



# MONTAGE

*In the Crosshairs:  
Intersections  
of Art and War*

Curated by  
Jaime May  
and Anna Heineman

Sponsored by AHS and the  
University of Iowa School of  
Art and Art History

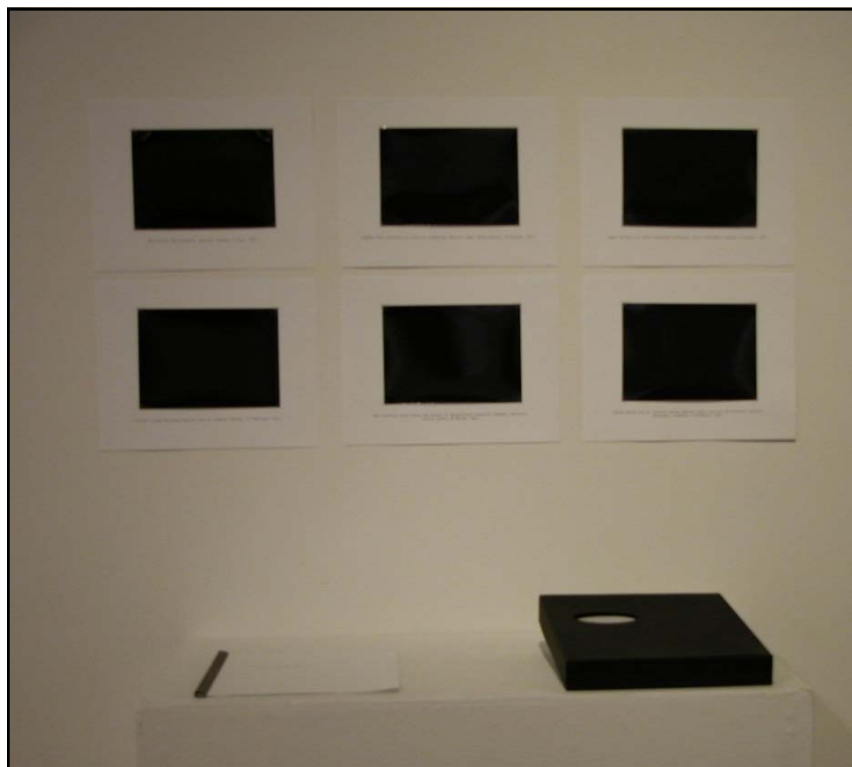
Presented in  
Art Building West,  
The University of Iowa,  
March 3, 2007-March 9, 2007

The theme of art and war is a sensitive and often volatile subject that provokes a diversity of responses, reactions and interpretations. As the very first exhibition to run concurrently with the Art History Society's annual student symposium, the topic of art and war could not be a more appropriate subject given our current political position in the Middle East. This exhibition was designed to act as an artist's forum in which a breadth of topics and perceptions surrounding the theme of art and war can be engaged. Existing within the critical space that comprises the crosshair between what is made visible in the media and what is rendered invisible, this show seeks to give voice and form to the perspectives that often run counter current to the "truths" promoted by popular culture.

David Riep examines the mechanics of photography and the limitations of photographer as artist in his conceptual piece, *Namibian Troops in Kinshasa, D.R.C., 16 August, 1998*. While some works included in the exhibition address our nation's current involvement in the Iraq war, Riep's photographic series highlights battles that have often been excluded from the western media spotlight, in this case, wars fought in Africa throughout

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**Fig. 1:** Dave Riep, *Namibian Troops in Kinshasa, D.R.C., 16 August, 1998*, photography on paper, 8.5" x 11".



the twentieth century. Riep's work reflects what is seen and what is left unseen in a literal manner, as well as within the guise of Western news makers.

Britta Urness's richly textured oil painting, *Desired End-States* depicts soldiers performing combat drills in shallow waters. Utilizing a repetition of forms and pattern, Urness's piece conveys the state of anonymity with which individuals are rendered once committing themselves to a life in the armed forces. Urness's faceless figures lack distinguishing characteristics, emotion or any trace of humanness, taking on a cold, mechanized quality as they move together seamlessly, like a well-oiled machine. According to Urness, "this painting could be happening in Normandy, Vietnam or modern day China." Serving as a metaphor of all wars, Urness brings to light the cold, depersonalized, robotic means imperative in the achievement of a "desired end-state."

