THESIS

MALICIOUS INNOCENCE

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ABSTRACT

MALICIOUS INNOCENCE

My work represents an exploration of warfare through the lens of children both in and out of the combat zone. Because warfare is such a multifaceted enigma, many of its aspects become overlooked in favor of grandiose narratives that speak towards its glorification or abhorrence. In the past, art was used to ennoble warfare as a kind of sport for the aristocracy, while legitimizing conflict through the actions of the ruler and state. However, beginning in the nineteenth century, there was a shift in propaganda that focused more intensely on the role of the individual soldier. By the twentieth century the focus had shifted largely away from the valor of individuals, instead focusing ever more on the abject qualities of modern warfare. These narratives all share a common theme that is primarily focused on the actions of individual soldiers or units, their heroism, and the horrors they endured. Yet children often play an ancillary role in many of these narratives, either providing a source for pity, or showing desperation while emphasizing the loathsomeness of an enemy. For this reason, I have chose to tackle the subject from a different angle – that of the child's involvement both in play as well as combat. By exploring the often overlooked role of children both in actual conflict as well as the social roles of children on the home front in times of war I hope to examine not only the effects of battle on the child, but also the cultural conditioning of children to further perpetuate the cycle of violence through the reinforcement of societal norms. To

achieve this I have been playing off the duality of chaos by juxtaposing imagery of children at play with imagery of war and its consequences.

Throughout this exploration my work has made several dramatic aesthetic shifts in an effort to communicate this sense of chaos – psychologically as well as physically. By combining traditional, indirect painting methods with contemporary photorealism, I hope to create visual tension between areas that are fully rendered as well as areas that are under developed and deliberately obscured. I have also begun the use of photo collage in the creation of my paintings in an effort to further destabilize the visual field and to bring an additional air of uncertainty to the narrative. Furthermore my palette has shifted away from a traditional, limited palette to incorporate a variety of colors. These help to emphasize the more unsettling aspects of the subject. By incorporating these elements of painting into the work I hope to represent a sense of disorientation that echoes the abstruseness of war itself.

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"He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future." – Adolf Hitler

MALICIOUS INNOCENCE

When we think of children and warfare, two connotations might immediately

come to mind. First and foremost might be the view of children as innocent beings,

victims to the whims of adults; the second more bluntly might be of the child soldier. The

former is the more prevalent narrative in various media on the subject, eliciting

sympathy for the victim, whereas the latter draws somewhat more indignation,

abhorrence and pity. While it is true that the majority of children who endure the

sufferings of war are victims, there are still many more who are active participants. From

time immemorial, children have been used by armies across the globe. Children have

been represented on the current battlefields of the Middle East, in Vietnam and

Cambodia, Korea and both World Wars to name but a few of the many conflicts which

tallied their ranks. While the extent of the child's involvement in various conflicts might

be lesser known it is not the only aspect of involvement that is over looked. As I stated

before, there tends to be a primary focus on the narrative of the child as victim, such as

those of children surviving the Holocaust or the London Blitz. Simultaneously the

narrative of the child soldier often remains relegated to documentary formats or brief

references to crazed fanaticism. However these narratives never address the notion

that the act of play and imitation help to perpetuate the cycle of warfare by cementing

traditional social roles, especially in males, as well as support the industrial and media

complexes trying to persuade them towards conflict in the first place. My work tries to

blend these three narratives forms together in a manner that conveys my own interests

in the obscure nature of (often deliberately concealed) narratives of war.

While warfare itself is a multifaceted enigma that cannot be interpreted through any single guise, so too are the complexities of the child's relationships to war. Throughout my work I have explored themes of war and its consequences through the lens of children. In this manner I hope to work off the duality of chaos found both in play and in conflict. In doing this I have juxtaposed children in the act of playing soldiers with scenarios of actual conflict, in order to examine the disparities between children playing in relative safety and children living in war zones. By blurring the lines between play and conflict, my paintings examine the role that children play not only in actual conflict, but also in the perpetuation of warfare.

