Exhibitions

Caught in the Crossfire: Artistic Responses to Conflict, Peace and Reconciliation

Herbert Art Gallery Coventry 25 January to 7 July

The Herbert Art Gallery sits opposite Coventry's cathedral and the resonant ruin of its former one, which on 14 November 1940 was devastated in a raid during which over 4,000 firebombs were dropped on the area. So comprehensive was the bombing that it led to a new German word, *Coventrieren*, meaning the total destruction of a city. The following day, John Piper – who later designed the baptistry window for the new cathedral – went into the smoking wreckage. The result was *Interior of Coventry Cathedral Nov 15 1940*, this show's opener. Piper's broken church is luminous, bathed in bonfire reds and yellows; like Paul Nash's ironic yet anticipative battleground vista *We Are Making a New World*, 1918 (not on show), it folds destruction uneasily into rebirth. In so doing, it telescopes the aims of 'Caught in the Crossfire', which ends with a perky little 'no more war' note from Yoko Ono: to tabulate artistic responses to conflict, to accommodate righteous anger concerning the apparent reality of perpetual warring, but also to sidestep outright hopelessness and – mostly, anyway – soapboxing. (And, as Ono's presence and a smattering of Banksys and Blek le Rat pieces might suggest, to interest a general public.)

Beyond this, the 37-artist exhibition spotlights the Herbert's collecting policy, which, according to the show's guidebook, has focused since 2008 on 'conflicts around the world from the Second World War onwards, together with peace and anti-war movements'. A lot to go at, then. The show touches on ten different historical and contemporary fronts, from Northern Ireland to Vietnam to Bosnia, from the various Gulf conflicts to Israel/Palestine and apartheid. These are divided across categories – 'Blitzed City', 'The Front Line', 'The Machines of War' etc. War, here, often feels like a veritable challenge for artists: how not to be dumb about it? Terry Atkinson's weighty drawing *Product. 15-Inch Howitzer, Made by Coventry Ordnance Company in Glasgow*, 1977, in which the dark, upwardly angled metal mass of its hardware looms monolithically, embeds ordnance in a political/industrial matrix; Cornelia Parker's *Embryo Firearms*, 1995, her twin Colt 45s lifted off the production line at an early, soft-edged stage, look like weirdly gorgeous Platonic weaponry – the work disarms in both senses.

Rosie Kay Dance Company *5 SOLDIERS: The Body is the Frontline* 2011 video

On this evidence, effective war art needs a graphic forthrightness that can shelter other registers. Iftikhar Dadi and Nalini Malani's *Bloodlines*, 1997 – the Radcliffe Line marking the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan rendered in blood-red sequins on a gold-sequinned base – works because it is at once factual and jarringly lustrous. By contrast, Matthew Picton's relief maps of Coventry and Dresden, charred sections of the scores for Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* and Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* demarcating the destroyed cities' streets feel fiddly and overly tight: a neat solution to a representation problem rather than something with actual gravity – unless one wants to call it deliberately incommensurate. Among the single works, most blindsiding is the multiscreen footage of Rosie Kay Dance Company's *5 Soldiers: The Body is the Frontline*, 2011, in which five fatigue-wearing dancers make a segmented dance out of anticipatory stages of combat and theatre-of-war events: regimented drills, excitable/sexualised physical jerks (to the Black Eyed Peas), seemingly being shot, crawling on broken legs and, finally, a death scene with a single, spasming, floored figure watched by the others. Death scenes are, of course, nothing new in dance; this, though, makes you forget categories.

