

AVENUE

Questions & Artists

DRAWING MY LINES

"Three killed in Beirut explosion." "More U.S. Marines for Afghanistan." "Kenya at the crossroads." While Britney Spears has had increasing media coverage of late, it'll be a long time before she outdoes the top media draw of all time: war. But even though Canadians digest reams of conflict coverage daily, how much do we really know about global wars? Both personally and politically? Such are the questions raised by a new Toronto exhibition on art created in the shadow of war. Here curator Séamus Kealy briefs Leah Sandals on the ideas this show is fighting for.

Q Right now, there are a few Canadian exhibitions on war. What can art really accomplish where war is concerned?

A I think there are a number of different things. A few works in this show are creations coming out of conflict. They're powerful opportunities to get a sense of what a culture has been experiencing during war. Other works counter the usual ways we look at war as media spectacle.

Of course, any exhibition is a whisper compared to the larger machine of war. But Trotsky said something like, "There can be an enormous wall in front of you, but there will always be a little window you can throw stones through." I think contemporary art is like that; when we take on these large subjects, it imagines alternatives.

Q Can you provide some examples from the show?

A The most obvious one would be Baghdad artist Abdel-Karim Khalil's sculpture. It's an incredible rendering of what would typically be a classical representation of nationhood, like a Greek sculpture or a Rodin. But he made this sculpture just after the Abu Ghraib scandals. There's something very disconcerting in how he's used this traditional form to represent national events.

On the other hand, Serbian artist Sonja Savic made her video in the late '90s, just before NATO bombed Yugoslavia. You can sense the tension of the coming bombing; I think it reflects how people are trying to define themselves in that moment of war.

Q These artists are quite far-flung. How did you find them?

A Heavy research. For example, I saw Khalil in a

film about Baghdad artists. There was brief interview with him and behind him you could see the sculpture; I had to get it for this show. It took a number of months to get in touch; luckily, I had students who spoke Arabic. It was the most complex sculpture shipping I have ever done, because there are very strong restrictions about how things can be shipped out of Baghdad.

I've also spent time in the Balkans, so I've known Savic for a while. And a lot of it was talking to artists I admire and asking them about other artists they liked.

Q Is this an anti-American show?

A That's an important question. Often, when we think war we think America. But I didn't want this exhibition to be an attack on the United States. Some works might single out that country, but a lot of projects speak to representations of war, something that is shape-shifting all the time, all around the world. There are also American artists in the exhibition like Paul Chan, who's responding to his own country's role in attacking Iraq; it isn't anti-American, because it involves Americans.

Q Before you were a curator you chained yourself to a tree for Greenpeace. Do you also have a personal background in war activism?

A I was involved in a few anti-war demonstrations in the past. Activism is something that occupied a large part of my twenties and it's something that I hoped to bring into curating. I think there's a difficult and sometimes uncomfortable relationship between those things.

Q People usually leave exhibitions like this wondering "What can I do?" Do you have any suggestions?

A That's a question I ask myself every day. And what do we do? Well, we have to look to each other. The global tendency for war is based on a conglomerate of different international parties. Even the realities of our daily living are part of the way global war continues. So I think we can sway the tide of war from the bottom up. If we examine how networks of power are made up of organizations of people as well as laws, then transforming the world through active engagement appears less insurmountable.

■ **Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War** continues to March 2 at the University of Toronto's Blackwood Gallery and Barnicke Gallery. For more information, visit www.blackwoodgallery.ca and jmbgallery.ca.

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Clockwise from top left: Johan Grimonprez's Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y; Kristan Horton's Drawing of A History of the First World War (Horton created these drawings while listening to an audio book of John McKee's The First World War); Jamelie Hassan's Because There Was and There Wasn't a City of Baghdad (Hassan created this postcard-like picture in response to the 1991 Gulf War); and Paul Chan's RE: The Operation, part of his Tin Drum Trilogy in which he tries to examine the consequences of the war in Iraq, in part by imagining American politicians as soldiers there.