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Todd Tremeer: Painting History/ History Painting

I refer to my work as “history painting.” Through this guise I evoke the old genre called “history painting” and its problematic status in contemporary art and the study of history. For as long as I can remember I have been surrounded by representations of history. Over the years I have visited countless museums, battlefields and forts. Some years ago I re-enacted the life of a Victorian British soldier and before then, had trained as reservist in the Canadian army. I have built model soldiers and dioramas with them, and my formative drawing experiences in childhood entirely focused on copying pictures of history. I can’t remember the first time I saw West’s *Death of General Wolfe*, Rubens’ drawing after da Vinci’s, *Battle of Anghiari*, a Napoleonic battle painted by Meissonier, David, Gros or Gericault. Before attending art school, I listed Lady Butler, Ernest Meissonier and C.W. Jefferys’ as influential artists and I knew something about the war art of Charles Comfort, Frederick Varley, Lauren Harris and Alex Colville. Significantly, I experienced all of this work through history book illustrations—only later I learned it was “Art.”

I suggest that by experiencing history through its multiple layers of representation, time past and narratives constructed about the past have merged. Representations generate representations and in consequence, the space between authenticity and representation is hopeless obscured. This, however, raises questions. What should be made of an original drawing or model that takes its authority from other representations? And, what about those (mostly boys and men) who build models and dioramas from commercial hobby kits—or the “experts” who convert and customize commercial “ready-made” kits, or “scratchbuild” models to make something as accurate, life-like and “truthful” as reality?

Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and Andrea Malraux’s, *The Museum without Walls* address the diminished authority of the original in the world of reproductions. Today more than a generation later, the space between the original and reproduction is more opaque. Museums exhibit authentic artefacts and replicas together; the skeletal remains of a dinosaur is reassembled, an

archaeological dig remade and a famous battle is miniaturized as a diorama. In each their own way, these representations of history make claims of authenticity and truth; as didactic exhibits, they depend on and confirm “official” narratives. As a consumer of history, I have devoured them all.

As the number of veterans of the First and Second World War diminishes and Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan continues, history and its representation seems a timely subject for painting again. My current project has been to find and paint from museum dioramas that didactically present national narratives of history. While my painted dioramas fall short of the grand narrative genre called “history painting,” they recall something of the copy, the illustration, play and the hobbyist’s craft. They are literally “little” narratives that play with history. As for my own work, they, like history paintings of the past, are of questionable historical or didactic value in regards to the illusions they depict; yet they may comment on history through their use of a discourse surrounding representation and through the narratives that people draw out of them. To this end, my “history paintings” allegorically suggest how our current military and peacekeeping actions around the world may be represented in the future. In purposely making representations of representations, layers of history may merge and be glossed over. So my paintings, like the history paintings and dioramas before them, are part of the elusive screen called representation and demonstrate something of the constructiveness of history.