Military art of the past is almost ubiquitous in its glorification of warfare, as a means to legitimize the violence of the state. While this is common throughout most of history, it isn't until the French revolution (1789-99) that the prevailing focus of military art began to change. Following the outbreak of revolution, the French found themselves involved in two costly wars and in desperate need of soldiers. Thus a new manner of propaganda was required to shift public consent and create an identity between self-interest and the interest of the state. This shift effectively created what we know as "patriotic militarism."[1] This new narrative form dictated the need for more documentary and celebratory modes of representation. The key change that occurs in this work was to remove the glory traditionally bestowed upon the nobility in military artworks and to place it upon the common soldier, which helped to cultivate a myth that there had been a leveling of power that might allow them to rise through the ranks to prominence.[2]

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[1] Susan Locke Siegfried, "Naked History: The Rhetoric of Military Painting in Post-revolutionary France." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 75 (1993): 235.

[2] Siegfried, "Naked History," 251.

Although this work brought attention to the common soldier, it nevertheless retained an air of military glorification. It isn't until the beginning of the twentieth century that military artwork truly began to reflect the horrifically abject qualities of warfare in response to the barbarism of the World Wars, which subsequently made it difficult to romanticize the war experience.

While one might be able to see representations of children in military artworks of the past, their roles are largely that of their time, as drummer boys and the like. This is due in large part to the ancillary role of most children in the armies of history. However the rise in actual child combatants is largely a product of the World Wars. During these great wars vast numbers of combatants were needed, while there was simultaneously a break down in the rules governing the distinctions between soldiers and civilians. As a result children became ever increasingly present on the battlefield as victims and actual participants in unconventional conflict. Although our most immediate thoughts are drawn to more contemporary conflicts in which children have been used as soldiers; World War Two stands out as the first wide scale use of children as soldiers as well as for its associated fanaticism, which children are so easily susceptible.

While the theme of children and war is sporadic throughout the decades following World War Two, it has nevertheless gained momentum in recent years. Although children don't often appear in military artworks, they haven't been left out of war narratives altogether. These child narratives primarily follow two major themes, the child as witness/victim and the child as perpetrator.[3] While the child witness/victim narratives are more predominant, they are commonly used to illicit sympathy by exploiting themes

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[3] Maureen Moynagh, "Child-Soldier Narratives, and the Problem of Form." *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2011): 40.

such as the Holocaust.[4] Interestingly many of these victim narratives focus on the plight of "friendly" children under occupation or attack while neglecting many of the same dangers inflicted on "enemy" children and civilians by those perceived to be in the right. By primarily focusing on the narrative of the "innocent" being attacked by a "malicious" force, as is the case in many narratives concerning children, it becomes possible for blame to be shifted away from the "victorious" in order to conceal their own atrocities. By eliminating any moral ambiguity from the war narrative, it becomes possible to promote the idea of ones own righteous position and the maliciousness of those in opposition.

In this manner the witness/victim narrative is not only used to support sympathy for children in various conflict situations, but also to evoke indignation for the enemy for waging war on innocent non-combatants in the first place. This leads us towards the second most prominent narrative on the subject of children and war; the child as perpetrator. Interestingly enough these child soldier narratives often work in the same manner as that of the victim. The child soldier is often referenced as a way to promote the immorality of the enemy. Although the child soldiers themselves are often viewed as victims, they often do not elicit sympathy, rather pity.[5] This pity stems from the perception of the child as being manipulated, all the while acknowledging their potential role in heinous acts.[6] Because of this the child soldier occupies a somewhat more convoluted narrative.

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[4] Mary Engel, "Children and War," *Peabody Journal of Education*, Vol. 61, No. 3 *The Legacy of Nicholas Hobbs: Research on Education and Human Development in the Public Interest: Part 3* (1984): 71.
[5] Moynagh, Child Soldier Narratives," 42.
[6] Moynagh, Child Soldier Narratives," 41.

