



Painting Desert Storm

John Keane's exhibition of paintings Gulf, depicting the 'Desert Storm' campaign,¹ aroused controversy because, faced by the righteous exercise of Western military might, it failed to demonstrate the standard mixture of endorsement and high-minded awe, rather making unaccountable suggestions about the operation of financial and media interests in the conflict. The painting which aroused most ire was *Mickey Mouse at the Front*,² a collection of reminders of the more inconvenient aspects of the great victory. Laid out in front of a fortified city are various elements: a palm tree hunched over unnaturally like some rearing worm, its fronds brushing the ground, serving to indicate environmental catastrophe; a shopping trolley full of weaponry, a symbol of conspicuous military consumption where combat becomes a consumer good, a motif which nicely links the expenditure of 'ordnance' with the inviolable Western freedom to consume; worst of all (for the press), a grinning Mickey Mouse squatting upon a plinth as if defecating, an image of America, and more broadly of chewing-gum culture, complacently and even blissfully presiding over the catastrophe.

Keane is evidently a liberal, anti-war artist of noble intentions and it might seem that such work should be welcomed as a break with the bellicose British consensus. Yet in looking further at

¹The exhibition was shown at the Imperial War Museum, London, between 26th March and 31st May 1992.

²All paintings in the exhibition were dated 1991. *Mickey Mouse at the Front* has been purchased by the Imperial War Museum.

his painting it becomes apparent that Keane is not merely against this war but war as such, and also no doubt against pain, sin and death. While this position allows him a vague critical perspective on the Gulf War, it blinds him to its specific horrors. Indeed his work is as much symptom as representation, a precise register of liberal confusion about the conflict. As such, it merely continues the long, honourable tradition of impotent and subjective outrage with which artists (sensitive souls) have greeted war. For Alan Borg, the Director General of the Imperial War Museum, "Artists from Goya to Picasso have set down their emotional responses to war, which are often bleakly despairing and equally often touched with irony. Keane's work stands within this eminent tradition, and it is perhaps not surprising that some people find it upsetting; but who could not be upset by the Basra Road or the burning oil wells?"³ It is of course unfortunate that some in the West have been 'upset' by the collateral effects of 'Desert Storm', but art makes them look this salutary moral lesson in the face - before assigning it to the eternal narrative of man's inhumanity to his fellow beings (and artists' powerful condemnations of the same). What is most of all lacking from this view is any conception, other than in purely utopian terms, that such acts could be avoided, and of the details of this violent episode committed in our name and with our resources against specific people and in a highly particular way.

Keane's work in this exhibition falls into two main types: documentary, genre scenes of the military camp, and large, symbolically loaded works which attempt a modernised history painting. Keane was first assigned to the RAF and as a commissioned artist of record made paintings of their encampments which draw on old devices and are not so very different from many works made during the two world wars. These pictures are often quite pretty, for the artist could hardly but be fascinated by the unfamiliar light and space of the desert, and within it the disposition of military equipment and personnel. In *Artillery*, for instance, the handling of colour and space has a strongly picturesque aspect, while *Draughts* portrays a game played under the attractive dappled light produced by camouflage netting. This allure also operates in works which portray things which Keane could not have seen directly and is ironically grafted onto depictions of military equipment. *Every Time We Say Goodbye* is a thickly painted, light, even lush picture of a Tornado releasing smart bombs, framed with the familiar military photographs of the projectile's destructive progress. It may be that the appealing cast of this picture is supposed to stop the viewer short, to provoke thought about the spectacular nature of the war yet there is little to suggest this intrinsically. The pictures produced by these weapons are by now positioned within a uniformly positive discourse of Allied military competence which is hardly questioned by Keane's decorative use of them here.⁴

