

Joyce Cairns- War Tourist

Published 24 Mar 2006 in *Northings, Highlands and Islands online Arts journal*.

Aberdeen Art Gallery, until 8 April 2006



'They Said the War was Partly to Blame' (1986) by Joyce Cairns.

WHAT BEGAN AS one artist's personal exploration of her own family's experiences of war has emerged as one of the most important art exhibitions of recent times.

Over a decade in the making, its importance lies not only in the exploration of human conflict and suffering but in the act of painting itself, reminding us of the power and poignancy of the mark made by a human hand.

As suggested by the Art Historian Bill Hare, it is a "reactionary", even "revolutionary" stance in a time when technology, the art of installation and the cult of celebrity seem to have rendered the art world impotent and devoid of humanity.

Here is an artist who has created a profoundly moving memorial of works which will have lasting impact and relevance.

The reactions of visitors to these paintings reveal powerful, thought provoking and poignant experiences, praising the artist's "monumental skill and compassion" and recognising the artists's "gigantic contribution to Art and History".

These are not just reactions to the emotional content of the works, but – as the accompanying working drawings, photographs and collected artefacts show – an accurate summation of years of dedicated work by the artist to her craft and subject.

Use of symbol and narrative that signify personal experiences are no barrier to the audience connecting with these images in a direct and visceral way. It is the perfect fusion of technical skill with intellectual and emotional

content that make this collection of works so remarkable and memorable. As spectators our reaction to them is immediate and deeply human.

War Tourist is a remarkable achievement by one of Scotland's most important artists and should tour both nationally and internationally

Following the death of her mother in 1983, Joyce Cairns began her investigation of the family history. During a holiday in Brittany the following year she “witnessed the anniversary ceremonies for the liberation of Rennes.”

The realisation that her father had fought on the same soil during the Second World War became the catalyst for her investigation, and she began the difficult process of retracing his steps in Europe and North Africa.

Carrying her father's photograph, her journey expanded as she travelled to Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, France and Belgium. Her exploration, research and documentation of these sites included the First World War battlefields in France and the Concentration Camps of the Third Reich.

Her responses to the war in Bosnia and the Gulf in our media-dominated age are also recorded in the exhibition. As a whole they read as a powerful and universal statement about the nature of war and its influence through generations.

Cairns explained that these are “not war paintings but memory paintings”. The works “are not intended, nor could they ever be, a full history of conflict in the twentieth century; rather my response is like that of a tourist as I dip in and out of locations and periods only making work when I discover that crucial emotional link.”

Cairns first painting of war, “Shadows of the Past, Liberation Ceremony, Rennes” (1984 oil on panel) depicts a central female figure as France invaded. The style of brushwork and the composition of figures overlapping and compressed within the picture plane recall the work of Otto Dix and George Grosz, a great influence upon the artist during the 1980's. The female figure is overwhelmed by the angular overlap of male figures, helmets and guns.

Treatment of the surface bears unsettling delicacy; there is a transparency of layers, some areas scraped away, which is disturbingly beautiful given the subject. This quality can also be seen in “They Said the War was Partly to Blame” (1986), where we feel we are drowning in transparencies of green and blue. In terms of both the handling and the subject matter, medium and meaning are multilayered in a way that is powerful, potent and intelligent.

The soul of the work in “Shadows of the Past, Liberation Ceremony, Rennes” is contained in the eyes of the female figure which stare out into ours. We are forced to bear witness to a highly emotive scene but more importantly to think.

This painting is dominated by earthy umber and black, accented by touches of red and steely blue. Although the black delineation of the figures and composition suggest the influence of Beckmann, Grosz and Dix, the painting's dark style bears the artist's own unique signature.

Although they share a last name and are often confused in discussion, the work of Scottish painter Joyce Gunn Cairns bears no relationship to Joyce W Cairns "War Tourist".

Here the latter exhibits the qualities that make her style so distinctive, characterised by mastery of her chosen medium of oil on board. The process of painting on such a surface, which does not give like canvas, is part of her dynamic as an artist. To me it is a struggle much like the years of investigation and research that informed and inspired the paintings.

Large scale complex figurative composition demands visual strategy and great technical skill. Cairns' years as an art student, then later as a tutor in painting and drawing at Grays Art College in Aberdeen, have no doubt brought sensitivity to her art that only comes through study of the human figure in all its strength and vulnerability.

In complex works such as "Sword Beach" (1996) and "Normandy War Graves" (2005), the studies, photographic references and working drawings reveal the degree of difficulty in successfully rendering a unified image. This can only be accomplished with a committed investment of time, total application to your craft and the desire to understand the subject, wherever that knowledge may take you.

The artist's ability to merge memory, experience and different periods of time through clever and considered division of the picture plane is breathtaking. This is evident in "They Said the War was Partly to Blame" partially set in the family bathroom in Edinburgh.

Here the artist is depicted in the background looking back from Footdee where she now lives to events of the past in the foreground, depictions of herself at different ages and the central figures of her mother. Her father, a constant presence, looks on through a boat window.

"The Ghosts of Tunis" (1995-96) and "Longstop Hill" (1995-96) are examples of specific places revisited physically by the artist and reinterpreted through paintings which move easily through time and the picture space. Both have a stage-like feel to them.

In "Longstop Hill" Cairns' father takes her on an "imaginary tour" of the battlefield on a camel. It is an extremely poignant image.

The artist depicts herself in the dress of a tourist visiting North Africa at the time of her own journey but also in her father's time, being led by his memory. His figure has the ghostly appearance of a sepia photograph, while the surrounding scene is drenched in the colour of the desert. It is based on a real physical journey made by the artist, but also an imaginary one through time and history.

