

E A S T H A W A I ' I C U L T U R A L C E N T E R

Reem Bassous
Svitlana Biedarieva
Dana Kavelina
Gongsan Kim
Monika Niwelińska

Curated by Andrzej Kramarz

GHOSTS OF WAR

Opening Reception: February 3, 2023, 6:00 PM

Exhibition: February 4–March 31, 2023

Detail from a painting by Reem Bassous

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With the exhibition *Ghosts of War* presented at the East Hawai'i Cultural Center, I invite you to reflect on the topic of war and how it weaves itself into our lives, sometimes in a direct way and other times in a more hidden form.

The very word “war,” or the more gentle term of art, “armed conflict,” has developed an unbearable lightness of being today, entering our vocabulary as some ordinary, everyday thing. Conflicts, if they do not concern us directly, disappear from the news in a few weeks or a few months at most. Yet the consequences of wars are not limited to the time and geographic zones of conflict. Often arising unexpectedly, they seamlessly span time and history across many dimensions of our lives.

This exhibition is not and cannot be an exhaustive examination of war. The topic is too vast and complex. This is the voices of women artists bringing us their unique perspectives. Svetlana Alexievich writes in her Nobel Prize-winning book, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, “the female voices in this matter were not taken into account.”

In this exhibition, a few important voices shift focus beyond the conflict zone, prompting us to look at history, memory and our relationships in a broader context.

In her film *Letter to a Turtledove*, Dana Kevelina combines amateur footage found on the internet, shot during the present Ukrainian war, with archival footage of Donbas from 1930, when the region was a hot spot for Stalinist industrialization. Her poetic text recombines the disparate materials into a surreal anti-war poem. The artist creates space for dialogue between past and present, between the political and the intimate. She notes the distortion of history and the dehumanization of the entire Ukrainian region of the country. Including archival footage, she recalls myths such as that the Donbas was a place of extraordinary “labor enthusiasm,” taking pride in workers’ ability to produce more than was required by the state.

Dana says, “*The Donbas city of Donetsk is represented as both the city of a million roses and the mining capital... Given the current political situation, I have the feeling that it's not just me looking at the archives, but the archives staring back at me. The archival materials have their own agency, they cast a long shadow, they raise questions.*” In this intimate film, Dana Kavelina evokes perspectives on the rape of women as an inevitable consequence of military conflicts. In one interview she says that, “*...rape of a woman by man can last for months, years, a lifetime. And in this sense, mass rape may be seen as an 'ethnic damage' – to bear the children of the enemy.*” She adds that rape is cheaper than a bullet.

A survivor of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), artist Reem Bassous, who is currently living in Hawaii, evokes memories from her youth, placing her personal experiences in the context of historical unrest and a national trajectory. The history of ancient and modern Beirut includes traumas of place and the inhabitants of the artist's hometown. Family tragedies, symbols in the form of Coptic or Islamic art, appear as iconic landmarks in the artist's memory. Omnipresent in the artist, ghostly figures return after many years, now infiltrating the complex layers of her contemporary spectral paintings.

The subject is also explored in *Gamma Trace*, the subtle works of the Polish artist Monika Niwelinska. Her work was created in the desert in New Mexico, approximately 60 miles north of White Sand National Monument. On July 16, 1945, under the codename *Trinity Site*, the first atomic tests in history were carried out there. The artist investigates whether the land in this area is still radioactive. She uses photosensitive copper plates, exposing them to gamma rays in the radioactive field. The artist does not show us the drama of the scarred landscape and the visible ecological impacts, but discreetly encodes radiation in the supposedly innocent abstract prints of landscape.

Gongsan Kim, a Korean artist living in the USA since 1997, pays tribute to the victims of the North Korean regime in her works. Her ritual performance involves making layered sculptures – altar-like images envisioned to heal the wounded spirits of the murdered victims of the dictatorship, thrown into collective pits without tombstones or names.

