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## From the Editors: War Art Now

Laura Brandon

Lindsey Sharman

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# From the Editors

## War Art Now

A SUCCESSFUL 2014 conference session on contemporary war art at the Universities Art Association of Canada's (UAAC) annual general meeting in Toronto and the 100th Anniversary of the founding of Canada's first war art program in December 2016, the Canadian War Memorials Fund, prompted this special issue of *Canadian Military History*. Edited by the conference session organisers, curators Laura Brandon and Lindsey Sharman, one of the following articles was first presented there. The seven articles in this special issue broadly represent Canadian war art's current practice and discourse offering a variety of perspectives on the past 100 years that touch not only on art history but military history too. The editors are delighted to include contributions from artists who have participated in the fourth and current official war art program, the Canadian Forces Artists Program (CFAP). Two contributions are by former art curators at the Canadian War Museum (CWM), one by the art curator at the Military Museums in Calgary, and two by Canadian academics specializing in contemporary military art. Combined as academic discipline, curatorial subject matter, and artistic vocation, the accumulated result is a snapshot of Canada's 'war art now,' to cite one artist's own words.

Beginning with the former CFAP artists, Gertrude Kearns provides first person insight into her practice. She takes the opportunity to look back over nearly 10 years of work featuring Canada's senior leadership as well as the previous decade of sometimes-controversial military art. Her article reflects the complexity of her work. It subverts expectation, revels in oxymoron and juxtaposition, oscillates between personal anecdote and vigorous research, and analyses its subject matter from the inside out much like she analyses the forces now, from within. Finally, she addresses the concerns of those preoccupied

with whether or not she is pro- or anti-war arguing that one can be both or neither.

Kearns, along with Mary Kavanagh and Erin Riley, is also discussed in Military Museums' art curator Lindsey Sharman's article, which explores portraiture—a relatively new genre for Canadian war artists. Arguing that landscape has long been the subject of choice for artists to represent war, she suggests that a new and arresting focus on portraiture, especially on the part of women, could result in it becoming to post-Afghanistan War Canada what landscape was to Canadians during the First World War.

Dick Averns evaluates the varied official war programs currently in operation in Australia, Canada, Egypt, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. While offering an international context for CFAP, he also positions his own work as an artist within this international framework. He prioritises personal artistic evaluation over state, government, or military assessments. He argues that it is the creative freedom individual countries offer artists rather than their program structures that result in good war art.

While Averns's signifiers of freedom and democracy through artistic criteria place commonwealth countries at the top of his list, scholar Susan Cahill's assessment of the exhibition *11 Artists for 11/11* questions the Canadian political and national narratives at play in times of commemoration. Positioning her thesis against the broader theme of the interrelationship of military history and Canadian national identity, she argues that in the public arena, curatorial choices reinforce notions of Canada as strictly a peacekeeping and peace building nation. As evidence, she cites the absence of combat-related works (from Afghanistan, for example) in the exhibition.

Three articles focus on the Canadian War Museum's art collection. University scholar and independent curator Christine Conley considers recent CWM contemporary acquisitions, noting the now prominent presence of photography. She reflects back 100 years, citing the creative fragmentation that resulted when artist and civilian alike struggled to make sense of their world following the horrors of the First World War. She finds an echo of the then contemporary surrealist and abstract movements in Barbara Steinman, Norman Takeuchi, Scott Waters, and Mary Kavanagh's contemporary war related works.

Former CWM Historian, Art and War, Laura Brandon, also looks at the changing role of photography in military art. A generation

apart, photography is important source material in the art of both Alex Colville and Elaine Goble. Goble acknowledges its primacy in her work but well-known official Second World War artist Colville's use of photography is almost unknown. In revisiting conclusions she made on his work over 20 years ago in this journal, when she was unaware of his photographic source material, Brandon references the National Gallery of Canada's recent acquisition of 309 of Colville own photographs.

CWM Assistant Historian, and former Acting Historian, Art and War, Stacey Barker provides another opportunity to see (literally) the preliminary sketches and watercolours that lie behind some familiar CWM artworks on canvas. Works on paper are highly protected in the museum world. Delicate and sensitive to light, they are less often exhibited. Yet they often reflect important immediate impressions, providing first hand accounts of what the artist witnessed. The more familiar and larger canvases that are more often (and securely) exhibited are generally studio pieces, bereft, perhaps, of the epiphanic moment afforded first sight.

While charting the expansion of media, subject and creative freedom over the last 100 years, we must recognize a parallel expansion in personnel. In keeping with many fields of endeavour, but perhaps, as well, because war remains a primarily masculine activity, for most of military art's history, male subjects and artists have dominated. Barker's article's introduction citing the paucity of women represented within the CWM collection makes this abundantly clear. In this context, this special issue is a marker of change. It is impossible not to view its pages as representative of female perspectives. Its co-editors are women, the treasures from the CWM's paper vault are all works by women, women artists are at the heart of Sharman's article, and only one of the authors, Averns, is male. As such, this publication signals an important recalibration of the war and military art history narrative in Canada.

LAURA BRANDON, *GUEST EDITOR*

LINDSEY SHARMAN, *GUEST EDITOR*