Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011: A significant exhibition at Museum of Modern Art's contemporary arts center

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Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011*: An exhibition at MoMA PS1, in Queens, New York, November 3, 2019–March 1, 2020*

A major exhibition at MoMA PS1, the Museum of Modern Art's contemporary art center in Queens, New York, examines more than 20 years of US military operations in the Middle East. *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011* shows the potential of artists to deepen our understanding of significant events through their work.

Important aspects of the onslaught against Iraq are addressed: that the war was launched on the basis of lies about "weapons of mass destruction" resulting in the death, injury and displacement of millions of Iraqis, as well as tens of thousands of US troops and the decimation of the country as part of American imperialism's drive to establish control of the oil-rich region.

Organized by MoMA PS1's chief curator Peter Eleey, and curator Ruba Katrib, the large-scale group exhibition of 250 works by over 80 artists/collectives fills MoMA PS1, a nearly 125,000-square-foot facility.

The show features many works by Iraqi artists who are less well-known to audiences outside of the region, as well as by Kuwaiti artists, Iraqi-American and artists of Iraqi descent living in various countries, American and other internationally recognized artists who responded to the Gulf Wars in their work at the time or in the years since. Much of the work, particularly by the Iraqi artists, is of interest and represents an advance in terms of a serious artistic approach to world historical events.

However, the exhibition overall demonstrates the still limited ability of artists, despite their sincere intentions, to respond to events such as the Gulf Wars in a way that deepens our understanding in an affecting and aesthetically compelling manner. This weakness derives from several interrelated causes, not least of which has been the art world's decades-long lack of support for artists seeking to address issues other than their personal "identities" in their work.

No less important is an underdeveloped historical and political consciousness, not unique to artists, that has hindered them from understanding the "reasons behind the reasons" for the eruption of American imperialism in the Middle East that began in 1990. Coupled with the prevailing practices of "conceptual" art, the result is too often superficial or one-sided artwork that is not up to the challenge of a topic of such magnitude.

There is a wide variety of media included: paintings, works on paper, handmade books, sculpture, photography, video and multimedia installations. They touch on many aspects of the Gulf Wars in both direct and indirect ways. The apocalyptic images of the burning Kuwaiti oil fields are among the more immediately recognizable. Set on fire in August 1991 by the retreating Iraqi military in the face of advancing US coalition forces, the 10 month-long firestorm caused enormous economic and environmental damage.

The firestorms appear in several pieces. The video *Behind the Sun* by Monira Al Qadiri's (Kuwaiti, born 1983) projects them at a huge scale on a gallery wall; Susan Crile's (American, born 1942) *Field of Fire* (1991) is a semi-abstract work of thickly applied black and orange paint-stick on paper; while Tarek Al-Ghoussein's (Kuwaiti and Palestinian, born 1962) *GW* series includes multiple images of the flame geysers in the distinctive, small square format of Polaroids.

Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 came in response to the Gulf emirate's sabotage of the oil-dependent Iraqi economy in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 with a likely green light from the US. But one learns relatively little of the significance of the oil fields set on fire by the retreating Ba'athist forces from the work. Whatever the immediate circumstances, the source of the destruction and mayhem in the Middle East is Western imperialism, led by the United States.

President George H.W. Bush's administration's launched Operation Desert Storm in January 1991. In the course of six weeks the savage aerial bombardment virtually destroyed Iraq's military, killing or wounding hundreds of thousands of soldiers, as well as laying waste to the country's infrastructure. Al Qadiri's video footage, on the other hand, is overlaid with a soundtrack of Arabic religious poetry that describes scenes from nature sourced from old television programs.

Other aspects of the conflict are dealt with obliquely. The *Embargo* sculptures by Nuha Al-Radi (Iraqi, 1941–2004) at first just seem whimsical, made from painted rocks, bits of wood and rusted metal canisters fashioned to resemble people. However, they reflect the impact of the decade of UN Security Council's sanctions under the Clinton administration that further crippled the Iraqi economy, restricting access to the most commonplace materials, even pencils. More importantly, the sanctions resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, many of them children, due to malnutrition, lack of medical supplies and diseases from lack of clean water.