There is a double aspect of prettiness in Keane's work which encompasses his painterly, almost Impressionist concern with light, colour and space, and the messiness of the surfaces themselves, the careless smearing and scumbling of paint which may stand as a picturesque simulacra of battlefield chaos. The two rarely productively coincide or collide and in the *Ashes to Ashes* series Keane's concern with surface is given full reign in abstract works made from sand, oil and coal mixed into thick, swirling pictures reminiscent of informel painting. An objection to much of Keane's work is its heavy-handed literalness, and the lack of representation in this series does little to sidestep the problem, given the leaden symbolism of their elements.⁵

The more ambitious works, which are not purely documentary, are collage assemblages which encourage detailed readings and which should evoke a deep consideration of their subjects. In an overt comment, *We Are Making A New World Order* is framed with dollar bills and painted over a

³.Preface to *John Keane: Gulf*, Imperial War Museum catalogue, (London 1992) p. 3.

⁴.The song runs 'Every time we say goodbye / I die a little ...' but even this reference is rather indirect.

⁵.These works can make no claims even to originality for Jean Fautrier long ago used the physicality of the paint as a register for the destruction wrought on the body by war.

ground of newspaper. Within this moneyed frame, Keane employs an encrusted paint surface (reminiscent of debris and sand) into which is embedded diverse matter, including a spine of metal rings, a plastic coated sequence of family portraits warped by heat, a crushed Pepsi can labelled in Arabic. Recurrent motifs make their appearance here: a sinister American soldier in dark glasses, an Arab dressed in a burnous seen from behind, a blood red Mercedes. These subjects are at once problematic and over-familiar, serving less as symbols of new configurations than as instantly recognizable clichés - the Mercedes, in particular, summoning up images of Bayswater as much as of the Gulf. Keane is presented with the problem of how to represent these figures in liberal painting, especially the inconceivably rich Arab of reality and legend, a figure that on one level is an oppressor, on another oppressed, being the subject of the protracted discourse of Orientalism. For the liberal artist such a figure is almost unrepresentable, and the tactic (which solves nothing) is to make him turn his back on the viewer, being known only as a type and a presence.

With these large scale works, Keane is trying to refashion history painting by creating apocalyptic landscapes with sizeable casts where meaning is generated by melodramatic gesture. There are fundamental problems with this spectacular mode of representation and its apparent heroisation of the events involved, even when the presentation of them is entirely negative, as in *Legacy* with its portrayal of the 'liberation' of a despoiled land, again under the aegis of a grinning Mickey Mouse. The mere image of environmental disaster in the Gulf, after all, does not necessarily question the rationale of the whole enterprise but may be used merely to drive home the lesson of Iraqi iniquity. The mix of documentary and symbolic modes produces difficulties. Keane is a painter of record (naturally so being a commissioned war artist) and his defence against aspersions cast on his loyalty was to claim that he had only painted what he had seen, that the shopping trolley full of weapons and the Mickey Mouse figure were actually there. Likewise, authenticity supposedly inheres in the photographs and objects collaged into the works because they, like the artist, were present at the scene. Keane assumes that because genuine documentary material is filtered through artistic sensibility it will automatically serve in the expression of his attitude to the war. This is far from the case, and these complex works often require the detailed expositions provided in the catalogue.

Worse than these ambiguities, Keane fails to represent or even suggest the very peculiar nature of the war. In the context of an exhibition held at the Imperial War Museum, it is especially pressing that he should, for to reach Keane's work, the viewer must cross the main court with its mechanical reminders of very different conflicts, and upstairs is exhibited a fine collection of paintings by other commissioned artists of the world wars. In utter contrast to these protracted and mutually destructive conflicts, 'Desert Storm' was largely a strife of spectacle, a war waged for public consumption, to humiliate a tyrant in order to ensure the survival of two demagogues. Uniquely, it was a 'conflict' in which the enemy barely returned fire: Keane has been bizarrely criticized for besmirching the valour of the Allied soldiers in what has been admitted as a 'turkey shoot'. The elite Iraqi troops and airforce, made so much of by the media, were withdrawn to a safe distance, the rest left to put up what defence they could. Of course there were financial considerations behind the war, and Keane is right to point to them, but it was fought primarily to produce images for domestic consumption in the most heavily involved countries.

