



After Pictures

Chris Down, Jane Eccles, Olexander Wlasenko

opposite page: installation view



Clarington
Leading the Way



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Chris Down, Jane Eccles, Olexander Wlasenko
at The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington
June 6 – July 4, 2010

Curator: **Todd Tremeer**

After Pictures

Introduction by **James Campbell**
Executive Director
The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington

Varied and compelling interconnections arise when the vision of two or more artists occupy a single space. In the exhibition *After Pictures*, Curator Todd Tremeer has interwoven a captivating journey through past lives and places, memories, and uncontrollable calamity in the work of Chris Down, Jane Eccles and Olexander Wlasenko.

Olex states “My drawings are free standing islands in a gulf of possible interpretations and interconnections.” The visual source for these “islands” is often a single frame from a film that impacted the artist’s life, such as Ukrainian documentaries or Soviet propaganda films. Sculpted by the application of powdered pigment via the artist’s fingertips, monumental figures rise up on large sheets of paper, causing us to ponder the intent of the original image, and the historical context of the “still frame” before us.

The internet is the endless visual archive from which Chris Down draws from. He seizes and re-interprets “images of violent dissent, natural disaster and personal aggression.” Eighteen ink and gouache drawings of identical size are hung closely together, forcing us to ponder the uncertainty, fear and disarray depicted: a collage of chaos.

Jane Eccles states “I try to make memorable images and give the onlooker the feeling that they have been there before.” Intricately painted dresses hang in her studio window, silhouetted by a seasonal light that permeates the translucent fabric. As this “waning light” passes through lace and thread, we ponder the lives that once occupied that garment. Perhaps it was someone we knew, perhaps we were there.

All three artists initiate such contemplation as films, photographs, the Internet and the elusive realm of memory provide springboards for their individual vision. My thanks and congratulations to all three for this exhibition. Thank you also to Curator Todd Tremeer, and to VAC Curator, Maralynn Cherry, for her mentorship of Todd in his first curatorial project.

Introduction by **Maralynn Cherry**
Curator
The Visual Arts Centre of Clarington

As the Curator of the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington it was my privilege to mentor artist Todd Tremeer. This is the first Curatorial Mentorship to take place at the gallery since the successful mentorship program in 1997 under the guidance of Carolyn Bell Farrell and Margaret Rodgers. Over a period of two years Tremeer has taken part in every aspect of the curatorial mandate and has presented the gallery with a major exhibition *After Pictures*. This accomplishment follows his recent completion of a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Western Ontario and receipt of the Joseph Plaskett Award. I am very grateful to the artists who participated in this exhibition. A special thanks to Todd Tremeer for his inspiration, creative vision, long term planning and patience throughout this process. It is the gallery’s intention to continue offering mentorship programs in the years to come.

After Pictures

Essay by **Todd Tremeer**

We are surrounded by pictures yet seldom give much thought to the vast array of moving images, still photographs, and printed graphic matter that we encounter each day. Some artists do notice. Artists do not create in a vacuum but spend a lifetime accumulating, assimilating and borrowing from the world around them. It is an ongoing process that continues to enrich the uniqueness and complexity of their vision over a lifetime. These influences may be indirect, subtle and encoded or may more explicitly appropriate other pictures.

The word “pictures” is an expansive term with many meanings. “Going to the pictures” once meant a trip to the cinema. The word can carry photographic connotations and on occasion implies drawings, paintings and prints. There are also “pictures of pictures”, perhaps better called reproductions or illustrations, and colloquial uses of the word “pictures” related to visualization and memory. This exhibition highlights the drawings and paintings of Chris Down, Jane Eccles and Olexander Wlasenko and considers how they create images “after pictures”. Each of these artists thinks about “pictures” differently and uses source imagery to different ends. What they share is an affinity for representing the figurative in art and an interest in the varying degrees and definitions of realism. Yet, calling their practices “realistic” in any narrow sense of the word would be overly confining, misleading and incorrect.

Olexander Wlasenko

Olexander Wlasenko’s large drawings echo the history paintings made by Soviet bloc countries during the Cold War. Many of his drawings are based on black and white art-house films, foreign cinema and wartime photographs. Regardless of origins, the images which Wlasenko appropriates are generationally removed and have been largely forgotten.

