

6-19-2017

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Gertrude Kearns

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### Recommended Citation

Kearns, Gertrude (2017) "Dropping Question Marks: War Art, Leadership, the Canadian Forces and Afghanistan," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol26/iss1/17>

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# Dropping Question Marks

## War Art, Leadership, the Canadian Forces and Afghanistan

GERTRUDE KEARNS

*Abstract: As a contemporary war artist, Gertrude Kearns presents interpretive challenges to the commemoration and contextualization of controversial aspects of Canadian military history, both from her personal perspective and in terms of the institutional responsibilities associated with meaningful public presentations of war art. In the context of her decade-long Afghan War senior leadership series, and with reference to earlier Somalian and Balkan works, in this article she discusses the appropriateness of her selected subject matter as well as her own responsibility as a war artist in dealing with everything from disturbing and regular subjects to mission concept. Kearns reviews accountability, her work both officially and unofficially with Canadian personnel, and offers diverse military and civilian perspectives on her independent research approach and decisions as a civilian war artist working with specific Canadian Forces military topics and events.*

### EDITOR'S PREFACE

THIS ARTICLE has much to say about war art and its relationship with contemporary art and military experience. It is very much a personal journey on the part of artist Gertrude Kearns. At its centre is a series of posters that combine portraits she drew or painted of her military subjects and words she heard them speak or that she received, read or wrote herself. The result in each poster is a dramatic collage of image, text, and headline. Examples of these posters were included in a 2015-2016 exhibition in Toronto and

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Calgary entitled *The Art of Command: Portraits and Posters from Canada's Afghan Mission*. Supplementary to Kearns's entire series of 31 texted war prints and posters are 32 more traditional portraits from life created between 2006 and 2016, a number of which were also exhibited. Collectively, this entire body of work is also titled *The Art of Command*.

This article is composed much like her posters. At its heart are her personal encounters with Canada's military leadership during the recent conflict in Afghanistan. These are combined with her own, their own, and others' ruminations on what they have experienced or observed of their own experiences in her work. In some cases, she has understandably protected the privacy of her interlocutors by not citing her sources. Finally, her subtitles read like headlines. The result, as you will see, is writing mirroring art.

## INTRODUCTION

I wish I had written these words: "The war drops its question mark."<sup>1</sup> *The Art of Command* has proven a remarkable process for me as its artist, characterizing and dropping mission-related questions and, hopefully, hitting targets, intended and otherwise.

This article coincides with the completion date of my decade-long Canadian Armed Forces senior leadership portrait project. Thus it feels timely to review some of its contextual and commemorative challenges from its inception to current military, contemporary art and public assessments of the large format series in particular.

There are many after-the-fact textual references throughout this article, none of which directly influenced the development of the artwork at the time. I believe that post-completion, an artist sees new associations in their work that validate and become integral to the extended creative process. I feel these references will enrich the reader's experience.

The City of Toronto Museum and Heritage Services most generously supported *The Art of Command* in an exhibition from 5 March to 13 June 2015 at Fort York Visitor Centre. It should be noted that due to space considerations a number of portraits were not included in the Toronto showing of 46 works from the series of

1 Anthony Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 70



*The Art of Command* at the Founders' Gallery in Calgary. [Dave Brown, LCR University of Calgary Photo Services]

63 pieces. A smaller exhibition that included new works from 2016 was subsequently on display in the Founders' Gallery, The Military Museums, University of Calgary, from 24 June to 30 October 2016.

The works discussed here are neither pro- nor anti-war; they are about war, and specifically the Canadian Armed Forces engagement in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2014. Discussed in a loosely chronological order, the subjects are mostly generals and colonels with some majors and two captains who were in command at various levels and times throughout the mission. The nineteen officers are mostly regular force with the exception of three reservists. The tours depicted span Lieutenant-General Lessard's 2008 NATO command of region-south to Colonel Hope's 2005-2006 pre-Operation Medusa PPLI (Princess Patricia's Canadian light Infantry) Battle Group command and Colonel Stogran's 2002 3PPLI Battle Group command in US-led Operation Apollo to Major-General Blaise Cathcart, Judge Advocate General, 2010- provision of legal advice at the strategic and operational levels during the planning and execution of the Canadian Armed Forces participation (conventional and special forces) in the Campaign Against Terrorism.

A war art documentation of sorts, the expanded portraits function on three levels: military portraiture, editorially tinged commentary, and quasi-historical records.



The study of war is morally complicated. Therefore it was and is incumbent upon me as a war artist to present a realistic picture of this engagement and to address conceptual challenges, operational complexities, and ground truths.

My introduction to Afghanistan was a contract with Task Force Afghanistan Roto 0 in early 2006. In this embedded experience, I spent nearly five weeks in arid Canadian Disruptive Pattern (CADPAT) gear, first at HQ Kandahar Air Field (KAF), with boards of inquiry outside the wire. I spent much time at the Role 3 hospital (then under US command), time familiarizing myself with the base, and then a crucial stint with the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) at Camp Nathan Smith and with the PPCLI on mounted and dismounted patrols, including a close encounter with the first suicide hit that took the life of diplomat Glyn Berry and grievously wounded three Canadian soldiers. Later, in January, post-Kandahar saw me in the Afghan theatre in Kabul with the Strategic Advisory Team. Included was some time at the Afghan National Training Centre during this last week before pre-rotating out to Canada via a few days in Camp Mirage, the 'open secret' forward logistics facility located in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Upon completion of the six contracted canvases in fall 2006, I recognized any further work on the war that I might produce must offer more depth. Command is what interests me. Senior leadership offers exposure to the driving force of the command logic, which influences process and mission outcome. I felt there was huge thematic potential in exploring command on a tactical, operational, and strategic level. From the top down, I could incorporate mission mandate, leadership challenges, theatre occurrences, and strategies for coping with trauma. But how to get there in an independent project now my contract was over?

For my second time dealing with CAF (Canadian Armed Forces) Afghanistan subject matter, the parameters were different. It was technically unofficial and time was completely on my side. The questions were how to get the commanders interested initially, and then, how to set up sittings with me having to work from my Toronto studio and with them so far afield? I had to plug away one step at a time. From 2009-2016, it was a long and complex process with lots of overlapping at times when I was finishing one portrait, developing notes on this subject, collecting information on a potential subject I hoped to connect with, reading, re-contacting officers frequently,

setting up meetings and sittings. The momentum of the process was exciting. Amazingly no officers who agreed to participate in the project cancelled.