The difficulties this presents an artist seeking to portray the conflict are most apparent in the series *Scenes on the Road to Hell*, depicting the aftermath of the massacre on the Basra road, in which piled up cars, trucks, a doll, sit alongside the recurrent subjects and devices - burning wells, collaged sand, drips of black paint symbolizing blood and oil. There are serious problems not only in the depiction of modern warfare where the artist is thoroughly controlled by the military (by the time Keane reached the Basra road there was barely a corpse in sight), but doubly so in a war which was fought to be consumed as spectacle. Keane's images of the exercise of Western power are rather less impressive than photographs of the real thing - and this could hardly be otherwise given the

intention of the war. The artist who is confined to acting as witness is powerless to reveal those things hidden from the video: high-tech atrocities committed against civilians and conscript troops, soldiers buried alive in their dugouts, the cultivation of starvation and disease by the bombing of sewage and irrigation systems. Keane's painting is in fact a faithful reflection of the media war and is concerned largely with the diversionary issues which set the agenda in the West: chemical warfare, guided weapons, Patriot missiles and - of course - the media themselves. It favours smart bombs over the (greatly preponderant) dumb ones and the terror weapon which was not employed (gas) over those that were (fuel-air explosives⁶ and napalm). The Death Squad, a thickly painted picture of soldiers carrying a body bag conforms to this perspective; the scene is rather unaffecting given the slight casualties suffered by the professional Allied troops (mostly self-inflicted)⁷ when compared with the massive slaughter of the conscript Iraqi forces and the 'collateral' civilian deaths.



⁶.These weapons saturate the air with fuel and then ignite it producing enormous temperatures, and blast on a par with a small nuclear device. They consume the oxygen in the area of the explosion so even those under cover may die of suffocation. The successful deployment of such weapons accounts for the sudden willingness of the United States to give up battlefield nuclear weapons.

⁷.Of 343 Allied deaths in the campaign, only 145 were killed in action; some of these of course the victims of 'friendly fire'.

There are works in which Keane does attempt to mediate his attitude to this spectacular military display. *Ecstasy of Fumbling* is a collage of gloves, a paint tube, a photograph of John Singer Sargent's major painting *Gassed* (1918) (which hangs nearby), nerve pills, detector paper and scumbled paint over instructions for survival during a chemical attack. One glove "holds" a paintbrush and this points the viewer to the fact that this is a self-portrait. The intersection of the apparatus of painting with that of war is like the insertion of the media into the conflict, and exhibits Keane's awareness of his own role. The part played by the media is sometimes indicated in other works, including *Blackout*, where a group of soldiers watch television coverage of the war, illuminated by the screen; or in paintings showing a video camera operator filming a corpse or a photo-call at an RAF base. Highly evident devices of framing, surface and the use of bare ground constitute references to painting itself, while one picture of a dead Iraqi soldier lying in the sand is simply called *Oil Painting*. Yet what Keane has failed to depict, despite such references, is the unsurpassed force of the military, logistic and financial apparatus ponderously deployed to produce some fleeting, gaudy electronic and chemical images (along with a few fine words) to divert the public, to nudge the polls by a point or two. Against this Niagara of resources, we can hardly expect to place a few threads of canvas, even if they were finely crafted.