While the child victim and perpetrator narratives are the most common, they often gloss over other prevailing child narratives of warfare. Because the nature of war leads us to naturally focus on the suffering inflicted on or by children, it becomes easy to overlook the role of children away from the front lines. In this manner American children offer us an interesting insight into this topic. While in most theaters of war children balance on a razor edge, between witness, victim and participant, the children of the Unite States occupied a unique role. While American children were not subject to the horrors of war first hand they nevertheless played an important part in the United States war effort. In addition to performing tasks like gathering scrap metal during the Second World War, children were also the main patrons of military toys and movies whose profits often went back into the war industry. In this way the American child helped to bolster the military industrial complex, which aimed large amounts of propaganda at them, and in turn perpetuated the cycle of violence.[7]

While military patriotism was at an all time high during the World Wars, the decades following saw a dramatic shift in public opinion. Because of instances of waning support, the military industrial complex has often been forced to manipulate public sentiment.[8] This propaganda has many forms, from toys and film that glorify militarism, to constant news coverage and even the regimentation of procedures for personal defense.[9] Similarly, films, TV shows, comic books and toys helped to cement traditional social expectations on successive generations of youth. As Ardyce Masters points out in his essay on the subject, "toys play a significant role in the maintenance of

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[7] Patrick M. Regan, "War Toys, War Movies, and the Militarization of the United States, 1900-85." *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (1994): 45.

[8] Regan, "War Toys, War Movies," 46.

[9] Diana Taylor, "Afterword: War Play." *PMLA*, Vol. 124, No.5 (2009): 1890.

the dominant culture."[10] Changes in the toy industry following the Second World War altered seasonal buying habits and made toys, military ones in particular, a ubiquitous staple on store shelves.[11] Just as a boom in toy soldiers had helped to sustain militarism during Edwardian England leading into the First World War, so too did toys help to sustain the militarism of the United states during and after the Second World War.[12] Furthermore, popular cartoon shows and games; such as cops and robbers as well as cowboys and Indians help in the development of the child's sense of the "enemy."[13]

This leads us to the child's predominant role in the fostering of militarism through the act of play. Toys, games, and movies help the child to recognize dominant social norms.[14] While dolls have traditionally upheld the expectations of the feminine within our society, war toys and games have been used to cement masculine expectations. While some argue that such things might contribute towards a kind of numbing towards warfare, others claim that such things are merely capitalizing on prevailing public attitudes.[15] Despite the difference in opinion on the matter, it does not detract from the fact that there is a correlation between the proliferation of war toys and film during times of heightened militarism.[16] Although there is this correlation it does not change the fact that war games are a ubiquitous feature in childhood games around the world. It could be argued that *play* is the *work* of children as it helps them to socialize and develop the

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[10] Ardyce L. Masters, "Some Thoughts on Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: War Toys and Post-Reagan America." *Journal of Psychohistory* vol. 17 (1990): 320.
[11] Joel Best, "Too Much Fun: Toys as Social Problems and the Interpretation of Culture." *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1998): 200.
[12] Best, "Too Much Fun," 202.
[13] Regan, "War Toys, War Movies," 47.
[14] Regan, "War Toys, War Movies," 48.
[15] Regan, "War Toys, War Movies," 49.
[16] Regan, "War Toys, War Movies," 52.

norms of any particular society. However war games can also provide an outlet for violent energy through the fantasy of power projected onto the world the child is otherwise powerless in.[17] In dealing with aggressive and destructive wishes in conjunction with reparative and loving ones, children are able to come to terms with anxiety and better learn how to manage it.[18] While the issues at hand may vary between children according to their specific backgrounds, these modes of play nevertheless help children to interpret their surroundings.

War toys and games have come under increasing attack in the last few decades as they are viewed only in terms of their violence. The crusade against military toys has been especially prevalent under the auspice of banning toy guns and violent video games. Such arguments cater to a loss of innocence with tendencies towards violence and a general desensitization to the abject.[19] Such claims are uncorroborated and miss a larger point concerning the ubiquity of such games. Even if you were able to remove all toy weapons and violent video games, children would still find a way to enact such games. By making a gun from a stick or simply using the pistol hand gesture, the child's imagination comes into play in order to perpetuate these modes. Thus so long as there is warfare within the child's frame of reference - whatever that might be - they will continue to perpetuate the cycle of militarism.