The Morphology of War by Svitlana Biedarieva focuses on the idea that each society gives birth to its own monsters. The artist says, “... *in the time of conflict, they procreate. A friend changes his shape and becomes an enemy – unfamiliar, ridiculous, and potentially dangerous. He experiences severe morphological changes. Collective unconsciousness influenced by mass media propaganda produces ideological 'monsters' embodied by real people.*” To create her large-scale works, Svitlana uses images from European illuminated manuscripts and bestiaries, reinterpreting them digitally – implying that the absurdity of history does not change with centuries.

The exceptional artists presented here encourage us to reflect on this topic and ask ourselves important questions. Conflicts and their results are not limited by geography. They influence us much more than we think, in more ways than we expect, and they are closer than we suppose.

Reem Bassous

Reem Bassous received her BA from The Lebanese American University and her MFA from The George Washington University. She started teaching drawing and painting in 2001 at The George Washington University, taught at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa for 9 years, and is currently an assistant professor at Leeward Community College at the University of Hawai'i. Bassous' regional and national exhibitions include solo shows at the Honolulu Museum of Art, SBCAST Gallery in Santa Barbara, and the Washington Studio School Gallery in Washington DC. Her work has been reviewed by various publications including the *Washington Post*, *Art Asia Pacific* and *Star Advertiser*. Bassous' work is in permanent collections which include the Honolulu Museum of Art and Shangri La Museum for Islamic Art, Culture and Design.

Grid: The process begins with a grid, which acts as a necessary structure for the multi-layered composition to come. The work is always at risk of being erased, which parallels the fear of loss in real life. The energetic mark, which is imbued with feeling and purpose, can reveal so much about the "act", be it war, or violence. However, these marks can also overtake the composition. That is why the grid is necessary; it anchors everything and offers a home-base reference for the composition.

Underlying Geometry: The lines and shapes guide the viewer throughout the composition through a visual weaving that tucks under or imposes itself over the various depicted elements. This interplay is often a dance between the abstract mark and a representational feature.

Visual Dictionary: An extensive archive of images collected for the past 17 years, which includes various symbols and icons. *Symbols*, in the form of Coptic or Islamic Art, are stand-ins for events or groups of people from my native Lebanon and the Middle East at large. *Icons* manifest as landmarks in my memory and are very tangible things that I grew up with. Since loss of life and loss of material things are of constant concern, this visual dictionary also acts as a memory keeper.

Integrity of the mark: Each mark should have enough presence and body to hold its own form and not take on the anatomy of the previous layer. The mark acts as a conduit to one's innermost thoughts and sensations. Hysteria, elation, distress or neutrality can transfer through the hand into the mark. Truth, in its purest form as it relates to the mark, can lead to the painting fulfilling its visual purpose. Honesty in mark-making can lead to the elimination of arbitrary or decorative marks which can hold no true purpose. It is a great mission that the mark carries; it has a role to fulfill in the creation of a complete work.

Moribund Outlivers: The postwar survivor appears in the form of a *Moribund*, someone who negotiates the path in between life and death. These figures are not formed deliberately; the paint determines how they appear (or disappear). The paint delivers the assault which shapes these Moribunds in their habitats. The “*hysteria of the mark*” that Gilles Deleuze writes about in describing Francis Bacon’s work comes into play: What quantifies a figure? What quantifies a head without a face? The figure is sometimes painted on a large surface, scaled to meet any viewer/spectator eye-to-eye. The tension that interaction generates is aimed to draw the viewer in and immerse them in the painting.

Substrate: The figures’ host paintings are often on unstretched canvas, allowing for the work to be rolled and carried by these nomads navigating the afterlife (or how a refugee in the present may roll a blanket for travel). This highlights impermanence; the large paintings haven’t been stretched since 2011, in solidarity with Syrian refugees.

Color: Blue and black play major roles in my compositions. Blue represents the realm of stars, paradise and infinity. Black represents the infinite in Western Art, but represents the rich, loamy soil out of which anything can grow in Islamic Art. Layers of black are peeled back and reasserted, as portals open within the surface that shift space, inviting a search for answers buried within.