The title of *We Are Making a New World Order* is one of Keane's frequent allusions to the work of artists in earlier conflicts, in this case to Paul Nash's apocalyptic First World War landscape *We Are Making a New World*,⁸ and such references reinforce Keane's position within the liberal tradition of anti-war art. That these references are often to the First World War⁹ is ironic for two more different types of combat, and their portrayal, can scarcely be imagined. If Keane's paintings are compared with those of Otto Dix (recently exhibited at the Tate Gallery)¹⁰ which unflinchingly delineate the diverse horrors of trench warfare, the lassitude and confusion of the liberal view of 'Desert Storm' is made clear. At first Dix faced difficulties in conveying the true nature of a war which on one level was truly spectacular, and yet in which some of the most significant aspects (gas, flying bullets, camouflage) could barely be represented. Like many in the conflict, it took him some years to arrive at fitting solutions: his immediate response in drawings made at the Front celebrated a Nietzschean alliance of violence and eroticism rendered in a style which echoed Futurism.¹¹ His later work concentrated not on the evident spectacle of mechanical conflict but on its myriad effects on the human figure, on the spilling and merging of the body in the landscape. Dix's work is transgressive for, while it is founded on record and draws its power from its documentary value, it proceeds far beyond what the usual media of record deign to reveal. As artists of record, the artists' different personal histories are instructive: Dix was a soldier who saw the full horrors of a sustained war of attrition between well matched opponents and who with a remarkable variety of means established an anatomy of modern warfare, a systematic exploration of wounds; Keane was a war artist permitted to explore the sanitised aftermath of a speedy slaughter. Both artists saw their documentary representations as symbolic of wider corruptions. Keane indicates this in a very direct fashion, as we have seen, by painting on pages of the *Financial Times*, and by selecting from his experience symbols of Western domination and consumerism; Dix more allusively reveals the literal corruption of the body politic. Both artists are also fixed on the act of painting, Dix through the constant reworking of traditional motifs, techniques and modes of composition (with reference

⁸.1918, also in the collection of the Imperial War Museum.

⁹.The title *An Ecstasy of Fumbling* is taken from Wilfred Owen's poem 'Dulce et Decorum Est'; there is also the inclusion of the Sargent picture in this work.

¹⁰.*Otto Dix, 1891-1969*, Tate Gallery, London, 11th March - 17th May 1992. The exhibition was previously seen at the Galerie der Stadt, Stuttgart and the Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

¹¹.See Iain Boyd Whyte, "Dix's Germany: from Wilhelmine Reich to East/ West Divide", in *Otto Dix, 1891-1969*, (London, Tate Gallery 1992) p. 28.

particularly to the German Renaissance), Keane through emphasising surface and frame and by the inclusion of heterogeneous material. While Dix is fixed on the act of depiction in paint, Keane is fixed on the medium itself. Keane's work is symptomatic of relativist lassitude and exhibits powerlessness in the face of a disturbing but inevitable spectacle; Dix, who from a less liberal position believes in human - and more particularly bourgeois - corruption, uses this as the vantage point to employ a sharper critical edge.

Yet even a painting which fulfilled Dix's criteria would be suspect in this age of images, in which the coloured picture has abandoned its hallowed, privileged place on canvas and has invaded every corner of the globe. Horrific images threaten to lose their power of confirming culpability by becoming part of the meaningless pageant of Gulf images, video stills sandwiched between adverts or other trivia and quickly forgotten. The sustained act of attention that fine art requires, and in particular that history painting with its detailed narrative sequences demands, is becoming less and less possible. Keane's pictures are indeed supposed to provoke meditation on the meaning of war and while the blatant symbolism of his materials and allusions may fail by bludgeoning the viewer, yet such reflection is important to penetrate the academic interest in the war, to bring home concretely the impact of what was done, the hundreds of thousands killed, wounded and bereaved, the meaning for a people of the systematic destruction of the material means of their country, and the disease and malnutrition which inevitably followed. Keane's statements are highly generalised and leave the worst things left unsaid. That they caused objections displays only the extent of British complicity and complacency, for such an exhibition could only ruffle feathers in a climate of overwhelming media conformity. The problem in Britain, especially now that on some level the electoral tactic of warfare has been vindicated, is what statements and what action could conceivably be effective. Mickey-Mouse at the Front is unlikely to become an icon for the horror of this particular conflict, despite Keane's good intentions, despite pointing to at least some of the more disturbing aspects of the war, and even despite hitting a raw nerve with its grinning cartoon emblem. The associations are either too conventional or too private, rooted in a partial (and highly controlled) personal experience. It may even be that a spectacular war cannot be condemned in images, certainly not in painting. Even photography or film which revealed the unseen atrocities of the conflict might be ineffective unless accompanied by a close analysis of the motivations and means of its prosecution.