

## VISCERAL COMPASSION: IMAGES OF WAR ARTIST GEORGE GITTOES

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Within the canon of Australian art history there has been a clear tendency to repress issues that emerge when artists explore religious and spiritual subject matter. Art history, like other disciplines, enjoys the subjectivity of its cultural framing and shares a common tendency in our culture to silence speech about religious or speculative discourses.<sup>1</sup>

Under the impact, however, of an increased vocabulary of writing about indigenous art that is dependant on anthropology and religious studies, together with a critical exposure to the contemporary arts of Asia and a general increase in the critical tolerance of the term "spiritual," there is an emerging framework of discussion about the visual culture of Australia that allows metaphysical and speculative considerations. Rather than defining this enlarged framework as a new stylistic concern or as the latest movement it is important to recognise the diversity of these religious themes and ideas.<sup>2</sup>

Under the dominant stylistic influence of abstraction in the twentieth century, the spiritual in art has largely been constructed as a means of transcending material existence or even as an escape or apocalyptic alternative to the mundane elements of material, social and political contexts. Many critics note the general impulse towards abstraction in art occurring within historical contexts that are dominated by political uncertainty and apocalyptic like moments in history.<sup>3</sup> The impulse towards purity will often in turn devalue the religious possibilities of social existence and communal symbols.

In this presentation I would like to consider the work of George Gittoes, a figurative artist committed to a vital sense of social relevance in his work. In my view Gittoes' art demonstrates a fundamental religious impulse and intent that pushes the consideration of spiritual issues towards a stronger social definition, and in particular towards the connection

between the religious imagination and social, ethical and communal concerns.

Gittoes has come to prominence around a number of issues that are not readily identified as religious. As an artist he has drawn his subject matter from social situations outside the canon of modern art such as third world countries and their politics, industrial labour and more recently the art of war.

A more detailed examination of Gittoes' work reveals a strong religious interest linked with an equally strong concern for social realities. It is as if the mystic and the socialist have joined forces to image the possibilities of defining the nature of the human. This religious awareness has moved against the more dominant tendency in modernism to see the spiritual in terms of scraping away all references to symbols, nature or figuration and finding in the sublime absence an articulation of ultimate values. Gittoes' interests, in contrast, are very this worldly. Images of war, death and hardship are among the most illuminating sites of his religious interest.

Gittoes' career has often been framed through his involvement in the Yellow House artist's community in the early 1970s. Largely a collaboration between Gittoes and artist Martin Sharp, it harnessed the collective talents of a broad range of Sydney artists working in painting, theatre, film and literature. The Yellow House is often characterised as an expression of pop art and drug culture with hallmarks of psychedelic environments and spatial shifts in focus characteristic of many pop art inspired experiments at this time. The recreation of this artistic collaboration at the Art Gallery of NSW in 1990 has offered a somewhat nostalgic view of the Yellow House "as a symbol of adventure at the end of the sixties, a time we like to remember for its optimism in the face of extraordinary political adversity."<sup>4</sup>

Both Martin Sharp and Gittoes acknowledge that the religious impulse of the project has been overlooked or at times repressed due to an embarrassment by commentators with the religious and spiritual content in the project. Gittoes still affirms that "art is something that can lead people

on a spiritual path".<sup>5</sup> In recent interviews they further claim that much of their work since has been concerned with religious issues.

The inspiration for the Yellow House lay with the example of Vincent van Gogh and his hopes for a community of artists. As quoted in the catalogue for the Yellow House retrospective, van Gogh writes of Christ as the great example of the artistic vision as he "lived serenely, as a greater artist than all artists, despising marble and clay as well as colour, working in living flesh".<sup>6</sup>

Gittoes' own religious pilgrimage was expressed in the Yellow House period through the more direct means of the Puppet Theatre where he drew on such material as Christian religious theatre, Sufi wisdom plays and contemporary theatre. The space was titled "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" and its design reflected his early interest in Islamic art and, more importantly, a search for a way of working that formulated an overall approach to vision and interpretation. Gittoes comments that

I wanted the ability to link symbols, colours, shapes and ideas, to have them flow around and over the viewer, inseparable from one another. This was a recreation to the dull streets of Askin era Sydney, the violence of Vietnam and the general public belief that art and mysticism were other ways to describe madness.<sup>7</sup>

It is this more universalising aspect of his work that has led Gittoes to expand his range of media and to work, at times, in nearly all areas of artistic competence. This has included theatre, involving performance, direction and production, as well as puppetry, story telling, photography, film and video, sculpture, drawing, painting, printmaking as well as making a significant contribution to the development of holography as an art form in Australia.<sup>8</sup>

One of the defining interests among this wide diversity of expressions is a strong sense of narrative that relies on the wisdom and improvisational skill of the story teller. Like all wisdom literature it creates a setting to reflect on the nature of the human. The human emerges not as an isolated existentialist category but as a self reflective character in a total environment of meanings that in turn conjures universal reference points outside the immediate narrative. In the catalogue to the Yellow House retrospective