Cylinders, by Wlasenko, is as large as many of the history paintings that inspire it. Its monumental size and degree of detail matches the seemingly heroic task of the soldiers it portrays. Here figures appear moving across the page, hauling their cargo and literally pulling us in their wake. This work demands we stand back to take it in, then move forward to consume its richly pigmented surface and finely crafted details. The paper’s luminosity shines through a nearly unperceivable wash of colour. Everywhere, layers of black pigment have been scrubbed on and erased through.

As with many of his drawings, *Cylinders* entered Wlasenko’s studio pre-constructed and with a history. This image is based on a small Second World War press photograph from the Sovfoto collection and was one of many images provided by the Soviets for dissemination in the Western media during the Cold War.¹ Not surprisingly, this photographic archive portrays the Soviets as industrious, strong and optimistic. These images are heavily censored and free of suffering.

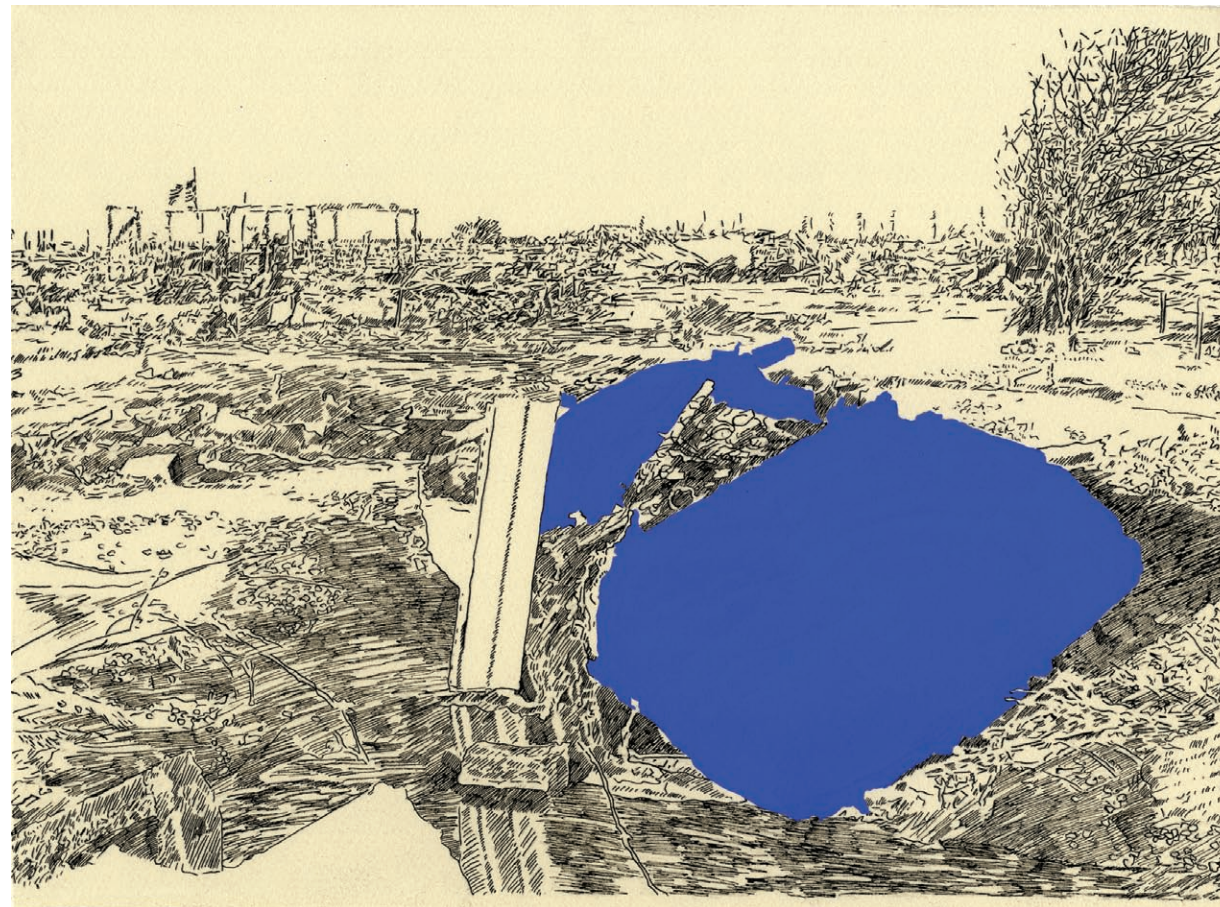
Wlasenko’s strategy of drawing from archival photographs is a process of dual selection. Images are first constructed by a photographer or filmmaker. Then the artist selects and revisits it – literally a moment of history – and resurrects it as drawing. By redrawing the photograph, multiple histories emerge which are distinct, yet in discourse with one another. On one level, the setting, narrative and costumes of an era are represented. On another, we revisit the image’s original function and composition. Finally, in the artist’s marks and erasures, we survey the drawing’s making. This “indexicality”, according to Wlasenko, plays between Roland Barthes’ view that a photograph comments upon what it pictures instead of its own materiality and his own love for language. It is therefore fitting that Wlasenko typically uses his index finger rather than a brush or pencil to apply his pigments.