Colonel Steve Noonan had commanded the Canadian Task Force Afghanistan Roto 0 in Afghanistan, and had contracted me and was the first subject of several pointed works in 2006. He had sat for me several times in theatre. A number of years later he told me, “We wanted an unconventional artist for an unconventional mission.” This was quite a departure from the norm at the Department of National Defence (DND), especially considering the infamous reputation of my work up to that point in some military circles. Colonel Noonan was a non-conformist in this regard. Later at National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ), he proved helpful on one occasion in particular when my sleuthing and haranguing were taking longer than I wanted with a potential new subject. Other than that, it was just me making contacts and establishing rapport as I approached commanders independently - my preferred route anyway - as the project slowly unfolded and gained credibility. My 17 days on HMCS *Algonquin* during Exercise Trident Fury 2013 gave me access to a half company of Van Doos (Royal 22nd Regiment) in the last week. This is where I met and communicated with Lieutenant-Colonel Steve Jourdain.<sup>2</sup>

After three years’ activity, Major-General David Fraser had finally come on board in 2011. He had commanded the multi-national brigade in region-south Roto 1 in 2006. Fraser eventually became the prime fulcrum around which I would explore leadership more fully from 2011 on. His vast operational experience grounded me in

2 Listed are all of the nineteen officers who sat and discussed their tours as veterans of the Afghan mission for *The Art of Command*, their ranks as they were at the times of sittings indicated, but sometimes portrayed in earlier times with lower rank in the portraits and texted prints: Colonel Steve Noonan (2006), Lieutenant-Colonel Dwayne Hobbs (2010); Captain Charles Pitkin (2010); Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew Zdunich (2011); Major Andrew Beckett M.D. (2011); Colonel (ret’d) Pat Stogran (2011); Major-General David Fraser (2011-2015); Lieutenant-General Andrew Leslie (2012); Colonel Ian Hope (2012-2014); Brigadier-General Omer Lavoie (2013); Major Jon Hamilton (2013); Brigadier-General Craig Hilton (2013); Lieutenant-General Peter Devlin (2013); Lieutenant-Colonel Steve Jourdain (2013); Lieutenant-General (ret’d) Marc Lessard (2013-2014); Lieutenant-General Jonathan Vance (2013-2014); Lieutenant-Colonel François Dufault (2014); Brigadier-General Richard Giguère (2015); Major-General B Blaise Cathcart (2015). There are two civilian subjects in *The Art of Command*: The Honourable Christopher Alexander (2016), politician and diplomat 2003-2009; The Honourable William Carvel (Bill) Graham (2017), Minister of National Defence 20 July 2004 - 6 February 2006.



*Strategies+Orders* [Maj.-Gen. David Fraser], 2013 by Gertrude Kearns. Fine art print. [Courtesy of the Artist]

many regards and three portraits and three related war prints mark his immediate time in theatre. In retrospect, there is trust and non-disclosure in the Major-General's and other commanders' cases for good reason. Presenting events in contemporary contexts as historical record can prove rife with thorny issues. For academic interest, I often added theoretical references, as in *Strategies+Orders*. This poster was two years in the making.

My goals in this project were twofold: learn about the war in Afghanistan and deliver a contemporary military history product to an audience predominantly interested in defence. However, I knew if the work was ever exhibited it might also be considered challenging contemporary art. But the series was primarily tailored for the defence environment because this challenged my process, and I believed there was a need for war art about the CAF Afghanistan experience in language that was militarily and conceptually suggestive.

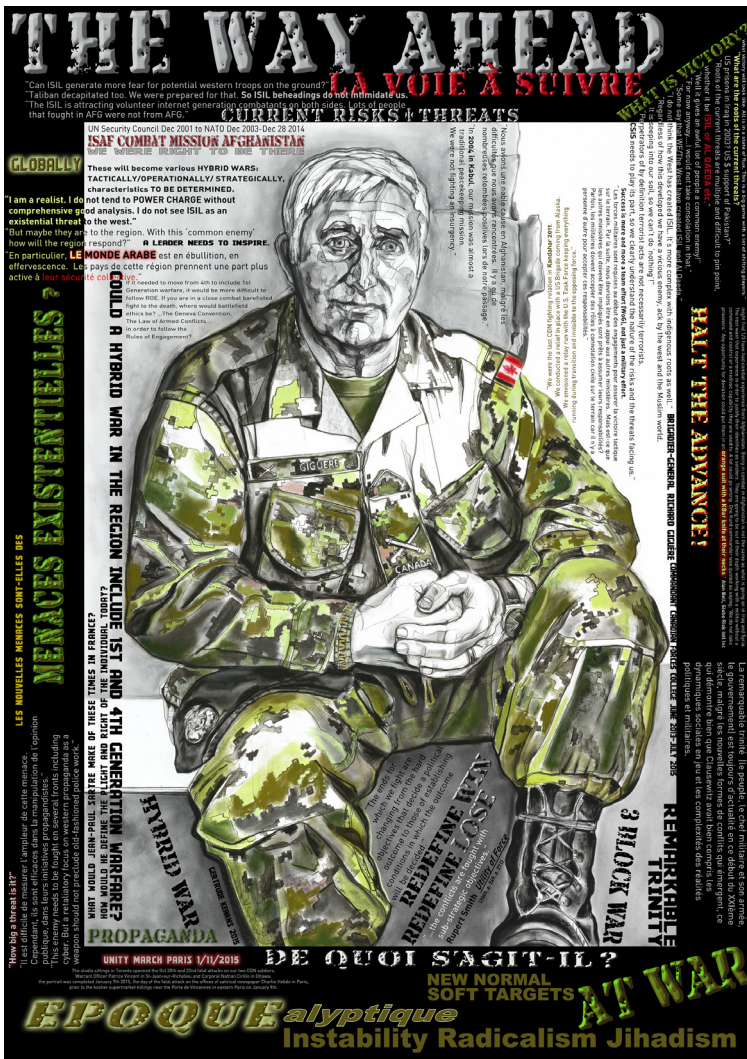
### **PROJECT GOALS**

The main focus of this article is the texted war prints into which my original military portraits are digitally inserted for visual impact and messaging. These maverick hybrids combine my work as both an artist and writer, delivering portraiture and information about Canada's longest conflict and largest personnel contribution since the Second World War.

In response to 9/11, Canada deployed over 40,000 CAF members in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014, some for several tours each. The operations focused primarily on toppling the Taliban regime, damaging Al Qaeda and its support for international terrorism, and on contributing air, land and naval forces to the international campaign to stop global terror. Initially sanctioned by the United States and then led by NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), Canada engaged throughout the campaign and commanded at the highest levels in the volatile region to the south, including Kandahar, during some of the most intense periods of the conflict from 2006 to 2011. Our activities involved combat, security, development, support and training operations, including the transition in 2011 from combat in the south to training the Afghan National Army (ANA) in the north until early 2014. Amidst post-9/11 fears, the national security rationale was "better to take the war to the enemy so you don't have to fight him at home."

My complete body of work is an army-centric impression of this twelve-year engagement. I felt it important in the later texted war prints *The Way Ahead* and *The Long Fight* to also reference the 2015 terrorist attacks in France and Ottawa, as well as geographic command engagements in Northern Africa and Syria. This nudged the series beyond Afghanistan, referencing the bigger picture and





The Way Ahead [Brig.-Gen. Giguère], 2014 by Gertrude Kearns. Fine art print. [Courtesy of the Artist]

how, at the end of 2016, Canada was still cautiously negotiating a national approach to global terrorist threats.

