

Public Pictures, Private Lives



Battle after Uccello
2007
Watercolour
150 × 260 cm

Uwe Wittwer works with images downloaded from the internet. Three of his large watercolours are based on PAOLO UCCELLO's paintings of *The Battle of San Romano*, which hang respectively in the National Gallery, London, the Uffizi, Florence and the Louvre, Paris; but their actual location is less important than the fact that they are available on the net alongside millions of other pictures posted by people from all over the world and from every walk of life.

The internet is eminently seductive because it is so accessible – you don't have to be a traveller or a gallery goer to view old masters – and because it is a constant source of surprise. While searching for information on the Dutch seventeenth century painter PIETER DE HOOGH, Wittwer accidentally came across a site dedicated to snapshots taken by American troops in Vietnam. At the other extreme from UCCELLO's glorifications of war, these banal mementos sparked off another series of watercolours about war or, rather, its portrayal.

More than five hundred years separate the two sets of pictures which, in effect, are polar opposites – official propaganda, on the one hand, personal reminiscence, on the other. UCCELLO's paintings were commissioned in about 1440 by the influential Florentine, BARTOLINI SALIMBENI to

decorate his palace. They transform a minor skirmish between Florentine and Siennese forces into a courtly display of equestrian prowess involving knights decked in the full ceremonial armour actually worn only for tournaments. Centre stage in the London picture is the mercenary NICCOLO DA TOLENTINO, whose incompetence nearly lost the Florentines the battle. Yet he is portrayed as a conquering hero while the butchery and chaos of battle are choreographed into an elegant tableau in which even the dead contribute to the ordered design.

Taken in quieter moments, the GI's informally framed photographs tend to focus on peripheral events that make up the daily routine of military life. A helicopter takes off, an officer's mess stands empty, a field scattered with military hardware is glimpsed through the window of a jeep and blindfolded Viet Cong suspects await their fate.

Over time, both sets of images have deteriorated. The silver leaf on UCCELLO's panels has oxidised to a dull grey and, some forty years on, the Vietnam polaroids are losing their colour. As personal memories fade, their ability to provoke vivid recollections also diminishes; as the Vietnam war recedes further into history, one day these pictures may appear as exotic as UCCELLO's decorative riders and carousel horses. But although the condition of the originals is deteriorating, ironically their evocative power appears to increase as the events they record become more distant; there is, it seems, an inverse ratio between immediacy and emotional affect.

Working with jpegs – impoverished versions of the degraded originals – Wittwer explores these changes. On screen, he transforms the images into black and white and dramatically simplifies them before projecting them onto watercolour paper. Watercolour is a remarkably apt medium in which to explore such phenomena, since it requires one to think in reverse, as it were – to work on the dark areas while leaving the paper (or creamy washes covering it) exposed as highlights. ›I don't focus on the obvious, but on the things around it‹, says Wittwer. ›I'm painting around the light, working in the negative.‹ With his attention directed towards areas from which information (light) is absent, it is not surprising that the artist occasionally inverts the originals altogether, by flipping them into the negative.

Battle after Uccello is simplified to the point where the figures become as two-dimensional as Indonesian shadow puppets, an association that emphasises the theatricality of the original paintings and acknowledges the immateriality of Wittwer's electronic sources. Black and white areas are equally important, so the composition becomes a dialogue between light and dark – the basic ingredients of vision and of picture-making – as well as a conflict between warring factions.



Ship, Camp
Field, Camp
Forest Piece, Camp
2007
Watercolour
56 × 76 cm

Wittwer transforms the Vietnam polaroids into near abstractions and gives them generic titles such as *Ship*, *Field* and *Forest Piece*. To read them you have to step back and getting further away, literally and metaphorically, reminds you that the events to which they refer are fading from individual and collective memory. And, appropriately, the level of detail that makes personal recollections so vivid is absent from these stark generalisations in which faces are reduced to masks of anxiety and landscapes look charred as though fire-bombed.



Wall Piece, Camp
2007
Watercolour
180 × 150 cm

Wall Piece, Camp shows a photograph of GIs swimming in a river in Vietnam taped to gold-embossed wallpaper that has long since become dirty and discoloured. This picture-within-a-picture is utterly banal, yet amazingly eloquent. The photograph seems to have been up for some time, since the blacks have faded to grey and the Sellotape at its corners has yellowed. Who put it there and why? A veteran wouldn't need this daily reminder of past experiences; on his return, he would more likely put his photos in an album or display them properly. The old fashioned wallpaper suggests an elderly person and the choice of scene implies a desire to imagine the loved-one relaxing rather than under fire. The thought of someone clinging to this memento long after the event introduces a keen sense of melancholy; the soldier who took the picture must surely be absent – missing or even dead. Evoking the anguish of separation, the watercolour also addresses the inadequacy of this little keepsake in ameliorating the ongoing pain of loss.

