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Commentary on War Drawings:

During the summer of 2005 I did fifty drawings which were a cumulative response to daily news reports of events around the world. Violence seemed ubiquitous—Iraq, Madrid, London, Russia, Israel—and as it filled the world, so did it fill my consciousness.

The first drawings I did were inspired directly from daily photographs in the New York Times, Then I began to hunt out war imagery wherever I could find it. I sought images that captured the magnitude of violence and that elicited a generalized sense of empathy in me regardless of which specific conflicts they portrayed. It was important to me that the quality of violence superseded the specifics of politics and geography. Finally, I posed my own models in the studio and worked from that imagery.

It interests me that no matter what the source of imagery, the experience of drawing and the results obtained are striking in their equivalence. Photographs of simulated poses in my studio triggered the same response in me while drawing as actual documents from current events; sometimes the most “real” sources resulted in the most abstract drawing, and my studio models provoked the most “realistic-seeming” drawings. Since everything I did was mediated—I cannot say, as Goya famously did in his “Disasters of War” etchings, “I saw this, or “I was there”—what I was really drawing was my own sense of rampant violence. I drew my response to living in a culture and in a period in which images of terror alternately bombard us or are precisely censored and hidden from our view. I drew what I saw secondhand, and what I imagined. It is only in my interior landscape that time is compressed and victims of current events become interchangeable with those from earlier wars. In this landscape violence seems timeless, changeless, and everywhere equally horrible. It is from within this landscape that I make my protest.

The language of drawing is by nature abstract. In lifting my subjects out of the context of their documentary sources I forfeit their concrete power to make pointed moral commentary about specific situations. In return, perhaps this same act of “lifting” or decontextualizing not only raises a fresh empathic response in the viewer but also allows the subjects to take their place alongside other universal and eternal sufferers (Christ, to name one, Kathe Kollwitz’s starving children to name just one other example). If so, it honors them and causes us to pay attention. The language of drawing is also, by nature, esthetic: using marks, surface, texture, and composition to engage the viewer. In its will to immortalize, it employs drawing paper and inks more archival than newspapers do. Does this act of “estheticization” trivialize the content or, confronted with these drawings, do we focus on and absorb things we otherwise would not? Can beauty be the bait to keep us looking when we might rather look away?

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