Afghanistan was our combat prelude into the changing nature of contemporary warfare. With the battlefield often situated amongst the civilian population, current combat includes non-uniformed “terrorist” enemies hidden at all times. With the enemy’s experience, what was purely tactical is becoming more strategic. Success is



The Long Fight [Col. Ian Hope], 2014 by Gertrude Kearns. Fine art print. [Courtesy of the Artist]

easier and cheaper for this actor in unconventional warfare when the powerful, expensive countering force can be heavily compromised by inexpensive insidious means. This is in stark contrast to the conventional warfare of the World Wars, both of which set the stage for the turmoil in today's Middle East and South East Asia. The seeds of competition between Washington and Moscow in Afghanistan and the surrounding region were sown immediately

after the Second World War during the four-month struggle in which Afghanistan gained independence from the United Kingdom. Russia rapidly established itself diplomatically in Kabul and, through the modernizing influence of Turkey and Iran, Afghanistan soon became a multi-national laboratory for contemporary nation building. This is ironically and academically stated in the poster *The Long Fight*. Britain and France, failing to honour the critical contributions of Arab forces against the Turks, carved up the Ottoman Empire for themselves, much to the dismay of British First World War officer Lawrence of Arabia who, after the Second World War, opposed the creation of the state of Israel, foreseeing only doom for the region.

*Concept and War* contains a reference to Lawrence with its subtle but sardonic commentary on leadership that those who were in Afghanistan will get. Refreshing jabs at leadership style and perceived skills are present now and then in *The Art of Command*. Regardless, referencing Lawrence also brings the First World War 'into the picture', encouraging reflection on those Arabs allies who were disenfranchised, and thereby inferring parallels with current borders and enmities.

## **COMPARISON OF MY PORTRAITS TO FIRST WORLD WAR PORTRAITURE**

Around the balcony of Currie Hall at the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston hang the stately portraits of some of Canada's First World War generals. As fine examples of military portraiture, these paintings record the appearance of each sitter and indicate many of his tangible accomplishments, for instance, his rank and the orders of chivalry to which he had been appointed as a result of his wartime service. Rather more documentary than engaging, each portrait offers scant insight into the sitter's personality, the most that can be had, for those without any background knowledge of the individual, being taken from a subjective interpretation of pose and expression.

Jumping ahead a century, military portraiture remains an active genre. In her most recent project, one that was completed independently of the Canadian Armed Forces over the course of nearly ten years, but with its unprecedented cooperation throughout, Toronto-based artist Gertrude Kearns has produced portraits that are rather more engaging





*Concept and War* [Lt.-Gen. Jon Vance], 2013 by Gertrude Kearns. Fine art print. [Courtesy of the Artist]

than documentary. Mixing recent military history with contemporary art, she uses large format portraits as the jumping-off point rather than as the objective to explore the complexity of command in modern,



asymmetric warfare, and in so doing, challenges traditional conceptions of military portraiture.<sup>3</sup>

### **AUDIENCES: THE TWO SOLITUDES OF THE MILITARY AND CONTEMPORARY ART WORLD**

The disparate universes of military and contemporary art can equally claim uberculture status. I straddle both in identifying as an artist and in establishing mandates for my work. As managers of violence in the profession of arms, the traditions, hierarchical structure, rigours and urgent necessities of the military at war are a compelling subject to address under the guise of the intellectual issue-driven aesthetics of contemporary art.

There is a range of response from both camps. I include art critics as part of the contemporary art world. Because my earlier work has had more exposure than the current command project, I will also refer to pieces from my Somalian, Balkan, and Rwandan projects (1996–2004) and earlier Afghanistan works (2006).

### **CONTEMPORARY ART CRITIQUES: FIRST WORLD WAR REFERENCE IN AFGHAN WAR PRINT TEXT**

Clearly I was being strategic when I got the notion in 2009 to exploit Frederick Varley's 1918 painting title *For What?* Is any piece of Canadian art more emblematic in our national memory of the gravity of sacrifice in the First World War?<sup>4</sup>

Varley indeed dropped *his* question mark, with positive public and institutional response to the implied anti-war (or just plain "sick of war") meaning that his painting implies. As Laura Brandon, former curator of war art at the Canadian War Museum (CWM), conveyed to me in a December 15, 2015 email, "The work was widely admired because it accorded with the post-war mood." If it had been painted

<sup>3</sup> Craig Leslie Mantle, "Commanding Art: Gertrude Kearns and Canada's Afghan Mission," Conference of Defence Associations Institute blog June 9, 2015 (accessed June 9, 2016)

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Varley (1881-1969), *For What?*, c.1918, oil on canvas, 147.2 x 182.8 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum 19710261-0770



*For What?*, c. 1918 by Frederick Varley. Oil on canvas, 147.2 x 182.8 cm [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-0770]

in 1914, I wonder what the military and public reaction might have been? Regardless, the good timing of this great painting has had it working as an antidote to propaganda (yet in itself a propaganda of sorts) and a Canadian denouement to the horrors of the First World War.

Varley's painting has institutionalized the question "for what?" to such an extent that it might dictate what is considered truly meaningful and even politically correct as commemoration and valid intellectual positioning in considerations around war today. "Good" thinking artists are not supposed to support war. Coerced good artists might do propaganda. But being anti-war and anti-security today is more institutionally cool. Exploring war as a contemporary artist, but from a defence perspective, is more unusual.

### **APPROPRIATELY APPROPRIATED?**

Expanding Varley's *For What?* to my own work became a fixation of mine. The title on hold for two years, I hunted for a visual that would deliver enough acute medical battlefield information and shock value. Straddling two definitions of "appropriate," I selected a post-surgical triple-amputee photo of a NATO soldier. Because there was such a shift from Varley's muddy land and dead body-filled cart scene to this highly clinical image, the work would at least be far from derivative in that regard yet match his painting in forlornness and helplessness. I took poetic license in patterning the bandages in CADPAT, allowing the unidentified NATO soldier to feel like one of ours, thus extending our national identification to our fellow allied troops. I thought this might enhance the spirit of compassion once the viewer was aware.

*Saved: For What?* automatically signifies relief. But here the colon stops short forcing you to consider "for what?" Has he really been saved? The ethical dilemma of saving someone better off dead is there to be had. For those who might think the Afghan War pointless, *Saved: For What?* implies an anti-war message. The military take can be more along the lines of questioning how Veterans Affairs Canada might best be able to provide long term for such a casualty if he survived. Others might ask what this soldier's sacrifice was about, whether his sacrifice was worth it, or how long before he dies.

### **A VOLLEY OF DROPPED QUESTION MARKS**

One soldier's reaction was that I had insulted the subject's honour by *not* showing his, i.e. the patient's, face. And yet, it could be considered a breach of privacy to identify him. Without a face the patient is a wounded "unknown soldier" instead of a dead "unknown soldier". Callously one might say, "If he has lost so much physically, he most likely has lost himself." Of note, most people seeing the image are not aware of the extent of this soldier's "other" injuries: a shattered pelvis, loss of scrotum, a colostomy, and most likely TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury). This truly diabolical case met the criteria I wanted. Most people would stop at the amputation and base their interpretations solely on that. Realizing the hideous extent of his injuries, what does saving him matter when he has *clearly* been



*Saved: For What?* by Gertrude Kearns. Fine art print. [Courtesy of the Artist]

injured past all functionality? Is saving him a greater crime than letting him slip away?