The Infinite: A dual grappling of painter and the painted with death and the unknown. There is a constant search for answers as an imagined journey is taken into the afterlife depicted through various painted scenarios.

Excavation: To un-inter, unbury, exhume previous layers or memories of the surface of the painting itself, as a metaphor for excavating the various layers of Beirut’s buried history.

Us and Them. 2015.
Acrylic, Flashe, Spackle,
Milk Paint, Latex and
Charcoal on Canvas.
72” x 84”

The Guide, 2020.
Oil and Acrylic on Canvas.
73” x 132”

The Arena. 2015.
Acrylic, Flashe, Spackle,
Milk Paint, and Latex on
Canvas.
72” x 84”

Moribund Outlivers I, 2017.
Acrylic on Canvas. 16” x 20”

Moribund Outlivers V, 2019.
Acrylic on Canvas. 16” x 20”

Svitlana Biedarieva is a Ukrainian artist with a focus on the topics of war, identity, memory, and resistance. Her project *The Morphology of War* (2017) was presented at the Museo Erasto Cortes in Puebla, Mexico, the National Center of Arts in Mexico City, and the 5th International Biennale of Odesa in Ukraine. In 2019 she curated the exhibition and the general program *At the Front Line; Ukrainian Art 2013-2019* (with Hanna Deikun), a project about Russia's war in Ukraine, which was presented in Mexico City and Winnipeg. Svitlana holds a PhD in History of Art from the Courtauld Institute of Art and has also edited several books dedicated to Ukrainian art. She has been selected as the 2023 Prince Claus Seed Award laureate.

The Morphology of War focuses on the idea that each society gives birth to its own monsters. In times of conflict, they procreate. A friend changes his shape and becomes an enemy – unfamiliar, ridiculous, and potentially dangerous. He experiences severe morphological changes. Collective unconscious influenced by mass media propaganda produces ideological “monsters” embodied by real people. This project is an ironic reflection of the ugliness of an armed conflict that distorts the image and the content with its aggression but it is also an exploration of how deeply these destructive instincts are rooted in the visual culture. A viewer is a witness of this Saturnalia, in its initial carnivorous impulse. The continuous line of monsters is reminiscent of the symbolism of the *Danse Macabre* taken by Ingmar Bergman for the conclusion of his film *The Seventh Seal*. Most of the images were taken from European illuminated manuscripts and bestiaries and reinterpreted in the medium of digital large-scale graphics. The absurdity of history does not change with centuries. It is invoked by particular political events, from the war in Ukraine to the terrorist threats in Europe, the Syrian crisis, and the drug conflicts in Mexico. In the context of global fear, this project is called to reflect the initial grotesqueness of any kind of armed conflict or political tensions.

From the series ***The Morphology of War***, digital print on HP
wallpaper, 200 x 457 cm, 2017.

Dana Kavelina is an artist / activist, bookmaker, illustrator and filmmaker based in Kyiv, Ukraine. She was born in Melitopol and graduated from the Department of Graphics at the National Technical University of Ukraine (Kyiv). Her works have been exhibited at the Kmytiv Museum, Closer Art Center (Kyiv), and Sakharov Center (Moscow). She has received awards from the Odesa International Film Festival and KROK International Animated Film Festival.

Dana Kavelina's film-poem ***Letter to a Turtledove*** was completed just a couple of weeks prior to its screening on e-flux Video & Film, which marks the film's premiere. The artist's original intention had been to publish her new work on YouTube as a reciprocal gesture towards the found online footage she had appropriated. The film's inclusion in the War and Cinema program is an attempt to alter the trajectory of this film that works as a shell fired at no particular target, and with no casualties in mind.

One of the crucial sources for Kavelina's work is the anonymous five-hour documentary *To Watch the War* (2018), a piece of found-footage filmmaking in its own right (previously discussed on *War and Cinema* in an interview with Yuriy Hrytsyna). *Letter to a Turtledove* is thus a second-degree artistic appropriation of amateur footage shot during the war in the Donbas region of Ukraine, recombined into a surreal anti-war film-poem. The war videos are interspersed with Kavelina's own animated segments, staged mise-en-scènes, and archival footage of the Donbas from the 1930s (when the region became a hotspot for Stalinist industrialization of the Soviet Union, and of heated class warfare) onwards.