Wlasenko's drawings may picture history, but in so doing, create new narratives. *Cylinders* does not share the same political function and history as its photographic predecessor. Instead of furthering visions of progress and power, Wlasenko's drawing looks upon events with the hindsight of history. Observing *Cylinders*, viewers may think back to any number of war films or images. The soldiers remind us of the transport of war supplies by all armies, the deportation of ethnic groups by Nazi Germany or the horrors wrought by Stalin.

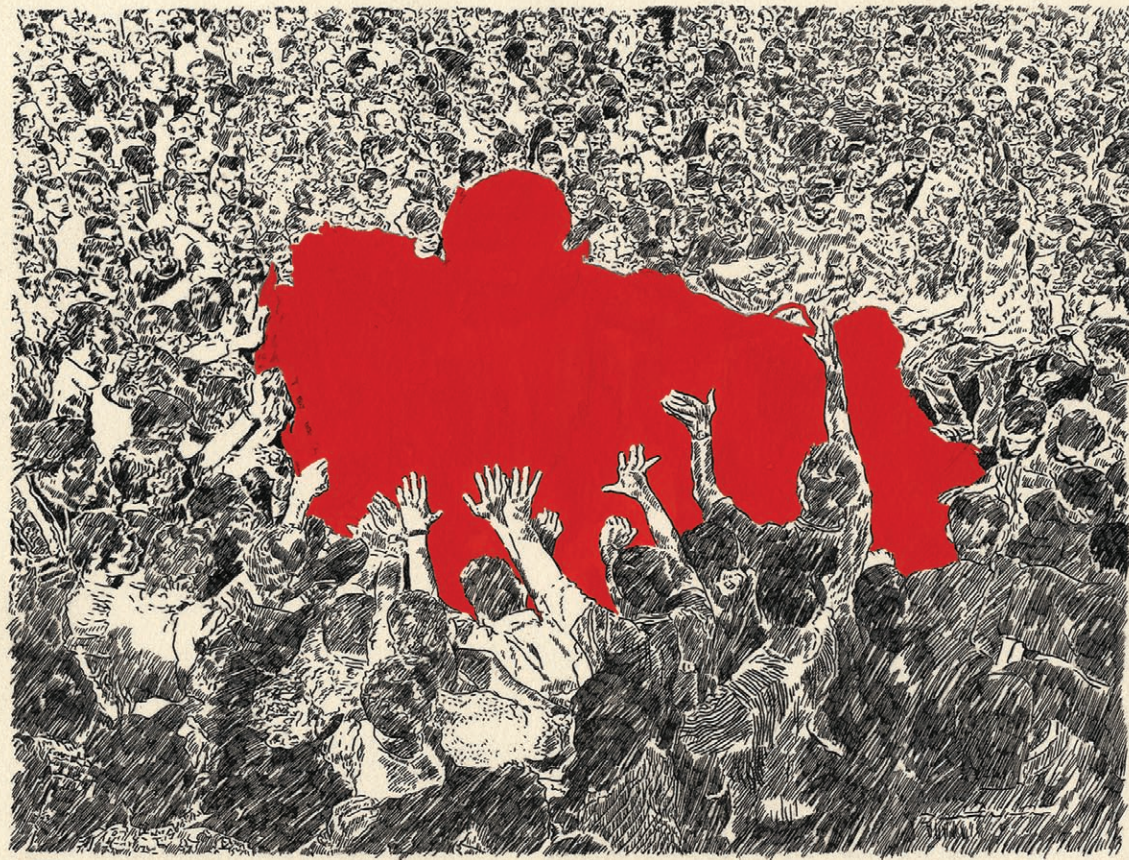
Wlasenko keeps us guessing as to the exact narrative unfolding in his drawings. Although his drawings are highly accurate handmade transcriptions of his source material, we are never quite certain what omissions or additions have been made. Close inspection of *Cylinders* reveals the soldiers are not pulling but are static and posed. There is also a seam and a subtle change in perspective between the drawing and photograph. These factors suggest the Sovfoto image was created with two negatives and was staged for the camera. More strange, in the corner of Wlasenko's drawing there is a woman's head. She may be asleep or dead but seemingly goes unnoticed by the soldiers. Conversely, the Cyrillic text on the soldier's load in the original photograph, is absent in Wlasenko's drawing.

