

“Our media companies want to continue this escalating war and throw gasoline on the fire.”

Peter Seaton, an Australian-based anti-war muralist speaks with the WSWS

Eric Ludlow

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The World Socialist Web Site spoke last week with artist Peter Seaton who was forced earlier this month to remove his anti-war mural in Melbourne following a vicious social media campaign by right-wing layers and an open, public attack by the Ukrainian ambassador to Australia Vasyl Myroshnychenko.

The three-storey mural—“Peace Before Pieces”—depicting a Russian and Ukrainian soldier hugging each other, was denounced as “Russian propaganda.”

Seaton, who has painted walls across Australia and internationally, spent almost \$3,000 on his Melbourne mural. He was accused of supporting Russian President Vladimir Putin and subjected to a barrage of abuse and threats on social media, including from some who attempted to publicly reveal his residential address.

The attack on Seaton and freedom of artistic expression is part of a broader attempt to cultivate a hysterical and militarist atmosphere, in which any questioning of the official narrative is tantamount to treason.

Eric Ludlow: Why did you decide to paint the mural?

Peter Seaton: I saw the events on February 24. I’ve been engaged in deep research and thinking for myself. It’s quite funny people saying that I don’t know the details of the conflict. I’ve done so much research about it. I came up with this concept when it all started and then I got emails from the Ukrainian community.

I actually sent an email with the concept to this guy who’s since been outing me. He replied to my email with a photo of what I planned to paint. He said, “I love the concept, can we jump on a call?” So, the same guy who said he loved it in March is now, months later, deeply traumatised by it.

I came up with concept of two soldiers hugging because I’d never seen that done before and was trying to find a way to represent peace, to represent unity. I felt that an artist’s journey is to create things that don’t exist in some ways. That’s what inspired me to create it, along with a deep dissidence with the notion of war in 2022 and picking a side.

My family has deep affiliations with conflict. My father was raised in Northern Ireland at the time of the Troubles and his mum was attacked by the Catholics for trying to be neutral. They

bombed her alcohol shop. While walking in Belfast he saw a car bomb go off and saw a foot roll past him. I’m no stranger to the kind of atrocities that happen in war times.

My mum’s side is Croatian. There was the Croatian and Yugoslavian war, which was a similar kind of thing between NATO and the Serbian-Russian representatives. It was a civil war.

What’s happening now with the Russian separatists, the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the Russian military—is a similar kind of civil war. You have people who agree with what’s happening, you have people who don’t. It’s not black and white, as the media wants to portray it. All this made me want to put a message peace out there.

I wasn’t trying to stir controversy. I’ve done a lot of research around the idea of dehumanisation in war. There’s always a side that dehumanises the other and the more it festers and grows, the more it creates deep-rooted hatred and deep-rooted conflict which lasts for generations. My intention with the artwork was to create something that brought humanity back to both sides of this war.

EL: What were some of the conversations you had, including with Ukrainians, before you finished the mural?

PS: The Ukrainian who said he loved it presented it to the Ukrainian community to see what they thought, but they didn’t think it was a good message for them as a whole.

I asked myself, “What is my art if it has to be authorised by a committee member?” This really takes away the expression of freedom of speech, which has always been a part of the anti-war movement.

They proclaimed the atrocities at Bucha but I’m well aware of the fog of war. We don’t know exactly what happened there. Deep investigations need to be undergone because there are atrocities happening on both sides of this war. I looked at everything they said but still felt that my artwork didn’t portray a bad thing and didn’t feel it that was excusing all these atrocities.

EL: Why do you think there was such a sharp backlash?

PS: You can see in the tweet from the Ukrainian ambassador a deep-rooted hate for all Russian people. That’s part of the propaganda war I wanted to cut across. It’s the crux of what I was trying to do.

I’d liken it to the Christmas truce, where in 1914 British and

German soldiers played soccer, shared cigarettes, and so on. It's alleged that a commander had to force them at gunpoint to fight again and so my mural was an attempt to create one of those moments in the midst of a war.

