

GEORGE GITTOES: on being there



CASULA
POWERHOUSE
ARTS CENTRE

EDUCATION KIT

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ABOUT THIS EDUCATION KIT

Art is something that makes you *think*
and *feel*. Art also tells a story - from the
artist, to the viewer (you and me).

We are here to discover stories
from artworks shown in this
exhibition, *on being there*. What
matters about art is what makes
it matter to you. Whether it's
the colour and composition
of painting; or its underlying
content, art can be interesting
for infinite reasons and none of
them are wrong.

Based on research and our own
interpretation, this Education

Kit aims to give you insight into
some of the stories found in
these artworks. The artworks
in this Education Kit were
selected to introduce you to
key periods of George Gittoes'
artistic practice over the past
five decades. Through Gittoes'
mystical lens, these artworks
examine life, death and chaos in
the ever-present wake of human
conflict.

We would like to acknowledge the Cabrogal Clan of the Darug Nation who are the traditional custodians of the land that now resides within Liverpool City Council's boundaries. We acknowledge that this land was also accessed by peoples of the Dhurawal and Darug Nations.

BIOGRAPHY

GEORGE GITTOES (AM) ARTIST AND FILM MAKER

George Gittoes is a major Australian artist, photographer and filmmaker. For over four decades he has documented some of the world's most notorious conflicts. From the killing fields of Cambodia to the brutal massacres of Rwanda, Gittoes has responded to the best and worst of the human condition. He has been recognized for his humanitarian and peacemaking efforts and has been awarded an

Order of Australia (AM) as well as the prestigious Sydney Peace Prize. Alongside his work as a painter and printmaker, Gittoes is an award winning documentary film maker and has worked in places like Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and more recently the dangerous urban suburbs of Chicago. He is the recipient of a number of major art awards and his work is included in many public collections in Australia and overseas.

INTRODUCTION

ON BEING THERE

'I feel privileged to have been able to spend much of my life creating beauty in the face of the destruction of war,' says George Gittoes. 'I have been waging a personal war against war with art.'

Through his work as an artist and film maker George Gittoes invites us to understand what it is like to be there, even daring to create, in some of the most dangerous places in the world. Gittoes wants the viewer to experience the conditions, situations and ethical dilemmas that he himself encounters in being there. Through drawings, paintings, photography and film, Gittoes takes us on a journey that

begins in 1970 with the Yellow House, a famous artists' community in Sydney's Kings Cross. From there his work takes on a more international scope as he travels to places like Cambodia, Rwanda, and the Middle East as an unofficial war artist. His journeys in the 1990s takes him to Iraq and Pakistan, and then to the founding of a second Yellow House in the city of Jalalabad in Afghanistan working with local artists and actors. This journey finds its most recent expression through his sojourn in 2018 in the suburbs of South Chicago, one of the worst centers for gun violence in the USA.

GEORGE GITTOES: on being there

ARTWORKS

ARTWORKS



Puppets 1-12, c 1970-2018, mixed media, dimensions variable

PUPPETS

In the early 1970s, George Gittoes was using puppets as a vehicle for anti-establishment performance art, a reaction to the horror of the Vietnam war. Performed in environments located at the Yellow House in Sydney, Gittoes puppetry combined sculpture, installation, painting and textile art with performance and storytelling.

The making of Gittoes puppets relies heavily on using found objects. The puppets are uncanny and grotesque ready-mades. The fusing together of performance and the ready-made, allowed Gittoes to weave complex historical narratives and contemporary ideas into the artwork. The puppet performances at the Yellow House also

opened up the possibility of looking at artworks as not just objects, but also as ideas and experiences.

Big ideas: War, protest.

Questions and Activities:

- What material are George Gittoes' puppets made from?
- Why do you think Gittoes creates puppets?
- What do the puppets and their stories represent? Is an artwork an object, an idea, an experience or all three?
- What materials do you have in your home? Create your own puppet from the materials at home

WHEN IT IS OVER, KENT STATE SUITE

When it is over is part of the *Kent State Suite*, a series of etchings that respond to political issues surrounding the long drawn out war the USA waged in Vietnam, which took place from 1965 until 1975. Military action led by the United States in Vietnam had sparked an international mass protest movement opposing the war.

When it is Over depicts the despair of a soldier in the aftermath of a battle, but also points to the collective trauma that carries over to those who witness and experience the horrors of war. In the image we see a face in anguish, grappled by an equally prominent and tormented hand. The frantic, stark

and exaggerated lines that render the figure reinforce an uneasy impression conveyed by the artwork.