With a vast amount of questions unanswered and unspoken history that we share in our own families, it is impossible not to be affected by the work. It is an unsettling experience. The levels of investigation are so intense that we cannot help but respond to it.

The ability to invest everyday objects with the epic presence of history painting, traditionally a male dominated genre, is also richly evident in the exhibition.

In using images of popular products, advertising, artefacts of war and inherited objects there is a sense in which the experiences of Cairns' own family during wartime echo the experiences of an entire generation.

There is a commonality of experience, particularly on the domestic front, of entire families deeply affected by experiences never discussed openly. War memorabilia is exhibited alongside the paintings not only as source material but as recognisable symbols of a time in living memory.

For Cairns inherited objects such as those depicted in two panels, "Father's Memorabilia Tunisia" and "Father's Memorabilia North West Europe" (1995), are infused with these "emotional links."

These are rare large-scale explorations in the genre of still life for the artist, but as with all Cairns work the key is the "emotional charge" inherent in them. Her father's uniforms, medals and collected artefacts were so filled "with presence of the wearer and his part in history, that an actual figurative input was unnecessary" in this particular work.

"Shoes From Majdanek" (2002-2005) from the holocaust series is another example, a "grey tortured mass with only an occasional glimpse of colour" filling the picture plane, going on forever. The painting is as overwhelming as the smell of decaying rubber that the artist records in her diary. We can never fully comprehend the horror of the death camps, the sheer scale of loss, brutality and deprivation. Like the artist, we can only ever be tourists. Hopefully, with the artist as witness, we will never forget.

"Auschwitz Memorial" (1999-2003) is an example of the artist's response to hundreds of photographs of men, women and children imprisoned, tortured and murdered on the site.

The only way for Cairns to process these images on a personal level was to study them intimately and try to give back "status, respect and dignity" by the careful study of each face through portraiture. The overwhelming sense that "[she] could not paint them all" is also conveyed in the composition of "Shoes From Majdanek" or "In Flanders Fields" (2005), where there are too many lost souls to be counted.

The horror of the artist at the scale and organisation of genocide in the Nazi death camps is expressed in her painted image of a bolt of yellow cloth. The repeated design was cut and sewn onto clothing to identify Jews. It reoccurs in "Dark Shadows" (1996-1997) and "Polish Journey" (1998) and as the artist points out in her accompanying notes, was manufactured by ordinary citizens.

Something as innocent and everyday as cloth is turned into an insidious instrument of war and genocide. Her insistence on investigative research reveals a truth about the artefact revealed in the painting. For me as a spectator the horror of that truth is the implication that no one is potentially immune from collaboration.

Her Bosnian paintings were inspired primarily by news reports. As someone from a generation that has only seen war on television and this particular war, these paintings were extremely thought provoking.

“The Drums of War” (1993), “Irma” (1994-1995) and “The Deadly Wars” (1994-1995) are collectively a communication of sorrow for the fate of innocent people and outrage at the inability of the international community to bring about a solution.

The carousel appears in “The Deadly Wars” as the carnival of war that never stops spinning. Our eye is lead into the piece by the red upright poles which like the figures and carousel animals are placed at unsettling angles. The circular stage contains three soldiers, a Croatian, a Muslim and a Serb. The painting is composed as a complex arrangement of forms both animal and human. My eyes read it as a triptych, as in the other two paintings a central figure is framed by these uprights.

Though Cairns utilises her own image in the exhibition this is not always self-portraiture. Such a figure can be more universal as a spectator or witness. I feel this is especially the case where it is framed in the visual and symbolic context of a triptych, an everyman/woman figure.

Not just suffering and conflict in a modern age but of past generations. For me it is a subtle reference to medieval altarpieces with the crucifixion as the central panel, although not overtly religious in meaning. It is primarily a powerful pictorial device.

“Irma” was painted as a tribute to a seven year old Bosnian girl air-lifted to the UK in 1993 for treatment for her injuries. She died before the painting was complete. Here the angular jostling of riders and their carousel animals is a good example of a composition of “interlocking pyramids” which the artist described as one working method for composing large figurative work during an interview taped at her home in Footdee.

A central female figure is framed by the uprights of the carousel and gestures with an open hand to a child right at the centre of the painting. She is pale, clasping her arms around the carnival tiger’s neck and encircled by the movement and madness all around her.

“Fragments”, a nine minute multimedia response by Andy Rice in collaboration with Joyce Cairns, combines photographic and painted images. In the same way that the paintings move in and out of time and place the film fades one image into another.

For example an image of the artist’s father is singled out from a larger group photo, then becomes his painted image in the locket around her neck in the painting “Sword Beach.”

The evocative soundtrack and poem "Night" by Elie Wiesel combined with collected photographs from pilgrimages to different theatres of war provide the opportunity to stop and really contemplate the content of the exhibition on many different levels.

The accompanying publication, "Joyce Cairns War Tourist", edited by Arthur Watson is a superb anthology, beautifully illustrated. It contains excerpts from the artist's travelling journals, family histories, and essays by Bill Hare (Art Historian), Alexander Moffat (Artist) and Stuart Allan (Senior Curator of Military History at the National Museums of Scotland) who explore three very different reactions to the paintings and their content.

Cairns also provided notes which accompany the paintings giving valuable insight into the artefacts, memories and images that inspired her work.

"War Tourist" is a remarkable achievement by one of Scotland's most important artists and should tour both nationally and internationally.

Supremely beautiful, disturbing and challenging the exhibition is an overwhelming experience not easily forgotten. These are "memory paintings" with contemporary relevance and timeless significance.

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