The text, for those who can read Russian, reveals the soldiers are unloading paper bales of the kind used for printing newspapers and posters. While the source photograph behind Wlasenko's drawing may no longer be valued for its propagandist intentions, *Cylinders* may provide the perfect allegory for this artist. This is a drawing, from a staged photograph, of soldiers preparing their message, which generations later will be drawn again.

On the third floor, there is a video by Wlasenko. Here we witness his drawings burn in the landscape until they are lost forever. *Tourists* appears on the invitation for this exhibition. It reappears and disappears in this third floor video. In this burning, drawings of photographic images become moving pictures again. This loss may evoke wonderment and speculation as to the history associated with these drawings and the images from which they came. What function did these drawings once serve? How does this final drama recalibrate former narratives and instigate new ones?



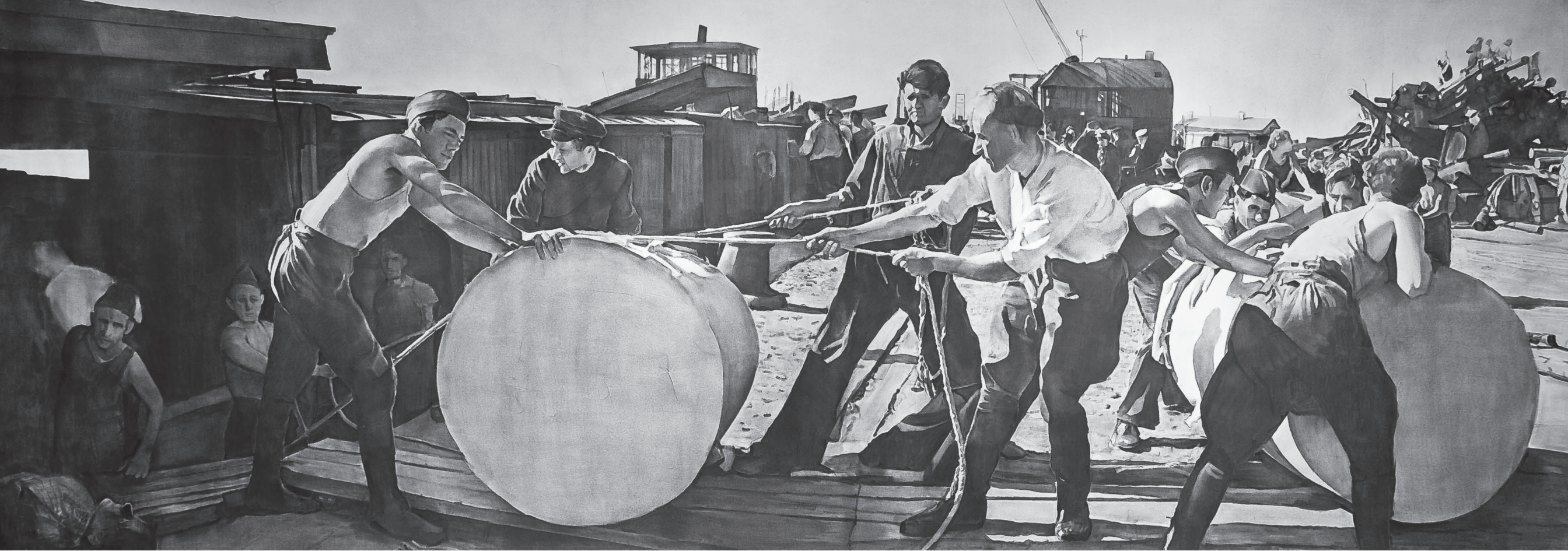
Chris Down, 9. *Untitled (Abandon All Hope)*, 2008; ink and gouache on paper; 28×38 cm



Chris Down, 1. *Untitled (Abandon All Hope)*, 2007; ink and gouache on paper; 28×38 cm



Olexander Wlasenko, *The Space Between (redux)*, 2008; pigment on paper; 122×183 cm



