

VISUAL ARTS

Throughout history, many artists have effectively investigated and recorded social and political issues worldwide. Artists such as Spanish born cubist artist, Pablo Picasso, and commissioned war artists, Stella Bowen, Wendy Sharp and Ben Quilty have all been exposed to the social and cultural cataclysm that is warfare, and have each displayed their personal response to such horrors through their artmaking practice. Through their diverse works, each aforementioned artist has effectively captured and visually communicated their reaction to the warfare they experienced, as well as the anguish and destruction it inflicted on the effected people.

In 1937, the Spanish Republican government commissioned Pablo Picasso to compose a mural for the Spanish pavilion at the Universal Exposition that year in Paris. Inspiration came on the 26th April, in the form of the horrific aerial bombing when the German air force, in support of the Fascist forces led by Generalissimo Francisco Franco, carried out a bombing raid on the small Basque village of Guernica in northern Spain. Picasso's iconic Guernica eloquently expresses his repugnance at the futility of war. The infamous artwork depicts a massacre of innocent victims and is filled with historical and political allusions, and expressive force. Guernica is imposingly large oil painting spanning 3.5m by 7.8m, and is seen as an amalgamation of pastoral and epic styles. Utilizing muted, tonal colours of grey, black and white, the painting can be viewed as having several sections that come together to form a single coherent statement of defiance. Picasso's abstract style serves to deliberately confuse the viewer's gaze, with figures and events that can only be picked out after careful analysis. The gaze is initially drawn, in most cases, to the left of the canvas, where a bull watches a woman who is grieving over a dead child. When asked to explain the symbolism of the artwork, Picasso replied that if he 'wanted to put it in words he would not have painted a picture, but he would have written a book'. Distorted, writhing figures and animals, reminiscent of the Spanish bullfight, are ghastly reminders of the terror, dread and suffering associated with war. The bull symbolises approaching death, the hand clutching a shattered sword symbolises gallant opposition, and the horses head is the agony of the Spanish people. Guernica incorporates elements of Cubism, Expressionism and Surrealism. Picasso challenged the intended audience of the artwork due to the shocking avant-garde elements portrayed in the iconic and symbolic work. Guernica is undoubtedly Picasso's most powerful political statement and depicts his immediate reaction to the cataclysms of war, as well as the anguish and destruction it inflicts upon people. Guernica has become an anti-war icon and effectively depicts Picasso's emotional reaction to the horrific experience.

Australian painter and writer, Stella Bowen, began work as an official war artist in February 1944, during the Second World War, and focused mainly on social commentary of significant events. She was posted to the UK by the Australian War Memorial, to a town where Bomber Command was based. Bowen's artistic strengths were mainly in the field of portraiture and she was commissioned to do group portraits of men and women of the Royal Air Force. Bowen was asked to paint a typical crew that flew Lancaster bombers on the intense bombing raids over Germany and occupied Europe. The day after Bowen began the Bomber Crew, the youthful group of six Australian men and one Englishman depicted in the work were reported missing in action. The distressed Bowen returned to her London studio to complete the work. In a letter to her brother Bowen wrote, "It was horrible having to finish the picture after the men were lost. Like painting ghosts." It was later discovered that the group's aircraft had been shot down and all men but one were killed by German soldiers. The surviving one was kept as a prisoner of war in Germany and was eventually repatriated in 1945. The composition of Bowen's Bomber Crew emits a sophisticated sentiment through her use of rich oil colours and her grid-like structure. The Lancaster Bomber hovers over seven angelic faces of the disembodied airmen. The decorative scheme of circles is reinforced in the aircraft, the men's faces, and their insignia. The names of the crew appear on their flying helmets and are repeated on the wreath-like ribbon, complete with their RAAF wings. Bowen has employed an "architectural layering" technique that utilizes small brush strokes of paint to create texture. The image acts as a memorial to the seven young crewmen and as such, Bowen has

painted this work with much care, dedication and considerable emotion. Through her personal representation of the Royal Air Force in World War II, and with the additional background story to the artwork, Stella Bowen has effectively communicated the social and political issue of war.