The image takes on a metaphysical dimension that is disembodied and de-territorialized, furthering any sense of horror and tragedy as functioning bodies and holding territory are crucial to war.

## HISTORIAN'S RESPONSE

Cultural historian Sherrill Grace has referenced my work in her 2014 book *Landscapes of War and Memory: The Two World Wars in Canadian Literature and the Arts, 1977-2007*. With the injured paintings in general, she might assume my intent and attitude towards the war more nobly intact than it is. Via Varley's *For What?* and my earlier 2006 medical works of which Grace is aware, her highly complementary comments below offer real insight into the role that audiences, artists, and institutions play in how war and the military are recorded and what is commemorated.

Should I, this artist to whom she refers, be assumed to be anti-war? I think the expectation is that I should or at least *must* be! This attitude is the product of a complacent "liberal" society.

As Grace writes about my large triple-panelled *What They Gave*, "These powerful images would have left Augustus Bridle (a Toronto art critic) speechless because they are much more disturbing than Varley's pictures. In *What They Gave* she [Kearns] depicts the deadly results of a suicide bomber attack through the medical treatment given three severely wounded Canadian soldiers. Works like these, based on Kearns's own witnessing and photographs, pose Varley's questions all over again, and make it virtually impossible for me to think the sacrifice worthwhile."<sup>5</sup>

As with my expansion of Varley's title in my 2011 war print, my 2006 patient painting *What They Gave* fit Grace's discussion and even implied the question, "for what?" Unaware of my triple amputee piece and later title expropriation, Grace already associated my work with Varley's *For What?* based on the compassion both our works engender, as well as their evocation of terrible beauty, and a sort of harmony in destruction. What is war but a series of variably controlled accidents? Taking an accident scene if you will, in this case a battlefield, and monumentalizing it with contemporary art's combination of strategic and "accident-prone" deployment of paint, I think both our war works jar with a resolution that feels final. War is too terrible; stillness in chaos acts as memorial. Despite this, paying homage for me does not exclude finding legitimacies in the conflict.

<sup>5</sup> Sherrill Grace, *Landscapes of War and Memory: The Two World Wars in Canadian Literature and the Arts 1977-2007* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2014), 45



Grace's more noble reaction is similar to mine, but only to a certain point.

Grace's inclusion of *What They Gave* in a comprehensive piece of scholarship might be considered in the same vein as an institution exhibiting the work. Grace *is* the institution. She has sanctioned my work by including it in her own and through her emotional reactions and analysis. These two artists, Varley and myself, might provide succour, galvanize mourning, and bridge the personal and public domains of grief.

We need the remove of being the public as much as we need to be shielded within ourselves to suffer. Grace cites Dominick LaCapra, an American contemporary historian known for his work in intellectual history and trauma studies. His two words referenced here by Grace are crucial to this discussion. "It elicits from me that quality of 'empathic unsettlement' that LaCapra finds essential to bearing witness. I cannot answer Varley's question because this ugly waste of human beings and nature seems utterly pointless to me."<sup>6</sup> Earlier in her chapter "Landscapes and War," Grace discussed the impact of Varley's *For What?*. "It haunts me because it evokes memories of reciting "In Flanders Fields"... There I stood in another landscape of memory made real by this painting and wondered—for what?"<sup>7</sup> Grace is sincerely moved and feels the works make the point that any human sacrifice is not worth it. Nevertheless, she makes assumptions about my attitude towards war via *What The Gave* and probably would include my 2011 texted war print *Saved: For What?* in the same rationale.

In fact, my implied questioning in *Saved: For What?* is much broader. There is no clear suggestion of larger security concerns, unless considered in the context of the entire command series bringing us up to current threats. It might seem logical to equate the question to the soldier's most extreme and grievous physical condition and, by extension, question the immediate cause of NATO's Afghan mission. In other words: blame the war.

I am *not* saying his sacrifice was not worth it, as on one level it is too soon to tell. My *For What?* considers the inside and outside

<sup>6</sup> Sherrill Grace, *Landscapes of War and Memory: The Two World Wars in Canadian Literature and the Arts 1977-2007* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2014), 38

<sup>7</sup> Sherrill Grace, *Landscapes of War and Memory: The Two World Wars in Canadian Literature and the Arts 1977-2007* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2014), 37

of the Afghan theatre. So on the grander scale, what is around the corner in relation to “this enemy”? That is the “for what?” That is the question mark I want to drop.

The mutilated body is a metaphor for Afghanistan. Like the soldier, it too may be temporarily saved. But for what? To implode or to be saved again? The world is too complex and shifting to ask anything but “for what?”

This most grievously injured NATO soldier did die two weeks later. Both the general malaise of Varley’s Great War painting as well as our era’s fatigue and discontent about the Afghan War connect the public emotionally to these disparaging depictions.

The painting’s supporting text in battered combat font labels him casually as a triple amp. Conversely, the hot red florid typeface of *Signature Injury* and *Ars Medicina* (the Art of Healing) suggest the formal magnificence of a handsome medical textbook. But this is not a typical medical textbook illustration. One US surgeon told me that triple limb loss was the signature injury of the Afghan war; another claimed that it was TBI, or Traumatic Brain Injury. Others feel it was, and continues to be, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Signature here means either particular to or the most pervasive. I have tried to include all three in the series.

### **FORT YORK VISITOR CENTRE PREPARES FOR THE PUBLIC**

In his exhibition text for *The Art of Command*, Chief Curator for Toronto’s historic sites Wayne Reeves discusses Varley’s First World War painting and continues by reviewing my other work *Blood on his Hands?*, a medical poster of a Canadian Forces surgeon that partners the amputee subject: “Major Andrew Beckett is not a combat commander, but he still bears immense responsibility for those under his care. His hospital unit’s motto, ‘Hasten to Aid the Soldier,’ adjoins some challenging text relating to the Hippocratic Oath. Once medical ethics are factored in, the blood on his boots and at his feet, while not on his hands, is referred to metaphorically in the text as being on his hands.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Wayne Reeves, “Consequences of Command”, orientation panel *The Art of Command*, Fort York Visitor Centre, Toronto, 2015

Both works subvert expectations of expert medical care, the honour we want to bestow upon the medical profession, and any romantic ideal of a soldier's sacrifice. But how should we expect ourselves to react to a piece of art that exploits extreme human devastation? Should we, including the surgeon, not consider what is best for the victim? Maybe let the soldier slip away and not subject him, in his most compromised state, to the brutal savagery of this particular battlefield surgery? In the case of the amputee, however, perhaps the surgeon was giving the guy a slim chance, and possibly buying time for his family to say goodbye. Ethical calls are gray areas. Maybe that is what this soldier would have wanted. He is still a soldier. In a perverse way expectations are again subverted. Identity withheld, I can assure you this soldier was as tough as they get. The message subliminally: keep pushing him until he breaks. We don't know if he has broken under such extreme punishment. But this is not an exercise; this is an operation (no pun intended). You can be injured or killed on an exercise. But this injury is exclusive to a contemporary war zone.

