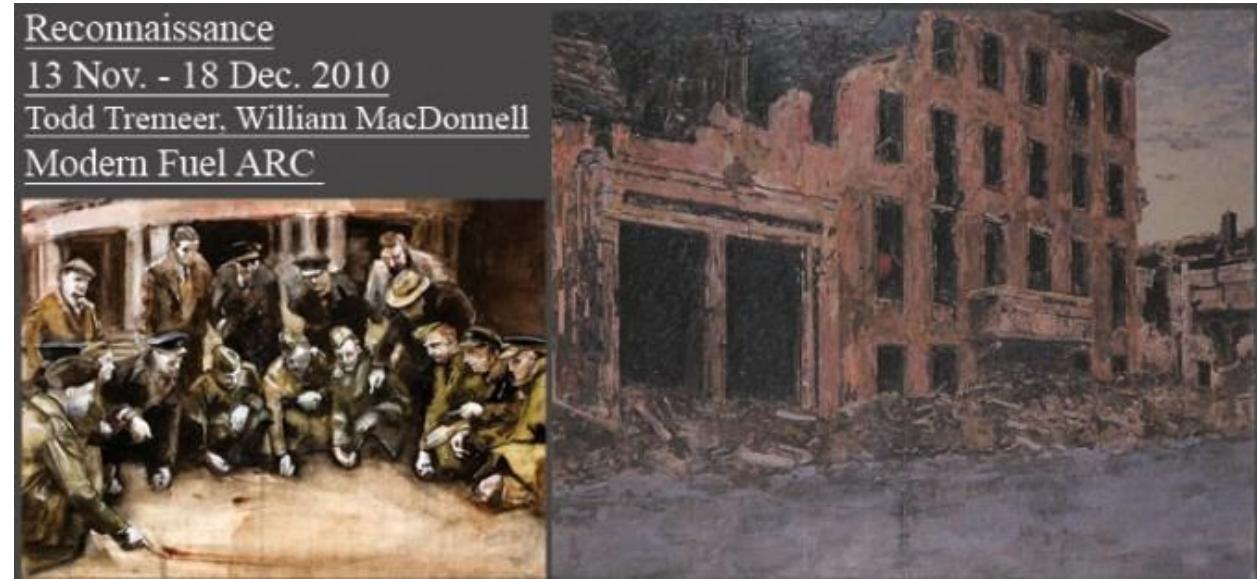


RECONNAISSANCE



In the Main Gallery: Reconnaissance with William MacDonnell and Todd Tremeer 13 November – 18 December, 2010 Reception: Saturday 13 November 2010 @7pm

Modern Fuel Artist Run Centre, 21 Queen St., Kingston ON "Reconnaissance" pairs the paintings and watercolours of William MacDonnell and Todd Tremeer, who each in their own way commemorate military history and complicate its representation and reception. In his large paintings on canvas, MacDonnell visits sites of historical significance and, very often, infamy. As both witness and war artist, MacDonnell brings tranquil observation to locales troubled by conflict, thereby unsettling the visual field. Tremeer's watercolours engage with military history by re-examining its official representations. His "Replay" series redeploy archival images from an undisclosed source on the Internet. His "Action Paintings" engage in a plein-air manner with actual battle scenes, but only as they are represented in war museum dioramas. By highlighting the gaps in his observations, Tremeer examines conventional representations of the history of war and adds another layer of interpretation to that history. The work of both artists sends its viewers on an information-gathering mission that is richly rewarding.

Reconnaissance Photos

William MacDonnell (Kingston, ON) obtained a B.Sc. at the University of Manitoba, a B.F.A. at the University of Manitoba and his M.F.A. at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. He has twice served as a war artist, in Croatia 1994, and in Afghanistan in 2007.

Todd Tremeer (Bowmanville, ON) studied at the Ontario College of Art & Design, obtained a BA at the University of Guelph and an MFA at the University of Western. Tremeer is the 2007 winner of the "Joseph Plaskett Award" for new Canadian painters. Image: (Left) Todd Tremeer, *The Game*, 2008. (Right) William MacDonnell, *On the Wilhelmstrasse, Later in the Day*, 1997.

Exhibition Essay

The work by William MacDonnell and Todd Tremeer in “Reconnaissance” deals with heavy subject matter, military conflict and its representation, in a way that is not heavy-handed. The work raises many questions concerning technology, history, aesthetics, and politics; to provide a pithy response is a challenge. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin wrote, “All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” (*Illuminations* (1969)). With reference to “Reconnaissance,” one could write that all efforts to render war aesthetic culminate in politics, which might be a brief way of formulating what Jacques Rancière proposes in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004).