Big ideas: War, politics.

Questions and Activities:

- How is the medium of etching, which allows for multiple reproductions of an image, significant to this artwork meaning or reception?
- Why did the artist exaggerate and distort the hands and face of the figure in the artwork?
- Using the cultural frame, describe how Gittoes artwork is reflecting on society?



When it is Over, Kent State Suite, 1-12, 1971-72. etching, aquatint, 30x45cm

ARTWORKS

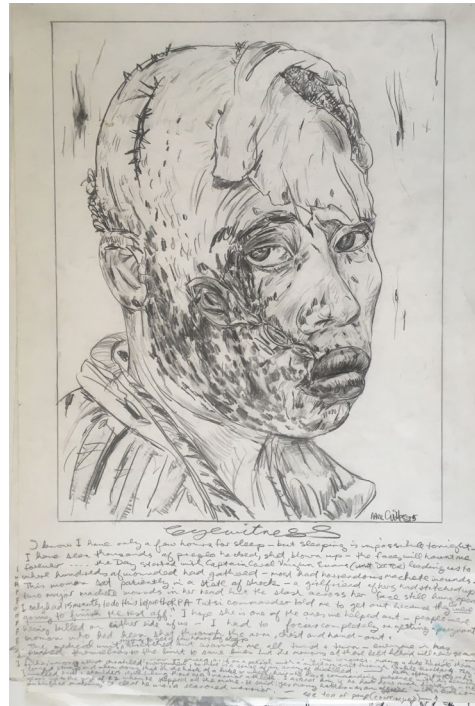
EYEWITNESS, RWANDA

Travelling artists often carry a sketchbook to make drawings of people and places as they go. Hastily drawn in pencil, *Eyewitness* is a portrait representing an encounter Gittoes had during his travels through Rwanda in 1995, following a period of civil war and resultant **genocide**. The portrait depicts a severely wounded and disfigured woman, an instance of individual suffering amongst a wider human conflict. Accompanying the portrait is a brief note written by Gittoes, a further insight into the devastation taking place at the time.

A common theme that runs through Gittoes artworks is the idea of the *artist as witness*. This idea can be contrasted with the *journalist as witness*. Different forms of media have their own inbuilt qualities, regardless of their content. The idea of *artist as witness* brings an interesting discussion about the role art plays in social activism and change.

Questions and Activities:

- Why is *making* a drawing significant, compared to *taking* a photograph?
- How is an artwork that represents war different from a news article?
- Using the idea of *artist as witness*, make a drawing documenting a memorable event that took place in your life.



Eyewitness, Rwanda, 1995, pencil on paper, 62x44cm

'KNIGHT'. DEATH AND THE DEVIL, X

'*Knight*'. *Death and the Devil*, X is a contemporary adaptation of an Albrecht Durer engraving produced in 1513. Durer was a German renaissance artist and used Gothic motifs and incorporates complex **symbolism** into his image. Durer's artwork is often interpreted to be an examination of moral virtue conquering evil.

Gittoes' re-working of the image replaces the knight with a US soldier, surrounded by contemporary symbolism and weighed down by excessive gear. With a target painted on his shoulder, limping along on a crutch led by a dog, this modern-day knight



'*Knight*'. *Death and the Devil*, X, 2006, oil on canvas, 167.5 x 137cm

appears vulnerable. Departing from Durer's original, Gittoes paints a figure downtrodden by modern warfare.

Big ideas: War, trauma, morality.

Questions and Activities:

- How does Gittoes' appropriation of Durer's artwork affect our interpretation of '*Knight*'. *Death and the Devil*, X?
- How would you define appropriation?
- What symbols can you see in these artworks and what do you think is the artist's motivation for representing them?



Knight, Death and the Devil, Albrecht Durer, 1513, engraving, 24.3 x 18.8cm (plate)



Photographs of the Yellow House Jalalabad (1-6), 2015-2018

THE YELLOW HOUSE

The original Yellow House in Potts Point, Sydney was the site of **collaboration** between a collective of artists in the 1970's, including Martin Sharp, Brett Whitley and George Gittoes. The house acted as a gallery, studio, performance and project space inspired by **Pop, Surrealism and other international art movements**. The space was modelled after a combination of Van Gogh's Yellow house in Arles and the Arts Lab in London, a collective where Martin Sharp had worked previously.

