

5-15-2017

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### Recommended Citation

Conley, Christine (2017) "Material, Trace, Trauma: Notes on some Recent Acquisitions at the Canadian War Museum and the Legacy of the First World War," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol26/iss1/14>

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# Material, Trace, Trauma

## Notes on some Recent Acquisitions at the Canadian War Museum and the Legacy of the First World War

CHRISTINE CONLEY

*Abstract: Recent acquisitions at the Canadian War Museum are considered in relation to the radical innovations of soldier-artists who endured the somatic conditions of the First World War trenches, privileging materiality and psychic reality over visual perception. Barbara Steinman and Norman Takeuchi bring the past into the present through the indexical presence of black and white photographic fragments and the emotive presentation of lost objects as signifiers of the desires of the absent. Scott Waters and Mary Kavanagh evoke dread and the contingency of death through anamorphic distortion and blinding luminosity. Like the suggestive surfaces of the Museum itself, these works unsettle us to make palpable the psychic toll of war.*

THE CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM has recently made a number of intriguing acquisitions to the art collection that introduce artistic strategies not typical of the collection overall. These works by Barbara Steinman, Norman Takeuchi, Scott Waters and Mary Kavanagh are diverse in subject matter and media, ranging from the genocide of European Jewry and the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War to the more recent conflict in Afghanistan and the ongoing threat of nuclear and chemical warfare. They are all connected in some way to photography, yet this in itself does not set them apart. Nor can they be distinguished by any particular political stance, anti-war or otherwise. Rather, the material and somatic qualities of these artists' works engage the viewer psychically, outside of any coherent narrative structure, working to register the traumatic

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force of conflict beyond representation. As I will explore here, the difficulty that such works may present to viewers seeking recognition in imagery derives, perhaps ironically, from the tremendous difficulty of assimilating or “working through” the horrors of the so-called “Great War.”

It is generally acknowledged that the cultural shock of the First World War marked a decisive change in twentieth-century modernist art. While abstraction and collage were already developed artistic practices prior to the conflict—part of a larger response to the accelerated speed and fracturing of modern life—the anti-art antics of Dadaist and later Surrealist artists devised critical new relationships between objects, the performing body, visual perception and psychic reality that broke decisively with the project of mimetic representation pursued over the previous five centuries. Yet the direct connection between these developments and the material conditions of the world’s first industrialized warfare has only recently informed research. Critically, such scholarship reveals how the somatic experience of the trenches was transformative in shaping the artistic strategies of those who survived its horrors.

Cultural anthropologist Fabio Gygi argues that the collective experience of the world’s first industrialized war “was crucial in reintroducing the idea of representation by material into so-called high-art,” supplanting the skills of illusionist depiction refined since the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> This development hearkened back to the economy of the medieval relic, wherein a fragment represented the authenticity and power of the whole and was related to a tactile experience as much as a visual one.<sup>2</sup> Gygi relates this specifically to the sensorial conditions of trench warfare that uniquely defined the Great War: the unrelenting, deafening assault on the ears and the constriction of vision within the trenches that subordinated the visual to the senses of smell and touch. The visceral experience of blinding gas attacks, including the donning of respiratory masks that further truncated vision, could also be added to Gygi’s account of this shared “experience of blindness and fragmentation.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fabio Gygi, “Shattered experiences—recycled relics: Strategies of representation and the legacy of the Great War,” in *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War*, ed. Nicholas J. Saunders (London: Routledge, 2004), 75.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

Dadaist artists would have been familiar with the unofficial trench-art of fellow soldiers who, on both sides of the conflict, relied on “real matter” for their art, “instead of creating a spectral illusion.”<sup>4</sup> Some soldiers, for example, utilized unexploded ordinance as ready-made sculpture, while at the front in the Champagne region, a miniature model of a trench was carved from the very chalk that was excavated on site.<sup>5</sup> However, the souvenir quality of these objects by largely anonymous soldiers limited their impact to those who shared the experience of trench warfare. Gygi argues that while the post-war responses of artists to the shock of the First World War differed, “there was one strategy to represent what they saw and felt in the trenches that most of them shared: the principle of bricolage, integrating shattered pieces into a new whole.”<sup>6</sup>

