

Holding Our Breath: The Work of Adrian Stimson

by Elizabeth Matheson



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The four-channel video, *Afghanistan, North, East, South and West*, is a good place to start discussing Adrian Stimson's work, given that he experienced this country firsthand. Four screens in a darkened room display footage that Stimson took while researching at the forward operating base in Ma'sum Ghar. The viewer's natural impulse is to read the four directional screens for signs of difference, for the local details that separate the familiar West from the unknown quantity of this troubled location. However, beyond the image of two traditionally dressed Afghanis in the midst of a ball game (with the recorded audio of the ever-present sounds of American television shows intermingled with the occasional call to prayer), it is not as easy as you think given the universal images of the sun rising and setting in the east and west. A desire to search out difference gradually gives in to the inescapable awareness that for many of us, little is known of Afghanistan, let alone the conflict itself. This is a situation that has now become a reality not only in Canada, but also in the United States and Britain. Censorship of war coverage has fundamentally changed the way we perceive conflict and although we may not realize it, we are living in a time where profound images of war no longer exist and therefore media images no longer have the potential to confront the complexities of war.

The representation of war has been part and parcel of the narratives by which human affliction has been communicated, and artists and writers alike have played a tenuous role in this regard. Yet it's fair to say that, unlike glorified or graphic depictions of carnage and conflict, the broader reception of work identified as imaginative has always been somewhat complex. One just needs to think of Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (1977), still acclaimed for its groundbreaking portrayal of World War I, yet still considered a threat, with calls for the book to be banned after thirty-five years in print. In the process of studying archival materials and photographs of a young Canadian officer Robert Ross, the narrator of the novel traces the atrocities and absurdities of war on the front. But *The Wars* is also a novel about a home front in deep psychological crisis that is sometimes felt more acutely on the battlefield. Throughout this ongoing conflict, Ross survives by binding himself to the smallest aspects of life — from the running of coyotes through the prairies to bird songs that can be heard even on a ravaged battlefield field — and in this world gone mad, the young officer, Robert Ross, performs a last desperate act (to spare horses from a fire), and in turn declares his commitment to life in the midst of brutal warfare. Within the nightmare world of mud and smoke of trench warfare, it is the reverence for life, not decay that lingered in the mind of Findley's hero.

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Something akin is at work in *Holding Our Breath*. Much like Findley's prosaic writing, Stimson's practice is concerned with life in a physical sense. Based on the artist's observations at the military bases in Kandahar and Ma'sum Ghar, as well as with conversations with the soldiers on the ground, this exhibition brings together drawings, photographs, video and sculptural installations that explore the ambiguities of war by linking personal history with wider cultural



Installation, Sand Box (2011), Photo Credit: Henri Robideau

and political issues. Although this work reflects on the complex situation in Afghanistan, Stimson deflects the focus away from the truncated newsreel moments to daily life-affirming moments. Charcoal drawings of what appears from a distance to be a bird is an Apache helicopter (well known for its use in overnight raids); an idle dog is actually a military trained bomb sniffer; gestural abstracted lines form a troop carrying a Chinook helicopter, the machinery of ongoing conflict — signs of the latent possibility of violence and even death. In a series of photographs, Stimson articulates the nuances and complications of living in war through images of suspended time at Canadian military bases: a half-finished concrete wall meant to be a rocket barrier; the arrival of a wounded soldier that has interrupted a coffee break; distant abandoned structures—and we are left to wonder what has become of the towns and settlements that surround this fortified camp. Here things don't erode; they are reduced, pummeled — and yet birds still sing ¹. Concurrent with these pieces, in which tension predominates, are five framed works, gentler in conception. Strangely reminiscent of World War I sketches, Stimson's naturalistic pencil drawings as much complement as interrupt one another — fascinating fragments that refuse to add up to a satisfying narrative. Still, the slight differences between the various renderings allow us to understand that the artist really looked at this place and in turn we are no longer the disinterested observer.

