

Violent signals

Inspired by war in the age of terror, this on-campus art exhibit is both chilling and enlightening

GALLERY REVIEW

Signals in the Dark: Art in Shadow of War

Blackwood Gallery
and Justina M. Barmicke Gallery

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Rating: VVVVV

Jade Colbert
VARSITY STAFF

With two shows exploring war currently shown in Toronto, you'd be forgiven for thinking that curators are coming to terms with a recent development—a turn, perhaps, in the wars in Afghanistan or Iraq.

As written in the curatorial statement to *War Zone*, currently on at A Space, "The aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001 has led to increased surveillance, suspicion and fear of specific groups—war can no longer be regarded as something that occurs 'over there' and not 'here.'"

True as this may be, that war on the homefront comes as a revelation is exactly the kind of sentiment that makes Kendall Geers, whose work "TW (Rock)" is part of the Justina M. Barmicke/Blackwood Gallery co-exhibit *Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War*, anxious.

"I was born in an 'age of terror,'" says Geers, "and have never known anything else. I grew up amongst car bombs and lynch mobs and I find it so pathetic the way we are now being



A still from Johan Grimont's 1997 film "Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y" explores the West's confrontation with terrorism.

force-fed the American experience as if 'terror' began on the 11 September in New York City."

Signals in the Dark brings together artists from parts of the world that might be considered peaceful, and those associated with war. But as the exhibit strives to illustrate, these categories quickly break down: under the pretense of peace, the world

is engaged in perpetual war. Not surprisingly, of particular concern is art's complicity in the process.

A central trope, in both respects, is that of the hijacker. Belgian artist Johan Grimont's history of the practice (once better known as the "skyjack"), "Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y," effectively questions the possibility of peace when the hijack is a constant

possibility. "Dial" shows how long this weight has rested on our shoulders (the film, which predates the September 11 attacks by four years, goes back several decades), so long it permeates our consumer culture: it seems slightly surreal when one TV journalist advises the viewer on which airplane seat is farthest from a potential hijacker. In another sense, the increasingly

formulaic visual presentation of each hijacking demonstrates how terror has stolen the media of television and video, as we continue to learn each time we view 9/11 footage, yet again.

As the narrator says in Czech cinematographer Harun Farocki's "Images of the World and the Inscription of War," the German word *aufklärung* alternately means "enlightenment"—light being what allows an image to be recorded on film—or "flight reconnaissance." Images are inscribed with terror regardless of whether we initially see it. Farocki traces the history of one particular image: the earliest photo of the Auschwitz concentration camp was taken in a reconnaissance flight. The Allies weren't looking for a concentration camp, though, and so the photo was never interpreted as such until the 1970s, when the CIA knew what they were looking for. The interpretation has been hijacked: once we're told what we're looking at, we will never see it as anything else.

What to do with this? It's easy to blame governments or to take aim at the broad target of "art itself." Through the kind of war-era speakers from which we could expect to hear emergency announcements, plays another message reminding students of the vigilance required. Amongst the documents read in "A Short History of Conscription in Canada," an audio-collage by Annie MacDonell and the only non-video work in the show, is a 1943 letter from then U of T president H.J. Cody promising Lieutenant-Colonel K.M. Holloway that the university will "collaborate to the full limit of its powers" in providing an army course at the university. *Shadow of War* is shown partly in the shadow of Soldier's Tower.

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