The artist who best demonstrates this practice for Gygi was Max Ernst (1891-1976). One of the most influential artists of the century, Ernst served in the German field artillery for the duration of the war and was wounded twice. His early post-war art involved cut up documentary photographs of the Western Front, collaged “as an attempt to reassemble meaningfully the shards of a broken totality.”<sup>7</sup> Here the cuts speak to the traumatic rupture of the catastrophe that remains visible even when pieced together. Indeed, as art historian Roland Penrose proposed, Ernst’s entire oeuvre was derived from “having survived the insane misery of the 1914-1918 war.”<sup>8</sup> Ernst’s most significant contribution was arguably frottage, a technique derived from popular culture and developed during his association with the Surrealists that produces traces of an object by covering it with paper and then rubbing with pencil or pastel. I think it significant that frottage issued from Ernst’s fascination with the defined grain of the floorboards in his room at a French seaside hotel in 1925. The artist’s evocative account of this chance encounter recalls the ubiquity of wooden planks (duckboards) in the trenches and in the panelled interiors of German dugouts that featured prominently in his

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>8</sup> Ann Elias, “Camouflage and Surrealism,” *War, Literature and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 24, no. 1 (2012): 10.

wartime drawings.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the technique of frottage initiated by his rubbings of the hotel floorboards incorporated the material sensibility of the trenches into the art of the avant-garde. This is evident in Ernst's *Histoire Naturelle* (1926), a series of frottage works featuring botanical specimens, and in subsequent "landscape" works that Gygi likens to "cross-sections through the earth, like trenches cut into the soil, opening it to the gaze of waiting soldiers."<sup>10</sup>

Crucially, Ernst's use of frottage combined two disparate qualities. On the one hand, there was the material veracity of the rubbed image as indexical trace, much like a foot or fingerprint. On the other hand, an indeterminacy in meaning collapsed the distinction between subjective and objective realities, producing what Ernst described as "a series of optical hallucinations."<sup>11</sup> Ann Elias aligns this conflation of "physical and psychological distinctions of nature" in Ernst's *Histoire Naturelle* with the practices of camouflage that emerged as a pervasive military strategy during the First World War and which elicited an avid response from Surrealist artists.<sup>12</sup> Without rehearsing the fascinating history that Elias elaborates, what emerges from this discussion is the critical connection between the concealment and deception of military camouflage and the hallucinatory effects of Surrealist artworks—both provoke a sense of latent threat within the field of vision.

Elias argues that the trenches themselves were "the most ubiquitous of all camouflage devices in WWI."<sup>13</sup> This insight informs her analysis of Ernst's *Histoire Naturelle* and later works, such as *Petrified Forest* (1927), in ways resonant with Gygi's aesthetics of material. Elias interprets the "claustrophobic, close-up vertical aesthetic" of these works as inscriptions of the soldiers' perspective in the trenches, "where the bodies of the dead merged with and emerged from the walls of their enclosure."<sup>14</sup> The fascination of such an uncanny return to the site of trauma lies with the nature

<sup>9</sup> Werner Spies et. al., *Max Ernst: A Retrospective* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag in association with Tate Gallery London, 1991), 12, 289 (fig. 16-17).

<sup>10</sup> Werner Spies et. al., *Max Ernst: A Retrospective*, plates 84-108; Gygi, "Shattered Experiences," 87.

<sup>11</sup> Max Ernst, "What is Surrealism?" in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 493.

<sup>12</sup> Elias, "Camouflage and Surrealism," 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

of camouflage as an embodied experience, incorporating on the one hand, the fraught moment at which a concealed threat becomes visible (a camouflaged tank emerges from foliage), and on the other, the sudden visibility of the viewing subject exposed to a malevolent gaze (caught in the glare of an illuminating light source). It is that gaze which puts the viewer “in the picture,” so to speak, a condition that the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, well versed in Salvador Dali’s paranoic-critical method, identified as the activation of the gaze by certain kinds of artworks.<sup>15</sup>

Much has transpired in both theory and art practice since the contributions of Dada, Surrealism and psychoanalysis—the recognition of the indexical trace as a quality of photography was not theorized until the 1960s by Roland Barthes—and no one living remembers the actual experience of the trenches.<sup>16</sup> Yet operations of chance, the aesthetic of the fragment (bricolage), the trace or indexical referent (frottage), and the latent threat of the indeterminate or anamorphic image that verges on legibility (camouflage) continue to inform the considered use of materials by artists concerned with the traumatic effects of armed conflicts. Indeed, something of this approach to materiality is evident in the design of the Canadian War Museum.