Although film media has embraced many child narratives revolving around war, it isn't until the latter half of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first

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[17] Graham Dawson, "Playing at War: An Autobiographical Approach to Boyhood Fantasy and Masculinity." *Oral History*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1990): 47.
[18] Dawson, "Playing at War," 50.
[19] Nick Nillson, "War Toys: The European Experience." *Children's Environments Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 2, *Toys: Research and Applications* (1984): 23.

centuries that artists have begun to address the child's role in wartime in a direct way. Artists such as Roy Lichtenstein translated the war experience into a manner recognized by children through his use of the comic strip in pop art, while Norman Rockwell explored the idea of patriotism on the home front in support of the soldiers abroad with his paintings of the Boy Scouts. Still other artists have chosen to take much darker and more disparaging approaches towards the subject.

Artists such as Gottfried Helnwein and Ronald Ophuis have made their careers exploring the abject aspects of war and the child's relationship to it. Gottfried Helnwein's painting *Epiphany III (presentation at the temple)* 1998, represents one of the artist's greatest commentaries on the roll of children in conflict (figure 1). The painting, which depicts a young girl laying on a slab, surrounded by old men with mutilated faces, stands as a testament to the Germanic vision of the child in the interwar years of the 1920's and 1930's. On one hand the men who surround the girl, represent the survivors of the First World War whose youth had been torn away from them, leaving them disfigured both outwardly and inwardly. On the other hand the young girl laying on the slab, presumably dead, represents the sacrifice of youth that Germany would commit again in the Second World War. However there is a deeper level to the girl's symbolism. She feels more contemporary within the image and thus represents the sacrifice of the German people's innocence as a whole for the crimes of the Nazi regime. Helnwein, himself born is Austria, struggles with what it means to be German in the post Nazi era. This sense of guilt as well as this loss of a "cultural innocence," due to the actions of the

Schutzstaffel, predominate many of his works, as he tries to remind a society of a dark past they would sooner forget.[20]

While many of Helnwien's works represent a complex narrative that weaves between the lines of guilt, memory, and the loss of innocence; *Epiphany III (Presentation at the Temple)* embraces the child-as-victim narrative. The work of Ronald Ophuis on the other hand wholeheartedly embraces the extreme abject and the narrative of the actual child soldier. In his painting *The Bet, Boy or Girl, Sierra Leon 2001*, 2012, Ophuis represents a scene described to him by a former African child soldier from Sierra Leon (figure 2). The young man told Ophuis of a game the child soldiers would play, in which they would find a pregnant woman and take bets on the gender of the unborn child, before hacking the fetus from the mothers womb, killing both. The painting itself is largely a barren street scene with a retainer wall, a corrugated tin shed, and jungle in the background. However limited the stage, the scene is expansive, each figure is life size and their cluster on the right side of the canvas draws the eye immediately away from the negative space. The scene depicts three adolescent soldiers restraining a nude and struggling pregnant woman. Simultaneously a fourth adolescent soldier is preparing to cut open her stomach with a buck knife. While the scene itself is extremely visceral, so too is the quality of the paint giving the piece an extra physicality for the viewer. Ophuis' works are shocking to say the least and tend to occupy a very uncertain moral standpoint. His work deals with a wide range of narratives that come from survivor tales and first hand accounts, which he gathers through interviews before reenacting with live models in the studio. Ophuis himself

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[20] Diana L. Daniels, "Introduction" in *Helnwein: Inferno of the Innocents,* 9-13
    Sacramento: Crocker Art Museum press, 2011: 10.

believes that knowledge of history is important and that our current modes of remembering it are flawed by, for example, not including imagery and text about children's involvement in war crimes.[21]

Although Helnwein and Ophuis' work represent aspects of the more common narratives surrounding children and war, they go beyond them by breaking away from the usual staunch morality, instead offering the viewer ambiguous scenarios, where they are forced to decide what is right and wrong. Although they break the normal paradigm their work still presents the child as a direct participant in conflict thus blurring the line between the loss of innocence and the corruption of innocence.

