



Contemplating War

Melanie Baker
Mandy Durham
Dominic McGill
Jesse Small
Do-Ho Suh

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art



Melanie Baker, *Podium*, 2003, charcoal on paper, 53 x 96", courtesy of the artist, New York, NY

Contemplating War

Toward the end of this summer in my neighborhood in Brooklyn, I started noticing signs posted on buildings and lampposts depicting military personnel who have been killed during the war in Iraq. While it was clear that the people in the pictures wore uniforms, the pictures focused mostly on their faces. Below the image was their name and one brief personal fact about them: loved NASCAR, had a twin, played guitar. The bottom of every sign read *Not Just a Statistic*. Those men and women once lived, now they're gone, and that fact is beyond politics.

Using low-tech means, those ad-hoc memorials (there was a sign for every person killed up to the point at which they were posted) were poignant reminders of the human cost of war. Although not intended as art objects, the posters attested to the power of visual images — they literally stopped me in my tracks. The posters are also part of a larger, ever-present supply of printed, televised and Web-based imagery that feeds our perceptions, not just about the war in Iraq but about wars in general, and about power, politics and the individuals who function within those systems. How do we make sense of it all? The works by this diverse group of artists — Melanie Baker, Do-Ho Suh, Mandy Durham, Dominic McGill and Jesse Small — give visual form to many issues while allowing the viewer to draw her or his own conclusions. The works are not just about war, but are engaged with artistic discourse

as well, and represent a range of themes and media.

Some of the works in *Contemplating War* are based on the artists' personal experiences. In the first artist's documentary, *Echoes*, 2002, Mandy Durham (b. 1979, lives and works in Kansas City) tells the story of her father's younger brother, Monty, who was killed in an ambush in Vietnam when he was only 18. More precisely, it is about the process by which Durham and her siblings learned about Monty, who had for so long remained unknown to them. Using family photographs, home movies and her father's memories, the artist constructs a picture of the uncle she never knew, and who, for years, no one spoke of. The film, divided into three acts, begins with a haunting montage of photographs of Monty. Like pieces of a puzzle yet to be arranged, the cropped images do not give a complete picture of Monty, but provide only tantalizing clues. This incomplete picture is perhaps symbolic of Monty's life, which ended far before it was lived fully. Over this montage, Durham narrates the gradual disclosure of Monty's story, as her father became more open about it and, in his own quest to in some way recover his brother, he decides to go to the reunion of surviving members of the unit of the First Armored Cavalry who served with Monty in Vietnam. The second act chronicles the road trip that Durham, her father (a Navy veteran), and sister took to the reunion, driving from Kansas to Texas. Along the way, he recounts

childhood memories and also tells of the shock he felt the day he learned of Monty's death. Text of this conversation appears at the bottom of the screen, like subtitles to the footage that Durham videotaped from inside the car. The film has been slowed down and edited in a way that accurately conveys the somewhat surreal mood of the trip. The final act of *Echoes* records the reunion of Monty's Army unit in a hotel banquet room. This segment brings the poignant ordinariness of the living in contrast with the almost mythologized dead, and it completes Monty's transformation from a ghost to a more substantial entity, though one that resides only in Durham's memory.

The only artist to have actually served in the military in *Contemplating War* is Do-Ho Suh. Suh (b. 1962, lives and works in New York and Seoul) was in the army in Korea, where a two-year military service is obligatory for adult males. His experience inspired him to think about what happens to people when they are trained to kill, forced to obey orders, and to conform to a group mentality. Where does the individual end and the collective begin, and what is the relationship between the two? *Some/One*, 2004, reflects Suh's ongoing meditation on that powerful dynamic. The piece on view in the gallery is a slightly different version of an earlier work with the same title, and this reprisal attests to the conceptual and formal resonance of its themes for Suh. *Some/One* is created from thousands of stainless-steel dog tags. For the earlier version of the work, the artist gathered thousands of discarded tags from an army-navy store in Providence while he was a student at the Rhode Island School of Design. Those tags had been misprinted; in the new piece, they are inscribed with random letters and numbers that signify nothing and everything at once, and these imprinted markings enhance the overall shimmering effect of the steel. Edging closer, one can peer inside the empty cavity — lined with red velvet, its hollowness suggests that anyone's body could fill it. The freestanding form with outstretched arms resembles at once a statue of a deity, a piece of ancient armor, or perhaps a sacred