What I have in mind, in particular, is architect Raymond Moriyama’s very inventive choice of materials to finish the War Museum’s walls. While the patinated copper plates recycled from the Library of Parliament work metonymically to reinforce the museum’s orientation to the Peace Tower, the more humble concrete evokes the tactile materiality of a combat zone. In first visiting the museum, soon after its opening in 2005, I was particularly struck by the vertical board pattern that Moriyama explains was achieved by requesting the contractors “to aim for a controlled imperfection, including creating loose joints so that concrete would ooze out from the seams.”<sup>17</sup> The highly textured imprint of the wooden supports presented a vision that I immediately associated with Max Ernst and his absorption with the floorboards of his seaside hotel. Indeed, the jacket cover of Moriyama’s *In Search of a Soul* features a

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 67–105.

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Raymond Moriyama, *In Search of a Soul: Designing and Realizing the New Canadian War Museum* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2006), 69.

dramatically lit photograph of this pattern that emphasizes its haunting complexity and suggestiveness.<sup>18</sup> While Moriyama was not inspired to precipitate the hallucinatory visions of the Surrealists, he did intend to “provoke a sense of unease within visitors sufficient to release some of their physical and emotional inhibitions.”<sup>19</sup> He writes: “The Canadian War Museum, from the moment of its birth, was not meant to be conventionally beautiful or to be of a conventional architectural form. The aim was to unsettle visitors somatically and to make them think and reach their own conclusions about the world and war.”<sup>20</sup> The recent art acquisitions under discussion here are consistent with this project.

Montreal artist Barbara Steinman is represented by two photographic works related to the Holocaust. Broadly viewed as the world’s first industrialized genocide, the scale and horror of the Holocaust is widely conceived as being beyond representation—though this view is enlivened by critical debate—and as a model for how we understand ethnic cleansing today.<sup>21</sup> Hence, the artist works with objects and photographs in ways that elude any coherent narrative representation. *Violin* (1997) (Figure 1) relates to Steinman’s installation for *Notion of Conflict*, an exhibition organized by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1995 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Steinman installed various violins and photographs in an exhibition space that coincidentally contained cages of books and archival materials stored there during a renovation of the museum’s library.<sup>22</sup> She recalls, “I remembered a photograph of violins confiscated by Nazi decree. To me a caged collection of closed books and hanging unheard violins could be a memorial or a premonition...”<sup>23</sup> Her haunting installation was inspired by the determination of artists who prevailed under oppressive conditions in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. The work is entitled *Atlantis Improv* to commemorate Victor Ullman’s

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., also illustrated on p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Conversation with Raymond Moriyama, Governor General’s Awards Ceremony, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa March 27, 2009; Moriyama, *In Search of a Soul*, 69.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>21</sup> See Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> CWM Collections Committee: *Acquisitions Form: Barbara Steinman*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Notion of Conflict: A Selection of Contemporary Canadian Art* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1995), 32.