As the fourth appointed female war artist and the first since Stella Bowen, Wendy Sharp was commissioned by the Australian War Memorial in December 1999 and deported to East Timor where she was required to cover the Interfet peacekeeping operations at the time. On Christmas Eve 1999, Wendy Sharpe attended a mass at the Suai Cathedral where she was to document the mood of the occasion. Sharp described the experience as “the most extreme thing I’ve ever experienced.” The cathedral had been the site of a massacre a few months prior, where the local people had gathered in the cathedral, thinking that it would be a safe haven, and instead they were slaughtered. At the mass the survivors re-enacted the massacre, including the killing of the nuns and priests, the burning of the houses, and the Interfet coming in as heroes. Sharp’s oil on canvas work *Midnight at Suai Cathedral* was completed in 2000 and is a powerful work in representing the horrific events that occurred on the night of the massacre. Sharp painted the image from the re-enactment she witnessed. The faces of the local people are partly illuminated by a lamp held by a man in the foreground creating a ghostly effect and displaying their empty and worried expressions. In the eerie light, these faces are a contrast to facade of the cathedral, which is stark against the burning orange sky. The background glow of the sky suggests a burning cathedral blanketing the scene, symbolising the horror and terror of the night of the massacre. Through Sharp’s choice of dull colour and simple, abstract figures she represents the sombre and uncomfortable environment in which she was immersed. Sharp’s expressive art making practice and her use of techniques such as colour, tone and depth have effectively displayed the emotional tempo of the artwork regarding death and destruction, and the unconquerable spirit of mankind in the social and political issue of warfare.

A contemporary Australian artist producing rich visual images which have earned him a national reputation. In 2011, the Australian War Memorial commissioned Quilty as an official war artist on a three week deployment to Afghanistan. His task was to record and interpret the experiences of the Australian servicemen and women, and to create art that reflected the bond Quilty had established with the soldiers he had met and befriended. Was captivated by masculinity and he looked at how young men in particular are initiated into contemporary Australian society. Began his artworks by taking photographs of the Australian soldiers. He asked each to pose naked from the waist up and to face the sun with their eyes closed, then to open them and stare into the blinding light, at which point he would take the photo. Quilty explained, “To me, this symbolises what they’re facing, something immense, overwhelming.” Quilty then returned to Australia and began creating portraits from these photographs. Quilty asked one woman, Captain Kate Porter, to be a subject for one of his portraits as he had found her an interesting subject due to of her life experiences. Porter was hesitant but Quilty eventually convinced her and the artwork *Captain Kate Porter*, after Afghanistan was completed in 2012 and hangs among Quilty’s other 14 *After Afghanistan* portraits. Quilty used the concept of nudity in his war artworks as he felt that it captured the sheer physicality of the soldiers and stripped away any protective layers, to reveal the frailty of human skin and the darkness of the emotional weight of war. He also felt that the naked figure symbolised purity and honesty, similar to the Renaissance era. In the final portrait of Kate Porter, her physical strength is apparent despite her nakedness but a sense of vulnerability comes through in the pose. Quilty’s choice of colour evokes flesh with a darkness that surrounds and threatens to consume the subject. The use of the impasto painting style has created a rough surface on the canvas which signifies the uniform and body armour that has been stripped away. In his *After Afghanistan* series, Quilty’s subjects are shown in a contorted pose that echoes their experience of the social and political issue of war.

Through investigating and recording significant events through time, and visually representing these events through art making, artists Pablo Picasso, Stella Bowen, Wendy Sharp and Ben Quilty have all effectively commentated to the public the social and political situations in which they were

immersed. Each artist's representation of the subject matter of war is influenced and effected by time and circumstance, however, each artist has effectively communicated their understanding and opinion of social and political events throughout history.