George Gittoes' World Diary reinforces media clichés

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World Diary, now exhibiting at the Queensland University of Technology, is a collection of work produced over the last decade by Australian contemporary expressionist George Gittoes. Travelling in most cases with the Australian Army or United Nations forces, Gittoes has worked in Somalia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Morocco, Mozambique, Yugoslavia, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, The Philippines and East Timor sketching, photographing and painting victims of the conflicts in these countries.

Gittoes has described himself as an “independent witness” who “challenges the image making of the mass media” in its reporting of civil war conflicts. *World Diary* not only fails to realise these claims; it reinforces the very media clichés Gittoes claims to expose.

Born in Sydney in 1949, Gittoes' artistic and political evolution is instructive. He began studying fine art at the University of Sydney in 1968 and, after meeting visiting US art critic Clement Greenberg, was invited to attend the highly regarded Arts Students League of New York. Greenberg was well known for his formalist art theory, which promoted flat non-figurative pictures and insisted that the main subject matter of painting should be the medium itself.

Gittoes rejected Greenberg's teachings and was drawn to Joe Delaney, a radical social realist, and several other American artists involved in the civil rights movement and mass protests against the Vietnam War. While these artists argued that their art provided a means for understanding and therefore changing the world, their rejection of Greenberg's formalism was combined with an insistence that the political messages in their works should take precedence over aesthetic considerations. This approach tended to hamper their development, diverting them from a deeper examination of the complexities and contradictions of their subject matter.

In 1969 Gittoes returned to Australia and with Martin Sharp, a former cartoonist with *Oz* magazine in Britain, became a founding member of the Yellow House, an experimental art and performance venue influenced by British and American “pop” art styles. No doubt those associated with the project sincerely wanted to challenge the stifling atmosphere in official Sydney art circles, as well as the government's military intervention in Vietnam, but their work simply reconfirmed Oscar Wilde's cutting remarks about certain late 19th century British artists. Their approach, Wilde declared in the 1890s, was “too obvious” and “too clearly defined”. “One exhausts what they have to say in a very short time, and then they become as tedious as one's relations.”

Yellow House closed after two years and Gittoes moved on, experimenting with a varied range of media: photography, colour holography, hydrophone recordings, film, puppetry and performance art. In the early 1980s he produced a number of outdoor performance art pieces, won recognition for several films, and was commissioned to produce a series of paintings in workplace settings, mainly at the Newcastle and Port Kembla steelworks, for the Australian Arts Council and the Australian Council of Trade Unions.

The “workplace” paintings were unexceptional but in 1986 Gittoes made a documentary about women in Nicaragua's Sandinista movement. This experience, according to one critic, inspired him to look for other civil war situations as subject matter for his creative work. Seven years later he negotiated a deal with the Australian Army to accompany United Nations troops

in Somalia—the first of many similar trips he made during the 1990s.

While some artists have honed their skills and political understanding as war correspondents, Gittoes' decision to join the UN's military operation signified a definite shift to the right. Like many of those radicalised in the 1960s and early 1970s, who combined condemnation of capitalism's excesses with a defence of the social order itself, Gittoes was swept along by the humanitarian rhetoric used to justify the invasion of Somalia. There is no evidence to indicate that he paused to consider any of the wider political implications, or the real reasons lying behind the increasing number of such military actions by the US and other major powers in different parts of the world.

Gittoes' Somalia paintings broke no new artistic or intellectual ground, nor did they suggest to viewers any suspicions about the motives involved. The Australian Army sponsored an exhibition of the works under the confused and misleading title *Realism of Peace*, and Gittoes was promoted in the media as "Australia's unofficial peace-keeping artist". In 1997 he was awarded the Order of Australia for "services to the arts and international relations".

Not surprisingly *World Diary*, the latest exhibition, has little to recommend it. Although some of the drawings and etchings have a certain visual tension, most of Gittoes' work—particularly his paintings—is crude, emotionally one-dimensional and repetitive. Gittoes simply catalogues the horrors of war, claiming that the conflicts themselves result from a fatal and incurable flaw, permanently lodged within humanity.

Bass Drum, a sketch of a young Protestant drummer in Northern Ireland, is typical. A rather overbearing and heavily tattooed adult is pictured adjusting the shoulder straps on the boy's drum. In hand-written text alongside the drawing Gittoes declares: "As the big bonfires blazed, bands play up a storm, dancers lose themselves in ancient rhythms—ancient evil is passed down, much older than Christianity, Catholics and Prods." Gittoes' feels no responsibility to examine the social and political complexities that produced the war.

This complacent and fundamentally false approach permeates the major paintings on display. *Night Vision* (1993), for example, depicts three cartoon-like UN soldiers wearing night vision goggles in Somalia. The soldiers confront children carrying toy guns. While the garish blue, dark green and yellow colours probably represent an attempt by the artist to illustrate the disorientation experienced by battle weary soldiers, the painting trivialises the subject, imparting no sense of opposition.

Welcome to Gaza (1994) portrays a young Palestinian surrounded by rocks, burning tyres and bombed out buildings. The young man has four arms and disjointed limbs. He aggressively gazes out at the viewer, one of his hands dripping with blood. The picture is unsympathetic and cold.

"Through my art," Gittoes recently declared, "I can be an advocate for so many people silenced by poverty and the conflicts around them."

Given his political evolution over the last decade and the shallow and uncritical nature of his work, it is difficult to take this statement seriously. If Gittoes genuinely wants to speak for the victims of imperialist-sponsored catastrophes, then he is obliged to examine how and why such developments have occurred. He needs to show some evidence of exploring his subject matter, and of inviting his audience to do likewise. But Gittoes' latest exhibition gives no indication that he is prepared to take this road.