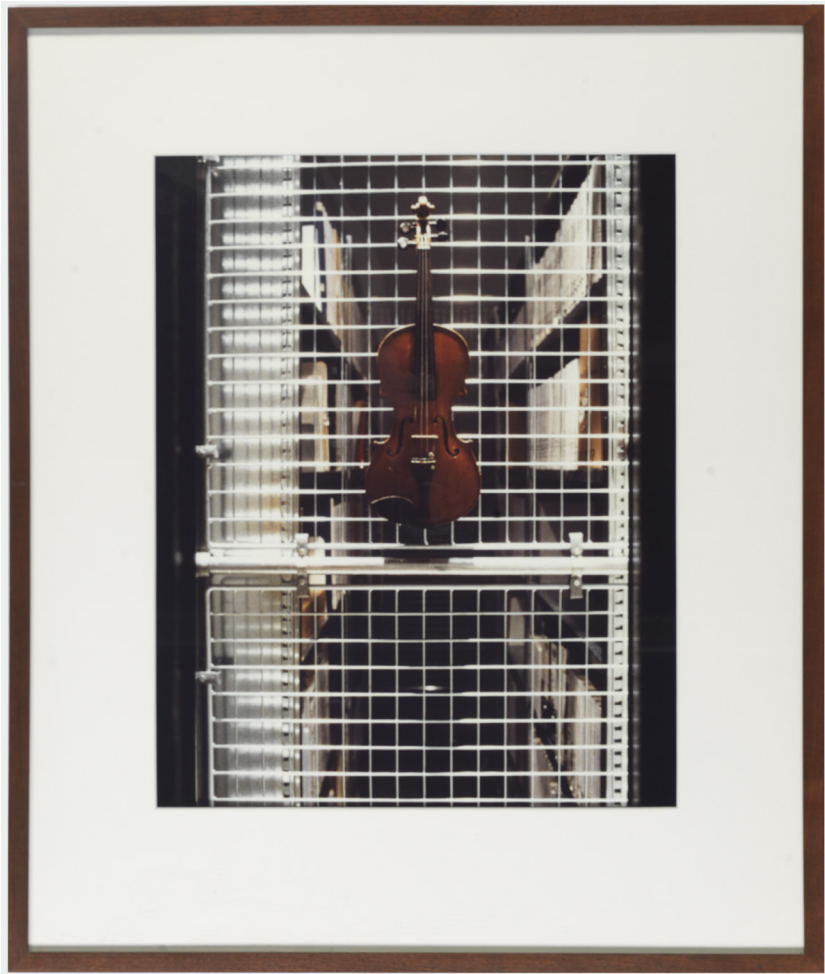


Figure 1. *Violin*, 1997, by Barbara Steinman. Giclée print on paper, 62.2 x 74.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist and the Canadian War Museum. [Canadian War Museum 20140619-002]

opera *The Emperor of Atlantis*, composed with librettist Peter Kien in the camp before their deportation to Auschwitz.<sup>24</sup>

The colour photograph *Violin* presents a single instrument before a metal grid that emphatically bars access to the shelves of books receding into the darkness beyond. The rigid structure of the grid,

<sup>24</sup> Gillian Mackay, "Reflective Spaces: The Art of Barbara Steinman," *The Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts 2002*, <http://ggavma.canadacouncil.ca/archive/2002/winners> (accessed March 8, 2016).





Figure 2. *Of a Place, Solitary*, 1989 by Barbara Steinman. 2 b/w silver prints, etched glass Photo diptych, 43.5 x 108 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Canadian War Museum. [Canadian War Museum 20140619-001]

parallel to the picture plane, contrasts with the organic sensuousness of the muted violin that evokes the spectre of human bodies and agency silenced by genocide. The force of systematic annihilation is thus instilled with poignant loss. In this context, the grid is indeed reminiscent of the system of anthropometric photography that was instrumental in establishing nineteenth-century certainties of European racial superiority that fed Nazi racial hygiene. At the same time, the absence of historical specificity—of documentary photographs, for instance, that would fix the event in time—promotes a more general sense of trepidation that extends the viewer's reflections to the persistence of genocidal conflicts today and the associated destruction of cultural heritage.

The second work is a black and white photo diptych entitled *Of A Place, Solitary* (1989) (Figure 2). On the left, a thick plate glass covers an indeterminate ground that suggests a close up photograph of human skin. Etched into the glass is a six-figure number that is only legible from an oblique angle, effectively positioning the viewer in front of the right-hand image. There, a woman's left arm extends laterally against a dense black background in a position of vulnerability, resonant with images of martyrdom in the history of Western art. Reminiscent of ambiguous Surrealist photos by Man Ray and Brassai, the high-contrast lighting and definition of the arm produces a hallucinatory effect that transposes the number 712773 onto the arm of a contemporary woman—an imagery that most acutely evokes the tattooing of prisoners in Auschwitz. The viewer is caught between two competing impulses: towards violation through

Figure 3. *A Measured Act – Hastings Park*, 2006 by Norman Takeuchi. Acrylic, conté crayon, oil pastel, photo transfer on shaped paper support, 148 x 132 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Canadian War Museum. [Canadian War Museum 20140167-001]



the imagined transfer of inscription, and towards empathy through the possibility of cross-generational identification and memory.

