

INTRODUCTION

The works exhibited here at Galleria Six are examples from a number of periods of my practice. The earliest work is from 1976, *Infantryman digging a foxhole, 16th Sherwood Foresters, 139th Brigade, 46th Division, Messines 1917*. The latest work shown here is from 1998, *A pastel drawing of one sentence and a pastel drawing of a dainty-footed World War 1 German Soldier blasted into a hillside in the Somme Area*. There is some strong resonance in the fact that the theme of WW1 should be present in both drawings when their respective productions are separated by twenty twenty-two years.

My practice, now sustained, uneasily but addictively, for nearly sixty years, has been realized through various textual and pictorial forms and through a couple of different organizational personnel systems – individual and group. These days I occasionally perhaps see it as a bit too superannuated, but the practice persists, and I hold on to it. My practice, like I guess a lot of other artists' practices, invariably feeds off previous periods and forms of my prior practice. There have been recurrent themes and preoccupations throughout the entire period of my practice. WW1 and WW2; inquiries into the concept and limits of the pictorial; concern with models of mind and cognition; Anglo-Irish relations, as they relate to slippages and rifts in the unity of the UK and the consequent problems of British identity, not least now a current national British identity argument in the form of the Brexit vote; domestic versus public as they relate to individualism versus community, text versus pictorial; and one of the most persistent concerns throughout the entire period of the practice, the ceaseless confrontation between the concept of practice and the concept of career. It is this separation between practice and career that fuels my uneasiness toward myself as a practicing artist. I am far from comfortable to be characterized as a career artist, which I guess I am, but much more interested in attempting to objectify myself as a practicing art – that is, I am much more involved in attempting to make a critical practice than in pursuing a successful career. Consequently I try to make a practice that is critical of practice rather than having a practice that celebrates a career. Various periods and realizations of my practice cross-reference two or more of the above mentioned themes, so the practice does seem to have developed some kind of continuity over the past nearly sixty years, despite my twice withdrawing from group practices (Fine-Artz 1963-66; Art & Language 1968-73).

There are quite a number of bodies of work that are not represented here. It is perhaps worth listing some of them. There are no works here from any of the following bodies of work: *Blue Skies* series (1980-81); *Trotsky Postcards* series (1982); *Happysnap-Historysnap* series (1984-85); *Goya Pictures: Letters from the Artist/Letters from Republic* series (1986-87); *Grease Works* series (1986-90); *Cultural Instrument/Cultural Implement* series (1990-96), and quite a few other bodies of work. Adding all these bodies of work listed above and the many bodies of work that this selection of works present here at Galleria Six represents together, does perhaps give some idea of the function of my practice as an ongoing and seemingly never-ending chain of interpretation and interrogation across multiple narrative pathways. One characteristic of the entire practice since 1966 has been a paradoxical condition; that of becoming

increasingly uneasy about the practice and, as I have noted already, especially the notion of being a career artist, and, at the same time, being addicted and bound to making a practice. This condition of the practice mentioned above, more or less permanent since the mid seventies, is the competition between practice and career. I guess it must seem obvious that in making this separation I do not see the two as the same thing. Whilst it is obvious that you cannot make a career without having some kind of a practice, a significant practice can be made without having a career. My practice being locked into such a paradoxical condition seems, as, once again, I have mentioned above, to have ensured that I attempt to make a critical practice, rather than producing a practice that is committed to celebrating itself. I have said for over thirty years that practice for me is predicament.

I have listed some of the bodies of work that are not represented here, now I want to write a few general remarks concerning a few of the works that are exhibited here. There are four paintings, the other works are all drawings made in a variety of media.

There are three *Enola Gay* paintings from the early 90s. This body of work attempts to characterize the fact that my own generation were hung on the wire of the Cold War, and the central stand-off of that confrontation was the threat of the deployment of ever more powerful nuclear arsenals. The event itself of the bombing of Hiroshima announced the establishment of mass killing from a remote distance. The *Enola Gay* dropped the bomb from a height of 600 metres. The outcome of the mission of Tibbets and the crew of the *Enola Gay* by December 1945 had killed 90,000 to 120,000 people without any of the crew ever setting foot on Japanese soil at the moment of the release of the bomb. This condition of remote mass killing increased the distances exponentially once the era of nuclear missiles became a reality and equally, the increase in the power of nuclear weapons also proportionally and, again exponentially, increased the potential for far greater numbers to be killed than had been the case at Hiroshima. The choice of colours for a great many of the *Enola Gay* paintings was influenced by two main ideas; the fact that Oppenheimer at the success of Trinity, the first test of the atomic bomb, at Alamogordo had referred to this success as a 'sweet solution', and this led me to try and mimic the colours of a child's sweet shop. The darker and or metallic colours of some of the other *Enola Gay* paintings were influenced by reports on some of the medical conditions, such as purpura, epilation, petechiae and haemorrhagic manifestations, reported as effects of radioactive poisoning suffered by the targeted population at Hiroshima. In respect of my view that Modernism is a wreck (T J Clark uses the word ruin) the atomic bombing of Japan was one of the confirming conditions of the wreck - there is no shortage of others. The razing of German cities by RAF Bomber Command and the US Eighth Air Force, the obliteration of Stalingrad by the Luftwaffe, and the firebombing of Tokyo prior to Hiroshima and Nagasaki already had the principle of remote mass killing well entrenched. Picasso's *Guernica* was a point of inquiry and interrogation in making this body of work. Another point perhaps worth raising in the context of the way the *Enola Gay* works were produced is the fact of their largely monochrome pattern. Typically, a flat, fairly even uniformly coloured flat surface with the item of the *Enola Gay*