There's an actual poem at the film's center: a monologue spoken off-screen, authored by Kavelina herself (and translated into English by Sergey Levchin). This piece of writing encapsulates the multitude of traumas, grievances, horrors, dreams, and hallucinations that have descended upon the Donbas region since its invasion by Russia in 2014. Still, numerous elements of this multitude originate from long before the war had actually broken out.

Letter to a Turtledove. 2020

Short film. 20 min.

Gongsan Kim was born in Seoul, Korea and immigrated to America in 1997. She has a BFA from Corcoran Art School in George Washington University. She has been a member of Soho20 Gallery in New York since 2012.

Her works are mostly created with political themes. She uses the method of burning fabric or material to express her sorrow over her divided homeland and to honor the innocent lives lost in North Korea.

She received a Special Award in the Passion for Freedom exhibition in London England in 2018. Her work was selected for Political Art in Warsaw; Political Art Leaseo Kusthal in Denmark; the Arte Laguna Prize in Venice Italy; and the Korea Culture Center in New York. She has had solo exhibitions in Soho20 Gallery New York, Korea Monitor Gallery in Virginia, the Korean Embassy in Washington D.C, Gallery All in Seoul Korea, and Workhouse Art Center in Virginia. She's also had a number of group exhibitions.

The theme of my art has been to create works that honor the deceased who died under North Korea's brutal dictatorship, to memorialize those who have been cast away into cold pits and forgotten without even gravestones to mark their passing. This work of art is made to commemorate the countless souls who were killed in the terrible political prison camps, which are said to be near impossible to come out of alive.

My art is done in a ritualistic manner meant to speak healing to the wounded spirits, praying for eradication of the roots of their sorrow. With their cries of anguish ringing in my heart, I just burn and burn, because I can imagine no other method that could do justice to the depth of their suffering and tragedy.

My art deals with political issues, but I have simplified my forms and colors as much as possible in an effort to show my emotions immensely and minimally. Of course, there is also the intent to inform North Korea of the repression of human rights through this piece. When freedom and human rights are restored in North Korea I will no longer write these fiery poems of lament.

***Names of Nameless Deaths*, 2013**

Burnt burlap and wood. 144" x 92"

Monika Niwelinska is a visual artist working primarily in the medium of photography and photosensitive processes, installation, printmaking, drawing, and painting. Her artistic practice embraces the areas of memory and perception, especially the internal recording of place and time and its visual translation into a tangible image. She is interested in tracing connections and tensions between presence and absence, appearance and disappearance – a narrative that resonates around the concepts of melancholy, memory and loss; traces, remains and time. Niwelinska's projects examine the relationships between photosensitivity and place, with a focus on post-traumatic sites and their visual representations, postmemory and the hidden presence of the past. The theme of radioactivity and the unique bond between photosensitivity and radiation remain the main subject of her work. Niwelinska's recent interests embrace the topography of Shoah and post-Holocaust spaces.

Niwelinska holds a doctoral degree (PhD) and a postdoctoral degree (habilitation) in the field of Fine Arts. Until 2020 she was Associate Professor (full-time, tenured) in the Department of Graphic Arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, Poland. In 2019 she was appointed as an Adjunct Associate Professor, Adj. in the Department of Photography at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC).

Major scholarships: Fulbright Senior Award 2016-17 (Rhode Island School of Design / RISD, Providence, RI), Socrates/Erasmus EU scholarship program (Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna, Austria, AY 2001/02), Kosciuszko Foundation Scholarship (2019), University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada (MFA scholarship, Department of Art and Design 2005-07), Young Poland Scholarship, Art Award of the City of Krakow Scholarship (2003 and 2022), and a Grant from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

Niwelinska has contributed to numerous individual and collective exhibitions in the US, Europe, and worldwide. A native of Krakow, Poland, currently lives and works in Chicago, USA. Artist's website: <http://www.niwelinska.com/>

[Y] / gamma trace - series of radiographic images - direct exposures of radioactive ground, Trinity Site, NM; photosensitive emulsion on aluminum and copper plates; plate size: 6x9", 2017.