Norman Takeuchi's *A Measured Act* (2006) tackles a part of the artist's childhood that he had consciously avoided recollecting: the forced migration and internment of 22,000 Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. The work was sparked by an invitation from curator Maureen Korp to participate in the group exhibition *Without a Passport* at the Karsh Masson Gallery in Ottawa, where Takeuchi now lives. It has since been exhibited in other galleries across Canada and the United States. Born in 1937, Takeuchi was five years old when his family relocated to the British Columbia interior.<sup>25</sup> Takeuchi's youth, combined with his own family's reticence to revisit the experience of exile, prompted him to extensively read about the subject before producing a series of five paper assemblages in the shape of life-sized kimonos, each with texts and photo image transfers related to particular internment camps: Hastings Park, Lemon Creek, Slocan, Tashme, and Angler (the latter a camp north of Lake Superior where Japanese Canadians who objected to

<sup>25</sup> Takeuchi, Norman. Interview by Christine Conley, Ottawa April 13, 2016.

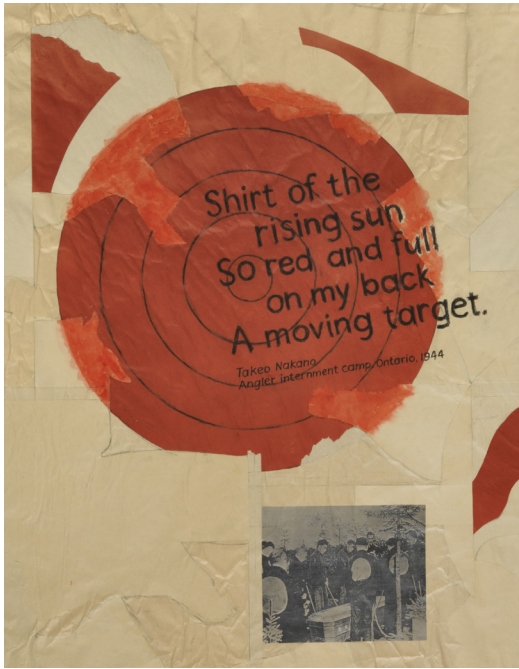


Figure 4. *A Measured Act* – *Angler*, 2006 by Norman Takeuchi. Acrylic, conté crayon, oil pastel, photo transfer on shaped paper support, 148 x 132 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Canadian War Museum. [Canadian War Museum 20140167-005]

their treatment were interned along with German POWs) (Figure 3). The kimono is emblematic of Japanese culture with variations worn by men, women and children. Hence, it is an effective means of configuring the racialized body imprinted with the memories of traumatizing events.

Though there is no particular order to these works, the Angler kimono, entitled *Shirt of the Rising Sun*, differs in scale and density (Figure 4). It was fashioned to fit a window at Karsh Masson in order to allow sunlight to stream through and illuminate the large red circle at its centre, along with this text: “Shirt of the rising sun, So red and full on my back. A moving target.” It is a message that suggests the fate of those caught attempting to escape the barbed wire and guard towers.<sup>26</sup> It also functions as a blazon of shame that continued to be felt by many internees long after the war had ended. The other four kimonos are treated like abstract paintings with areas of bold red and blues punctuated by archival photographs and documents that have become emblematic of deportation: an RCMP officer interrogating a fisherman; thousands of confiscated fishing

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



Figure 5. *A Measured Act – Slocan*, 2006 by Norman Takeuchi. Acrylic, conté crayon, oil pastel, photo transfer on shaped paper support, 148 x 132 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Canadian War Museum. [Canadian War Museum 20140167-003]



Figure 6. *A Measured Act – Slocan* (detail).

boats sold for a pittance; a crowded registration desk, and families with their meagre belongings waiting for trains and buses; a men's baseball team; make-shift housing and crowded conditions in the camps; a child in a kimono with parasol participating in cultural activities at Lemon Creek; and the "Orders from the BC Security Commission" instructing Vancouver-based Japanese to depart within twenty-four hours' notice (Figure 5-6). Painted texts supplement these images. The figure 22,000 is the total number of Japanese Canadians dispersed, while 17,000 refers to those who held Canadian citizenship, a right that was stripped away with shocking speed and