In my own work I instead look at the role of play and imagination in conjunction with the tumult of war in order to deal with how the child is prepared for war in the first place. By juxtaposing children in the act of play, with the consequences of war, I hope to represent the thin line between where innocence and morality breakdown, in addition to the child's natural tendencies towards cruelty that results from unrefined rectitude. Like Helnwein and Ophuis, my work melds twentieth century history with the contemporary. Though both artists utilize contemporary themes in their respective repertoires, historical narratives never the less predominate many of their themes on war. Likewise my work throughout my investigations has drawn inspiration from a plethora of resources - from the art works of the past and present, film and documentaries, memoirs, history books and photography - with a particular interest in the obscure. Like Ophuis, My painting *Fear Shall Crush Fear*, 2014, was inspired by the first hand

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[21] Mare Valli and Marcherita Dessanay, "Ronald Ophuis" in *A Brush With The Real: Figurative Painting Today* (London: Laurence King Publishing ltd. 2014), 182-3.

account of a veteran soldier (figure 3). The painting was inspired by an interview in the BBC's documentary *War of A Century: When Hitler Fought Stalin*, in which an ex-Russian NKVD officer describes being part of a blocking detachment at the battle of Moscow after Stalin's infamous Order 227. Stalin's order stated that there was to be no more surrender of Soviet territory and that any man who surrendered or retreated was to be executed as a coward and a traitor. It was the officer-in-question's job to kill any Russian soldiers he saw running in his direction. He stated that they "used fear to crush fear."[22] In other words they used the irrationality of being killed by your own men, to outweigh the fear of being killed by the enemy.

While this interview was the initial inspiration, the painting itself plays on a somewhat different situation. My painting *Fear Shall Crush Fear* depicts a group of six children playing soldiers, reenacting a firing squad. While five of the children take aim with their stick riffles on the right of the canvas, their commander on the left holds his stick sword at the ready to give the signal to fire. Each of the children are decked out in newspaper costumes, offering an air of comedy to the otherwise grim situation. The children occupy an empty space amongst the bombed out ruins of buildings. The middle ground is occupied by three figures pleading with the commander for their lives. While the scene itself is somewhat comic in its absurdity, it still holds dark connotations. The ruins of buildings evoke the sense of war ruins and also hold the connotation of the ruins of Russian cities during the Second World War. The figures in the painting hold two separate but somewhat equal connotations. On the one hand both the child executioners and those to be executed are appealing to a sense of futility,

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[22] Vladimir Ogryzko, "Spiral of Terror," Pt. 2 of *War of A Century: When Hitler Fought Stalin*, DVD, written by Laurence Rees, (United Kingdom: BBC Video, 1999)

hopelessness and irrationality. The figures of those to be executed were sourced from an image of a firing squad line-up following the Warsaw Uprising (August – October 1944). The figure is the only one in the original photo to be shown pleading for his life. By repeating the figure within the painting, I hope to echo the anxiety and hopelessness in his face. In this manner the condemned are caught in the futile act of begging for their lives, ultimately showing the last vestige of life trying to outweigh the irrationality of being killed by their own. At the same time, the figures of the children represent these qualities in a different manner. Sourced from a photo dating to the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), the children are most certainly reenacting something that they likely witnessed. I chose the image not only for the children's actions but for their costuming as well. Likewise the gullibility of children to believe anything they are told adds an additionally malicious element to the painting. Despite the plea for life the children remain resolute in their actions. Furthermore the fact that the children have dressed up in this kind of absurd, make-believe style of newspaper uniform adds to the idea of the children's own irrationality. Similarly the costumes hold the additional connotation of illogical intent by representing a kind of irreverence towards the seriousness of the situation.