Jonathan Johnson's multi-media video piece, *Letter of Sympathy*, focuses on the human costs of modern war. Documented and processed through databases and paper forms within minutes of being killed or wounded in action, Johnson utilizes a replica of the form letter template used by governmental agencies to inform families of their loss. Set up on a laptop computer, a disembodied hand changes little else than the name



**Fig. 2:** Brita Urness, *Desired End-States*, oil on canvas, 3' X 3'.

**Fig. 3:** Jonathan Johnson, *Letter of Sympathy*, multi-media video, 12" x 8" x 8".



of the subject and addressee of each "sympathy" letter. The depersonalization of those lost in battle is poignantly articulated in Johnson's piece. Treated as nothing more than a cog in the military machine, Johnson shows us in very startling terms the extent to which individuals willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for their country are in return regarded as an expendable and replaceable entity.

Inok Kalkwarf combines her role as artist and mother of a soldier in her sculptural piece, *Enduring Freedom National Guard Monument for Afghanistan*. Kalkwarf's piece brings an unparalleled sense of personal reality and identity to the seemingly faceless soldiers sent overseas, while also paying homage to the stoic families that await their safe return. Comprised of a bronze plaque mounted on stone brought back from Osama bin-Laden's temporary hideout, the piece honors her son and her son's unit, the 133<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Iowa National Guard who served with distinction in Afghanistan in 2005. Her son is indexically referenced by the presence of his worn army fatigues and combat boots placed inconspicuously behind the memorial piece. In contrast to the detached manner in which our country typically views soldiers, Kalkwarf sees these young soldiers as nothing more than naïve innocents sent to slaughter for a cause driven by the political and monetary desires of the powerful few.

Bombarded by images of war in the Middle East, it is easy for American audiences to become desensitized to the horrific



**Fig. 4:** Inok Kalkwarf, *Enduring Freedom National Guard Monument for Afghanistan*, cement, brick, brass, metal, and phototransference, 36" x 48" x 2".

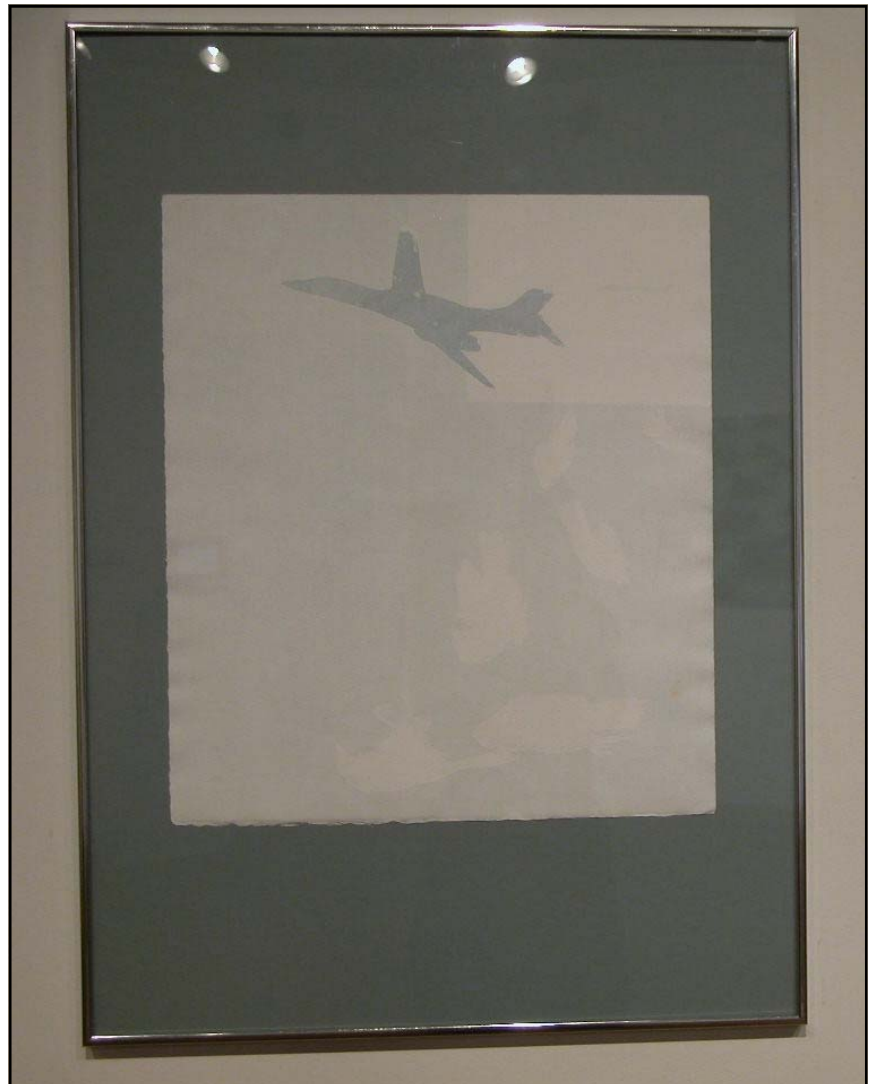
reality of those living amid the mortar fire. Appropriating the charred remnants of a bombed out car, Jennifer Meyers' installation piece, *Attractive Nuisance* was intended to bring a physical reality to the detached war images that pervade Western news reports of our current involvement in Iraq. Symbolizing of a chaotic moment of death, injury and terror—the burnt out, twisted metal is a ubiquitous reminder of the constant potential for sudden and random violence for those surviving in Iraq.