This series of photographs shows the artists, musicians, performers and film makers who work alongside George Gittoes at the Yellow House in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. The house acts as a sanctuary for local artists who live in an area controlled by the Taliban; a

group who forbid artistic expression. There can be dire **consequences** if **fundamentalist** groups take issue with a particular art form or artwork. The Jalalabad Yellow House is in effect a conceptual extension of the 1970's Sydney Yellow House, where artists often took an **anti-establishment, avant-garde** approach to art making.

The Yellow House affirms the healing power of art: Taliban leaders in Jalalabad investigated the activities of its artists and decided to give it their approval and protection.

Questions and Activities:

- How can the Yellow House be evaluated through the post-modern-frame?
- What were some key influences on artists working in the Yellow House?

THE BEAST

In 2016, Donald Trump's bid for presidency has dominated the news, inspiring me to revisit the beast theme....the disparity between rich and poor is creating monsters.

- George Gittoes, 2016.

The Beast is an **uncanny** portrayal of a mythical creature. Painted with lively brushstrokes that violently swirl across the canvas, the snarling beast is writhing in a disordered scene of horror. Coinciding with Donald Trump's rise to power in 2016, the context surrounding the production of this painting is significant, and in hindsight we can see it as an image of foreboding.

The saturated orange hue Gittoes used to render the beast is now **synonymous** with Trump's eccentric appearance. The violent scene we see in *The Beast* also foreshadowed the rise in political and social unrest across the United States.

Big ideas: Politics, mythology, violence.

Questions and Activities:

- How does the energetic and loose application of paint reinforce your impression of the image? Use the structural frame to respond to this question.
- Why is the context around this artwork so significant?
- Sketch a mythical creature to represent a contemporary political figure.



The Beast, 2016, oil on canvas, 196.5 x 273.5cm



Two Worlds in Harmony (Sufi), 2018, oil on canvas, 153 x 197.5cm

TWO WORLDS IN HARMONY (SUFİ)

Whilst living and working in Jalalabad, Gittoes met a **Sufi** musician, said to be over 100 years old. The old Sufi sang his traditional songs accompanied by his instrument, the harmonium. The mystical beliefs of the Sufis has led to their **persecution** by extremist groups like the Taliban and ISIS. Unfortunately, one day ISIS fanatics executed the old Sufi who had befriended Gittoes. Grief stricken by his death, Gittoes creating a series of portraits depicting the old Sufi musician.

Two Worlds in Harmony (Sufi) shows a lone figure playing his instrument, surrounded by vivid swathes of warm colour that obscure a landscape

painted in deep cool hues. Overlapping patterns seem to glow from the figure, echoing geometric designs of Islamic art. The brooding landscape that surrounds the figure is offset by the overlaid patterns, which give the painting an **ethereal** atmosphere.

Big ideas: Sufism, friendship, grief.

Questions and Activities:

- How do you feel when you view this artwork?
- What do you think Gittoes is trying to communicate through this artwork? Respond using the subjective frame.
- Activity: create an artwork that represents loss.

WORDS

Gittoes spent 18 months living in Englewood, Chicago - an area rife with gun violence. There he produced the film *White Light*, an examination of gangs and gun violence, as well as setting up another Yellow House. After gaining the trust of the local community, Gittoes created a series of portraits depicting them.

Words portrays aspiring rapper Lil' Dave. It combines a black and white sketch with oils and spray-painted stencils. Bold text spelling out 'DEATH' 'GUNS' and 'WORDS' interrupts our view of the figure, who clutches two pistols which obscure their eyes. Gittoes takes an unconventional approach to portraiture with *Words*, in that the figure is partially masked by text and the weapons he holds - pointing to the fact that his identity is interwoven with guns and violence.

At its core, *Words* is a portrait of a contemporary poet. Where Gittoes uses images to come to terms with his experiences of war, Lil' Dave uses words, hip-hop - contemporary poetry to decipher his environment.

Big ideas: Inequality, identity, gun violence, gangsters.

Questions and Activities:

- How does this work take a post-modern approach to painting?
- How does Gittoes documentary film making inform his studio based art practice?



Words, 2019, stencils, oil on canvas, 152.5x122.5cm

ARTWORKS

ARTIST DIARIES (1-8)

For the last few years, I have been making drawings and observations in my diary notebooks about how I see war as horror and the internal damage it does as being more enduring than the physically destroyed buildings and bodies.