Unlike contemporaries who have investigated the media portrayal of the perpetual state of warfare or how others experience the daily realities of violence, Stimson presents conflict from a different perspective. Stimson's personal history — he spent time in the military and his family has long served as soldiers within the Canadian military and historically as Blackfoot warriors — feeds into his ongoing interest in the links between personal, cultural and military identity. Working neither from within nor from outside the system, Stimson seeks to engage the hands-on problematic of war and to engage it with critical proximity rather than distance. Rather than simple patriotism, Stimson's work responds to the violence and conflictual process of colonization and its postcolonial aftermath that he witnesses on the streets in Canada and in military occupied Afghanistan, and which are manifested in his videos, drawings of landscapes, portraits of individual First Nation soldiers, memorialization of individual soldiers and in his own writings.

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A remarkable series of entries taken from the artist's journal before, during and after his trip have been assembled and printed, thus re-connecting two sites of human experience — the war in Afghanistan and the Canadian home — which the media insists on falsely separating. “As a First Nations person, I am interested in our shared history with the military, how it was used against us as First Nations (Oka), or any deemed *radical group* and is a noble calling for many Indigenous persons,” he wrote. “It is a space of discipline, of mind, of body, controlled yet aware of the tenuous nature of life.” ² In a recent interview, Stimson recalls shortly before his departure: “Everyone conveyed their concern and love at the same time. My father, a military man, could hardly speak when he wished me well. It was like everyone took a big breath when they heard and never let it out until I was back.” ³ Attention to the



Master Corporal Jamie Gillman 2010 (2011–12) and Corporal Percy Beddard 2010 (2011–12) 10,000 Plus (2011), Photo Credit: Henri Robideau

individual specificity of lived experience is a guiding principle in Stimson's work. An evocative example of this approach can be found in the portraits of individual soldiers, *Master Corporal Jamie Gillman* 2010 (2011–12) and *Corporal Percy Beddard* 2010 (2011–12). Hovering above eye level, these enlarged and transformed portraits feature two individual First Nations men wearing military uniforms, potentially evoking heroic narratives and a romantic sensibility. But these militaristic images have been altered. The original painted backdrops of base fortifications and helicopters hovering in the Afghan sky have been saturated with a dark red ground, which suppresses specific details and visual information⁴. What remains of each image suggests state and military compliance while at the same time being wholly individuated, as if these subjects are about to step out of history, to capture their brief moments of subjectivity, to seize corporeal re-presentation, and to resist conceptual erasure that is nothing less than death: the obscure and the unnameable.

Stimson's work is ambitious in its refusal to accept any easy solutions to the theoretical problems that attend the representation of conflict, while at the same time continuing to insist that communication — a real communication — must be attempted. While theoretically influential (Stimson's performances and installations have been noted in the self-other postcolonial Canadian discourse)⁵, many of his works emphasize how the moral centre of our universe is defined by nature. Nature as an aesthetic, as a moral form, becomes an entirely necessary cultural act in Stimson's eyes, something the present world needs to process. The significance of this cannot be underestimated in a world where democracy and the right to devastate land are somehow conflated. His piece *10,000 Plus* (2011) refers to the number of First Nations, Inuit and Métis who have served in the Canadian military. It consists of four monochromatic rectangular paintings (red, yellow, black and white) with earthly offerings of sage, sweet grass,



Memory (2011), Photo Credit: Henri Robideau

tobacco and cedar on them — creating a resonance between present and past, art making and militarism, prayer and hope — drawing attention to the experiences and histories that are too frequently silenced. Here as elsewhere, Stimson utilises natural materials and traditional images not to produce ‘another’ reality, but to reintroduce life-affirming details often buried, denied, and mystified by society.

