

The art on war

The Blackwood and Justina M. Barnicke galleries are preparing to launch a new exhibit that focuses on the relationship of contemporary art and its reflections of war.

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Three letters often penetrate our media, our art, and our culture – W-A-R. Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War, a collaboration between UTM's Blackwood Gallery and the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery on the St. George campus, explores contemporary art's relationship with war through inter-disciplinary works of protest, struggle, enlightenment and even mockery. The exhibit includes work from seventeen international artists exhibited at two campus locations, a catalogue, a program, a public symposium, and a forty-day film and video program. Blackwood curator Seamus Kealy expands upon the importance, the protest, and the transformation this exhibit could ignite in the U of T community.

What should students keep in mind while interacting with the exhibit?

Kealy: Students might want to keep in mind that each artwork is, in very different ways from each other, a response to contemporary war and the way that war is experienced.

I selected each artwork to fit into the theme of war and its representations - how war is seen from afar, thus imagined, and how we come to understand war. This theme also includes a confrontation of the terrible reality of global, uncontrollable war and how it has a proximity to ordinary life, no matter where one lives. This is underlined, for example, by the sculpture by Abdel-Karim Khalil, which came all the way from Baghdad, and represents his reaction to how Iraqi people are treated, as well as represented.

Or we can consider Dominique Blain's banners in the CCT Building, which demonstrate how inter-connected architecture and contemporary institutions are with ideas and histories of war and, in many cases, actualities of current war. The banners might be seen to transform the atrium building into a space resembling totalitarian architecture. Upon closer inspection of the banners, it is clear that the artist is making a comment upon the order of bodies and machines under ideas such as nationhood or patriotic fervour.

There are also a few artworks that are disturbing, whether because of images we see or what is spoken, some of which we will see on the Video Wall. Again, these artworks mostly attempt to introduce us unusually to some more difficult subjects of war, subjects that, I think, are crucial to consider in this day and age.

War and politics have always been a prevalent topic in the arts world. Why did Blackwood choose this theme for its winter exhibit?

Kealy: There is a curious history of art's relationship to war. Art has often served war, depicting occasions or personalities of war as mythic or heroic, or framing a period of time into a certain kind of history. Boris Groys, who will come to UTM on January 25 as part of the symposium on art and war here, says that today the artist is being replaced by the soldier or terrorist themselves - where images can be produced for political or emotive reasons by anyone, and images of war are more commonly arising from the field of war (and the media) than the artist. But this is a subject onto itself.

I organized this exhibition as a means of broaching the subject of today's ongoing war, and how it is not distinct or separate from our lives. Many of the artists' projects demonstrate this, and many others seek to form ways of imagining a world beyond war, but from the very realm of war itself. I feel this is a very urgent task.

What do you hope will come from the exhibit's exposure to young students and university affiliates? Do you want this exhibit to be a form of protest against global war and the resultant "global empire"?

Kealy: Undeniably, yes. This project is a form of protest. However, it is also a heavily-researched and inter-disciplinary project that brings together a variety of different ideas and expressions. This mosaic of examinations, representations and analyses of war, I believe, enables many entry points for a wide audience.

However, what is constantly coming up with the artworks is a glimpse at the potential of humanity. By this, I mean that although the exhibition has a terrible, almost unrepresentable subject, the experience is not meant to be a pessimistic one.

This is what I would hope people will take away with them; a sense that the world can be actively imagined for the better, where from the stuff of reality we can produce and share ideas and expressions, and beginning very seriously with this communication, the world can be molded into a better place.

The exhibit will open Wednesday, January 16, at 7 p.m. in the Blackwood and 5 p.m. at Justina M. Barnicke, and runs until March 2.



photo source/Seamus Kealy