind of Beauty,” All-about-photo.com, April 19, 2024,

<https://www.all-about-photo.com/photo-articles/photo-article/1537/gabriele-micalizzi-a-kind-of-beauty>



Figure 13. On the left: Gabriele Micalizzi, *L'umarell*, 2024.  
On the right: Gabriele Micalizzi, *End of The Caliphate*, 2024.

I appreciated the impact of the scale of Micalizzi's tapestries, and decided I would attempt a work of my own on a larger scale, and that I would install it outside rather than within a studio context. This in turn presented challenges regarding material choices and its specific location. I could not use paper collage as the work would not be waterproof or resilient enough to cope with Wellington's extreme weather conditions. However, before I confirmed the size I needed to find a location.

Disused garages (Figure 14) in the King Street car park are within the wider Massey campus and within close proximity to the studio.<sup>59</sup>



Figure 14. Helen Pinson, *King Street carpark and garages*, 2025.

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<sup>59</sup> 22 King Street, Wellington. Massey University Entrance F.  
<https://www.google.com/maps/place/22+King+Street,+Mount+Cook,+Wellington+6021/@->

They have an accessible roof and existing steel posts protruding above them, and, for my purposes, ideal for securing rope. Once I obtained permission from Massey University Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa, Wellington Facilities I was able to calculate the height and width for my photocollage-painting.

For *Gaza* (Figure 15a-f) I worked with eight photographs depicting the Israeli forced evacuation of Gaza City in September 2025:

*The vast majority of Gaza's 2.1 million residents have been displaced by Israeli attacks on the Strip Credit: Mahmoud Issa/ Reuters.*

*Smoke rises from an Israeli strike, as displaced Palestinians, fleeing northern Gaza due to an Israeli military operation, move southward after Israeli forces ordered residents of Gaza City to evacuate to the south, in the central Gaza Strip September 24, 2025. REUTERS/Dawoud Abu Alkas.*

*5 separate images with the same caption -Displaced Palestinians, fleeing northern Gaza due to an Israeli military operation, move southward after Israeli forces ordered residents of Gaza City to evacuate to the south, in the central Gaza Strip, September 24, 2025. REUTERS/Dawoud Abu Alkas.*

41.3038928,174.7753634,17.03z/data=!4m6!3m5!1s0x6d38afe0bc3ce48f:0x11afdc6c8cd84767!8m2!3d-41.3038978!4d174.7779202!16s%2F%2F11c29swggj?entry=tту&g\_ep=EgoyMDI1MTIwOS4wIKXMDSOASAFQAw%3D%3D

*Displaced Palestinians, fleeing northern Gaza due to an Israeli military operation, move southward after Israeli forces ordered residents of Gaza City to evacuate to the south, in the central Gaza Strip, October 1, 2025. REUTERS/Mahmoud Issa.*

I created a digital collage featuring my concerted strategies of repetition, alterations of scale, and fragmentation. In fact I created it first by physically laying out and positioning, and rearranging photocopies along the studio floor, which I then photographed and referred to when I created the digital form. I had the transferred file printed onto billboard vinyl by commercial printers, who also fixed eyelets along all sides to aid installation.



Figure 15a. Helen Pinson, *Gaza*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 15b. Helen Pinson, *Gaza*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 15c. Helen Pinson, *Gaza*, 2025. Process/work in progress.



Figure 15d. Helen Pinson, *Gaza*, 2025.  
(Marama Groot and Ruby Millichamp) Process/work in progress.

Two fellow students from the BFA and MFA programmes (Marama Groot and Ruby Millichamp) helped install the work. Marama is a climber; her knowledge of knots assisted in creating tension lines to secure the work. Concrete blocks weighed down the lower edge, and also secured the top left corner of the artwork as the upright posts did not extend far enough. I felt it was important for it to be hung with the bottom edge placed along the ground, to emphasise the fact that *we're all touching the same earth*.

Once installed, I worked over the surface using acrylic marker pens to highlight repeated elements of colour within the photographs—in particular the water carriers and barrels, so essential for sustaining life, and I drew around the patterned flowers on the mattresses that will provide some form of base and comfort; I scrubbed oil stick across the sand and along the roadside barriers; I used spray paint but its application was erratic due to the wind; I painted with bitumen and turpentine working over the bombed buildings of Gaza City, and over the smoke and debris and rubble visible along the extended horizon.



Figure 15e. Helen Pinson, *Gaza*, 2025. Work in progress.