In addition to interpreting personal narratives of war, some of my works deal with much more direct historical themes. My painting, *Effluvium*, 2015, is such an example (figure 4). The initial purpose of this painting was to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the first use of chemical weapons on the battlefield by the German army in 1915. The painting itself depicts a very small child wearing the German spiked army helmet of the First World War, with his head down and his arms raised. Billowing up

before the child is a plume of toxic yellow smoke symbolizing the mustard gas deployed by the German army. For me the painting holds several interpretations. First of all the child in the helmet represents the militarism of the German state at the time as well as the willingness of said state to resort to the recruitment of very young adolescence. Additionally the child's gesture while symbolizing this unleashing of toxic gas also holds the connotation of frustration and anxiety. The child almost has a defeatist look, while also possessing an air of extreme confidence. Additionally the child, while belonging to a certain period, represents not only the lost generation of The First World War, but that of his own generation which would be sacrificed during the Second World War. Similarly, the child represents the loss of Germany's cultural innocence through the use of poison gas during both World Wars that helped to stain its honor into the present.

While *Fear Shall Crush Fear* and *Effluvium* deal with very direct narratives of the war experience, my painting *No Surrender*, 2015, offers a more confused narrative constructed from a variety of contextual sources used to blur the line between time and place (figure 5). The painting depicts a young boy wearing combat fatigues with a bandaged head sitting in what appears to be an aftermath, smoking a cigarette. Besides the boy is a pile of partial mannequins lying around before the ruins of a church. Above the boy a pair of arms are up-stretched in the motion of surrender, while a banner reading the opposite is draped across one of the surrendering hands as it dissolves into the cast shadow of the church ruins. In the background the clouds in the sky are lit up by a still raging inferno from the battle that had just taken place. This painting offers a rather complicated reading. On the one hand, there is the juxtaposition of the obstinate and surrendering gestures. On the other, the juxtaposition of the idea of the actual child

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soldier with the child playing make-believe. The scene feels timeless. In order to convey this confusion, imagery from the Vietnam War and the Second World War was used. Additionally, the non-specific mannequins were used to symbolize the dead in this fantasy.

Although *No Surrender* blends various sources, it still relies on certain historical contexts. In contrast my most recent painting deals with the subject of contemporary children in the war zone and blurs the line between play and actual violence. My painting, *Hostage*, 2016, is comprised entirely from images of children from the recent conflicts in Syria and Iraq (figure 6). The painting primarily focuses on a young girl who has been injured in some way as she stairs coldly out at the viewer. The image of the girl originally came from *The Atlantic* magazine's contemporary photojournalist suite on the war in Syria. Her head is bandaged while her cloths are disheveled and bloodied. To the girl's left, on the right of the painting a young boy is holding her by the neck, with a toy gun in her face as he leans forward to gaze at her worry. Behind the boy lays another male child. His face is cut off by the edge of the canvas, revealing only his bloodied mouth as he lays prostrate on the ground, presumably dead. In the background of the painting another boy is immerging briskly from brightly colored smoke, wielding a toy AK-47 pointed in the direction of the dead child on the ground. Once again the piece can be read in multiple ways. While the images of the boys with guns were taken from images of war play, the images of the other two children came from actual victims of the conflicts in Syria. In this manner the children address a fine line between violence witnessed and violence reenacted. Additionally the painting touches on the violence against women in the Middle East. The girl who appears to

have been brutalized, perhaps even molested, is now being threatened with death. In this manner the work echoes the current plight of female rape victims throughout the region, who often endure unjust penalties for levying charges against their attackers. The girl's eyes scream to the viewer for help despite her otherwise calm, if not shocked demeanor.

In addition to exploring a new line of inquiry conceptually, this body of work represents a major turning point in my work. In the past, the work was completely beholden to traditional, indirect painting methods. The paintings presented in this thesis strive to break down those methods and combine them with contemporary ways of building an image. *Fear Shall Crush Fear* attempts to strike a delicate balance between levels of development and obscuring of information within the piece. Throughout the process, paint was still built up indirectly, but work halted on certain areas before others. Areas such as the background and the figures on the periphery of the canvas were only worked to a certain degree, while retaining a somewhat more unfinished quality. These areas were additionally layered over with multiple layers of transparent glazes to produce a kind of dark haze. While this haze acts to emphasize the grimness of the situation, it doubles as an obscuring agent that conceals information within the painting. Only the three central figures of the painting are painted up to a higher level of detail. The haze surrounding these three figures as well as there contrast to the rest of the image creates a kind of myopic effect which somewhat resembles a gun sight. Similarly the most prominent newspaper hat within the composition bisects the canvas at the absolute center acting almost like the cross hairs of a riffle scope. In this way the

painting holds the added connotation that the children standing on the firing line are themselves there against their will.