Figure 7. *A Measured Act – Boots*, 2006 by Norman Takeuchi. Conté crayon and acrylic on paper, mounted on canvas, one of six, 32 x 32 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Canadian War Museum. [Canadian War Museum 20140167-007]



Figure 8. *A Measured Act – Rice Bowl*, 2006 by Norman Takeuchi. Conté crayon and acrylic on paper, mounted on canvas, one of six, 32 x 32 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Canadian War Museum. [Canadian War Museum 20140167-010]

ease. Takeuchi's choice of layers of cheap packing paper, left over from a friend's recent move, aptly evokes the sense of dislocation and loss experienced by those who could only take with them what could be carried.<sup>27</sup>

These transfers of documentary evidence employ a photo-montage aesthetic that invites the viewer to make connections

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

between texts and images. Photo-montage also invokes the authority of the photograph as indexical image, that is, as a trace of the light that once illuminated the events pictured. This physical connection brings the events of the distant past nearer. But the six drawings of household belongings that accompany the kimonos work differently to register the traumatic affect of these experiences. Takeuchi imagined the possessions that Japanese Canadian families may have selected to take with them upon being removed from their homes and arranged his drawings of these objects on shelves, much as he envisioned their display in the camps.<sup>28</sup> On the first shelf, a baseball and glove speak to cultural integration and the popularity of the sport amongst Japanese Canadians and Takeuchi himself. Rubber boots, much like those that Takeuchi recalls his father wearing as he tended to chickens during the war (Figure 7), as well as a white cloth, signifying “the cultural importance of cleanliness,” are also presented as important objects.<sup>29</sup> The second shelf displays images associated with food and comfort: a teapot, a rice bowl with chopsticks (Figure 8), and a soya sauce bottle. These drawings are not entirely nostalgic. Indeed, the anachronism of the Kikkoman soya sauce bottle designed by Kenji Ekuon in 1961 points to the psychic difficulty of such childhood reminiscences. Executed primarily in black *conté* with painted red accents, the objects depicted cast deep shadows as if imperilled, caught by a searchlight in the dark—again reminiscent of photographs of Surrealist objects. Takeuchi’s cultural touchstones are fraught with an uneasy melancholy and sense of loss, yet the dark beauty of their rendering also confers value on them as emblems of a denigrated heritage.

Two recently accessioned paintings by Toronto artist Scott Waters were produced as part of his experience with the Canadian Forces Artist Program (CFAP). Sent to CFB Galetown in 2006, he was attached to a Royal Canadian Infantry battalion preparing for deployment to Afghanistan and arrived in Kabul in 2011. However, Waters’ fascination with all things military preceded his training as an artist, harkening back to his youthful experience in the Princess Patricia Canadian Light Infantry from 1989 to 1992. His work, *Sgt. Collette* (2007) (Figure 9), employs a number of strategies that depart from and counter the heroic immortalizing conventions of

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

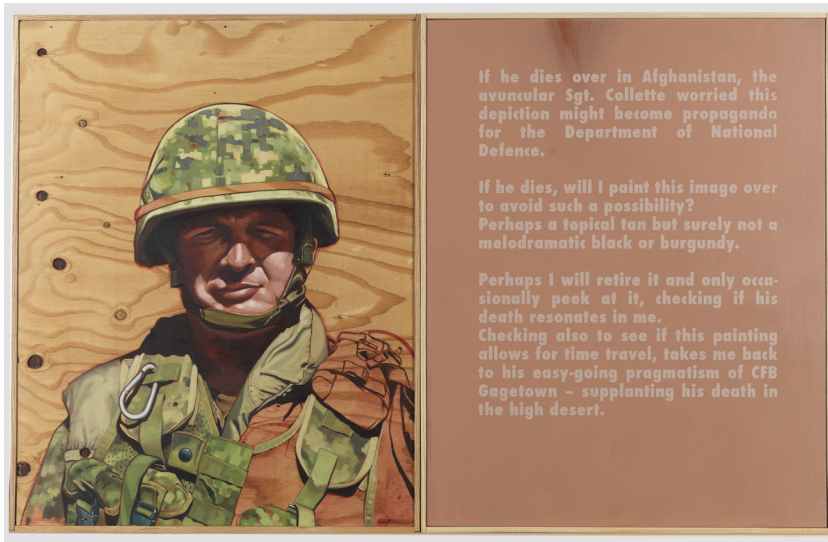


Figure 9. *Sgt. Collette*, 2007, by Scott Waters. Oil and acrylic on panel. 2 panels, 77.3 x 61 cm and 77.4 x 60.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Canadian War Museum. [Canadian War Museum 20140409-001]