**Fig. 5:** Jennifer Meyers, *Attractive Nuisance*, door of a Sedan vehicle, 3' x 3'.

Meyers' simple proposal of placing this object on the lawn outside the Art Building West would have given individuals passing by the opportunity to consider what it might be like if the reality depicted on the evening news became a reality specific to our own daily lives. However, referred to as an "attractive nuisance" which would attract and possibly harm curious neighborhood children, the University of Iowa's Risk Management department denied permission to exhibit this sculpture. Rather than including the sculpture in its entirety on the campus lawns, we incorporated fragments of the car into our exhibition space in an attempt to reference the thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians killed by detonating vehicles.

Nicole Donnelly's *Litmus Test* is a visual culmination of the artist's internalization of all the news media surrounding the war in Iraq, as well as other battles happening around the world. In contrast to the noise and destruction typically associated with a



**Fig. 6:** Nicole Donnelly, *Litmus Test*, monotype, 18" x 24".



**Fig. 7:** Jonas Olson, *Tank*, oil on canvas, 20" X 20".

B1 fighter jet, Donnelly's aircraft appears almost ghostly against a sky of washed out, subdued tones. The points of origin and destination of the fighter jet is left ambiguous as it hovers silently, almost innocuously over the heads of an unspecified population. According to Donnelly, "although *Litmus Test* is a quiet image, it hopefully brings attention to the brutality and sadness of war."

By contrast, Jonas Olson's oil painting simply titled *Tank* examines the very realistic need for military protection and support. Olson reasons that "instruments used for war can certainly lead a viewer to an avenue of aggression, violence, and death but within that context there is also the interpretation of strength and protection. It is the latter in which I prefer to dwell." Olson believes that every confrontational situation will produce an aggressor and a defender. "No matter how much one may despise war, the weapons used are a necessary defense from the enemy," Olson states. In his depiction of a small tank held literally in the palm of a disembodied hand, Olson makes visual metaphor to the NRA adage: "it is not guns that kill, but those who handle them."