Wittwer's subject is not war per se nor the way we picture it; nor is it memory and the way the meaning of images changes physically and conceptually as the events they refer to recede into history; nor is it the unreliability and inadequacy of visual information to encapsulate human experience – though all these things inform and enrich the work. Similar concerns have been explored by artists such as LUC TUYMANS. CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI has addressed the pain of loss and the power of images and objects to evoke or memorialise the dead and numerous artists from SHERRIE LEVINE to DAVID SALLE have appropriated images in order to raise questions about authorship and the ownership of pictures once they enter the public domain.

These topics are all germane to the work, but Wittwer is not nostalgic. He does not hanker after a time when concepts such as authenticity, originality and idealism were not yet an issue; in this regard, he is not a postmodernist nor a sceptic. ›We are no longer mourning the loss of modernist idealism, but trying to build something new‹, he says. ›I'm not concerned with what lies beyond MALEVICH's *Black Square* – with endless discussions about abstraction and post-abstraction or with the death of painting. Something has been lost forever, but that provides the opportu-

nity to start something new – something fascinating and vibrant. We are now in a situation to mix things up, to explore how information is transported from one person to the next and transformed by new media. We have to learn to handle this kind of information and art takes part in the discussion by bringing high and low art together and translating banal, indifferent or corrupted internet material into the beautiful and sublime.‹

Wittwer transforms his source material into images that have a disquietingly sinister beauty. Comparisons between recent and earlier work reveals greater levels of refinement, as looser and more gestural brushmarks are replaced by further restraint and delicacy, suggestive of increased irony and detachment. And as the work becomes more unapologetically beautiful, it emphasises the paradox at its heart.

Virtual images are translated into watercolours whose palpable physical presence and hand-made immediacy are crucial to their meaning. Look carefully and you notice how the paint soaks into the paper, seeping from one fibre to the next to collect in pools of velvety darkness whose margins appear porous and negotiable. This gives rise to a distinct sense of ambivalence; one can't be sure whether the images are emerging from the paper into greater clarity or sinking into the surface and losing definition – whether they are coming into view or disappearing from sight.

Images are revealed to be fundamentally unstable and their meaning open to interpretation, but this makes them no less desirable. In fact their very ambiguity, elusiveness and ephemerality are among their most interesting attributes. Wittwer recalls, as a boy, writing messages in lemon juice which became visible only when the paper was heated. Appearing on screen one minute and gone the next, electronic images are as fleeting as lemon juice encryptions, which is part of their appeal; another is the way they collapse difference by reducing everything to the same level and the same time frame. Simultaneity has become commonplace; daily life is now as fundamentally surreal as the chance encounter envisaged by LAUTRÉAMONT, of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table. As we flip from newspaper to magazine to hoarding, and from film to television to computer screen we are exposed to an endless sequence of bizarre juxtapositions and jump cuts.



Wall Piece
2007
Watercolour
180 × 150 cm

In *Wall Piece* a fairy-tale glimpse of far-off conflict infringes the womb-like privacy of a dark interior. Isolated on a black ground an exquisite landscape appears on a television screen; closer inspection reveals it to be a river (the Tigris) with, in the distance, a smoking town – Baghdad immediately after the first bombs have been dropped by American planes. The surrounding darkness is a web of vigorously painted brushstrokes whose velvety-rich density was achieved by applying ten coats in several different blacks; by contrast, the television image is a luminous gem in

which limpid blue water can be seen flowing beneath pale skies just beginning to fill with smoke. On the one hand, there's the comforting immediacy of haptic experience and, on the other, the ethereal charm of electronic information. And there is no way of gauging the reality of the television picture as it hovers in space, like an apparition.

›What is reality and what is fiction?‹ asks Wittwer. ›What is going on in our brains when we zap between channels – from a chat show, to a murder mystery, to the news? What is the difference between a pornographic website and real sex, and are the two getting closer? What is the difference between a painting, a photograph and a digital image? As soon as you put down the first brushmark, it is electrifying in its individuality and physicality in a way that photography never is.‹



Still Life negative after van Aelst
2007
Watercolour
180 × 150 cm

The power of the brushmark is paramount in *Still Life negative after van Aelst*. WILLEM VAN AELST specialised in still lifes featuring a lavish world of plenty; tables groan under mountains of fruit and dead game. Wittwer has reduced this excess to a basket of grapes and a few peaches attached to a leafy branch which float on a ground dappled with blue-grey brushstrokes. Rapidly painted in watercolour, the brushmarks denoting this summary abstraction dance across the paper with the lightness and elegance of Chinese calligraphy.