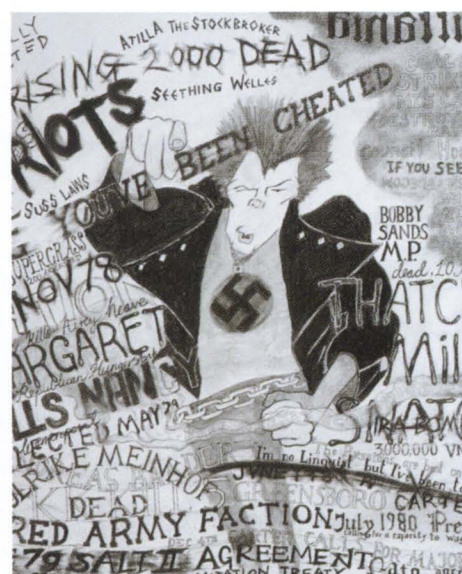
Jesse Small, *Hard Candy* (detail on left), 2004, porcelain, 12 x 18.5', courtesy of the artist, Alfred, NY

garment, as well as functioning as a kind of memorial for the nameless individuals who have fought and died in so many wars throughout history.

Like the dog tag, the helmet is standard-issue military equipment. In official parlance, a helmet is not just a helmet, but a Personal Armor System. The reality of the helmet — that it and its wearer are ultimately disposable — is obscured by this aura of indestructibility. In his large-scale installation *Hard Candy*, 2004, Jesse Small tries to shatter the myth of indestructibility. The installation consists of porcelain replicas of standard issue army helmets in muted colors arranged in regular rows on the wall. Some of the helmets are marked with a calligraphic kind of graffiti, which alludes

to soldiers' personalization of helmets and gear, such as inscribing a girlfriend's name out of sight. As a teenager in Los Angeles, Small (b. 1974, lives and works in Kansas City and Alfred, New York) was active in the graffiti and tagging culture there. For the artist, these outlaw practices embody an individual's desire to personalize the impersonal by making a literal impression on ordinary, banal and, most importantly, blank surfaces. Another part of the installation consists of porcelain vehicle tires, which are covered with organic, barnacle-like forms that resemble architectural embellishments. Many of the helmets are adorned with similar, flowerlike forms, and all are glazed in pastel, sugary,

colors. The artist has called the piece *Hard Candy*. According to Small, *Candy, because war is an opiate. Candy because modern war is decadent*. Further, by introducing an incongruously decorative aspect to decidedly utilitarian objects, Small is subverting their intended function: these helmets are as breakable as a dinner plate — as fragile as the heads they are intended to protect — and the tires become artifacts that could have been found under the sea. For the artist, this aestheticization of the equipment is a way of freezing and memorializing it: Small would like his sculptures to be a memorial to the long-gone, now useless army tire, because as he simply states it, *Army tires need to be stopped. Their rolling brings no good in the world*.