Yet the show is not a fair fight, if you will; overbalanced as it is by an extensive display for kennardphillipps and, in his earlier guise as a solo artist, Peter Kennard. The pair's widely seen (as intended) photo-collage *Photo Op*, 2005, featuring a grinning Tony Blair taking his own photograph on a camera phone against a backdrop of a smoke-blackened oilfield, emblematises their updating of John Heartfield and Hannah Höch's scabrous montage style. Their 2010 series 'The War You Don't See' (made for John Pilger's film of the same title) – featuring Blair and Bush on a red carpet strewn with dead Iraqi children, or Rupert Murdoch holding a Sky-branded camera whose lens is blocked with a thick wad of dollars – hammers their position home. Kennardphillipps's larger works, meanwhile, make it clear that, for them, an effective art in wartime comes down to sheer visual vigour. *Soldier #1*, 2006, one of several works involving huge prints pasted onto a rough-surfaced bed of newspapers, features an Allied soldier, rifle in hand, booting down a black door; in the image's montage, he seems to be kicking it against a huddle of anonymised, cloaked, ghostly bodies, mostly grey but some stained a urinous yellow. The image/object has the mulched texture of a weathered wall, against which the figures could almost be the shadows of bodies in a nuclear blast, and the engulfing scale of a color-field painting; sections of it are ripped. A single sandal sits in front of the door – someone has evidently rushed through it into blackness.

A compressed panorama of invasion, dehumanisation and terrorising that was formerly used as a billboard in London, this has a near-irreducible rhetorical clout; it makes one aware, makes one remember, and operates in countermanding fashion to official media imagery. And yet the work that continues to run through my head is, rather, Jamal Penjweny's photograph *Iraq is Flying, No 3*, 2006-09, from a series shot in ruins or other evidence of war and featuring a leaping figure caught in mid-air. A girl in overcoat and Converse trainers jumps in front of a line of tanks parked outside an apartment block; the sky is flawless blue; she throws her arms and legs out strangely, geometrically. She's leaping because asked to but she's also happy to leap, recognising the function of circulation in which, David Joselit argues in *After Art*, 2012, lies art's political capability today. Beyond its dialectical push, Penjweny's photograph gets over because it snags a viewer on several

genera of unexpectedness, so that this 'artistic response' to conflict privileges both terms equally. The war is self-evident. The art is in the angle of a limb. ▮

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Michael Smith: Fountain

Hales Gallery London 11 January to 23 February

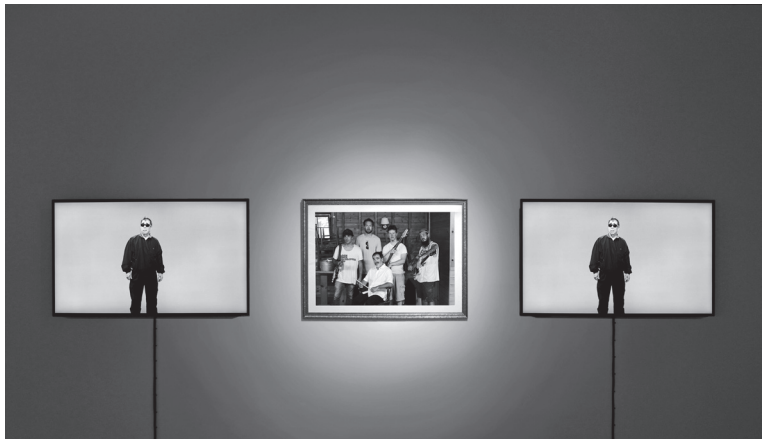
In the US, after the classic rhapsodising on Columbus and Cortez, the first few chapters of junior high school American history textbooks afford mention to the cohort of lesser explorers of the New World. Juan Ponce de León is one such figure who, though he discovered the gulf side of Florida and, by happenstance, the Gulf Stream, is perhaps more memorable for what, by some accounts, he was searching for after he landed: the Fountain of Youth. Given that Florida has been more recently nominated as the place where, as Conan O'Brien once put it, 'America goes to die', Ponce de León's quest had a strange prescience. In 'Fountain' at Hales Gallery, Michael Smith takes advantage of the loaded dichotomy, in conjunction with the lineage of his own video-and-performance alter ego 'Mike', to happily excoriate the notion of ageing gracefully.