Medium: radiography. Visual registration of the post-radiation space – on-site exposure with the use of the radiographic technique. The radiography process is a recording of gamma rays' emission - irradiation of the surface of the radioactive ground directly on the photosensitive plate.

Basic data: ■ location: Trinity Site, NM, USA, ■ date: 01.04.2017, ■ soil radiation: 0.5 milliroentgen/hour,

■ technique: irradiation – radiography. ■ applied photosensitive material: Hydrocoat Resist Plate, Imagon Film, Puretech, liquid photosensitive emulsions on copper/zinc/polymer plates.

[Y] / gamma trace project was realized in April 2017, at Trinity Site - a military base located on the vast deserts of New Mexico. A photosensitive record of Trinity Site grounds was implemented through a radiography process. Unique properties of radiographic technology reflect the effect of extreme radiation, caused by the nuclear explosion – visual evidence of which was the shadows (of people and objects) left on the ground after the explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Radiography, a direct photo-technique, uses gamma radiation (gamma rays that irradiate and therefore literally expose photosensitive plates) as a method of recording and archiving the nuclear trauma – the way an atomic explosion irradiates and mutilates the ground by emitting gamma rays. The resulting images, captured on the verge of the visible, function as a material trace – a scar – or a pure indexical manifestation of the place's invisible, inherent trauma.

Gamma-exposed photographic plates – direct, non-camera records of radiation – are clear evidence of radioactive contamination and nuclear annihilation. The resulting radiography is a photographic record of radiation emitted by contaminated ground particles. The process of recording radiation on a photosensitive plate is a photographic capture of an extrasensory, invisible phenomenon and the transformation of the emitted energy into a visible, intensely sensual experience.

In the case of the exposure process at the Trinity Site, there is a special relationship between the medium (ground radiation) and the object (photosensitive plate). The material is in a way marked by the medium that has burned its mark on it. The photosensitive plate registers the ray, and the latent energy of radiation.

The progressing process of radiation gradually overexposes successive areas of the image's surface, interfering with its tissue – just like gamma radiation penetrates the Trinity Site. The metaphorically understood concept of the trauma of the place and the entropy of the image is related to a sense of melancholy, awareness of loss, and the inevitability of the process we observe.

Radioactive

[2009 – now; an ongoing process]

Series of photo-intaglio prints (unfixed photo-sensitive emulsion on copper plate, printed on Hanemuehle paper and Japanese tissue; various sizes). Plates were printed between 2009 and 2022. Images are seen in different stages of fading images. Resource: found footage – archival documents and photographs of radioactive events and locations.

The point of departure for the images was the documentary representation of radioactive areas and contaminated spaces, in a sense marked off by trauma. The artistic goal of the project was to provide a visual means to represent a relationship between memory and perception and a notion of overexposed place and space. Images of radioactive spaces are overexposed. Photosensitive images are subjected to entropy processes. A visible image will be a notation of a moment in time, a particular state of the image documenting a phase in the decay of unfixed photo emulsion.

The series of works became a notation of particular moments in the process of image evolution – its beginning, gradual destruction and slow disappearance – an organic process oscillating somewhere between visible and invisible. The changes in photo emulsion, its disintegration and disappearance, seem equally as natural as the entropy process occurring in nature described by the rules of physics.

In the developing images, chemical processes are not completed. The described method is crucial for pinning down a relation between the technological process and the conceptual side of the project dealing with disappearance, functioning of the image on the verge of visibility, or even complete destruction. In this approach, each print is just a notation of a particular state of a plate. It is also a way of catching the destruction of the emulsion.

Regarding the realization of the project on the technological level, I made a series of graphic images in the photo-intaglio technique (photography is directly exposed and etched on the copper plate using the photosensitive film “Imagon”). Exposed plates were printed in a traditional way.

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