#### **VARIED MILITARY REACTIONS**

After some deliberating, Major Beckett agreed to my proposed text for *Blood on his Hands?*, saying it was a proud moment for him as a military medical practitioner. He was bravely allowing an extremely unorthodox representation of his professional self as a serving officer. Beckett's senior medical command became aware of both works and apparently found them acute: an unofficial institutional acceptance. However, it could only be just that, unofficial. What soldier wants to see how they could end up? Yet it is the potential fallout of soldiering. Some personnel appreciate powerful images, though there is a larger appetite for attractive jingoistic military art.

Years before the Fort York National Historic Site museum exhibition, the amputee piece was viewed on the web, an institution of sorts. It invoked both extreme praise and vociferous condemnation. Within a distinct societal group these veterans span three generations.

The first two same-generation veterans considered the dramatically paired war prints in the concrete tunnel enclave of the Toronto exhibition: *Saved: For What?* and *Blood on his Hands?*



“This [the amputee] alongside your trauma surgeon are, as the kids say, ‘The Shit!’ At least I think they say it! If they don’t, it is meant to mean ‘Wow’.” —*Retired Lieutenant-Colonel Pat Stogran, Canadian Commander and Afghanistan veteran*

“Wow. I was quite viscerally moved by those posters. We actually just did a triple amp a couple of weeks ago on an Afghan soldier. He has even less of a chance of doing well in this country.” —*US military surgeon and Afghanistan veteran Colonel Mike Woll*

Powerfully from another military surgeon:

“The smell of the combat hospital that comes back to me is of dirty wounds, fresh blood and draining bowel contents from open wounds. These smells overlie the stench of sweat and human fear. Kearns’ power to make me revisit this time makes me feel the sweat, fear and dust of Afghanistan again. I often avoid looking at these images because of the discomfort of memory they cause. For a war artist, I can think of no greater praise.” —*Canadian military surgeon and Afghanistan veteran Major Andrew Beckett, the physician subject of Blood on his Hands?*

These two Canadian soldiers are referring only to the amputee poster:

“Terrifyingly beautiful—bravery of the victim aside, it is a message about the futility of war.” —*Retired Sergeant Billy Willbond (September 28, 1941–October 28, 2014) the most senior veteran and veterans’ advocate*

The youngest vet here represents several of his fellow soldiers who emailed me almost in unison late one night, all with a similar message:

“You disgust me at the most base level. You’re not even a Pig. More like a crow feasting on their lost limbs.” —*From the youngest, a Canadian Afghanistan veteran (name withheld)*

The image enrages, revolts, and satisfies. From “not even a Pig” to “Wow,” “The Shit,” “Terrifyingly Beautiful” and “no greater praise,” *Saved: For What?* has waves of meaning, like the waves of

nausea you might feel contemplating the circumstances around the fate of this soldier.

I had wept in the process, maybe as penance for such a gratuitous and perverse use of imagery. One has entered sacred soldier ground. And in so doing, *Saved: For What?* represents the divide between military and war art. Is it sacrilegious and inappropriate expropriation or effective potent messaging?

One painting in particular, a depiction of an anonymous triple amputee lying in hospital after surgery (a non-Canadian, by the way, who later succumbed to his catastrophic injuries), is the most difficult. At first glance it does not seem to “fit” with the rest of the works, even though it is a macabre portrait of sorts at its most basic level. Yet, it is perhaps one of the most important for it illustrates in stomach-churning detail the possible consequences of command. *Saved: For What?* (artist’s collection) reinforces in no uncertain terms the messages that the texted prints communicate about the burden, weight and awesome responsibility of command in war. The decisions ultimately made by each commander profiled in the exhibition, whether major or major-general, had the potential to put a soldier in the Role 3 Hospital at Kandahar Airfield. The wrong decisions on a good day, even the right decisions on a bad day, could have tragic, life-altering results. That fact alone gives reason for pause.<sup>9</sup>

I gave a talk at the Fort York Visitor Centre on 9 May 2015. I had been tipped off that some angry veterans were planning to interrupt my presentation and challenge me on my use of the triple amputee who they mistakenly assumed was a Canadian soldier. I had already clarified this with some veterans a couple of years’ prior online. For whatever reason they did not show up.

#### **ANTI-WAR PROPAGANDA OR POLITICAL STATEMENT?**

Visitors to the Fort York Visitor Centre, many of whom have an interest in history, came prepared to spend time with the exhibition.

<sup>9</sup> Craig Leslie Mantle, “Commanding Art: Gertrude Kearns and Canada’s Afghan Mission,” Conference of Defence Associations Institute blog June 9, 2015 (accessed June 9, 2016)



The artist (left) with Lt.-Col. Steve Jourdain (centre) at the Fort York Visitor Centre in 2015. [Image courtesy of Claudine Jourdain]

I was really impressed with so many who not only absorbed the 20 large original portraits, but also read the content of the 26 war prints, easily taking a good one and a half hours. Wayne Reeves spearheaded the exhibition and supported the inclusion of *Art of War* with the huge word “unfuck” at the base. Colonel Pat Stogran, the subject of the piece and former fired ombudsman for Veterans Affairs Canada, has continued to represent veterans’ issues. Harkening somewhat differently to my Lieutenant-General (ret’d) Roméo Dallaire and PTSD work ten years earlier, *Art of War* has edgy text and incorporates army trash talk, emphasizing Stogran’s resolve: both in his dealing with the system now as a highly profiled veterans’ issues catalyst, and in his own head as a PTSD sufferer.

If read alone, “art of war” and “unfuck” might present the piece as anti-war, as “unfuck” subverts the theoretical “art of war.” Flanked with Stogran’s quotes, it sidetracks and specifies *his* head and *the* system, with a further quote stating: “Hey, I’m just another fucked up soldier.” The most potent subversion is still in relation to “art of war” and can be read as criticism of the mission, Stogran’s acknowledged position. The piece has parallel political overtones in relation to his frustrations as a former ‘dismissed’ veterans’ ombudsman. This was another example of an officer working through some discomfort but ultimately allowing me to proceed.

As their names are included in the text, I said from the beginning with each that I would push my own ideas, but would print nothing without their approvals.

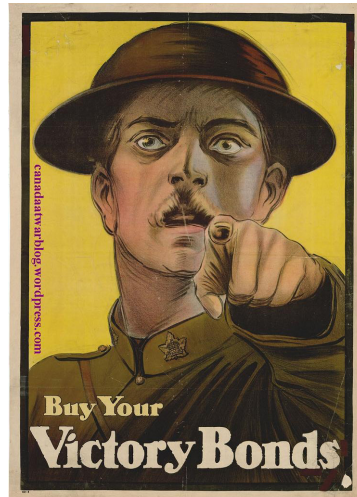
### **DIVERSE COMMEMORATIVE APPROACHES**

Both commemorative, the two posters of Major-General Omer Lavoie as Lieutenant-Colonel diversify treatments of similar subject matter, his Battle Group command in 2006 during Operation Medusa. Gloomy, opaque and without mixed messaging, *For my Soldiers* stylistically invokes the Great War. The more modern *Victory+Loss* pushes boundaries with controversial PTSD and battlefield references, touching on some competitive and controversial aspects of command. The text blocks are organized under US General Omar Bradley's eerily glowing yellow Second World War quote, "Those that are not tormented by their soldiers' perils are not fit to command." The "between the lines" of that statement being, if you are too tormented you won't function to advantage and will fall victim yourself.