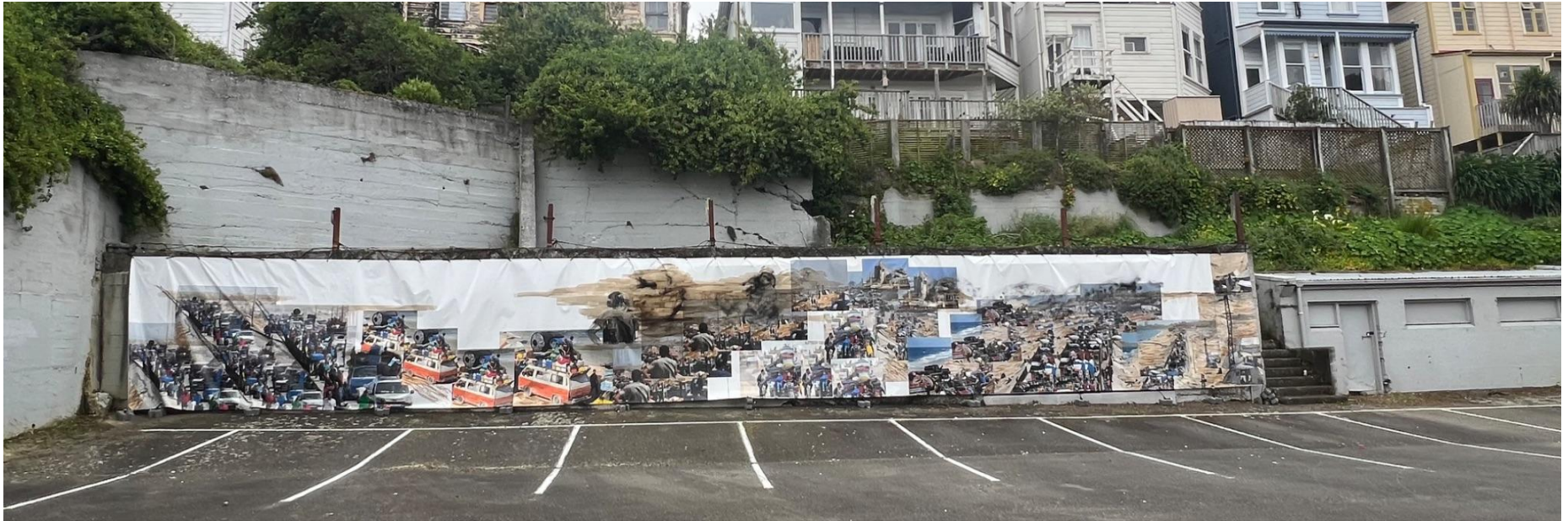


Figure 15f. Helen Pinson, *Gaza*, 2025.

In the middle section of the photocollage-painting, the head and torso of a lone figure is in the foreground. Their hand is held up to their ear - they are on their phone while looking back at Gaza city as it is bombed. I reproduced the figure, in oil stick and bitumen, looking back at the city, at life size, representing us as the viewer. That is the back of our head, we are looking in a mirror, reminiscent of René Magritte's *Not to Be Reproduced* (*La reproduction interdite*) 1937, where the reversed reflection challenges our sense of reality, and invites us to rethink how we see ourselves and the world. (Figure 16)



Figure 16. Recreation of René Magritte's *Not to Be Reproduced* (*La reproduction interdite*), 1937.

Each time I went back to check on the installation over the following weeks, I would find myself re-engaging with the fragmented reality of displacement it represents. I was aware of the need for tension in the rope by which the top edge of the billboard was suspended, and the weight of the rough concrete blocks by which the bottom edge was secured. I was aware that these materials—the vinyl, the ropes, the concrete blocks—were reflecting those of the Aid tents and makeshift shelters of rope and tarpaulins on the sand, and amongst the rubble, within the repeated imagery of this forced displacement, this domicile.

I planned to find another location, off campus, within the Wellington CBD but thus far without any success. In the meantime, I initially had permission to install on the hoardings of a builder's site compound, still on campus but with more foot traffic and visibility. The project manager met me on site and even said their workers could help me install the work. I had supplied a photograph of the work with my original request however, I don't think the project manager had looked closely until after our meeting on site, as he subsequently queried, via email, the subject matter and upon receiving my response, very politely withdrew the permission, citing, "As a company, we do need to remain neutral in relation to political and humanitarian issues."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Appendix 1

Chinese Artist Ai Weiwei has the view that “Everything is art. Everything is politics.”<sup>61</sup> It seems that for the building company art is only ok if it is not political. Unfortunately, they are not alone in distancing themselves from this particular conflict. There has been an issue globally with political and corporate pressure being applied to ‘cancel’ those who bring attention to what is happening in Gaza.