Gittoes included a statement of his artistic intentions expressing something of that communal and religious vision. "At the time I thought art was changing and what we were doing was revolutionary. It would only be a short time before the rigid conformist and materialist forces in our society would begin to weaken and the total art approach would infiltrate spaces everywhere. This spiritualisation of man-made environments would assist in the transformation of peoples' consciousness and thus help to save the planet."<sup>9</sup>

Gittoes' introduction to religious ideas came about during his late teenage years through reading the wisdom literature of various religious traditions ranging from mystical poems of St John of the Cross to the Sufi stories of Nasrudin. This reading reinforced a connection between art and social environment. Among his friends Gittoes is still referred to as the "William Blake of Bundeena".<sup>10</sup>

In 1978 with his partner Gabrielle Dalton he set up a film making company and directed, photographed and produced a number of documentary films. The most important of these projects was *The Bullets of the Poets* filmed on location in Nicaragua in 1986. The experience of being present in a situation of revolution and social conflict inspired a new return to drawing and painting.

The subject of the film was the lives of a group of Sandinista women poets who belonged to a school of poetry which was committed to describing the social realities of the present time, and which was termed "Externalism". Gittoes was greatly affected by these strategies.

The externalist poets believed in using real life events and physical experiences in their poetry, instead of the imagery of the imagination. For them reality was more incredible than fantasy. Inspired by this poetry of reality, I began my first externalist drawings with charcoal, of soldiers at the frontline of the contra war.<sup>11</sup>

In many ways the shape of the work Gittoes has completed in recent years has been a continuation of influences that came together in 1986. The experience of Nicaragua was followed up in 1989 with a period of time in the Philippines where through involvement with politically active artists such as Nuni Alverado he was confronted with artists involved in the struggle of

oppressed peoples. A number of these artists have been involved in the recent Brisbane Asian Triennial and have stayed with Gittoes while in Australia.<sup>12</sup>

It was through this contact that Gittoes met many artists, priests and theologians concerned with the plight of people caught up in the civil war in the Philippines. Artists in the Philippines were involved with direct action through community arts initiatives, mural painting and in generally providing an alternative image base that sought to dismantle the simple image propaganda of the Marcos regime.

He says "this is what religion means to me. It is being aware of modern problems, and applying Christianity to the situation. It is the Bible being re-enacted in the present day".<sup>13</sup> The particular perspective that interests Gittoes is not religion in its institutional form as a set of doctrines or beliefs or its development as a cultural institution but rather that form of Christianity which has developed in third world countries that has sought to empower the poor and marginalised that has come to be termed "Liberation Theology".<sup>14</sup>

Liberation Theology is a way of reading Scripture so that the Bible and Church tradition speak to the poor and oppressed, taking as its basic insight the realisation that in the law codes of ancient Israel particular attention was given to those most marginalised in the society such as the poor, dispossessed and foreigners. This hermeneutical key unlocks the Bible as a source of authority for consciousness raising and the provoking of action for people to take the future and the present into their own hands.

Liberation Theology overturns the implicit power relations present in the social structure in which the Church participates, calling it into question from the point of view of a divine agency of liberation which is now over against the status quo. It is a politically active ideology that acts to make people aware of the power relations and politics present in a situation that is determining their future.

Since 1989 Gittoes has put his energy into two source areas of imagery. The first is that of the *Heavy Industry* series which involved a series of artist-in-residence positions in industrial centres such as Broken Hill,

Newcastle and Wollongong.<sup>15</sup> An exhibition of the completed work toured regional galleries in these area during 1992.

The second series, *The Realism of Peace*, has seen Gittoes forge a relationship with the Australian Army as an official war artist. This has involved Gittoes spending time with serving Australian military personal in mainly United Nations peacekeeping roles in such places as Somalia, the Middle East, Cambodia and the Western Sahara. In return for board and lodging alongside the military personal, Gittoes returns to the Army his field sketches and photographs that offer a documentary perspective to the situation being covered. Gittoes' own work, which includes more expressionist style drawings, paintings and graphics, remain his own property.

The Blake Prize award for 1995 demonstrates Gittoes concerns in approaching a more deliberate religious perspective. The work entitled "The Preacher - Kibeho Massacre Series, Rwanda" graphically portrays a Christian preacher, Bible in hand, giving words of comfort to those caught up in the fighting in East Africa in April 1995. Gittoes was on hand as part of his role as war artist with the Australian Military in mostly peace keeping roles.

On returning to Australia from Rwanda, Gittoes completed the work over one night as a summation of all the visual horror he had experienced in the midst of war. In respect of the religious content of the work Gittoes commented that

With "The Preacher", he represents what I think religion should do, raise people up, make people feel human and spiritually alive and give them courage and faith. When I returned home, I was carrying this terrible imagery in my head. I have a wife and two children. I didn't want to go straight into the studio and start painting dead children.

