An Artist in Rwanda...

MISFORTUNES OF WAR

Multimedia artist George Gittoes is a singular voice whose graphic commentaries on international political and military conflicts articulate humanitarian concerns that reflect no allegiances. Profile by Marie Geissler.

POLITICAL art has a complex and varied history. Governments and factional groups have long used it for promotion. Australian artist George Gittoes holds a unique position in its composite artistic landscape. An accomplished multimedia artist, with skills in photography, television journalism, drawing and painting, his commentaries on humanitarian issues from many of the world’s trouble spots are without fear or favour.

Confronting and urgent, Gittoes reports what he sees. It is an uncompromised view. In the work of the past decade from militarised zones all over the world his mission has been to raise public awareness to the acute suffering, inhumanity and pathos experienced by innocent victims of war. He reminds us of their courage and probes our hearts and minds for answers to pointless regional and global conflict.

On 22 April, 1995 Gittoes was the first voice to alert a stunned world to the atrocities that occurred in a mass slaying in Kibeho, Rwanda. Over 4,000 Hutu were killed by the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Army. The massacre at Kibeho camp was a mere one-day wonder for most of the world’s media because of a cover-up of the true death toll by both the United Nations and the Rwandan Government.
Yet, as Gittoes points out, the reason why so little international attention was given to this event was due to an unco-operative UN and RPA. Bodies were all mostly buried before the media were allowed into the scene of the tragedy and the accuracy of figures for the body count undertaken by Gittoes and members of the Australian UN Peace Keeping Forces completely denied. Supporting this work in the electronic media, Gittoes gave an exclusive interview to *The Bulletin/Newsweek* (Holocaust, Scandal in Rwanda, 6 June, 1995). The front cover of this issue featured an horrific scene from the battle with an Australian soldier carrying a wounded African on a stretcher, whose fly-blown face was pock-marked all over with wounds. Gittoes' Sydney exhibition, "Eyewitness Rwanda", at Arthaus Gallery in June, 1995 drew from the hundreds of photographs and sketched incidents of personal note from this experience, also the large-scale canvases based on this primary material.

Commenting on the Rwandan work, Gittoes says: "It represents how an artist can be a vital and effective voice in human affairs today. I was able to draw on all my artistic skills to bring world attention to the scale and scope of the tragic circumstances surrounding the Rwandan massacre. Had my reports not gone to press or air, the world community may largely have ignored the atrocities altogether. My documentation of these events strengthens the case for a reassessment of the role of UN Peace Keeping Forces. The Rwandan massacre demonstrated their total impotency. It could have been avoided if the UN had the political will to act decisively and unequivocally. Essentially, the bureaucratic and political structure governing the operation of the UN Peace Keeping Forces renders it impossible for UN personnel at the coalface to take decisions that would avert killing at critical times. The inability to take action to save lives in a situation of crisis is the greatest collective failure of the UN forces. Their record in Rwanda suggests that aggression carries no price. To counter this a serious strategy for Peace Keeping Forces needs to be put in place." His work is raising awareness in no small measure, providing insights into some of the most momentous international events of the late 20th century. Always a first-hand account, he draws from his experience "behind the scenes". As a freelance artist/television journalist in the mid-1980s, he documented the plight of innocent victims of the internal struggles in Nicaragua and the Philippines. More recently
a travelling exhibition "The Realism of Peace: George Gittoes", organised by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, explored the human face of individuals caught up in the turmoil of war in Somalia, Cambodia, Western Sahara and the Middle East (Sinai, Southern Lebanon, Israel and Hebron). For this work Gittoes accompanied the Australian contingent of the UN Peace Keeping Forces into these areas, depicting scenes of human experience rarely covered by mainstream media. The exhibition also drew on the work undertaken in 1994 while in South Africa to document what the artist calls "a triumph of the human spirit" - the positive outcome of the Mandela election. "The Realism of Peace" began its Australian tour at the Darwin Museum and Art Gallery in June, 1993.

Gittoes passionately believes in the power of art to transform the way people think. His work is a testament of his commitment to this precept. His exhibitions are strategically organised to maximise opportunities wherever possible to raise global awareness of the futility and barbarity of war.

"Dealing with images of pain and suffering is a way of working with the dark side of the human psyche. It is very profound. And though I am compelled to do it because of what I believe its impact will be, I find it very distressing," says Gittoes. "When people see my work, its poignancy gets through the barriers that most have built up to seeing violence. Importantly, many often discover a very positive side of themselves that makes them want to go do something about such inhumanity."
Gittoes’ work for the Rwandan exhibition includes medium- and large-scale oils, as well as drawings, photographs and extensive written material describing the circumstances surrounding the subject of each image. The work is highly charged, confrontational and provocative. The carnage and human debris of the Rwandan massacre is laid bare. We see deep gashes, splayed flesh, gouges to the neck from machete blows and infected lacerations. In some works the subjects are already dead, in others they are mortally wounded. Bodies lie strewn on battlefields or victims gaze piteously out at us, transfixed by fear and suffering.