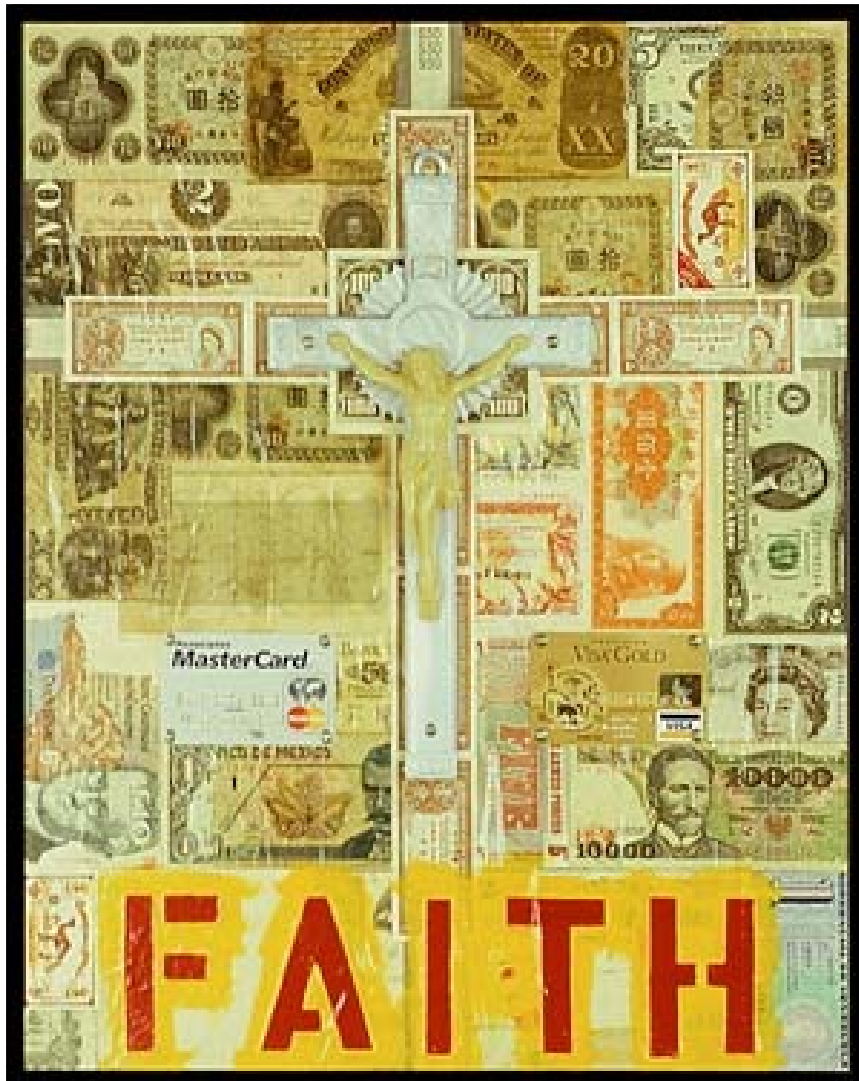
Terry Rethje's confrontational three-dimensional piece, *Hinges* explores Western principles and belief systems that are manipulated and used to justify the implementation of aggressive

**Fig. 8:** Terry Rethje, *Hinges*, wood, steel, and aluminum, Open 68" X 62"; closed 45" X 41".



military force. Inscribed with both religious and political phrases that are considered to be foundational to our sense of national identity, Rethje questions whether or not such ideals can ever be fully obtained in our day to day lives. According to Rethje, “there is always that moment of truth when we measure our actions beside our imagined ideals, and our hypocrisy is made evident.” As though standing in front of a mirror, we see the bold, capitalized, interchangeable lettering that will either form the word “adopt” or “abort.” Issuing an ultimatum to his audience Rethje demands that we either adopt these ideals into daily practice or abort them.

Along similar lines, the artist known as “Christian Dubya Wright” declares, “I believe that one of the primary functions of contemporary art and artists, is to dissent.” Wright’s collage of paper currency, credit cards and a plastic Jesus is intended to reflect the manipulation and reinterpretation of iconography that is so often used to “brand” nations, corporations and religious institutions. Comprised of a loud, acrid color palette, and combined with an eye-catching lacquered sheen, the title of the



**Fig. 9:** Christian Dubya Wright, *Faith*, acrylic on canvas board with paper currency, credit cards, and plastic Jesus, 16" x 20".

work, *Faith* is printed in large lettering at the base of the cross upon which a plastic Jesus is crucified. Having protested the Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq in the streets of San Francisco and Washington D.C., Wright's work functions like a megaphone, rallying his audience and demanding us to reconsider the signs and symbols we base our beliefs and justifications so firmly upon.