At this point I started to ask at what point does an artwork become Public Art. Would installing my photocollage-painting externally on the builder’s hoarding on the University Campus, rather than within an onsite gallery, make it ‘Public’? I think no, not in the general acceptance of its definition. It would just be an artwork that’s available for public viewing if the public chooses to look. Although it may seem that placing ‘Art’ outside the whitecube gallery will “affect a diversity of audiences beyond the existing ‘art world’”<sup>62</sup>— it is not a given that those audiences will engage. Further, there is some doubt whether or not Public Art can act politically given the systems within which selection is usually made<sup>63</sup>. However, Public Art, if appropriately commissioned, can “deliver multiple social, economic, cultural and health benefits”<sup>64</sup>. I consider that installing *Gaza* in an external location would be more akin to ‘Street Art’, graffiti and billboards which have been used as a political tool to break the hegemony of municipal institutions and dealer galleries.

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<sup>61</sup> Dieter Buchhart, Elsy Lahner, and Klaus Albrecht Schröder, *Ai Weiwei - in Search of Humanity* (Hirmer Publishing, 2022), 12–25.

<sup>62</sup> Cameron Cartiere and Leon Tan, *The Routledge Companion to Art in the Public Realm*, Routledge EBooks (Informa, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429450471>.

Although I had always intended for my ‘billboard-like’ work to be installed outside, I wondered what the effect would be if I wrapped it as a panorama around the walls of an appropriate-sized white cube gallery. It took three of us to de-install and re-install the work within a gallery on campus. I decided it would be superfluous to use rope to secure the work when the eyelets could easily hang on angled nails —there are no weather conditions directly affecting the gallery space. I intended to hang the work with the left-hand edge abutting the window frontage, however, this would have meant my painted figure was facing into the far corner of the gallery and not towards the scenes of domicile that they were, and that we are, by proxy, witnessing. (Figure 17a-g)

<sup>63</sup> Steven Cottingham, “Political Art and Metaphoric Exchange,” in *The Routledge Companion to Art in the Public Realm*, ed. Cameron Cartiere and Leon Tan (Routledge EBooks (Informa), 2020), 48–57.

<sup>64</sup> “Public Art Heritage Aotearoa New Zealand — about Us,” Publicart.nz, 2022, <https://publicart.nz/about>.



Figure 17a. Helen Pinson, *Gaza*, 2025, Detail.



Figure 17b. Helen Pinson, *Gaza*, 2025. Detail.



Figure 17c. Helen Pinson, *Gaza*, 2025, Detail.



Figure 17d. Helen Pinson, *Gaza*, 2025. Detail.



Figure 17e. Helen Pinson, *Gaza*, 2025. Detail.



Figure 17f. Helen Pinson, *Gaza*, 2025. Detail.

Once again, I felt it was important that the work should touch the ground. I did consider whether or not I should alter the floor of the gallery. Should I give it a fresh coat of paint, or possibly paint it a different colour? Should I import sand and rubble? I decided no, to all, as I felt it would not add significantly to the viewing of the work.

My intention was that walking into the space the viewer would be surrounded with this large-scale work wrapping around the gallery walls. And that is the case but, initially, I was concerned that this photomontage-painting could be sanitized by its whitecube surroundings; that it would no longer portray the raw enormity of this humanitarian crisis.

However, I realised that as I re-visited the installation over the following days, I found myself engaging with it in a different way.

The work is still grounded, but without the distractions of the King Street location, both physical and elemental, there is the opportunity to spend more time in consideration of the photomontage-painting and its imagery.

In the external location I found that I, and others that I observed viewing the 'billboard', of necessity approached front-on but then tended to walk along it viewing the work almost over their shoulder. With this iteration one walks into the centre of the room and as one would with individual works within a gallery, one steps back and forward in front of the work as well as along its length.

Having created this photocollage-painting, I have spent many hours looking at the individual images, the scenes they depict and the individuals shown within them. I have met their gaze. It is my intention that this panoramic installation of *Gaza* will offer the observer a more intimate engagement with the separate elements of the work as well as experiencing it in its entirety; that it creates an immersive environment within which they can relate to the content, in the hope of eliciting a response encouraging them to also 'see in the dark'.



Figure 17g. Helen Pinson, *Gaza*, 2025.

## Conclusion

*Art is not a better, but an alternative existence; it is not an attempt to escape reality but the opposite, an attempt to animate it.*<sup>65</sup>

Through my practice, I have been animating the mediated reality of armed conflicts we are receiving, via images, in real time. I have generally made my works within weeks, if not days, of the events they depict. They are a considered manifestation of my initial visceral response to what I am seeing. I have explored how my photocollage-paintings operate as a means of bearing witness to the unrelenting images of conflict, domicile, and mass displacement that circulate in contemporary media.