military portraiture, most immediately in the equal space accorded to image and text. Here the theme of mortality pervades Waters' first-person reflection, which begins as follows: "If he dies over in Afghanistan, the avuncular Sgt. Collette worried this depiction might become propaganda for the Department of National Defence." The text continues with the artist considering strategies for erasure and remembrance that would avoid this possibility: painting over the image or only looking at it occasionally to consider its resonance as an index of loss or as an aid to memory. Collette is pictured opposite the text in camouflage gear, squinting into the camera that captures the encounter between artist and subject at CFB Gagetown, an experience of "easy-going pragmatism" recalled somewhat wistfully by Waters. The painted portrait, clearly based on a photograph, has the unfinished quality of a work in process, akin to the work of memory itself. Waters writes, "That's the power painting has, it brings the past forward, but a photograph marks the date of the shutter. When you look at the painting you know it's been built over a period of time."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, this work is a trenchant meditation on

<sup>30</sup> Scott Waters, "Enclosed Encounters of a Military Kind: Reflections on Life in the Canadian Infantry," *Border Crossings* 25, no. 4 (2006): 52.



Figure 10. Infinite Universe, 2013, by Scott Waters. Oil on canvas. 193 x 182 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Canadian War Museum. [Canadian War Museum 20150077-001]

the nature of memorializing from the point of view of soldiers rather than the state.

Characteristic of Waters' other works at this time, the background of *Sgt. Collette* remains unpainted to reveal the plywood support, emphasizing materiality over illusion. The visibility of its grainy pattern bleeding through Sgt. Colette's uniform conveys both an unfinished quality and a feeling of contingency to the presence of the soldier who could conceivably be located anywhere. Some realization of this is evident in Waters' observation that plywood in some ways "becomes a form of camouflage."<sup>31</sup> As discussed above, while camouflage can achieve the disappearance of things through mimicry, it is also understood to affect a kind of latency within the visual field where pattern verges on the potential legibility of something else.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 51.



This anamorphic quality, associated in Renaissance painting with *memento mori*,<sup>32</sup> conveys the dread of the unrepresentable—trauma.

Waters' fascination with the contingency of vision is also evident in the second work accessioned by the Museum, *Infinite Universe* (2013) (Figure 10), painted in response to Waters' CFAP assignment in Afghanistan. Travelling at night with Canadian soldiers under conditions of high alert, Waters photographed the dark interior of their modified (up-armoured) SUV, barely visible amid the luminous glow of navigational equipment and against the exterior glare of flashlights being shone on their licence plate. In this painting, tension is made palpable through these varying qualities of light intensity in ways consistent with my earlier discussion of camouflage and the First World War. Here, the flashlights recall the alarm of impending exposure associated with flares and searchlights used on the battlefield. The artist tells us "... this was a moment where our world could have split into two very different directions... I was really interested in this moment where you just don't know what is going to happen."<sup>33</sup>

Mary Kavanagh, a Professor in the Department of Art at the University of Lethbridge, is a member of the Atomic Photographers Guild, an international group of artists concerned with atomic and nuclear issues. She has used lens-based media (video and photography) to create works that examine the Cold War and nuclear testing programs, recording freighted historical sites such as Trinity, New Mexico where the first atomic bomb was detonated in 1945, as well as contemporary sites that evidence the more subtle anxieties of the nuclear age. As John O'Brian observes in his review of her exhibition *Atomic Suite*, Kavanagh avoids the conventions of photo journalism and what Simon Norfolk has dubbed the "military sublime" in describing "unpeopled photographs of destruction and ruin."<sup>34</sup> Kavanagh's photographs are at a cool remove, beyond immediate recognition. They demand our critical reflection.

<sup>32</sup> The signal example is Hans Holbein the Younger, *The French Ambassadors*, 1533 where the anamorphic skull in the foreground undermines the worldly importance of the sitters.

