

Six artists respond to Iraq War in shrink-wrapped

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At the Or Gallery until January 24

Pablo Picasso's mural *Guernica* was painted in direct and immediate reaction to the German bombing of that Basque town in April 1937. With its screaming images of grief, terror, and civilian death, it is the most famous antiwar message by any artist of the last two centuries. *Guernica* also functions as a significant inspiration to the Or Gallery's exhibition **shrink-wrapped**. Curated by master's candidate Alison Rajah, the show focuses on the responses of six local and international artists to the American war in Iraq.

The first work you encounter in the gallery is Abbas Akhavan's installation insulation and props, a bunkerlike wall of sandbags and a couple of construction-style vertical support beams. Filled with cellulose insulation rather than sand, the bags materially reiterate the work's title. They also contribute to the sense of being in a besieged, embattled, claustrophobic place. The pristine condition of the bags and the play on the word insulation, however, point up the physical, psychological, and moral remove of the American people from the war they are waging in Iraq.

Martha Rosler explores a similar theme. Long identified with the feminist movement, she is represented at the Or by five photomontages from her 2004 series "Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful". Here, she juxtaposes appropriated pictures of elegant home interiors with scorching images from the Iraq war. Heavily armed soldiers, fiery explosions, hooded prisoners, war amputees, and dead children are integrated into settings of privilege, comfort, and blithe consumerism. The message here is blunt: American well-being cannot be disentangled from the slaughter and destruction in Iraq. Rosler's angry condemnation of the smug and cynical justifications of George W. Bush and Co.—waging war on terror abroad to keep Americans safe at home—and of the West's continued, oblivious overconsumption, reverberates through this work.

Adel Abidin's *Travels* is a bitterly ironic "tourist guide" to Baghdad. His project consists of brochures that include advice to travellers that the city's high-end hotels and restaurants are dangerous places and that "Most museums have either been closed or looted." A. S. Dhillon's colour photographs document his recent

antiwar project, modify me, during which he released a cloud of text works on paper into the sky, from a big red balloon. The project questions our moral position with regard to the Iraq war, each white-on-black sheet reading, very simply, “Are we the good guys?”



Pablo Picasso's mural *Guernica*, whose images of terror reflect the 1937 German bombing of a Basque town, has inspired the works in the Or Gallery's shrink-wrapped exhibit.

Josephine Meckseper's short video *0% Down* is a sleek montage of advertisements for gas-guzzling cars backed by a soundtrack of Non's "Total War". Again, the message is obvious. This work is on view with her slightly longer video *March for Peace, Justice and Democracy, 4/29/06, New York City*, a kaleidoscopic montage of images from that immense demonstration. On the surface, this piece appears to celebrate the huge, diverse, and peaceful crowd of people gathered together to democratically express their views. Its use of psychedelic splitting and morphing images, however, and its recurring depictions of face-painting hippies evoke memories of 1960s counterculture and Vietnam War protests. The subtext suggests that the pattern here is an ugly and perhaps insoluble one, that the United States is once again involved in an unjustifiable and unwinnable war.

Afflicted Powers, a video and broadsheet installation by Gail Wright and the collective Retort, also employs footage of antiwar demonstrations. In the video, a protest banner depicting Picasso's *Guernica* morphs into a kind of screen behind which are projected images of aerial warfare, from World War II to the present. Playing behind the shifting visuals is a wordless soundtrack of heavy rain, thunder, and crackling fire. The final background video image, of a passenger jet landing on a runway, conveys the message that we are all implicated. Our continued dependence on oil means that we are as responsible as any of those bomber pilots for raining terror down upon civilian populations.

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