– George Gittoes, 2010.

George Gittoes diaries are a significant component of his art practice. The diaries provide insight into the remote war-ravaged places where Gittoes has worked; people he works with and the artworks he creates. In addition to giving us a glimpse into the thinking behind Gittoes art practice, the artist's diaries can be viewed as artworks in their own right.



Artist Diaries (1-8), 2015-2019, visual diaries, mixed media.

A visual diary is a portable archive for artists to record thoughts, feelings and ideas through writing and drawing. These diaries provide artists with a nest for **incubating** ideas for future artworks. They also serve as personal journals and a space for problem solving artworks as they progress. Whilst writing is one way to document events or clarify the thinking process for artists; drawing is an **observational** approach towards a visual kind of thinking.

Questions and Activities:

- Why are visual arts process diaries important?
- What do Gittoes visual diaries tell us about his art practice?
- Make an entry in your own visual diary combining writing and drawing.



Security, 2020, oil on linen, 168 x 244cm

SECURITY

In the name of keeping us safe from 'terrorists' our government and military intelligence agencies have put us under minute observation. We no longer have rights to privacy with our telephones or emails. Facial recognition, our credit cards and social media allow everything to be tracked and used to control and manipulate us. Surveillance cameras everywhere (even in our personal computers) record our activities.

*In China, people are rewarded or punished on the basis of **conformity** to the will of the Central Government, gauged by 'likes' and such interactions on their iPhones.*

The rest of the world is moving the

same way, with those in Intelligence and Police pressuring for more opportunities to 'crack down on crime and lawlessness'. Drones and robots are being used increasingly as enforcers.

Security is about how the cure can be worse than the threat.

– George Gittoes, 2010.

Big ideas: Surveillance, civil liberties, privacy.

Questions and Activities:

- Using the quote above; evaluate the symbolism found in this artwork, expand on what you think Gittoes is attempting to communicate through this artwork. Use the structural and/or subjective frame.

GLOSSARY

Anti-establishment is the view or belief of one which stands in opposition to the conventional social, political, and economic principles of a society.

Avant Garde is a French word meaning, 'advance guard' or 'vanguard', literally 'fore-guard. They are people or works that are experimental, radical, or unorthodox with respect to art, culture, or society. It is frequently characterized by aesthetic.

Collaboration is the action of working with someone to produce something.

Conformity is the act of matching attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours to group norms, politics or being like-minded.

Consequences is a result or effect, typically one that is unwelcome or unpleasant.

Etching is a printmaking technique that uses chemical action to produce incised lines in a metal printing plate which then hold the applied ink and form an image. Multiple copies of prints can be made from an etched plate to create a printed edition.

Ethereal is lacking material substance: immaterial, intangible.

Fundamentalist - a literal interpretation of 'religious' scripture's, 'ideology or politics.'

Harmonium or Reed Organ, is a keyboard instrument in which the notes are produced by air driven through metal reeds by foot-operated bellows. Sufism - is a mystical form of Islam, a school of practice that emphasises the inward search for God and shuns materialism.

Genocide is the deliberate killing of many people from a particular nation or ethnic group with the aim of destroying that nation or group.

Incubating is to cause or aid the development of something, be an idea or physical being.

Persecution is the hostility and ill-treatment, especially because of race or political or religious beliefs; oppression.

Pop is an art movement that emerged in the 1950s and flourished in the 1960s in America and Britain, drawing inspiration from sources in popular and commercial culture. Different cultures and countries contributed to the movement during the 1960s and 70s.

Sufi also known as Tasawwuf is mysticism in Islam, "characterized by particular values, ritual practices, doctrines and institutions". It is variously defined as "Islamic mysticism", "the inward dimension of Islam" or "the phenomenon of mysticism within Islam".

Surrealism was a cultural movement which developed in Europe in the aftermath of World War I and was largely influenced by Dada. The movement is best known for its visual artworks and writings and the juxtaposition of distant realities to activate the unconscious mind through the imagery.

Symbolism is the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities.

Synonymous is closely associated with or suggestive of something.

Observational is drawing on things that one has seen, heard, or noticed in everyday life.

Oracle is a priest or priestess acting as a medium through whom advice or prophecy was sought from the gods in classical antiquity.

Uncanny is a strange or mysterious, especially in an unsettling way.

If there are other words in the Education Kit that you are unsure about, write your own definition for them below:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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