He suggests that there is an aesthetics at the core of politics that Benjamin left unarticulated when he posed the politicization of art in opposition to the aestheticization of politics. Politics and aesthetics find their junction in Rancière’s concept of “the distribution of the sensible” that describes an orchestrated revelation of what is common to a community and of who gets to participate in it. Rancière writes, “*Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time.*” This quotation can certainly be applied generally to maneuvering in an art world whose language can appear as exclusive as a code, a secrecy that is arguably of utmost importance in politics and warfare. It can also be applied more specifically and less grandly to the strategies and techniques used by MacDonnell and Tremeer in their work.

The works in “Reconnaissance” is political then, beyond the artists’ statements and the positioning of their work, not only in what it chooses to make visible, but also and perhaps most importantly, in what it shows to be invisible. The work in this exhibition by William MacDonnell spans two decades of his practice and encompasses at least a century’s history. As if providing a framework for the exhibition, two of his monumental paintings bookend the gallery: “On the Wilhemstrasse, Later in the Day”(1997), a painting of the blasted façade of Hitler’s Chancellery building completed by MacDonnell after a period of research in Berlin; and “Ruin Upon Ruin”(2010), a similarly evocative ruin that the artist encountered during his recent deployment as an official War Artist in Afghanistan. MacDonnell has traveled extensively in an unofficial role as a war artist, documenting in his paintings sites of conflict around the world. “Reconnaissance” also includes paintings based on his observations of the conflict in the Balkans. Rarely are the signs of warfare highly visible in MacDonnell’s paintings, except as the visual echoes of that conflict in a haunted landscape. Presenting sites of contemplation, the paintings activate a kind of detective work or vigilance in the viewer, who searches for clues in their surfaces and in their titles.

“History Painting, Post Mortem, 15 Januar 1919”(1994), for example, has a title indicating that what might otherwise be merely a mildly grim tourist snapshot of Berlin is in fact a picture of the site commemorating Rosa Luxemburg’s murder. As Grigori or watcher angels are a recurring motif, often hidden, in MacDonnell’s work, it would not be too much of a stretch to equate the perspective of those who view his paintings with that of the angel in the ninth of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (*Illuminations* (1969)), who, turned towards the past, sees one single continuous catastrophe. Whereas MacDonnell has traveled great distances to be proximate to actual scenes of military conflict, Todd Tremeer pointedly exaggerates the distance between his work and the experience of war, which is only approximately rendered. His “Replay” series (2008-9), for example, was produced during a residency in France, where, instead of drawing from the serene landscapes bearing little trace of the devastating wars they endured, Tremeer chose to reproduce archival military images. Found on-line using Google image searches, with keywords such as “soldiers with models” for example, the beguiling images he produced appear with few cues and little information to determine the context for their depicted activities: a soldier painting a model airplane, men hoisting a giant limp tank like a balloon, or a group in uniform huddled for what could be either a strategy session or a game of marbles. These paintings follow on another series of work called “Action Paintings”(2006-10), which depict battle scenes as they are staged in war museum dioramas visited by Tremeer.

In both series, not only does Tremeer foreground the fact that he is presenting the viewer with his depiction of a representation of military history, but also he underscores the incomplete and constructed nature of those representations. Just as the war museum dioramas present a truncated and compressed facsimile of a battleground, Tremeer’s images compress the essential information in compositions that are as striking for what they leave out as

for what they put in. Along with the recent “Detachment”(2010), a troop of paper doll soldiers, Tremeer’s work contributes to an understanding of conflict from a hobbyists or enthusiasts war-gaming and highly-mediated perspective. This perspective is not so much that of Benjamin’s angel of history, but rather of an omniscient god looking on the field of battle with the attitude wanton boys bring to flies. The fact that virtual simulations of war, like the popular video game *Call of Duty*, are currently almost indistinguishable from real acts of warfare is a confirmation of Benjamin’s bitter observation about the aestheticization of politics: that humanity’s self-alienation is such that it can experience its own destruction as pleasurable. Out of respect for the soldiers and his role as official War Artist, MacDonnell has rendered his Afghanistan paintings with a greater degree of verisimilitude. However, they still exhibit a great degree of painterly abstraction, if in a less obvious way than MacDonnell’s earlier, more encrypted landscapes. The deliberate gaps, omissions, and gestural approximations in Tremeer’s work also speak the avant-garde language of abstraction.

In Rancière’s politics of aesthetics, the vanguard of art is understood in two differing aspects: in the military notion of a force that marches in the lead, equipped with state of the art tools to respond to the situation on the ground and prevail; or alternatively, in the aesthetic anticipation of and invention of future forms of life and living. In this regard, viewers will play an important role in “Reconnaissance,” if they can see within the unrealized abstract patches of the work on display an overlooked opportunity or an underdeveloped idea for a new form of life or political arrangement with a greater potential for peace.

Essay by Michael Davidge.