Some people equate all Russian soldiers to the ones who've alleged to have carried out atrocities. But you have to understand the conscription aspect of the Russian military and the fact that many of them run away when they get to the frontline. They don't want to be there, they're just regular people. I've got messages from Russian people saying they just escaped conscription. They're part of the Russian left wing, are deeply against this war and are protesting against it.

The equation presented by the Ukrainian Ambassador, which basically says that all Russian soldiers are rapists, is deeply offensive to the people in Russia who are against the war. They're doing everything they can to stop this and are being locked up for protesting against the war.

This doesn't really fit into the [Ukrainian] narrative of rallying to fight against what they say is the fascism of Russia which wants to expand. I don't think that that's what's happening. I think the Russian reaction is a more of a response to a security threat.

Whether justified or not, Russia is reacting in the same way that the US would if Canada had an alliance with China and China wanted to put nuclear weapons on the US border. The US would invade Canada in a similar way that Russia is in Ukraine. It's a proxy war between NATO and Russia.

Part of the backlash against the mural is a reaction against me wanting to try and deescalate the conflict. They want to build a notion of hate towards the other side and rally everyone against that and get more money for that. These oligarchs have been filling their pockets and when you start to expose that and present a mission of peace, the warmongers pipe up and do everything they can to make out that you're a Russian spy or Russian asset.

EL: Do you know of other artists or figures who have been hounded similarly?

PS: Well, John Lennon was harassed by the Nixon administration for speaking out against the Vietnam War. They even tried to deport him. Muhammad Ali was hated by US authorities for opposing the war. Today, people are too scared to say anything about anything because there's this climate of cancelling people.

EL: Have other anti-war artists inspired you?

PS: It's not that I was drawing particular inspiration from them in the mural piece. I was more inspired by wanting to put out a message of peace.

We're at a stage in our technological evolution where we just can't continually throw gasoline on these wars. It's going to get to a point where someone's going to drop a nuke. It's happened before. Conveniently, Raytheon, Boeing and all these defence companies are getting multi-billion dollar contracts from this war and that just suits them really nicely.

EL: You mentioned the Christmas truce of 1914. Why is this historical example important?

PS: It highlights the fact that these people are so closely connected to each other, so much in common and so many similarities. They've literally been turned against each other by

nationalism and politics. It just seems sad.

Obviously, there's no excusing what Russia has done but it's also sad that the Ukrainian armed forces and Ukrainian civilians have been used as cannon fodder for war between the US and Russia. I just want to highlight the fundamental humanity we have.

EL: What do you think backlash against you—as an anti-war artist—says about the cultural environment we are living in and its impact on freedom of expression?

PS: I suppose there's some concern around about saying things that go against the Australian government's stance—they are sending weapons and stuff over to help fight this war—but people can see through that.

What's amazing is the media, the *Daily Mail*, the BBC, the *Independent*, whoever else, have tried to portray me as something that I'm not. At the same time, I've received so many messages from people saying they can see what I'm trying to say and that this is what we need.

The mural is a message of peace. If we don't find peace, we will all be in pieces. It's not that hard, it's not a false equivalency argument.

EL: You were obviously under immense pressure to remove it but why do you think there were no prominent figures defending you?

PS: I think people are scared to go against what the media machine are putting out. The narrative is that every single Russian is responsible for this war or the only way out is to kill all the Russian soldiers. Our media companies want to continue this escalating war and throw gasoline on the fire.

It is sad to see more censorship and we're starting to see more lack of freedom of speech. Most artists just want to paint flowers on walls and paint geometric things because it keeps everyone happy. But that's not what art is about, especially street art, which is an anti-establishment movement.

It feels good though that there are people who see my message and see that war is never a good thing for any side. It creates poverty, it creates massive environmental damage, and it creates so much trauma.



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