Olexander Wlasenko, *Untitled (cylinders)*, 2009; pigment on dyed paper; 183×508 cm



this page: installation view

opposite page: Jane Eccles, *Three Skaters*, 2008; acrylic on canvas; 76×76 cm





Jane Eccles

Jane Eccles tells stories with words and images. Whether spoken or written, her words draw mental pictures of the landscape, of another time, of another place. Her paintings are narratives that live alongside stories she has collected and written. She believes an artist works with the subject they know best and so, pictures and writings are made, collected and preserved. The artist's sketchbook ferments this collage of ideas. In her sketchbook, words create pictures and pictures bring new words. In this dovetailing of narrative and image, the artist's vision moves, evolves and expands.

Eccles paints from beautiful, unique and handcrafted items that have been cherished and loaned to her by others. Like the sitter who exposes more of their inner self as time passes, Eccles' paintings develop visual complexity with the passage of each painting session. The underpainting gives the work its body; later visitations bring more layers, glazes and veils of colour. We are unlikely to know the woman behind each, but in each painting we sense a biography, story and history. Eccles' dresses are akin to portraits.

In *Barb and Sam* Eccles paints the dress worn by Barbara Underhill in her 2009 performance during "The Battle of the Blades". This costume was designed by Anne Dixon to be animated by light and movement. Sam performed so that Barb could skate to her daughter's voice – a long stored dream for Barbara Underhill. In Eccles' painting, this dress hangs after the performance, motionless on its hanger in front a window before a winter landscape. The energy and movement of the performance is recalled in the diagonals of the window blind. Painted light dances across the dress's stitched details and penetrates its delicate fabrics.

The studio window is a constant in Eccles’ series of dress paintings. Her studio window locates each narrative within the artist’s home. Through it we see the world and most often, it is winter. The sun is an ever changing source of illumination, intensity and direction. It changes each day and with the passing seasons. Snow makes the landscape brighter and forges strong contrasts between a subject and its surroundings. This window creates space and also contains the landscape like a camera’s viewfinder. In the foreground is the object, the middle ground the window, behind is the landscape. Each space is a narrow field. This vision owes something to conventions of Renaissance perspective colloquially called the “window onto the world”. Indirectly, by the work’s cropping and perspective, Eccles uses the photographic space that has defined realism since the advent of the camera.

Eccles’ dresses come out of a tradition of still life and portrait painting whereby the subject entered the studio to be painted. *Pond Hockey* has different roots and comes “after pictures” in another sense of the phrase. It reconstructs memory through the amalgamation of sketchbooks, memories, the recalling of old photographs and a deep awareness of art history. *Pond Hockey* may come after Bruegel’s *Hunters in the Snow*, or may borrow from any number of lesser known Dutch Old Masters who typically painted dark figures skating on the frozen canals of Holland. Then too, there are numerous early Canadian paintings and photographs of figures in a winter landscape. In this painting there is also something dark, menacing and sobering. It recalls, in each of us, our own dark memories. In other paintings, Eccles’ colour and light harkens back to the Impressionists and she has long admired the works of Ingres. His graceful drawings and paintings record some of the most elegant fashions of nineteenth century France. Such comparisons, however, infer assimilations and lineages rather than quotations. Viewers are more likely to recall in *Pond Hockey*, memories of other pictures – most likely their own – archived in shoe boxes and their own family albums. *Pond Hockey* is like an old photograph we all know – same photo, different people – and it may be iconically Canadian.

Chris Down

Chris Down draws and paints from the pictures he has collected. This series, *Abandon All Hope*, re-imagines the Bible’s apocalyptic *Book of Revelations*. Here, Down co-opts the voice of the religious and righteous, and takes the ongoing and seemingly unending “War on Terror” as his setting. He shows us a world collapsing and at its moment of rapture. Civilization explodes in an orgy of panic, pain and suffering. And critically, photography fuels and adds authority through documentary “truths” to his vision.