In Fort York *For my Soldiers* was installed in its own space, situated as an introduction around the corner from the long bunker-like concrete tunnel that held the large drawings followed by the 23 huge posters (three smaller posters were exhibited in an introductory space). *For my Soldiers* darkly contextualizes our physical and emotional space, harkening to the past. The commander crouches on guard, weapon raised over the names of his lost soldiers.

### **SUBVERTING PROPAGANDA**

The 31 posters rely on variously sourced and presented ideas and information about the mission and its implementers. They have been compared to First and Second World War "propaganda" posters—a "depassé" word in the defence and security realm, which prefers the contemporary term PSYOPS (psychological operations). Propaganda in wartime is about the immediate enemy threat and getting the message out and understood in the blink of an eye. Propaganda as a highly emotional sales device needs to appeal to the emotions, targeting specific audiences for immediate results in the war effort.



First World War Canadian Red Cross poster (left). [CWM 19900076-809] Canadian propaganda poster (right), ca. 1917-1918. [CWM 20010129-0729]

My posters are the antithesis. More complex, they are neither selling a war (i.e. they are not pro-war), nor are they anti-war, as they do not question defence postures. With a sense of urgency, however, they are intended to *look* but not read as propaganda. I try to engage without being didactic.

Avoiding typical propagandistic caricatures of the subjects, I prefer complex and psychologically charged portraiture with more complex writing to simple messaging. I push the use of dramatic fonts, crucial to war posters, using several styles and combat typefaces to emphasize texts. I have tried to make every war print unique and not formulaic in look or message delivery.

Whereas *Science of War* probably comes closest to propaganda in its directness, the triple amputee in *Saved: For What?* butts head on with the standard Red Cross pitch, which avoids the grey areas in saving soldiers' lives: propaganda vs reality.

### **AS FOR TRUTH AND LOGIC?**

The following might express the philosophical underpinnings of this Afghan War body of work. My posters are propositions for each commander's battlefield experience. The First World War heroic combattant and philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's



*Science of War* [Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie], 2013 by Gertrude Kearns. Fine art print. [Courtesy of the Artist]

writings are about clarification, the setting of limits on what can and cannot be said. From his 1922 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, “what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what



we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.”<sup>10</sup> Or what is worth saying cannot be said. This sensibility drove the work.

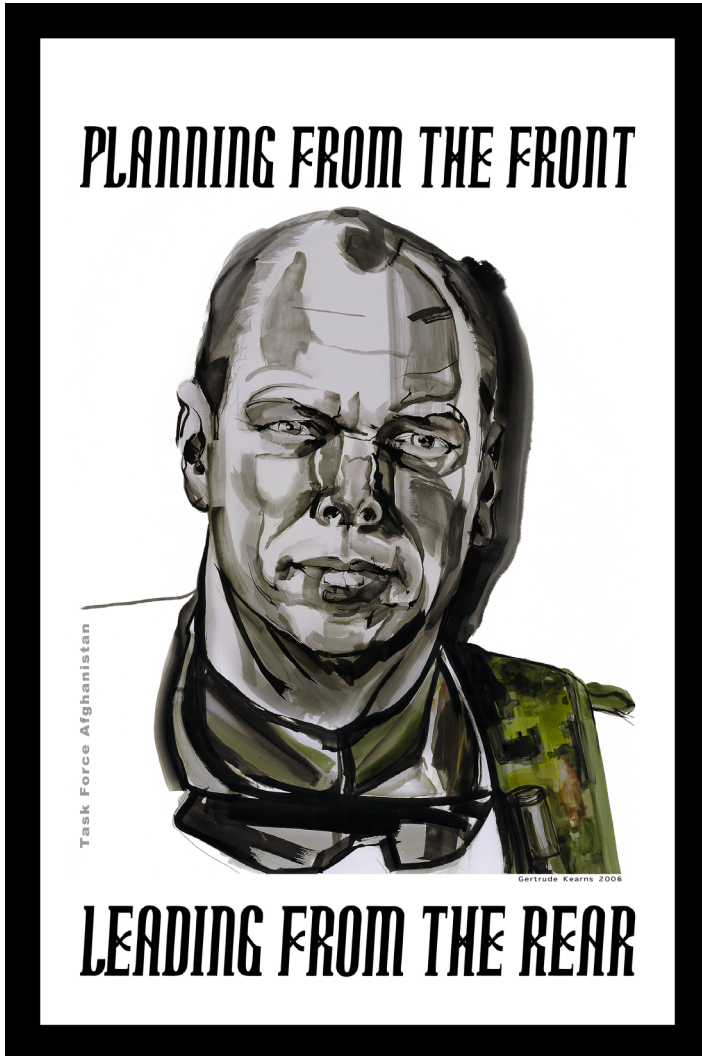
“the ‘whole truth and nothing but the truth’ can never be told via war diaries and op orders.... It is decentred, elusive, and frequently as silent as its combatants. Truth—war felt and not just accounted for—lies in the interstices of textuality, in the margins and off the page, buried deep in the minds of individual soldiers...truth” [lies] somewhere in a fog of war.” —Major Andrew Belyea, CD, PhD, Royal Military College

In my case, the portraits are the silence, and the associated text reveals what can be said “in the face” of what cannot. These are attempts at driving home a logic in each piece about the *a posteriori* war experience of each subject.

#### **CONTEMPORARY ARTIST AGHAST AT PEACEKEEPING REALITY**

In 2004, I attended an artist collective showing at Propeller Centre for the Visual Arts on Queen West, Toronto, of which I was a member, where I showed my first huge war print, a Balkan piece of Major-General Lewis MacKenzie with the text “Keep the Peace” above him and “or I’ll kill you” at the base. The poster evinced everything from “Hey that’s cool” to discomfort. A member artist was shocked first by my message that even peacekeepers might kill, and second that I had jeopardized my perspective by associating with the subject. “How can you be objective if you are getting so close to the military?” she asked. “Well there is enough to be objective about within,” I countered. I learned later that General MacKenzie had swaggered confidently into the gallery in his inimitable manner to see the seven-foot installation. The member artist was apparently not impressed. Not with General Mackenzie and not with me! I had explained to her what it meant, that readiness and the use of force could be the required approach when there was no peace to keep and innocents were being slaughtered. In an eight- word nutshell, that was the message of the text. But alas, I was only digging myself deeper in her disfavour!

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922, Wikisource (accessed 20 November 2016)



*PLAN/LEAD [Col. Steve Noonan]*, 2006 by Gertrude Kearns. Fine art print. [Courtesy of the Artist]

### **IS IT OXYMORON?**

The MacKenzie piece presents a reverse play on oxymoron potential. It was the template two years later for the first large format Afghan war print *Plan Lead*, the pivot into the decade-long project. Both these posters use succinct language to approximate complex defence



ideas or mission concepts. These works were the most exciting points of departure for me in terms of *my* way ahead as a military artist.