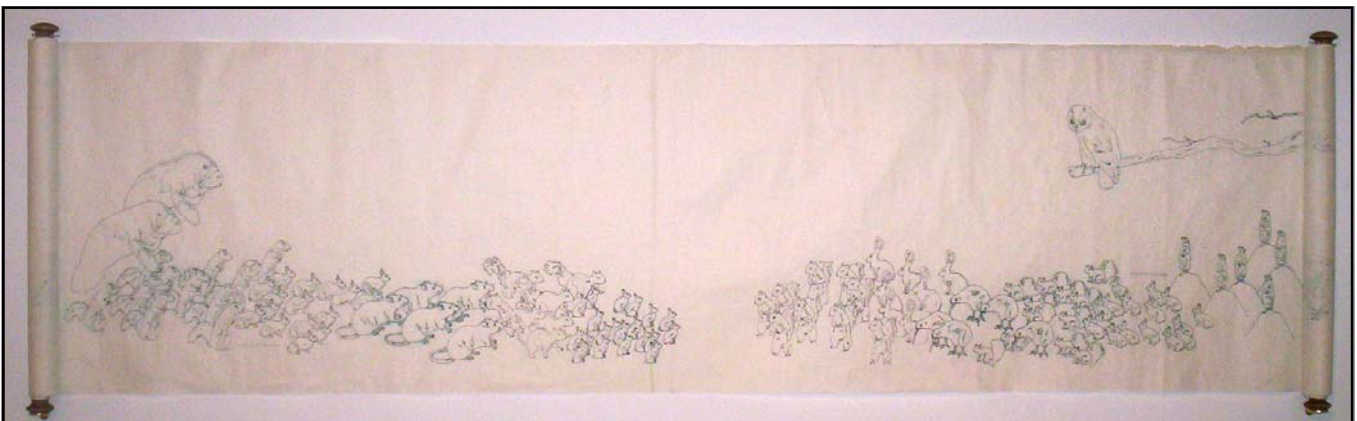
Joshua Haringa's stop motion animation sequence, titled *The Clap*, introduces a vibrant and humorous, albeit critical element to the show. At first glance, the piece appears whimsical and childlike, with brightly colored pastel forms melding into new forms in a fluid motion. For Haringa, humor is important to his overall artistic work aesthetic. Interested in provoking an "initial curiosity," Haringa's work is intended to capture the undivided attention of his audience, bringing them into his cartoonish world with the objective of appealing to his viewers at various, dynamic levels. Poking fun at the proliferations of

**Fig. 10:** Joshua Haringa, *The Clap*, video animation, video screen, multi-dimensional.



religiosity, militarism, and self-congratulatory applause that have precipitated from the events of September 11, 2001, Haringa provokes pointed questions and dialogue, and not, necessarily any answers.

Jessica White also employs the iconography of childlike innocence in her work, *The Great War*. Spanning nearly six feet in length, *The Great War* depicts a meeting of animal characters sketched delicately onto a fragile, antiquated scroll. Highly evocative of Richard Adams' classic novel, "*Watership Down*," White creates her own moralizing tale using images of children and animals as metaphors in her investigation of western definitions of "right" and "wrong." According to White, "in every war or conflict there are at least two sides: those who are good versus those who are evil." *The Great War* seeks to explore the



