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GEORGE GITTOES: Witness to a War

by Noah Dillon

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Although my hometown of Austin is well advertised as a bastion of liberalism in Texas, for radical politics of every stripe, one must go to Houston. Here, oil barons, libertarians, Revolutionary Communists, anarchists, organized crime, human traffickers, and other unnameable conspirators have found sanctuary on the third coast. Houston's Station Museum, devoted to progressive left-wing political art, is the perfect location for *Witness to War*, a retrospective for artist, activist, and documentary filmmaker George Gittoes.

Originally hailing from Australia, for the last 25 years Gittoes has worked in every major war zone from Nicaragua (1986) to Afganistan to Pakistan (2005 – present). Museum director James Harithas and curator Alan Schnitger have composed a rich introduction to Gittoes's work, which attempts to illuminate conflicts typically ignored for reasons of political and economic expedience.

Following an introductory tutorial the show dives into a flurry of sketchbooks from Gittoes's daily experiences since 1986, featuring an illustrated perspective on some of the greatest horrors of the 21st century. Saddam-era Iraqi dinar, frightening murals by U.S. Marines, crucifixions, magazine clips, photographs, stickers, and selections from art history books all find their way into Gittoes's notebooks. These clean, restricted life drawings are sharp and expressive. For instance, in the haunting ink sketch of blindfolded rebels, "Islamabad and Peshawar, Pakistan" (2007–2008), a line of chained men in single file swells and shrinks eerily. A patterned floral background efficiently heightens the hallucinogenic quality of their drama; Bruegel's allegorical "The Blind Leading the Blind" (1568) comes startlingly to life.

Gittoes's work often asks two questions: what are the experiences of other artists working and surviving in war zones? Or, what is his moral responsibility as an artist-correspondent? When Gittoes allows his subjects to explain the former, or, when he talks about his own experience of the latter, his work is clear and insightful.

Gittoes's most successful projects are his films, in which his subjects can convey all the subtlety and depth of what they have known. They are able to establish what the psychiatrist R. D. Laing called "inter-experience," a psychological connection between people, essential for social and political action. In his film *The Bullets of the Poets* (1987), Gittoes and co-creator Gabrielle Dalton document the struggles of Sandinista revolutionaries during their decade-long struggle against Nicaragua's right-wing dictatorship. Without commentary or intervention, Gittoes provides spaces for feminist poets to tell the story of their country and their art—including the Revolutionary poet Gioconda Belli, who describes her work as "an art of urgency."

Diary excerpts from the 1995 Rwandan genocide drive home the moral imperative of Gittoes's humanitarian art. Unlike the sketchbooks in the front galleries, these four large pages are written with a nib pen and appended with photographs. Fictional stories and factual accounts collide as wobbly handwriting intensifies their immediacy. The journals are ornamented with snapshots bordered by loose, muted strokes of watercolor or pen. Horribly wounded civilians, their faces disfigured by machetes, explode from the page, staring down viewers with searing physical and emotional pain.

"Rwanda Maconde" (1995) recounts a massacre at the Kibeho refugee camp. Words gush forward feverishly, spilling down the page with forceful propulsion. A few lines have been hurriedly redacted and the text changes size or bleeds or devolves into emphatic scribbles. At the anchored center, one photo shows a boy staring fearfully; in another, the bodies of a mother and child are dumped unceremoniously into a mass grave. Both images are framed by burning slashes of color. The spare and direct construction of the document hits you square in the gut.

In his installations, Gittoes puts foreign conflicts squarely into our domain. "DVD Store" (2011) smartly re-creates a small, Taliban-threatened video shop the artist documented in his 2009 film *The Miscreants of Taliwood*, shot in Pakistan's nearly lawless Northwest Frontier Province. The tiny outlet, covered floor to ceiling with ads and packaging for local Pashto films, screens trailers for Gittoes-produced Tali movies on small monitors overhead, including *Moon Light* (a parody of the vampire romance *Twilight*) and a female-empowered flick, *The Tailor's Story*. These DVD stands become loci for what Benjamin Barber termed "Jihad vs. McWorld," places where globalizing markets come into violent opposition with tribal, fundamentalist reactionaries.

Gittoes's paintings, and his *Night Vision* series in particular, are less moving than the rest of the show, however. *Night Vision* follows the story of fictional United States soldiers, Section Leader Corporal Night and his Virus Squad (a name reminiscent of William Burroughs). Part of their fable is told in four large diptychs, each with an image and a separate panel of text over a rolling red background. Night functions as Gittoes's alter ego, but the story's supernatural expositions and twisted figures feel flat compared to what the artist can show by simply recording the world around him. Furthermore, the tales substitute unconvincing shock value for human connection. "Blood

“Aquarium” (2009) offers, in imperiously capitalized letters, a strange and dull poetic image that could describe a soldier or the recently assassinated Osama bin Laden. Gittoes’s daubs and swipes of fresh-from-the-tube oil paint give them a raw viscerality, but the limited repertoire of marks and color flattens the images.

Another oil painting in the show, “American Soldier” (2002) plays more and takes more risks. The surface is thoughtfully built and makes use of a greater variety of techniques: glazes, tints, washes, large brushes and small ones. You can really get into it, and the exhausted infantryman marked “ME” at its center is more credible here as Gittoes’s doppelganger.

Gittoes’s prolific output includes some great pieces, and some lesser ones. Even when his artworks aren’t wholly seductive or persuasive, his humanism is brightly evident, a dedicated and compelling advocate for the violently oppressed.