<sup>33</sup> Ania Romaniak, "In the Studio with Scott Waters," *Ink Noir*, January 10, 2014, <http://www.inknoir.com/studio-glimpse/in-the-studio-with-scott-waters/> (accessed April 15, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> John O'Brian, "Mary Kavanagh," *Border Crossings* 31, no. 4 (Dec 2012-Jan 2013): 101.



Figure 11. *The Expulsion (in white)*, 2013, by Mary Kavanagh. Ink-jet print on BFK Rives archival paper. 61 x 168 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Canadian War Museum. [Canadian War Museum 20160111-001]



Figure 12. *The Expulsion (in green)*, 2013, by Mary Kavanagh. Ink-jet print on BFK Rives archival paper. 61 x 168 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Canadian War Museum. [Canadian War Museum 20160111-002]

As part of her deployment with CFAP, Kavanagh videoed and photographed personnel involved in radiation and chemical detection training at Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC). *The Expulsion (in white)* (2013) (Figure 11) and *The Expulsion (in green)* (2013) (Figure 12) are two sets of photographic portraits that depict staff wearing protective military clothing. Like Waters, Kavanagh's work refuses the tradition of heroic portraiture and owes more to the impassive, serial strategies of conceptual art, for there is little here to suggest the subjectivity of the woman or man before us.<sup>35</sup> The individual photographs are printed side by side as a combined image using identical formats. The shallow depth of field and close

<sup>35</sup> See Laura Brandon in *Group 6: The Canadian Forces Artists Program, 2012-2013*, Exhibition catalogue (Carp: Diefenbunker, Canada's Cold War Museum, 2015), 26.

cropping focus on the expressionless faces of these workers encased in white, protective helmets; or, on the other hand, on their barely perceptible eyes within the confines of green gas masks. But in both cases, the subjects pose to stare straight ahead with a distant gaze that conveys their serious purpose, or perhaps, as the title alluding to the book of Genesis suggests, a certain resignation to the exigencies of life after the bomb.

In both sets of portraits, light plays off the helmets and gas masks in a way that is disarming, similar to the use of camouflage and blindness amongst the other artists discussed here. Our view of the posed personnel in *The Expulsion (in white)* is partially obscured by what appears to be reflections from overhead lights in the laboratory. In *The Expulsion (in green)*, on the other hand, the outdoor structures and landscape of the testing ground are only detectable as distorted images on the curved glass surface of the gas masks. So while both subjects are apparently sealed and secure from environmental threat, this fracturing of the visible suggests their vulnerability and the need for vigilance against whatever may lurk beyond the scope of their distant focus. In *The Expulsion (in green)* especially, the concentricity of the visual field encompasses the viewer and suggests something of the paranoid anxiety symptomatic of the nuclear age and the menace of biological warfare.

In this essay I have considered recent acquisitions of contemporary art at the CWM that engage the viewer psychically to register the traumatic force of armed conflict beyond representation. Such works do not operate as coherent narratives but rather provoke moments of perceptual instability—verging on the hallucinatory—effects that I have connected to the response of soldier-artists to the somatic conditions of trench warfare during the First World War. Drawing on studies by Fabio Gygi and Ann Elias, I have argued that the truncating of vision experienced by those in the trenches engendered material techniques that sought to convey other forms of reality beyond the rendering of coherent illusionistic space. The fragmentation of images through bricolage, the indexical quality of Max Ernst's frottage that mediated a traumatic recall of the trenches, and the Surrealist fascination with the properties of camouflage/mimicry as a strategy in war and in nature, enabled visions of a fractured world that privileged psychic reality over perceived reality. Characteristically, such works introduced a sense of latent threat associated with the activation of the gaze that puts

the viewer “in the picture” so to speak, with all the associated sense of vulnerability that such visibility provokes, engendering a sense of unease or uncanny return to the site of traumatic events. These strategies persist in the fractured narratives of the CWM acquisitions. Steinman and Takeuchi bring the past into the present through the indexical presence of black and white photographic fragments and the emotive presentation of lost objects as signifiers of the desires of the absent. Waters and Kavanagh evoke dread and the contingency of death through anamorphic distortion and blinding luminosity. Like the suggestive surfaces of the Canadian War Museum itself, these works unsettle us in ways that make palpable the psychic toll of war.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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