

“Art's Ugly Right?” Danielle Arnaud Gallery, London. 15 March - 12 April 2025

“Art’s Ugly Right?” Leon Golub said during a lecture in which he and Nancy Spero humorously questioned the audience concerning assumptions about the beautiful. The problematic relationship between aesthetics, violence and attendant trauma is addressed in this show through a focus on working methods of artists from varied age groups and backgrounds.

The exhibition is structured around a series of questions. For example: What strategies might be adopted to understand an aesthetics of violence today in our Post-Cold War era? How might a spirit of protest be applied to a politics of landscape or the natural world? What form might art take that is engaged with communities or that which facilitates human agency when encountering colonial or structural violence? Which approaches might be more efficacious in terms of a critique of the structures of power? How could artists respond to increasing numbers of traumatised, dislocated people living in limbo alongside the contradiction of those with immense wealth?

Beginning with Terry Atkinson’s *Yellow Styrofoam Enola Gay* 1991, a pure colour field functions here as a Cold War landscape, an emblem of a cultural milieu. The understated silhouette of the front view of the Enola Gay, the aeroplane which dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, 6th August 1945, emerges from yellow paint as a harbinger of a military-industrial complex. Critic Peter Suchin describes the implications of the work thus, ‘By placing an image of this dark and distressing technology within the ostensibly neutral field of an abstract work Atkinson emphasises that Modernism is a product of the same contingencies that are responsible for the invention and use of atomic weapons’.

The politicisation of aesthetics is paramount in the work of Atkinson, where assumptions regarding an artist’s role within capitalism are questioned particularly through use of language for example, with captions. Likewise Suchin’s own work, itself apparently a version of pure abstract painting, shifts Modernist formalism through a structural linguistic turn. As an artist and art critic the rhetoric that surrounds and informs painting is part of his practice. Suchin’s index cards function alongside his paintings as jottings and marginalia from everyday life and politics much like the cafe culture of Picasso or Diderot. Unlike Atkinson however, Suchin does not deal directly with violent imagery but he does counter the violence of a structural, authoritative language on art.

Atkinson refers to himself as a ‘history recording artist; his works are inhabited by Goyaesque and science fiction ‘time-travellers’ which traverse the major historic events effecting the era in which he grew up and which still underpin our lives today. The American Civil War, (ACW) and the Russian Civil War are the subject matter of his works. In *ACW #73*, Atkinson has arranged a collection of archival war imagery, one image, (12) *HT* refers to Harriet Tubman of the Underground Railroad and connotes her significance for the abolition of slavery.

Joy Gregory's wider practice consists of photographic visual stories that expose the often violent events of Black histories such as apartheid and the transatlantic slave trade. This is accomplished more through the gentle art of persistent conversation to encourage an image than through 'capturing' an image. She has described spending two days talking with a person before producing her camera for portrait. In this way the sensibility of her work is a storied visual account not a 'photoshoot'. For this show, Gregory's work connects Janus-like to the historical portrait of Harriet Tubman: *Mother*, (from the Descendant series) film still 2021, is 'thinking about what life may be like in the future' Gregory says. This descendant of slaves is encountered by the viewer from behind while she is reading a book.

The Silver Wave 2022, is a mesmerising film about a woman named Ada. Its rhythm, pace and the hum of museum air conditioning contribute to an atmosphere of a vast frozen landscape. Michelle Williams Gamaker describes the storyline of her film: 'Ada's story (Ada Blackjack, an Iñupiat woman from Nome, Alaska), is one of survival at all costs. Accompanying explorers to Wrangel Island she went against her better judgement, because she needed money to care for her son Bennet'. Using a collection of Alaskan children's toys; a canoe, figures in sealskins are animated so that they cease to be museum objects and regain their personal, lyrical value. Gamaker says her work aims to regain a sense of agency for Ada in the context of colonial violence. We hear Ada's voice and feel her exploitative situation, yet her honesty, directness and eloquent persistence is moving and drives empathy in the viewer.

The phrase sublime rage seems apt for much of the content of Nancy Spero's work with its mixture of joy and abject despair. Yet she has been fully descriptive herself when referring to the process of drawing scratched and scribbled images of Vietnam helicopters consuming and spewing out human beings as exorcism. This level of anger aimed both at her exclusion as a woman artist in the New York art world and the reality of victimhood in war and of the torture of women is both sublimated and exorcised into unresolvable aesthetic works. *Torture in Chile 1975*, a text work, reduces aesthetic appeal to linguistic recognition, yet even this intensely violent report is offset by the presence of a woman leaping joyously across the page. This work cannot be said to depict tragic figures as an aesthetic mediation of reality. These works are post holocaust, post Hiroshima representations of existence as total war, which renders Spero's term 'exorcism' an appropriate word as it broaches the concept of evil.

The renewed relevance of religious concepts such as good and evil in our post secular era has been highlighted by T J Clark in his book, *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come 2018*. The book explores religious medieval painting as precedents to the bizarre politics of our era. He writes, 'We live in an age of revived and intensified religion, and of wars in which once again God's will is invoked to deadly effect'.