These photocollage-paintings are not attempts to reproduce tragedy, nor to claim experiences and trauma I have not lived. Rather, they arise from the uneasy place between distance and responsibility—a recognition that while I am physically and politically (in as much as I personally can be within a Western-aligned country) removed from these conflicts, I am nonetheless implicated as a witness; as a fellow human. My practice emerges within this tension: between the mediated viewing of global suffering through screens and the desire to slow that seeing, to hold it still long enough for understanding, compassion, and

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<sup>65</sup> Joseph Brodsky quoted Anne Bogart, *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*, 5.

contemplation. In doing so I hope that it “may help inform consciousness” in the viewer.<sup>66</sup>

Through repeated processes of fragmentation, enlargement, layering, and reconstitution, I treat the photograph as evidence and as an object—one that demands re-engagement. My photocollage-paintings deliberately interrupt the rapid consumption of images that too often overwhelm or result in detachment. The labour of making—cutting, pasting, re-scaling, painting—becomes a mode of thinking through, and making sense of, what I am seeing. In doing so, the works attempt to transform a fleeting encounter on a screen into something material and durational. They offer a space where the viewer might choose to stay longer, and to engage, rather than turn away.

Central to this project is the question of what it means to look from afar and yet remain ethically engaged. As theorists such as Sontag, Mirzoeff, and Chouliaraki suggest, witnessing from a distance is fraught and complicated: images can numb, disgust, overwhelm, exploit, aestheticise, or ‘other’. And yet images also carry the demand to see, to refuse ignorance, and to acknowledge the realities of those whose homes, families, and futures are being destroyed. The reality of domicile. My artworks operate within this dilemma. They clearly are not propositions for political solutions. Instead, they signal the effort to see—to keep seeing—in a world inclined to make such witnessing fleeting, they say “*this is how it was*”.

<sup>66</sup> Gerald Marzorati, *A Painter of Darkness : Leon Golub and Our Times*, 31.

Installing Gaza as an outdoor work, with all its vulnerabilities to weather, tension, scale, and public scrutiny, made this dynamic particularly visible. The refusal by a building contractor to host the work, on the grounds of “neutrality,” underscores what is at stake: the ways in which public space itself is contested and the conditions under which suffering can be acknowledged, represented, or silenced.

At the time of writing, an artwork by Gabrielle Goliath which was planned for the South African Venice Biennale Pavilion 2026 has just been cancelled amid concerns that it was too ‘polarising’<sup>67</sup> as it contained references to the current conflict in Gaza. This follows the attempted de-selection of both Lebanese-Australian artist Khaled Sabsabi from the Australian Pavilion for previous works featuring conflicts in Lebanon, and Palestinian author Randa Abdel-Fattah from Adelaide writers week.

These frictions reveal that images of conflict are never simply seen; they are always mediated through politics, institutions, and social discomfort. My practice intervenes, asking how art might challenge the limits of where and how such images may appear.

Ultimately, my project has been driven by a desire to respond, however inadequately, to the human experiences behind the images I am seeing. Obviously, my photocollage-paintings cannot prevent the violence they depict, but they can insist on attention—on the slow, difficult work of recognising the humanity of others and the devastation wrought upon their homes. Anne Bogart,

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<sup>67</sup> Daily Maverick quoted in ARTnews, January 2026.

“faced with a world that often feels unjust, vicious and even unbearable”<sup>68</sup> chose the theatre as her field of action. I choose visual art, and my role as an artist involves acknowledging those who suffer, and to compassionately bear witness, creating artworks that in turn might inspire the viewer to also bear witness, to watch the unwatchable, to show compassion when considering current devastating conflicts, from displacement to domicile, and question their own perceptions of them, as both reality and representations.

<sup>68</sup> Anne Bogart, *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*, 6.

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# Appendix 1

## Email from building contractor

Thank you for sharing the background on your work and for explaining your thinking around the project — it's clear a lot of consideration and care has gone into it.

As a company, we do need to remain neutral in relation to political and humanitarian issues. For that reason, we're unable to include or display works on our site hoardings that could be associated with specific causes, organisations, or events. This approach helps us maintain balance and respect for the broad range of clients and staff we work with.

That said, please know this doesn't mean we lack empathy. We, like many others, feel deeply for those affected by the conflicts and the difficult circumstances happening around the world. We simply need to ensure that anything displayed on our sites remains impartial and focused on the work itself.

Thanks very much for your understanding — we really appreciate the thought and effort you're putting into your practice.