As the prelude to this series, *Plan Lead* subverts the serious traditional military slag “lead from the rear” into a contemporary working concept in conjunction with “plan from the front.” The subject is retired Major-General Steve Noonan as Colonel, Canadian Commander of Task Force Afghanistan Roto 0, 2005-2006. My intention: compactly express the underpinnings of the strategic approach in this theatre of operations.

I sent the poster image to a defence studies group I belonged to. A fellow member told me forthright that I had insulted both the officer and the military. That was the not case at all, I argued. In a statement at the request of the chair, a retired colonel, I convinced several members, including him, to see the poster in a contemporary light. I said, “Col Noonan is the hinge into the concept which relies on a reverse take of lead from the rear.” After the First World War, senior officers lost touch with the men they had led by being too far to the rear. It was relevant in Afghanistan because the mission was all about supporting the Afghans in determining their own future (mentoring, but helping them to plan and lead). In other words, the idea was to “put an Afghan face on the mission.” The concept was sound but bringing it to reality was not an easy thing to do, particularly in the early stages when the Afghan forces were not ready to take the lead. Hence the cryptic message and the fog-of-war look I gave to the poster.

### **CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM PRESENTS “ATROCITY ART” AND COMES UNDER ATTACK**

Institutions, such as museums, can also be unorthodox, but they need time to consider acquisitions and exhibition programming. They like context. Let me jump back twenty years and look at the Canadian War Museum’s relationship to a pair of highly provocative paintings, deemed inappropriate to the extreme by some, and appropriate by others.

A potent image referencing a significant historical event can memorialize and become institutional public memory. The slaughter of nearly one million people in the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the 1993 murder of sixteen-year-old Shidane Arone at the hands of

two Canadian soldiers were the subjects in two of my researched series, investigations of leadership and responsibility in the chain of command.

A couple of my 1994 Rwandan genocide paintings also caused some consternation, in particular a 2002 Dallaire portrait (one of six about this general's command dilemma) prominently displayed near the entrance of the Canadian War Museum.

I must refer to historian Simon Schama's 1992 *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)*.<sup>11</sup> He speaks to the ludicrous challenge and presumption of historical portraiture. It is a wonderfully obscure yet pointed reflection on the ambiguous notion of truth in history, of resurrecting historical figures, themselves so already mythologized that it is more than likely the writer or artist will be off any correct track; who would ever really know? A perfect opportunity to do anything! He uses the famous painting of the dying General Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham by Benjamin West as a theme for this exploration of glorification and public memory.<sup>12</sup>

I was found guilty of glorifying criminals in the name of military history in Ottawa in 2005.

As regards the CWM acquisition of my 1996 Somalian works, in the form of a letter addressed to a former curator of war art for a literary journal former war museum curator Laura Brandon wrote in 2000:

We acquired another disturbing Somalia work recently, after a long struggle to find the money... It's a diptych by Toronto artist Gertrude Kearns. A sort of combination of a *Maclean's* photo of the event and Picasso's *Guernica*, it shows a gravely wounded Arone in the hands of Clayton Matchee on the one hand, and Kyle Brown on the other. You might not approve, but I felt it important to acquire these works because the death of Arone was, as an event in Canadian military history, important, and likely to become ever more so.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (Toronto: Random House, 1992)

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770, oil on canvas, 152.6 x 214.5 cm, National Gallery of Canada, 8007

<sup>13</sup> Laura Brandon, "A Museum of War" *Descant* 108 (spring 2000), 65-6

I had recognized bizarre trophy potential in the press images. Matchee had told Brown to take photos in the pit of the murder as it was in progress. Brown later said he had taken the initiative to take the photos, interesting in any determination of “extent of guilt” or innocence. Regardless, these trophy shots taken in turn by both soldiers, a commemoration in real time of the event became my source for iconic-like representations of the tragic consequences of senior leadership on holiday. The victim’s pilfering was a threat to the mission. That is not in question. The works are about how I saw Brown’s dilemma within the command structure. As studies of capability and mindset respectively, the Brown painting was titled *Somalia with Conscience*, the Matchee *Somalia without Conscience*. If I had used text (as I do now) on the works to clarify my position, it might have been quite different. However, I proceeded with minimal graphic vocabulary in the nine-and-a-half-foot canvases, trusting the abstract elements, and not just the blatant licentiousness, to suggest the dark side and morality, and to guide interpretations. The pieces were monuments to what had gone wrong, not to anyone being a hero. The question mark was around degrees of guilt.

People have mistakenly assumed that the Canadian War Museum commissioned these canvases. Not so. This project was self-initiated and submitted by me to the museum once complete with no expectations.

The Canadian War Museum, with a clear strategy in place, invested efforts in the collecting of this controversial war art. In 2005, one of the two large torture paintings was finally exhibited after seven years in storage after they could finally situate the Matchee panel within the peacekeeping area in their new facility on Lebreton Flats. The brotherhood, meaning the Airborne Regiment, was angry. The uproar around the pieces had to do with some veterans seeing them as heroic paintings of criminals. Those with Airborne allegiance were understandably irate. They had suffered a devastating blow when the government decided to deal with the perceived discipline problems and hazing video by disbanding the regiment. It was a terrible waste. However things had gone off track.

The disbanded Airborne soldiers’ gut response to the display of *Somalia Without Conscience* was worlds apart from the basic shock and awe reaction of most civilians to the gory murder. The *un-*enigmatic power of the images presented a threat to “band of brothers”

sanctities. The memory and accomplishments of their mission were being robbed of honour with this atrocity representation.

The Canadian War Museum had to put a guard on the Matchee piece as there were threats to attack the painting, and older veterans had threatened a boycott of the museum. However, other soldiers supported the works, including some from JTF2 (Joint Task Force) who believed that it was important for the event to be recorded and presented in a war museum.

### CONTEMPORARY VS MILITARY SUBJECT MATTER

Some contemporary gallerists in Toronto, who were familiar with my non-military work, had earlier questioned not only these works, but also my interest in the military. In those days it was normal in general and in the arts establishment to slag “those sick military types.” So to actually be interested in them as legitimate human subjects? That was another matter. One gallery director with some interest in my work to date saw the new Somalia images. “How can you be interested in this subject matter?,” he asked.

This is what probably stood in my stead as regards the Canadian military. By 2002, some commanders, officers, and people at Veterans Affairs Canada recognized my interest in these matters. I was not perceived as an automatic “lefty pinkie” anti-military type.

A quote from the essay “Calibrating Official War Art and the War on Terror” by fellow war artist Dick Averns makes an important point about “practices that push beyond record keeping or illustration, instead offering alternative visions that afford new positions through their critical value.”<sup>14</sup> He goes on to mention my mid-1990s Somalia torture works as being critical, whether as subject matter and/or war art is somewhat unclear. “*A Brush With War: Military Art from Korea to Afghanistan* toured Canada to six venues in four provinces 2009-2011....but Gertrude Kearns’ *Somalia 2, Without Conscience*, 1996, depicting Canadian troops murdering a captive in Somalia is certainly critical.”