And the one powerful positive image I had was the preacher. I could see him in his yellow coat and I could feel his courage.

I went into the studio virtually on the day after I got back and painted it very quickly. The picture took about four hours to do. I thought I would have to go back the next day and touch it up, but when I came back I saw that there was nothing more to do to it. It was just there.<sup>16</sup>

The most recent major project completed by Gittoes is an installation that brings together the threads of his social and religious interests. Invited along with a number of other Australian artists, Gittoes was given the opportunity to develop an installation piece as part of "Innenseite", a large

survey of 140 artists from around the world held in association with Documenta X in Kassel in 1997.

For this project Gittoes elected to work on an installation of paintings in a unused shed on the edge of the campus of the University of Kassel. This space had been associated with the movement of Jews to the east during the Second World War and so comes with a potent set of references, even before Gittoes began his installation of work summing up his experiences in Rwanda.

Inside the abandoned shed Gittoes hung nine large vertical canvasses filled with collective images drawn from first hand sketches or drawings begun in Kibeho. On the reverse side written in German was text from Gittoes' journal, recording as an eyewitness the distressing details of the massacre of tens of thousands of people including many children.

The installation is set as a room reminiscent of a liturgical space. One processes through the hanging images on either side of an "aisle" to the front platform where two images of "hope" are presented: a photograph of UN peacekeeping forces and a white plaster statue of the Virgin Mary similar to the one at a shrine in Kibeho which had been erected as a result of visions appearing there. These failed objects of salvation do not, however, dominate the scene, as other images of hope and resurrection begin to appear.

In contrast to the often cursory reporting of visiting journalists, Gittoes engages the events through the sensibilities of an artist. He notes, "I witnessed and interpreted these events as an artist, so I present my spiritual and emotional observations. Only out of the art created from these memories, can some light emerge from the darkness of recorded events."<sup>17</sup>

Gittoes' work represents a radical commitment to image making that involves a scrutiny of the cultural habits of sight that lead to blindness, non-involvement, and irresponsibility in respect to other persons. They have moral implications. In an age where notions of popular spirituality experiment with a privatised form of commercial gnosticism, Gittoes' work offers a reminder that the human form is a universalising reality. We are all

part of this system that we inhabit, and our vision needs the necessary undergirding of an ethic based on the human form.

In any tradition of religious art, there tends to be an evolving sophistication of symbolic forms that seek to educate and inculcate a way of seeing that explains all things in an overall cohesive manner. Gittoes' art considered religiously would confront any tradition with its ability to be truth-telling. As human institutions, all religious systems carry the possibility of being repressive and working to dehumanise their adherents. As Gittoes' works engage these realities, it is a radical engagement with the face of humanity and investigation of the terms of its reference.

Theologically speaking, much of his work can be understood in terms of a commitment to incarnational categories: that in speaking of God, or ultimate values, or universalising tendencies, one can only speak of the condition of the human image. Incarnational theology affirms that the search for God is not found in non-referential practises of prayer that repress, deny or escape fleshly existence; rather it is in the very terms of one's own creatureliness that ultimate values must be found. Images provide the substance for articulating the conditions of fleshliness to the extent that people are able to find the freedom to choose and the power to achieve life in human community.

As an artist Gittoes limits our vision and concentrates the meandering eye to see and to focus on his subject. Using stretched perspectives or unusual angles Gittoes concentrates the eye to engage the subject. In his figure studies that gaze is often returned quite directly and intently. One is not given much space to look away or rest from this close engagement.

Last night when she pleaded with me, she seemed to be projecting her whole being out of herself. Now her face was caked with blood, there were small, but deep wounds on her forehead and, where tears had streamed through the clotting blood, they left paths as vivid as dried river beds. She was unreachable. Now her children were gone, I no longer had a reason to exist for her.<sup>18</sup>

In passages like this, scrawled around the edges of drawings and accompanying the paintings, Gittoes seeks to narrate the intimacy and



directness of a gaze that is held with relational and moral implications. Seeing is not detached or set apart. The artist as witness invites the viewer to participate in this act of seeing and to take responsibility for the gaze that is returned.

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#### REFERENCES

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- <sup>4</sup> Joanna Mendelssohn, *The Yellow House 1970 - 1972*, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, 1990, p. 7.
- <sup>5</sup> Interview with the artist.
- <sup>6</sup> Mendelssohn, p. 17.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, page 50.
- <sup>8</sup> See Rebecca Coyle and Philip Hayward, *Apparition: Holographic Art in Australia*, Power Publications, University of Sydney, 1995.
- <sup>9</sup> Mendelssohn, p. 50.
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- <sup>11</sup> *Heavy Industry: George Gittoes*, Broken Hill City Art Gallery, 1992, p. 13.
- <sup>12</sup> J Gatbonton, J Javelosa and L Roa, eds, *Art Philippines*, The Crucible Workshop, Manila, 1992.
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