So too, the many instances of "Dafatir" (artist notebooks) reflect the embargo in that without access to art supplies, many artists chronicled their experiences in pen/ink on paper or cardboard. Dia al-Azzawi's (Iraqi-British, born 1939) *War Diary No. 1*. (1991) and Rafa Nasiri's (Iraqi, 1940–2013) *War Diary* (*No 2, It's a Dirty War*, 1991) and *Seven Days in Baghdad* (2007) are haunting, the latter in particular with red and black handprints urgently demanding our attention.

Other work such as that by Himat M. Ali (Iraqi, born 1960) addresses the destruction of Baghdad's famed book-market, *Al Mutanabbi Street* (2003). Al-Azzawi 's *Book of Shame: Destruction of the Iraq Museum*

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(2003) reflects the despoiling of what was once the most advanced cultural centers in the Middle East.

Another compelling piece is a wall-sized array of small portraits by Hanaa Malallah (Iraqi and British, born 1958) *She/He Has No Picture* (2019). The haunting faces of mostly women and children initially appear to be painted, but on closer inspection turn out to be collaged out of burnt canvas. They commemorate the victims of the Al Amiriyah bombing on February 13, 1991, in which 408 civilians were killed by a US precision "smart bomb" strike on a shelter. The title refers to the brass plaques that stand in for those victims who remained unidentified.

These are among the more successful works in the exhibition. However, they hardly come close, or even attempt to encompass the full scope of the Gulf Wars. Objectively, making art about any war is a challenge—does the artist depict war's brutality by showing the intensity of human suffering or the magnitude of physical destruction? Does one focus on the callousness, criminality or stupidity of those responsible for launching the war or show the everyday life of those subjected to occupation? What of the troops tasked with carrying out these missions, some of whom do so with sadistic impunity while others are economic conscripts who may have little ideological commitment to the "mission"? And then there are aspects particular to these wars, which were "sold" to the public by an unprecedented level of propaganda disseminated through a relentless media blitz by the imperialist powers.

Unfortunately, most of the work in the "Theater of Operations" exhibition takes up one or the other of these topics, but without adding much scope or insight. The media campaign was the subject of several artworks. Thomas Hirschhorn's (Swiss, born 1957) *Necklace CNN* (2002) is an oversized "bling" sculpture of the CNN logo hung on a wall, telling us nothing beyond the obvious.

Several of the videos merely perpetuate the mind-numbing effect that they purport to critique. Dara Birnbaum's (US, born 1946) *Transmission Tower: Sentinel* (1992) and Michel Auder's (US, born France 1945) *Gulf War TV War*, 1991 (edited 2017) crosscut news footage of politicians and news anchors "explaining" events in such a way as to make them even less comprehensible than the original barrage of propaganda.

Deep Dish TV's *Shocking and Awful: A Grassroots Response to War and Occupation* (2004) includes a lot of valuable video footage, particularly of day-to-day interactions between US troops and ordinary Iraqis under the occupation, and of the international mass demonstrations before the war which were the largest anti-war protests in history. But the videos are displayed on 12 continuously playing monitors, again making them nearly impossible to absorb.

And while informational overkill is the subject of Rachel Khedoori's (Australian, Iraqi-Jewish, born 1964) *Untitled* (*Iraq Book Project*, 2008-2010), an installation of 70 volumes reproducing *every* article that included the words "Iraq," "Iraqi" or "Baghdad" in any news source from 2003 to 2009—in order to suggest the "indigestible magnitude of information about the war, raising questions about the representation of violence"—what comes across is that the artists themselves cannot make sense of what they perceive, so they merely reproduce it uncut, unedited, "raw."