His photographs have an immediacy that places the viewer centre stage – from panoramas of the desperate herded together at medical outposts to studies of troops tending to the wounded, or scenes of victims caught unawares in the plight of the moment. Drawings executed in situ are perhaps Gittoes’ most poignant records. They are strong, summary statements that bring us to within an arm’s length of his subject. Usually portraits, they are sketched quickly, giving the soft pencil medium a passionate expression with lines that seem to scour the surface of the paper with an urgent and energetic dynamism.

On his drawings Gittoes has scribbled notes. He is determined that we should understand and remember. One depicts a portrait of young boy with a crushed head who was trampled by a crowd fleeing the Rwandan Patriotic Army guards. Another depicts a child with a machete wound to the neck, inflicted by his own Hutu militia in an attempt by them to maintain control of their ranks.

Drawing attention to the indiscriminate attitude of

'RPA guards to killing is the subject of two drawings and their counterparts in painted form. A mother and child and a youth were both security checked by the RPA for release from the refugee stronghold. The woman was shot, the young man went free. Gittoes explains this situation in his diaristic notes beside the drawings. His feeling for both subjects are then painted in graphic form in large portraits. One, a portrait of innocence – a young mother with a child strapped to her back; the other, an image of desolation and abandonment – the wounded youth with bandaged head.

In these and his other paintings Gittoes savages the canvas with a raw energy that voices his outrage. It is a passionate encounter with a frantic pace that plunges us headlong into a vivid expression. Volcanic in their intensity, many images seem to explode like shrapnel off the surface of the canvas. Fluid brush-
strokes flow in frenzied eddies, etching anguish and despair. Seeking to plumb the depths of human torment, he combines a lurid palette, purples, blues, greys, blacks and brown curdle in thickly impastoed paintwork, softened by swirling creams, yellows and pink highlights.

He paints a distressing study of a father carrying his dead son, unaware at the time that all hope of life was already gone. In another work a preacher is stretched Christ-like across the canvas with generous arms outstretched in a gesture of compassion as he tries to calm the frightened crowds. A child lying in the arms of her mother is the subject of yet another work. Like figures of stone, they lie immobilised amongst the refuse on the ground.

Gittoes places his lens close to his subject. He forces us to feel their pain and their utter disillusionment. "I wanted to use the medium to cut through the current popular indifference to images of horror and death that are played out so regularly across our television screens. Painted images can do this. They have a magical, personal power that's often transformational and promotes action. The impact of such imagery, drawn from the fact that the artist, unlike the cameraman, sits with the subject and contemplates it for many hours, sometimes days, while painting it. This deeper connection with the subject comes through in the image."

Commenting on his realistic style, Gittoes says: "I purposely chose a forceful, expressive, narrative style like Van Gogh and Munch because it expresses feelings and is readily accessible to the widest possible audience. This means people across any culture can understand my images. This ability to universally communicate is critical to my work. I believe art should engage with issues that move people deeply and help promote compassion and healing."

The material generated by Gittoes on Rwanda was acquired under conditions of extraordinary courage and duress. He spent three weeks in and around Kibeho, during which time he worked with the Australian Peace Keeping Forces, assisting them to give medical aid to refugees who had been ordered to go home. "I was an extra pair of hands to give aid where many more were needed. My difficulty was in finding time to document the carnage and scenes of tragedy."

Marie Geissler
Source 1

'The Preacher' 1995

by George Gibbons
Section One: Short answer

This section has two (2) questions. Answer all questions. Write your answers in the space provided.

Spare pages are included at the end of this booklet. They can be used for planning your responses and/or as additional space if required to continue an answer.

• Planning: If you use the spare pages for planning, indicate this clearly at the top of the page.
• Continuing an answer: If you need to use the space to continue an answer, indicate in the original answer space where the answer is continued, i.e. give the page number. Fill in the number of the questions(s) that you are continuing to answer at the top of the page.

Suggested working time for this section is 30 minutes.

Question 1

Refer to Source 1. Using visual art language:

(a) Discuss the formal organisation of Source 1. Explain what you think the artist is communicating.
Question 2

Examine Source 2 and, from your own point of view, using appropriate visual art language discuss how the artist has used materials and techniques to convey meaning about social and cultural issues in the artwork.