The painting *Effluvium* also yielded some nice results in the way of technical experimentation. While still built indirectly, utilizing a similar glazing method to obscure out certain things, the approach to this painting was much more direct. The initial lay in of paint was done with a much heavier application and blurred to establish the faded atmosphere of the piece. The next layers were similarly laid in before being selectively blurred to emphasize the quality of focus. From there obscuring glazes were added to subtly adjust the tone of the painting. Many of these were then worked into the surface in order to vary their individual effect within the finished piece. Then the brighter color of the gas was built up through successive layers of direct scumbling. The major take away from this piece was a general loosening of the application as well as an over all simplification of the process.

Throughout this process of experimentation, I have looked to contemporary artists for technical insights, namely Gerhard Richter and Justin Mortimer. Gerhard Richter is best known for his photo realistic approach. For Richter the photograph isn't elevated to the status of painted totality, thus it retains its own physicality, its own sense of reality and plausibility.[23] Richter's painting *Aunt Marianne*, 1965, embodies this reality and possibility as well as having a personal connotation to the artist (figure 7). Richter was born in Dresden, Germany in 1932, surviving the downfall of the Nazi regime and bearing full witness to the horrors of war. The painting *Aunt Marianne,* represents a personal tragedy within Richter's own family, adding a sinister air to a seemingly sweet

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[23] Pier Luigi Siena, "Gerhard Richter: Introduction." In Gerhard Richter Paintings, 1. Bolzano: Museion, 1996.

painting of an ordinary snapshot. Richter's aunt had been diagnosed with schizophrenia as a young girl. Under the Nazi eugenics program she had been forcibly euthanized as an adolescent. Although Richter never knew his aunt personally, he grew up with stories of her. Richter's painting of the snap shot of his aunt emphasized the quality of faded memory. The painting, which depicts his aunt as a young girl, sitting on a blanket with an infant, is painted in a blurred manner. For Richter this blurring operates in two ways. On the one hand, it represents a faded and obscured memory of his aunt. On the other hand the blur, which is predominant in Richter's photographic work, appeals to the idea of the photograph being itself a tangible object and in some way its own reality.[24] While warfare is represented in the work of Gerhard Richter, it is not a major theme throughout his repertoire. My interest in his work stems almost solely from a technical perspective. Richter's use of the blur in the painting of photographic images is especially appealing and I have adapted it selectively into my works to create varying degrees of emphasis.

While Richter's work is an inspiration to me, the work of Justin Mortimer has done more to help me depart from my own personal rigidity. Although Justin Mortimer's work does not deal with children, it does deal with warfare and the abject. His work primarily addresses the Balkan Wars of the 1990's, and recent civil unrest and human catastrophes across the world. His paintings are often very bleak and dark, punctuated by extreme bursts of toxic color. His work also layers meaning to the point of opaqueness where nothing is even remotely clear. He does this in order to confuse the sensibilities of the viewer and push them into the morally ambiguous roll of witness and

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[24] Rachel Haidu, "Arrogant Texts: Gerhard Richter's Family Pictures." In *October Files: Gerhard Richter*, 152-167. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009: 164.

perpetrator. He has been a major influence on my work. His painting *Plantation*, 2014, depicts an ambiguous figurative scene at twilight (figure 8). The right hand side of the painting is dominated by four disembodied monochromatic figures. Behind the figures is a tree-line revealing the twilight sky. The figures stand before a grouping of trees fading into the blackness of the left side of the painting. The scene is illuminated by a bright yellow flare, revealing only this small portion of an otherwise wider composition. The figures in *Plantation* seem to be up to something sinister. The only figure with a face is seemingly detained by two disembodied arms and a body without a head, while another beheaded figure prepares something in the background. To further confuse the narrative, Mortimer has obscured parts of the figure group with out-of-place balloons. Although the scene is unsettling, its ambiguity raises interesting questions as to its interpretation. Despite the narrative uncertainties, *Plantation* offers a variety of appealing technical nuances. Mortimer's technique strikes an incredible balance between extremely underdeveloped areas and those that are highly built up and textured. Much of the background is comprised of dark, sketchy under painting that is built over with small bursts of extremely thick paint in areas of detail. Additionally his use of limited, yet extremely bright color, in combination with a monochrome palette creates further tension in the work. By blending these aspects with the deliberate over working or omission of information, Mortimer hopes to tackle information within the paintings in the manner with which he feels it is handled by contemporary media. Additionally he utilized photo collage in the creation of his images, often working back and forth, editing between the collage and the painting itself. [25]