I hope that this current Afghan War work might be considered critical. Robert McGorman emailed me after seeing *The Art of*

<sup>14</sup> Dick Averns, “Calibrating Official War Art and the War on Terror” Canadian Forces Artist Program, 2008-2009, online pdf, 8 (accessed 3 December 2016)

*Command* at Fort York Visitor Centre. “Considering the huge scale of every aspect of the work, one is almost tempted to think in terms of Greek myth or the Bible, and the possible wrathful punishment that humans are sometimes made to suffer for undertaking such a monumental project. I hope the gods don’t make you mousey - that’s not your style of course - and even if it were you’d find nothing cheesy to nibble on in the whole collection.”<sup>15[2]</sup>

Setting aside whatever wrathful punishment might await me *this* time, for better or worse the 63 Afghanistan works are my monument to this war.

I had said to a soldier on my return from Kandahar in 2006 that I felt very self-pressured creating anything about the war so soon as I didn’t have a good enough handle on what I needed to say. He replied, and I paraphrase, “It is like us having a tour of six months, and going in there to accomplish something. You are going through the same thing. You went in and this is still your tour.” I had written in hindsight it is much easier to take a position knowing less. By March 2010, before the heftier period of the Afghan project, “At a loss: negotiating allegiance as an autonomous entity.” I stopped at the title. I was thinking about my deepening identification with the Canadian Forces and how I might convey *my* interests in the war in tandem with officers’ experiences.

### **POST-MODERN IN CONSTRUCT?**

“You think like a guy,” a retired officer had said to me. Stunned, I stepped back and saw a utilitarian objectivity at play in my work. Another soldier had used that word to describe his take on the war prints. Was I desensitized? It was up to the original portraits of the commanders to express command sensibility with humanism. After all, the military is a people business. The text offered opportunities for dry, mischievous, analytical extensions of the portraits.

What might historiographers and art critics say? Maybe that these posters are pieces of contemporary art, post-modern in message and construct? Post-modern maybe aptly describes this multi-perspective articulation using variously sourced and presented material. Unavoidable that mandate coexists with uncertainties,

<sup>15</sup> [2] Robert McGorman to author, June 18, 2015



complexity and paradox, whether seeming or real: dropping question marks and the odd conclusion?

The content is completely military yet the presentation untraditionally hip for portraiture of senior commanders. The depictions are generally described (in a British international feminist art journal) as “self-structured documentation” by Founders’ Gallery curator Lindsey Sharman in her 2015 review of four female war artists: Tamara Abdul Hadi, Sandra Bromley, Gertrude Kearns, and Althea Thauberger.<sup>16</sup> I feel she might underestimate what I as the artist was specifically after and controlling within the collaboration. I often organized their body positions and always the text, further directing the content and required clarifications. My gentlemen subjects cooperated for months to years afterwards if needed. Some challenged the vision I presented initially but did not dictate except, understandably, for one. I embraced that as it only shed more light on him and his command. Their keen cooperation was vital for the historical record legitimacy of the work. Otherwise it would be supposition.

### **VISUAL IMPACT AND MESSAGING**

The process and understood messaging is one thing between the artist and military officers. The readings of the works by civilian and defence personnel prove another—the former sometimes finding contradictions where soldiers did not.

Toronto artistic director and curator of MOCCA (Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art) David Liss, who has seen the evolution of the series since 2006, provided a savvy contemporary arts perspective on the interpretive challenges associated with the works in 2015:

It’s interesting to consider the potential difficulties of these works operating in two different cultures, especially esoteric cultures like contemporary art and the military. I imagine that it’s tough to straddle both worlds as an artist and convey the readings and meanings that you intend. I imagine that the art world might dismissively categorize the

<sup>16</sup> Lindsey V. Sharman, “The Female Gaze: a (re)viewing of those marked by war” *n.paradoxa* 35, War/Conflict issue (January 2015)

series as ‘military art’ that exists outside of their accepted paradigms, and that the military world might see these images as irreverent or inappropriate, as they don’t appear to conform to the type of ‘traditional’ representation that they might expect. The work embodies these uncomfortable contradictions and for me it’s these contradictions that contribute to the interest and value of the work.<sup>17</sup>

In a sense, Liss confirms a certain post-modern approach in the poster work, with a nod to the “two culture” reality of my practice. I see the approach as a redeployment device. I invade prescribed territories. I think it allows complex messaging. What might appear as contradiction in one area is transitioned out of or more easily into through the sharing of information.

“The posters were more of a revelation to me, however... and the text is challenging – not because it has strong messages for or against war, but precisely because it moves honestly back and forth between those poles. That strikes me as more honest without sacrificing impact. I have to say, I’m impressed that the institution gave full voice to those contradictions. I also have to say that, pictorially, your way with text is very agile and original...”—Don McCaw, artist, Toronto, June 6, 2015

It is interesting that he refers to contradictions. But as regards the “institution” allowing them, meaning the Canadian Forces, he typically assumes the project was officially contracted, and therefore allowed: not at all, I funded it myself. The travel, research, organizing, technical time, printing and framing costs over the years were finally somewhat alleviated by my generous City of Toronto contract in 2015 for the Fort York exhibition. This has mostly allowed me a high-end printed and framed product to further exhibit as in the University of Calgary most recently in 2016. Despite all my own overtures, the senior command co-operation sometimes sanctioned from within CAF for those still serving, offered the project an invaluable solid approval rating as the work gained momentum and traction. Some serving officers would have sought approval for the sittings from a higher level even without my knowledge. Others just took the initiative. Those just retired obviously did not need approval. In

<sup>17</sup> David Liss, artistic director and curator of Toronto’s MOCCA (Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art), email to author, January 13, 2015

a sense it's a fine line between how approval tacit or otherwise is viewed in determining a level of institutional responsibility for the project. Regardless, as with the TFA Roto o contract in 2006, I had free reign and was not censored.

For the officers, and myself, there were no contradictions in messaging. Like the supposed oxymorons of Peace/Kill and Plan/Lead, these were realities being expressed, conceptual suspensions understood by military folk and appreciated to varying degrees by civilians who often saw instead interplays of anti-war and pro-war as opposed to solid message.

Complex contemporary art today needs to be interpreted and gradated through some understanding of the concerns in question. When those concerns are specifically defence it can be strange territory for civilians. I have not modified the presentation of content in the Afghanistan War series in order to make interpretations easier. The “profession of arms” project is heavily military, but with enough twists along the way that might allow for a breadth of interpretation regardless of audience. Like history read or news today, you may find your own positions on the war evolve. It is the intentional ambiguities and dropped questions within a dry acronym ground that might allow that. The ideas and quotes depend on contiguous associations within each construct, and without. Propagandistic attitude and complex messaging shape this maverick record of our long military engagement in Afghanistan.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Gertrude Kearns** is an independent artist in Toronto who has worked officially and unofficially as a Canadian war/military artist for over two decades. Her work has been exhibited nationally, is in private and institutional Canadian collections, and publications internationally. She has lectured on her work. She has been artist in residence at the Royal Canadian Military Institute, and in 2015 did the Canadian Security Studies Program at Canadian Forces College.

Her expanding *ART of COMMAND* Afghan War project 2006-2017 was shown in Toronto at the Fort York Visitor Centre in 2015; the Founders' Gallery, University of Calgary, The Military Museums in 2016; and is currently at Canadian Forces College DND Toronto 2017-2018.