Visualisations of Dante's ever decreasing spirals of decent into the subterranean architecture of hell, coupled with recent paintings of the flotsam of migrant boats connects Steph Goodger's work to notions of life as limbo or purgatory. Her current painting, *The Doom 2024* aims to disrupt the hierarchical narrative of a 13th Century medieval church painting, the *Chaldon Doom* which is structured around a purgatorial ladder leading to compartments on either side of the ladder. Her aim is to disarm the extreme narratives about good and evil. Her interpretive model is Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* where the extremities of the 'life to come' are resolved as interdependent notions that are wedded together. The result is a fabulous vertical codex, where the ladder leads nowhere and ascent and decent have lost their previous meaning.

'It's not war so much as what accompanies it and its endlessness', states Caroline Bergvall of her work, *REFUGIO: seeking shelter* which here acts as a bridge between narratives of violence, trauma and homelessness. Bergvall, primarily a poet, makes multidisciplinary, often collaborative works derived from many sources from Norse saga to science fiction. Her text work in this show, develops her title by elucidating dictionary definitions of the human need for refuge and shelter. Meandering through various historical eras the accompanying sound work likewise takes this theme and acts it out as spoken poem with discordant musical accompaniment. Shouting in the background gives the presence of actually being there, looking for shelter in an atmosphere of shouted hostility.

The Winnower, (X-ray Runner) Stephen Lee 2025, plays on two historical painting genres the picturesque and the dignity of labour. Composed of landscape vistas with transparent layers of X-rays and surveillance scans, the winnower having dropped their basket is running or migrating forward while glancing back.

Exquisite paintings of plants and landscapes which investigate the meanings and taste of the picturesque in a contemporary context characterises the work of Edward Chell. Plants beautifully rendered are also insidiously polluted or on the brink of extinction. Chell has responded to the theme of the show by creating a blackened oval traversed by patterns of a field of plants. Inevitably this painted oval alludes to the fashionable 18th Century device for viewing ideal landscape modelled on the artwork of Claude Lorraine yet Chell's blackened visage offers the contradiction of ecological disintegration.

Fallen 2019 from the *Lost Flower* series, is one of Rosa Nguyen's porcelain husks: ceramic remnants of real plants from Rosa's garden coated in porcelain and burned out in the kiln. These works are personified residues of the distant violence of war. They have a ghost presence yet resonate with the meditative quality of Buddhist teachings. One of Rosa's key reference points is the highly political self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc at a busy intersection in Sai Gon 11th June, 1963. Rosa says she is reminded of this Buddhist tradition of taking the sufferings of others upon yourself in meditation when working with the kiln firing process. Increasingly topical as a

response to the religious violence of the 9/11 attacks, Buddhism in contemporary art continues to offer artists a means of creative meditation alongside constructive protest that is non-violent towards others.

Situated next to Nguyen's plant husks is Leon Golub's portrait, *Napalm Head*, 1960. Ideologically and spiritually distant the two works create a dialogue regarding representations of humanness, memory, power and of political significance. Jerry Salz amusingly referred to Golub's aesthetic approach as 'Blow-torch realism'. With characteristic directness Golub refers to his own work: "...it's a definition of how power is demonstrated through the body...how power and stress and political and industrial powers are shown".

Mieke Bal writes thoughtfully about the representational methods of Will Pham's video about the Vietnamese Mental Health Service, *VMHS Legacy Project 2023*. The work, she says, 'consists of two parts: close-up video images of speakers who talk about the Service and sometimes, about their own situation; and a great number of photographs, both in colour and in black-and-white, clearly archival. When comparing this artwork to other works in the show, it really seems like a closing statement. Not only is the VMHS as a socially much-needed institution closing, the archival presentation appears as such a closing in itself. If we consider the medium, the simple fact that the photographs are obviously not video-bound, turns this work into a sensitive historicising retrospective, whereas the speakers are all presented as speaking in the present. This makes the thirty-years' existence of the Service in this video document that honours its initiator, Jack Shieh, into a precious historical product of cultural heritage'. Will Pham's wider practice includes paintings of refugees and patients from the VMHS. One of the paintings, *Chillin'*, 2025 from his Resettlement Paintings series is included in the exhibition. Pham's community work extends to the pleasant social atmosphere of a restaurant referred to as 'Little Vietnam' which will also feature as an event in the garden of the gallery.

Two of Mieke Bal's own video works are included in the show, *Elena 2006* and *Refugeedom 2023*. *Elena* is the epitome of Mieke's 'Migratory aesthetic'. From a remote peasant farm in Romania Elena speaks her heart out, in an extraordinary lament for her and her family's lost life due to the migration and absence of her son. Elena speaks, her son listens, the artist does not interfere having arranged the event and the viewer is a participant in the process upon reception of the video. *Refugeedom* is superficially more contrived, art historically savvy and theatricalised however the artistic intention is to effectively make refugees visible. Mieke's practice is explicated in her accompanying essay, 'Lessons in Looking to Resist Violence'.

When initially thinking about this group show while in my studio, I began by asking myself a series of existential questions about the representation of violence. This exhibition has now materialised into various thematic patterns of visual responses. Notably several artists deal with religious reference points. A context of dogmatic sometimes violent approaches is observable in many religious groups today. In what

is described as a post secular world artists have highlighted the need to occupy this area of meaning.

The effect of violence on human beings is represented through various points of view; as a victimised emblem of power relations, as self-determination through armed struggle and as attendant trauma particularly through voice as human agency. These positions of moral imperative sit side by side in this exhibition.