In his writings, Stimson orders daily occurrences into small signs of life. “Waiting for the sun to rise over the jagged peaks,” he writes. “A rooster crowing in the distance. A woman in a white shawl rides her bike. Crisp cool morning air.” In trying to understand and represent the devastation of war from a visual artist’s point of view, Stimson took on the hardest thing of all — to see what is really there. Later in the day he writes, “I just visited the Ma’sum Ghar memorial on the hillside commemorating the casualties of war. I am feeling sad. I am feeling disconnected from the peacefulness of the countryside and the realities of fortification. It just doesn’t feel real but it is. It is this disconnect that I am interested in.”⁶ This disconnect between ‘*peacefulness of the countryside*’ and the ‘*realities of fortification*’ can take us back to another preoccupation of Stimson’s — the industrial and systematic decimation of the bison as analogous to the cultural genocide of indigenous peoples on the Great Plains. This theme appears early on in his body of work, most notably in his retelling of western settlement as *Buffalo Boy*, a queer, camp persona infused with



Memory (2011) [detail], Photo Credit: Henri Robideau

personal narrative and wicked humour that riffs off customary illustrious figures of the western frontier such as Buffalo Bill and other western mythmakers.⁷ What characterizes many of Stimson's projects most significantly, however, is its profound respect for the created world.

In one visual coup, Stimson's earlier installation *Beyond Redemption* (2010), with its powerful presentation of a taxidermied buffalo (upon a red base) surrounded by anthropomorphic forms created by bison robes hanging on crosses, demonstrates that, as humans, our positions as the architects of civilization is by no means assured. Along the walls of the gallery are historic images of the bison slaughter alongside

elegiac white paintings with black graphite images of nuclear events, raising many historiographical issues with captivating, quiet virtuosity. While fears of nuclear warfare have somewhat abated, the idea that the earth is about to suffer a serious trauma (possibly through environmental disaster) is as strong as ever. The fragility of the earth is further evidenced by a series of paintings depicting human interventions on the land such as mining and industrial farming, as well as the ubiquitous forms of oil wells and pump jacks that mark the plains. A video taken by Stimson shows a spectral close-up view of a white buffalo, a significant prophetic reference for many Plains First Nations. How much meaning can a video hold? How much depth is there in this close-up digital rendering of a young buffalo? Inexhaustible meaning and daunting depth, it turns out, when you know how to look, and try to understand this deeply symbolic representation. For the return of the white buffalo is not simply considered a cautionary warning for humanity, but a blessing. This consciously or unconsciously taps into a widely held societal sentiment, rarely articulated but widely felt, that it may be in fact a relief to have the wild grasses take over again. Other paintings depict apocalyptic landscapes with a leaping buffalo calf and a grown buffalo contemplating the viewer with an air of bemusement and indifference. Stimson may take seriously the imagery of a traumatized landscape, but he understands enough about the end times to tease it at the same time. This is not a simple recuperation of history or a dystopian vision of what may come; it makes the past, present and future seem real, heavy with dark truth, yet not so burdensome that there isn't room for levity or room to breathe.⁸

In many of his new works in *Holding Our Breath*, Stimson returns again to explore situations where physical or logical contradiction appears as a new way of creating a certain balance between two opposed directions. In the floor piece *Sand Box* (2011), two kinds of space interpenetrate one another: the inside and the outside, the constructed and the natural. The idea for *Sand Box* (the title carries the double meaning of play and the lesser known military slang for deployment to the Middle Eastern front) originated from a series of photographs that document the barbed wire landscape — a familiar material in Afghanistan that divides military occupied territory, standing against the forces of destruction and disorder. At each of the black wooden structure's corner, Stimson placed posts employed to string razor wire along the perimeter of the work. The work's material abrasiveness asks for careful movement, and the empty sand it protects can only fully be understood when a viewer stands in close proximity to the barbwire. Standing closely, one cannot help but notice that the base of *Sand Box* has been marked red, a colour here that the artist has used to reference the colours in the Afghan flag but a colour which has often signified colonial power for the artist in previous works.⁹ It leaves one to wonder, what is really at stake in this territory of sand? This implication of territorial boundaries — between the home and warfront, military classifications and natural resources, albeit expressed in minimal, almost conceptual terms — posits other physical boundaries that control space like reserves and other cordoned-off places within many former colonies, including Canada. Does Stimson give this importance?