plane itself rendered very small, sometime to the point of near invisibility. There was an attempt here to articulate a two point (at least) crossover reference point – the image of the plane itself being noted by survivors at Hiroshima as being a very small and undisclosed incident in the sky, almost to the point of anonymity; thus this anonymity of the delivery point of such devastation melded with the notion of the monochrome as one of the most reductive points in the cultural production of modernist art itself being harnessed to reflect the event of the reduction of a large civilian population and city environment.

Nearer to home, events in relatively recent UK history, the war in Ireland and on the UK mainland during the 1960s to the 1990s provided a narrative for the *Irish Works* (1983-86). There are four *Irish Works* exhibited here. There are many hundreds of *Irish Works*, practically all of them are made from either pastel (most of these on black paper) or pencil, there a few that are ink drawings. They vary in size, there are relatively large works, but the vast majority of the works are around the sizes of the four exhibited here at Galleria Six. The body of previous historical art works I looked at most closely in making the *Irish Works* was Goya's *Caprichos*. The cast of agents and agencies being depicted in these drawings being the contemporary actors in what seemed then, in 1983-86 when the *Irish Works* were produced, the ongoing black hole of a historical Anglo-Irish confrontation that had proceeded for centuries. In the narrative that the *Irish Works* attempted to convey, the historical concept of the border had a very loaded political history. The border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland had acted as a potent historical trigger, a point of contention and conflict since the inception of the border in 1921 through the passing of the United Kingdom Parliament's Government of Ireland Act in 1920. This border particularly raised and continues to raise (not least currently in the matter of Brexit) issues concerning the identity of the United Kingdom. The issue of the border between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland was, throughout the seventies and eighties, a contentious, not to mention explosive issue. This war around this border increasingly frequently seemed to suggest slippage and instability of the identity of being both British and Irish. The grim reapers of the Provisional IRA favoured the elimination of the border, whilst the equally brutal tactics of the British Army, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Protestant para-militaries were carried out in the interests of maintaining the border. There was a linkage here in the *Irish Works* too, even at this early date, to the emergence of the Scottish National Party (hereafter SNP) since this entry of the SNP in the 1980s on to the British political stage signaled the fact that the SNP were beginning to enjoy some initial prominence in the governance of the UK. As with the Irish nationalists, the logic of the Scottish Nationalist's policy could be seen as irrevocably leading to the idea of restoring a national border between Scotland and England. All this, again, has re-emerged as having present currency in the matter of Brexit. Both the external Irish border with the UK and the internal UK border between England and Scotland are contentious issues in the present dispute between pro and anti Brexiteers. In this sense the *Irish Works* have a strong link to the *Grease Works*. There are no *Grease Works* exhibited here at Galleria Six, but a number of the *Grease Works* are made in the image of the Union Jack (the UK national flag), and these particular *Grease Works* are made up of grease troughs, with the material of the grease intended to stand for the

pressures upon and slippages within what once seemed, say at the end of WW2 in 1945, a very secure British national identity. These particular Union Jack *Grease Works* have then, at least in my view, a transparent link to the *Irish Works*. This link to the borders of present day Britain is one of a number of themes I have attempted to raise in producing the *Grease Works*, but this link (amongst the two other perhaps more prominent issues that drove the making of the *Grease Works*) to the *Irish Works* had a considerable input into my producing the *Grease Works*. In this sense too the input of the *Irish Works* into the *Grease Works* is a pellucid example of how one body of work feeds off earlier bodies of work in my practice. (1)

The commentaries above on the *Enola Gay* works and the *Irish Works* are an attempt to state something about seven of the works exhibited here at Galleria Six. Below I write commentaries about all the other works shown here, but in the short time afforded before the deadline for publication and the opening of the exhibition then writing this introduction had to necessarily be relatively brief. So below are a few bullet points about many of the other exhibited works.

1. The earliest work made in 1976, *Infantryman Digging a Foxhole, Sherwood Foresters, 139th Brigade,, 46th Division, Messines, June, 1917*. This work belongs to a series of works made between 1974 and 1980. The series is titled the *WW1 Works*. As I suggest above, both WW1 and WW2 have been a recurrent supply of both textual and pictorial resources for my practice since 1962. All the work I have made and continue currently to make since 2014 are concerned with various themes and events culled from WW2 records and resources. A very early precursor to my present ongoing series now titled *WW2 Works* (2014 and ongoing) shown here at Galleria Six is *Hurricane Armourers/Blue Triangle* made in 1987.