Smith's exhibition sees his old friend Mike, a far more malleable and less self-aware version of the artist, feeling his own mortality more acutely. The photographs of *Fountain of Youth State Park, Journey No. 1*, 2012, are crisp but unstylised documents of Mike's twilight quest, where they could easily have been fudged and angled bluntly enough to mimic the air of tourist shots taken by Mike or a similarly amateur companion. Unostentatiously scaled and subject-driven, about half of them foreground the character, as he poses schlubbishly and absorbs the scenery, sometimes grasping a prop sailing sheet or conquistador's spear, as if he might draw just a little extra life from the place through the hemp and varnish.

The opposite wall of the gallery's small interior plays the same video on two monitors with a single still photograph in between. The video is an absurdly but not unpleasantly long steady shot of Mike (or is it now Smith himself? – the rift between the two narrows at points) riffling around in his jogging suit's multitude of pockets, removing and replacing the usual late-middle-age paraphernalia of glasses, mobile phone, overstuffed wallet. The amplified sounds of all this over-burdened fidgeting pipes wryly through the small gallery space, making a public burlesque out of private fumbling.

When Smith is a bit sad or deluded, he is naturally also at his funniest. In the artist's earlier works, it helps that he exudes the plausible innocence and bears the slightly off-average physique of the natural slapstick comedian. His face would have been the envy of Harpo Marx, with its lithe, robust eyebrows rapidly changing altitude above a wide, prodigiously expressive mouth. And in his shuffling uncertainty and glacial pace, he presages contemporary comedians like Zach Galifianakis and the duo of Tim & Eric. Comically empowered by these, and by his quizzical detachment from direction, Mike makes epic the everyman's persistent bewilderment even as he mocks his archetype's inclination towards premature self-congratulation.

In the video work of the early 1980s, the faux-naiveté and bad taste of both Mike and the productions he starred in tempered the preceding television dabbling of Chris Burden or David Hall with a popular outreach whose genuineness was cloaked in satire. Even the works of that period share a cadence with a diversity of current creative output, from the shrill, spliced narratives of Ryan Trecartin to the nightmarish domesticity of Todd Solonz. Smith's peculiarity these days is rather in the fact that his representation of that same horrifying tedium walks the planet with his face and voice, an indistinguishable alter ego and a sort of reversal of the internet-trolling 'avatar' guise favoured by some younger artists.



Michael Smith
Avuncular Quest 2012

As in those past video works and performances, the Mike of the *Fountain* is driven and aimless, entering with purpose then spectrally floating on as any tangible opportunities glide swiftly out of his reach. In the autumn of his life, Mike's myopia and self-regard have given way to an appreciation of time's implacability, but he is still incapable of handling such weighty concepts. The orange water bottle that dangles around his neck in the *Fountain* photographs is a stark totem of the equating of accumulation with salvation – the confusion of stuff with fulfilment to which our man is ever prone. But as absurd as Mike's predicament may appear, it, like all of his past concerns, is easily enough ours to inherit. Like the best in comedy, Smith leads us down the garden path of ridiculing the other, only to reveal to us as the joke tightens that we have been laughing at a distorted image of ourselves. He is Rabbit at Rest or Willy Loman. Stingingly, he is you and me, before too long. ▮

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Raymond Pettibon: Human Wave

Space Studios London 25 January to 17 March

Raymond Pettibon is best known for his seminal album covers for LA punk band Black Flag and Sonic Youth; through these collaborations his oeuvre has become inextricably associated with the 1980s punk scene. Despite these seemingly counter-cultural affiliations, Pettibon has also had a significant profile in the commercial art world since the 1990s. Much of his success has been through the display, sale and circulation of his wonderful black ink and gouache drawings, with their recurring themes of the sea, sport, violence and pop culture. Here, at Space Studios we get a different take on Pettibon through his film works.

In these videos, Pettibon's fixation on icons of US counter-culture of the 1960s is given an aesthetic which reaches beyond his drawings, bringing the viewer into the chaotic, dark and insular politics of the late 1960s drop-out and far-left scenes in the US. The stars and subjects of these videos are variously the

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