Paintings once illustrated what we feared but today it is the camera’s pictures that scare us. It is sometimes said that television (and now the Internet) lets us watch, from afar, events we wouldn’t want to experience firsthand. Photo journalists, with their cameras, have been on the frontlines of conflict for at least a century and today, virtually anyone can upload to the Internet, pictures of what they have seen. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag argues that twenty-four-seven news reporting feeds our appetite for pictures of suffering. “If it bleeds, it leads”, she writes quoting a tabloid mantra.² Stories of atrocity, loss and horror have always fed the human imagination. During the Reformation, it was woodcuts in the broadsheet newspapers that pictured the atrocities committed between Catholics and Protestants of the sixteenth century. Prior to the camera, depictions of war and violence relied on the artist’s imagination if an event was to be recorded. In this regard, Goya’s famous *Disasters of War* etchings may be described as brutal and violent. These etchings are significantly different, removed and unreal compared to the photographs of shattered and charred bodies of the First World War, the Holocaust or a modern crime scene.

Down’s preference is for the on-the-spot, amateurish, oftentimes urgent snapshot image. Drawings that make up *Abandon All Hope* are unassumingly small, verge on abstraction and, when taken individually, can be quite cryptic. We, however, encounter a wall of images and experience its totality before its parts. The work’s repetitive structure, and artist-made but mechanistic marks, simultaneously shock and intrigue us. These drawings based on photographs are abstracted by the flatly drawn lines used to copy and trace the imagery. Down’s works oscillate between their digital origins and Reformation era woodcut inspirations. It is unclear where exactly his images come from, yet it hardly matters. The protagonists in these pictures become anonymous by the translation from photography to drawing – and critically so – because these are the pictures of chaos, loss and horror that emerge from every war, conflict and disaster.

In Down’s work the indexical quality of the photograph (the record of an event, time or place) is preserved in the translation of the photograph to the handmade. Even when the final image is quite abstract its photographic legacy remains intact. This gives his work the authority of photographic truth, but of what, we are never certain. There is no optimism in *Abandon All Hope*. We are left unsure if the artist is an instigator to this unfolding drama, or a voyeur, watching, collecting and transcribing the paranoia of our age, online, from the comfort of his home. What Down relays to us is the urgency of the now. *Abandon All Hope* demands we act immediately – against a threat we can never quite identify – or perish as we watch “it” engulf us.

Chris Down, Jane Eccles and Olexander Wlasenko are committed to drawing and painting. Artists who make handmade images are unlikely to believe painting died with the advent of photography, yet are the first to recognize their task was forever changed by it. Today we are more likely to accept a photograph than a handmade image as factual evidence. Significantly, this holds true, after computer editing has made image “corrections” easier, cheaper and more convincing than ever before. Artists, better than most, understand each photograph, no matter how mundane and truthful, carries a judgment, viewpoint and intention.

Finally, each of these artists creates a tangible or metaphorical archive of images which they draw upon. Whereas a camera freezes time, memories are constructed. Memories are fragmentary moments, nostalgic yearnings and dark remembrances. In this act of remembering one is likely to recall some salient point, a stance, mood, detail or colour. In contrast, the staged, selected or edited photograph can undermine and challenge memory with its evidentiary authority. Thus, Wlasenko and Down’s drawings appropriate photographs so as to explore and mobilize the authority of the photographic document. The history Wlasenko draws from was once official and is now distant.

He appropriates the façade of history to question past narratives. Eccles, alternatively, paints a past that is personal and local. The narratives she seeks lie deep in the subconscious but resonate with us all. Down looks to the future but refers to the past. He surfs the Web and collects its energies so as to challenge our prevailing fears. In the end Sontag tells us:

The photographer’s intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it.³

Endnotes

- 1 This collection is part of the MacLaren Art Centre in Barrie, Ontario. It has been a valuable resource on several occasions for this artist.
- 2 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Picdor, New York, 2003) 18.
- 3 Sontag, 39.

Todd Tremeer would like to thank VAC staff for the opportunity to curate *After Pictures*, especially Maralynn Cherry for her guidance throughout this project. Also Olex, Jane and Chris for their enthusiasm and trust.

Chris Down would like to thank the VAC, Todd Tremeer and fellow artists, Jane Eccles and Olex Wlasenko. He would also like to acknowledge the support of his wife Paula and two sons, Christian and Gruffydd.

Jane Eccles would like to thank Ron Eccles, Todd Tremeer and Maralynn Cherry for their support in preparing *After Pictures*. Also thanks to the staff at the Visual Arts Centre and in particular to David Gillespie for installation.

Olexander Wlasenko gratefully acknowledges Deborah “Technology Champion” Nolan for editing the video in this show. Thanks to Todd for his continued support and interest over these many years. To Danaka: with love and resolution for all of those evenings when you just wanted to stay in and watch a movie and all I could think about was drawing from it.

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