**Fig. 11:** Jessica White, *The Great War*, silkscreen on paper, 22" X 70" .



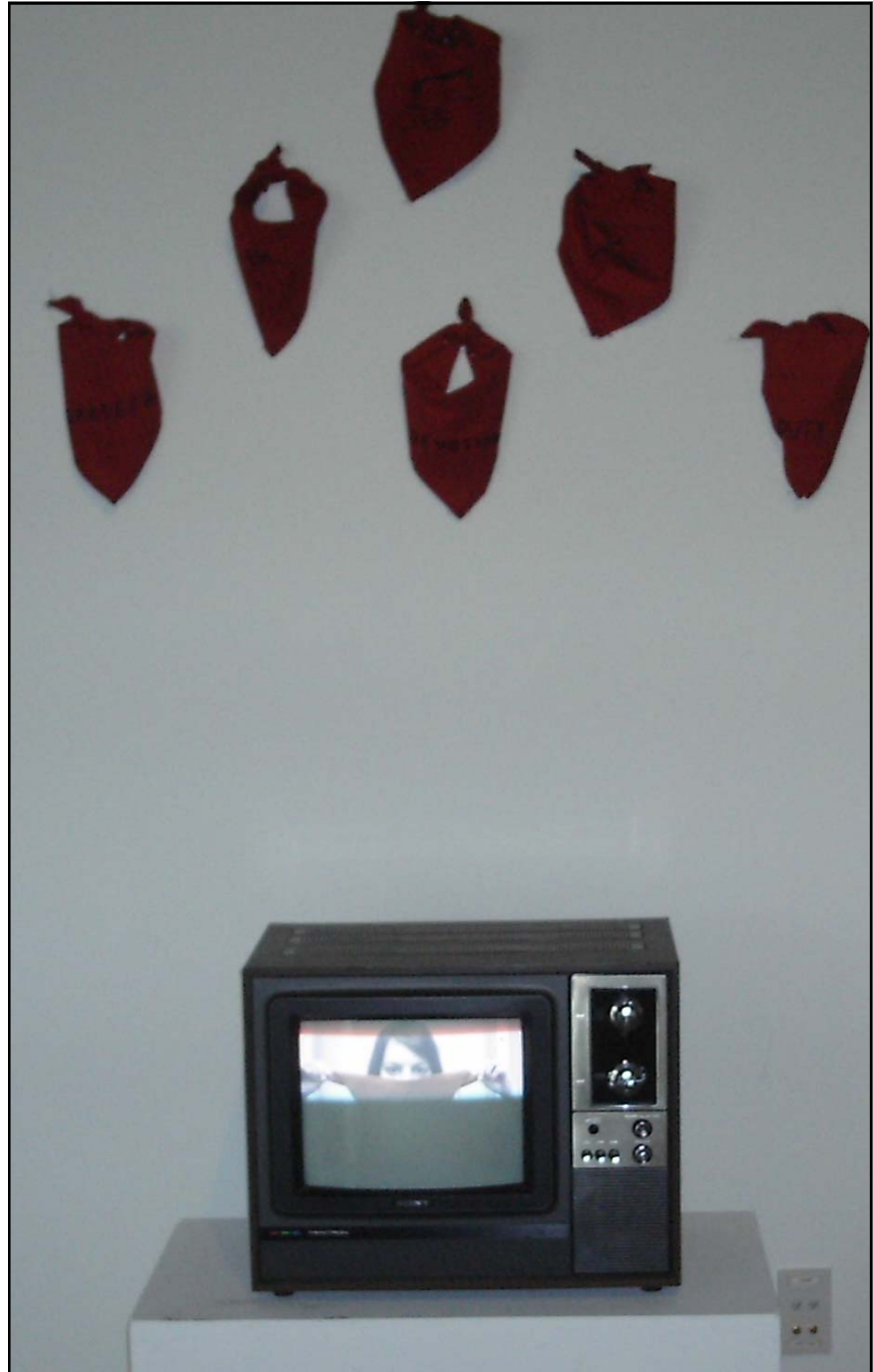
**Fig. 12:** Peter Schulte, *This Machine Kills Fascists*, graphite on paper, 9.25" X 11".

distinguishing characterizations we attach to people who embody these designations.

The fluctuating boundary that separates "good" from "evil," "right" and "wrong" is further explored in Peter Schulte's contemplative drawings, *Don't Give Up*, *This Machine Kills Fascists*, and *Surrender*." Schulte's simple, austere and intensely meditative drawings are a spiritual experience in which one is confronted with the inherent oppositions at the root of each belief, emotion and decision. Exploring themes of courage and naivete, iconoclasm and hopefulness, fear and defeat, Schulte's quiet drawings lends a sense of stillness and solitude to the subject of war, life and death.

Finally, Jill Baker's multi-part performance and video installation piece, *Devotion of Duty*, elaborates on the interchangeability of one's political position and ideological stance in regard to the topic of war. Each video sequence shows Baker sitting against a plain white backdrop, the lower portion of her face obscured by a red handkerchief upon which a message comprised of a single word is stitched. Complicating the relationship between public and private in her embodiment of intimate performance, private protest and counter commemoration, Baker reveals the multiple meanings and often opposing ideological capacities each word occupies. In this respect, Baker explores the possibilities of the artist as citizen, provocateur and witness, as well as terrorist.

While many of the works represented question and sometimes criticize the ideological justifications supporting wars of the past, other artists choose to address the war in Iraq directly. It is often the case that we—the public—are caught in the crossfire of conflicting information pertaining to our involvement in Iraq. Striking an emotionally resonant chord, the artists represented in this exhibition serve as an equilibrium of sorts, creating a space where one is invited to consider perspectives that exist far outside



**Fig. 13:** Jill Baker, *Devotion of Duty*, multi-part performance and video installation, multi-dimensional.

EXHIBITION REVIEW: INTERSECTIONS OF ART AND WAR

the “truths” promoted in Western media. Offering a sense of awareness, protest, activism and empowerment, the diversity of work exhibited here helps broaden our own perspectives and understanding of art and war.

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