2. Two works shown here belong to the series titled *Medianik Works* made in the early 1980s. They are, (1) *A party of Medianiks, off duty and getting drunk whilst on a Caribbean assignment. The front man doing his impression of Ben Turpin*. (2) *Media Conference*. As I guess is obvious, this was a whole series of drawings attempting to comment on what I saw as the increasingly intrusive and manipulative role of the media into daily life.

3. The work titled *A pastel drawing of a sentence and a pastel drawing of a dainty-footed World War 1 German soldier blasted into a hillside in the Somme area* is the most recent work in the exhibition, it was made in 1998. The work, obviously, calls once again on the reservoir of WW1 texts and images I can consult. But it is mainly concerned with the relation between language and image, a long term interest of mine since, at least, the exchange in my very earliest days in 1966 of the group of people that became, in 1968, the group Art & Language. It has remained a central concern in a number of bodies of work I have made over the last 50 years. In my view of my practice the work does not in any strict sense belong to the earlier *WW1 Works*, but is more appropriately placed and imbedded in a series of works I made more or less throughout the 1990s, the large majority of them being drawings. The central concern of these works was to attempt to accentuate the difference between looking and reading. Hence the pastel drawing of the sentence may be looked at as a series of marks

or a series of letters ordered according to the grammatical rules of English. But I would maintain that certainly to anyone who can read English it is hard to ignore the reading of the sentence and consequently more difficult to treat the marks as 'shall we call the, 'abstract marks'; it is hard to not read it at as a sentence at some point in the event of observing it. But, probably, more generally most people who are familiar with reading any language but cannot read English, would probably either recognize it as, or at least suspect it to be, a linguistic series of marks. The pictorial image of the German soldier was placed alongside in an attempt to show the relation between our viewing of pictorial items and use of language in the interpreting of them – for example take the four word phrase 'dainty footed German soldier'.

4. *The Stonetouchers 4*. This is from a series of works called, unsurprisingly, *The Stonetouchers* This series of works, like a number of the series of works of mine from the seventies and eighties, had long extended textual/pictorial titles/designs called map-keys. There are five works in the series. All the paintings feature depictions of our daughters, Ruby and Amber Atkinson, children at that time, in 1985. The settings of the all the paintings are WW1 cemeteries in Northern France. This particular painting, *Stonetouchers 4*, is set in a South African cemetery. The specific motivation for the painting happened in the following way. We were on a family holiday driving through that part of the country in Northern France in which are situated the WW1 cemeteries. By accident, the particular cemetery at which we stopped to visit on this occasion happened to be a plot full of the graves of South African soldiers. At that time, 1984, Apartheid in South Africa, centred not least on the imprisonment of Mandela and the assassination of Steve Biko, was high visibility news. Due to this high media coverage our two young daughters were well aware of this confrontation with the Apartheid regime in South Africa, in which, for example, e Margaret Thatcher had been widely reported as characterizing Mandela as a terrorist. In the face of this media coverage our two daughters, judging by their questions about the gravestones, seemed puzzled that the UK and the South Africans had been allies in WW1. We did our best to explain to them some of the complexities of political history involved, we also pointed out that the two countries, South Africa and the UK had been allies too in WW2. So this painting, like all the other *Stonetoucher* paintings, all of which feature our two daughters as actors in the cemetery settings, are much concerned with the relation between confusion and education.

The full title/map-key is as follows.

The Stone Touchers 4

Young females on the Male Christian History dressed sward

Dear Ruby and Amber,

What is the difference between the words 'Apart' and 'heid'?

The land on which this cemetery stands

Is the free gift

Of the French people

For the perpetual resting place of

*Those of the Allied
Armies who fell in
The war of 1914-18
And are honoured here*

Map-key

South African Monument

*Ruby Atkinson
Born coloured 'white'
'29.10.75*

*Amber Atkinson
Born coloured 'white'
22. 5.78*

5. There are two drawings exhibited, (1) *This is an insult to donkeys!* and (2) *Sketch for an art map without a leaven of irony Francisco! History-Restaurant Art 1, Paella-Pie* which are two of the original drawings from a catalogue titled *Cooking the Books* for an exhibition at Air Gallery in London in 1987. This series of drawings drew together various sources which I had used in making my work of the previous two years. The exhibition showed all these drawings and a series of relatively big paintings already mentioned earlier in this introduction *Goya Pictures: Letters from the Artist/Letters from the Republic*. There are 30 drawings in the series and 29 paintings, many of the latter quite large. The links to Goya's work in thinking about both the making of these particular works and to my thinking about my practice generally over many years, again especially Goya's *Caprichos*, are obviously indicated in the title of many of the individual works, both drawings and paintings.

6. The drawing titled *Trussed carcass awaiting inspection by Stalinists for signs of Trotskyism* is one of many drawings I made between 1980 to 1984, the narrative of which was the events and outcomes of the relations between Trotsky and Stalin both before and after Trotsky's expulsion from the Soviet Union by Stalin in February 1929.

Note

(1) See *Grease: Mute and Malleable*; an essay written for the book to accompany the exhibition *Mechanisms* curated by Anthony Huberman at the Wattis Institute in San Francisco in the coming fall. Three *Grease Works* are being shown in this exhibition.

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