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[25] Justin Mortimer, "Texts," Updated 2014. http://justinmortimer.co.uk/justin-mortimer--

Much like Mortimer, my works have begun to utilize photo collage in the construction of images. By doing this I am able to construct my own narratives, while blurring the lines between the contexts that the individual images originally retain. In this manner photo collage allows me to shift the narrative perspective further away from the tangible. Whereas military art before the nineteenth century focused primarily on the nobility, the art that evolved between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries began to focus ever more of the commoner, eventually coming to value his first hand experience. Although photo collage detracts from the shift towards the first person in the early twentieth century, it nevertheless allows for a more convoluted narrative to form that plays of the way in which information is now processed. Additionally I have begun to play with various levels of development within the painting, as well as the deliberate obscuring of information to control the overall narratives of the pieces. Furthermore, my palette has shifted away from a traditional limited palette dominated by earth tones, to incorporate an array of color in order to present a more child-like quality to the subject while juxtaposing the often serious nature of the paintings.

While my process is still evolving, these modes of working offer an exciting avenue for growth. It is my hope to continue to blend the techniques I have developed in order to create more work that combines the confused and chaotic elements of conflict with the obscuring of information that takes place in the construction of war narratives. By juxtaposing images of children playing war with those of its consequences, I not only hope to examine the dualities of chaos in play and conflict, but also the duality of the children's experiences during times of war. By looking at the inequity of those children

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who glorify war through play in relative safety with the children who reenact what they

have witnessed or participated in, I hope to draw light onto the reasons behind the

perpetuation of such extreme violence.

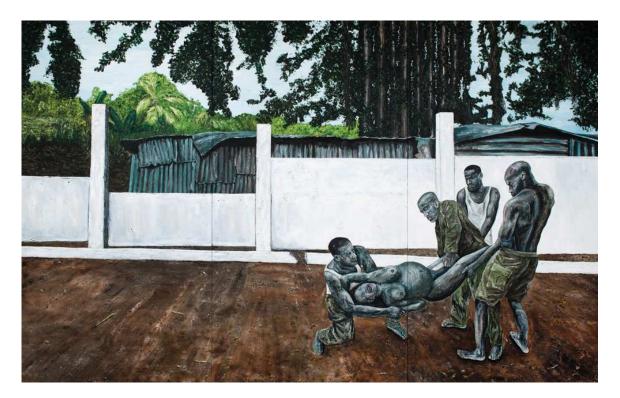Fig. 1, Gottfried Helnwein, *Epiphany III (Presentation at the Temple)*, 1998, oil and acrylic on canvas

Fig. 2, Ronald Ophuis, *The Bet, Boy or Girl, Sierra Leon 2001*, 2012, oil on canvas, 340 x 540 cm

Fig. 3, Sam Swihart, *Fear Shall Crush Fear*, 2014, oil on linen, 4' x 6'

Fig. 4, Sam Swihart, *Effluvium*, 2015, oil on linen, 11" x 14"

Fig. 5, Sam Swihart, *No Surrender*, 2015, oil on linen, 22" x 30"

Fig. 6, Sam Swihart, *Hostage*, 2016, oil on canvas, 36" x 48"

Fig. 7, Gerhard Richter, *Aunt Marianne*, 1965, oil on canvas, 120 x 130 cm

Fig. 8, Justin Mortimer, *Plantation*, 2014, oil on canvas, 180 x 220 cm

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