Dominic McGill, *Project for a New American Century* (detail on right), 2004, graphite on paper, 6.7 x 65', courtesy Derek Eller Gallery, New York, NY/ Private collection



Mandy Durham, *Echoes*, 2002, digital video, dimensions variable, collection Johnson County Community College, gift of Marti and Tony Oppenheimer and the Oppenheimer Brothers Foundation

New York–based artist Dominic McGill’s ambitiously scaled graphite drawing *Project for a New American Century*, 2004, is a sprawling timeline chronicling the major events of the last 60 years. The piece, which is 65-feet long and nearly eight-feet high, undulates like a ribbon wall in the gallery, enveloping the viewer into its densely drawn folds. McGill (b. 1963, lives and works in New York) starts where contemporary history is thought to begin: with the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. Bombs rain down on the grid of the city as the sky above is filled with names, events, and catch phrases of the time such as Truman Doctrine and Doomsday Machine. Integrating pictographic elements with text, events unfold in a mostly linear way, yet names, images and newspaper headlines spiral across the vast surface in a dizzying fashion. McGill uses many different graphic styles to render the thousands of bits of information that make up this engrossing panorama that is meant to mimic the vast complexity of its subject. As time progresses, connections between developments and the often disastrous effects of one event, or even of a single individual, on the future become clear as we are reminded of things we thought we had forgotten. The drawing brings us to the present day, with Dick

Cheney and Halliburton among the final inscriptions before the piece ends in a dark thicket of trees. This final passage seems purposefully ambiguous: Will the trees remain? Is it the end of civilization or are we looking at Eden? Perhaps the real question is whether we learn from the past, or if history is doomed to repeat itself.

In its inclusion of hundreds of names — JFK, Mao, Nixon, Idi Amin, Margaret Thatcher — McGill’s piece reminds us that events which will have an impact on entire nations are put into motion by the actions of a few. Somewhere behind closed doors, the fates of peoples are determined, war plans drawn up, and deals made. Decisions are delivered to the public by a spokesperson who comes forward to present a scripted, media-ready explanation which may or may not tell the whole story. Do we really know who is making the decisions, and what kind of access to the process do we actually have? The cynical view is that time will reveal the actual machinations and motivations behind most political decisions, if they are not already on the surface. And even those who don’t doubt the system would acknowledge that it is nevertheless a labyrinthian one, and that it is media-driven. Melanie Baker is a close observer of the news media, both televised and printed,

and her forceful body of work examines the constructions of power generated by and for those formats. For Baker, (b. 1955, lives and works in Brooklyn, New York) scale is essential to conveying the degree of power that these people have and how small it literally makes her feel in the face of it. Her 2001 charcoal drawing, *Company of Men*, is a 45-foot-long depiction of men in suits. Their facial features are hidden in shadow or partially cropped, but their identity is clearly stated by virtue of their monumental scale and the assurance of their postures, as they rise 13 feet above the viewer.

Baker’s most recent work is based on media images of the group of men in the current administration: John Ashcroft, Donald Rumsfeld, and President Bush, among others. The artist focuses on facial expressions and gestures: the stone-faced politician, the handshake, the dark suit, a mouth open in front of a microphone. With an economy of information, Baker gives us all we need to know about exactly what we are looking at. In *Podium*, 2003, we see just a hand gripping a podium bearing the presidential seal, and this is enough. Along with charcoal, Baker uses newspaper as a collage element in some of her works to represent the figures’ skin because, as she puts it, *the newspaper that I read becomes a collage that forms their skin and is specific to the person being depicted*. This crucial formal aspect of Baker’s project signifies the inseparability of the media’s portrayal of the person and the person himself.

To say that these are tremendously complicated times is to understate the condition of contemporary life. The five artists in *Contemplating War* are grappling with the same questions we all are, about the uncertainty of the future as well as how we got to where we are right now. The works in this exhibition do not impose a particular political view or enforce a certain mode of thinking about the issue of war. Indeed, what good art does most effectively is ask questions, rather than answer them, and to suggest ideas about how to view the world.

— Meghan Dailey, independent art critic, NY

Cover: Do-Ho Suh, *Some/One*, 2004, stainless steel military dog tags, steel structure, fiberglass resin, fabric, 6.3 x 9.6 x 11', collection Johnson County Community College, gift of Marti and Tony Oppenheimer and the Oppenheimer Brothers Foundation