Seventeenth century Dutch and Flemish painters have long been a source of fascination for Wittwer. Celebrating the peace and prosperity that followed the bloody separation of the Calvinist north of Holland from the Catholic south, GERARD TERBORCH shows members of the wealthy merchant class writing letters, playing music or sharing a drink in the lavish surroundings of their own homes – enjoying the trivialities of untroubled domestic life.



Interior negative after Terborch
2007
Watercolour
180 × 150 cm

But Wittwer savages his source material. In *Interior, negative after Terborch* a woman playing a mandolin has been reduced to little more than a dark shadow, while her audience has been turned into wraiths whose leering, mask-like faces are reminiscent of the deranged citizens that people JAMES ENSOR's paintings – as though revealing domestic harmony to be a sham, or exposing the presence of dark forces that threaten it from within or without. This ghostly scene is juxtaposed with watercolours derived from family snaps posted on a Croatian website. Dating from the 1950s to the 1970s, the period of Wittwer's childhood, they show the contemporary equivalent of TERBORCH's scenes of family wellbeing – smiling couples, happy family groups and children playing. The artist used to take his own photographs, but now prefers to use pictures from the web. ›It gives me more distance‹, he explains. ›I don't want any psychological engagement with the images.‹



Bride negative
2007
Watercolour
180 × 150 cm

The face of *Bride, negative* has been blacked out and simplified into a mask as though disfigured by grief; she sits awkwardly clutching a bouquet that provides the only patch of light in this otherwise gloomy picture. The flowers decorating the hem of her wedding dress inject a timid whiff of hope into the joyless scene. ›It's all about light‹, explains Wittwer; but since he speaks softly with a Swiss accent, I hear ›It's all about lies‹, which is equally true since translation and transformation are central to his practice.

Why, though, should his two main subjects be war and family life and the assumption that the images we have of both are either partial or entirely fictional? I search for an explanation and discover links that, although tenuous, are no less intriguing. Wittwer was born and brought up in Switzerland which, like the Low Countries, is divided into catholic and protestant areas where different languages are spoken. When TERBORCH was celebrating the calm that followed the rift in Holland, the thirty years war that similarly tore Germany and Switzerland apart had only just come to an end. Little wonder, then, that Wittwer views with scepticism the blessed stability that TERBORCH portrays in his paintings. The impact of war and other historical events on private lives is an issue that Wittwer explores again and again, through oblique rather than direct references.

Cut to World War II. The artist was born after the war in a country that steadfastly maintained its neutrality; but throughout the war his father lived in Berlin, pursuing his profession as a classical singer. Although he was born in Northern Germany, he had a Swiss passport that exempted him from active service and he didn't leave the city until 1945. In Zurich he had to abandon his earlier career to work in a factory, but Wittwer recalls him singing SCHUBERT in his spare time to his wife's accompaniment – a scene reminiscent of a TERBORCH painting. His only comments about the war years were that a few bombs dropped on Berlin; only when Wittwer visited the city and saw the devastation, did he realise what an understatement this was. ›It's a mystery how people can bear such extreme situations,‹ he says. ›Why didn't he leave earlier?‹



Interior negative
2007
Watercolour
180 × 150 cm

Interior negative shows a man and woman having breakfast; painted in the negative, their heads resemble skulls. The decor dates from the 1930s and, says Wittwer, is typically fascist. The room is dominated by a heavy chandelier that hangs ominously overhead, as though to remind us of the way that political and cultural values infiltrate the very air we breathe. Red liquid resembling blood drips from the table to suggest both vulnerability and guilt; no one, it seems, is immune from the way public events penetrate walls and invade personal spaces – both literally and metaphorically.

The monochrome image floats above an expanse of sky blue as though it were a mirage. This is the kind of room in which the artist's father might have lived with his German partner and it's tempting to see Wittwer's fascination with both images of war and pictures of interiors as an attempt to understand the complex interplay between private lives and current affairs that no one has been able to escape throughout history. But now that pictures of distant conflicts invade our living rooms on a daily basis, this relationship forms an inextricable part of the narrative of ordinary life.

›Now that we have an endless stream of images on television and the internet,‹ says Wittwer, ›we have to think again about what an aesthetic system might be. What is an image, how does it function and how is it connected with memory? And why, since we have too many images already, do artists produce even more? These are important questions and we have to answer them again and again.‹