The pieces by artists experiencing the war at a distance—whether American, European or Iraqis in exile—tended to be less interesting. These artists fall into two groups. One includes artists like British-American printmaker Sue Coe (born 1951), whose work has always taken the form of cartoons protesting an assortment of progressive causes: cruelty to animals, industrial food production, apartheid, AIDS and numerous others. Included in this show, her prints lampoon Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and George "W" Bush, as well as point to the connection of the war to the oil and gas industry in *MOBILize/the Gulf* and *Shell's Exxon* (both 1990). Although Coe's work is often compared to the prints of Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) who created searing images of the impact of World War I, particularly on women and children, Coe's work is far less profound in both form and content.

Other well-established artists like the American minimalist sculptor Richard Serra (American, born 1938) and Fernando Botero (Colombian, born 1932) registered their outrage, shared by many around the world, at the exposure of the torture at Abu Ghraib. Luc Tuymans (Belgian, born 1958) painted a close-up of Condoleezza Rice emphasizing her mouth, and by implication, her lies to justify the invasion of Iraq on the assertion that Hussein had acquired nuclear weapons. As Secretary of State, Rice declared famously that "we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud." These artists, not necessarily considered "political," responded to particular events each in his own distinctive style.

The situation of these artists, who did not witness the Gulf Wars or events in the region first-hand, has by necessity meant that they drew on news images for their sources. Often these have become recognizable images in their own right, such as the hooded prisoner at Abu Ghraib; many have appeared in ways to manipulate public perceptions.

However, seeing something with one's own eyes does not in and of itself lead to an unbiased or valuable interpretation. This is particularly evident in the work of painter Steve Mumford (American, born 1960). A master of realistic oil painting, as well as watercolor, Mumford's monumentally scaled *Dying Soldier* (2009), shows a team of medics working valiantly to save an oversized soldier on the operating table who looks dead. The unmistakable message is that the US military occupation is, most likely, a lost cause.

Mumford is one of the few American artists to have consistently made the Iraq War a central subject of his work. While claiming to be "neutral," Mumford continues to solidarize himself with the occupiers more than the occupied—it is noticeable that he rarely depicts Iraqis other than as abject, humiliated prisoners. Mumford says, "I wanted to distill something essential about the drama of war, beyond right and wrong. These aren't anti-war paintings. They aren't political. I'm not trying to address the morality of the war or George Bush's foreign policy agenda. I went to Iraq because I wanted to know what being in a war zone was like, and paint about it from my own subjective experience."

We have previously reviewed Mumford's work, and have little to add. US soldiers have been fighting wars for decades in the Middle East and Central Asia in the interests of the oil companies, defense contractors and Wall Street financial institutions. The vast number of American troops who have been killed, wounded or left suffering with PTSD or other disabilities, with incalculable effects on their families and communities, are also victims of imperialism's insatiable greed and ruthlessness.

But Mumford's "non-political" approach only encourages those who claim that support for "America's heroes" does not mean support for "America's wars." In fact, the two go hand in hand. The US military has been carrying out a criminal, murderous occupation of Iraq, or attempting to, since March 2003. It is responsible for massive war crimes, including the barbarism in Abu Ghraib and the decimation of Fallujah and other centers of opposition. American operations in Iraq, as the WSWS has noted, amount to sociocide—the deliberate and systematic murder of an entire society.

The photographs by Judith Jay Ross (American, born 1946), on the other hand, communicate the impact of the war on the soldiers without serving as an apology for US imperialism. Taken in Allentown, Pennsylvania, in the 1990s, these modest, informal portraits reflect the increasing enlistment of working class families in the military, as well as another series taken of the variety of people who took part in anti-war protests in 2003.

Although the work in "Theater of Operations" often falls short of the greatest artwork about war—such as Francisco de Goya's etchings *Disasters of War* (1810-20); Eugène Delacroix's *Massacre at Chios* (1824); Käthe Kollwitz's many prints like *The Widow II* (1922); Otto

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Dix's 1932 triptych *The War;* and Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937)—it is a step forward. Events are impelling the artists toward treating the neo-colonial "Gulf Wars" with the complexity and emotional immediacy that art can offer, while suggesting the need for a political perspective to put an end to war altogether.

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