In *Memory* (2011), Stimson has laid out eight rows of small, painted, white wooden blocks edged with red paint, arranged like a graduating class photograph on the wall. Each block refers to a soldier casualty. Yet, imagery is withheld. Instead, a description of each soldier is marked by a caption listing their name and their age at the time of their death. The more the work withholds its information, the more one feels compelled to pursue it — either by re-reading the names of the soldiers more closely or by trying to discern the work’s serial logic. Voluntary intimacy is the result—a disarming closeness that the media of the same obitutorial content does not allow. An empty, black, student chair placed solemnly in front of the work invites other associations. Suddenly the title *Memory* recalls a conversation with the artist about his residential experience while looking at school albums from residential schools — with rows and rows of student pictures, casualties of abuse¹⁰. It could be argued that Canada’s historic policy of protecting, civilizing and educating aboriginal peoples at any cost has been replayed in Canada’s deployment to the rich resource-laden country of Afghanistan. No longer peacekeepers or protectors of the environment on the front, it is perhaps not that surprising that the denial, misrepresentations and omissions around resources and the treatment of Afghans in their own country echo colonial pasts and wrongdoings.

It is at the end of his book Timothy Findley makes us aware of the interconnectedness of all things in one final photograph of the young Canadian officer Robert Ross — not at the front but in his own country Canada — with his sister riding a horse. On the back of the photograph is written: ‘Look! You can see our breath!’ ‘And you can.’¹¹ And so here the visual imagery of war has been transformed — from stereotypical to something that we might not have a word for. If one accepts the notion that, as individuals, we can reflect upon, react to, and even alter the events in large systems such as war then Findley’s concluding remarks make sense. On this criteria, the work of Findley, and the work of Stimson, are united in their purpose; they suggest what might be if one holds onto the most important tangibility. Both forms of art are striving, by different means, to hold onto life.



10,000 Plus (2011) [detail], Photo Credit: Henri Robideau

Notes

1. “Birds in the morning are universal. The sound of sweet chirps, as if nothing was wrong or mattered.” Adrian Stimson, “Holding our Breath”, *BlackFlash* 28.1, September 2010, p.39
2. *Ibid.*, p.36
3. Charles Hamilton, “Artist in Afghanistan: Up Close to the Violence of War”, *CARFAC Newsletter* 22:6, July/August 2010, p.11
4. For their initial presentation at Neutral Ground Contemporary Art Forum, these works were painted with a distinctive foreground, middle ground and background. At the time of writing, these works have been altered and retouched with red. From a conversation with the artist in March 2012.
5. Lynne Bell, “Beyond Redemption” in *Beyond Redemption*, Mendel Art Gallery, 2011; Ryan Rice and Carla Taunton, “Buffalo Boy: THEN AND NOW” in *Fuse Magazine* 2, March 2009, pp.18-25 and Lynne Bell, “Buffalo Boy at Burning Man: Camp, Mourning and the Forgiving of History in the Work of Adrian Stimson” in *Canadian Art* 24, June 2007, pp.44-48.
6. Adrian Stimson, “Holding our Breath”, *BlackFlash* 28.1, September 2010, p.43
7. For more discussion by this author on the role of humour and protest in the work of Adrian Stimson, see “Back Talk: protest and humour”, catalogue essay for a 2006 group exhibition *Back Talk* curated by Elizabeth Matheson, Dunlop Art Gallery www.dunlop-artgallery.org/exhibitions/archives2006_01.html
8. When asked how the artist felt about viewers perceiving the work in *Beyond Redemption* as surprisingly humourless and museological (with more than likely a preconceived notion of Stimson’s practice as pure camp), Stimson replied that in fact these apocalyptic works are his most humorous works to date. From a conversation with the artist in March 2012.
9. From a conversation with the artist in March 2012.
10. Interview with the author; May 2010; in this interview, Stimson discussed residential imagery in his work, including the potent imagery of residential class photographs.
11. Timothy Findley, *The Wars*, Penguin, Toronto, 2005 p.198