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Laura Brandon

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# Cause and Affect War Art and Emotion

Laura Brandon

Nine years ago, I completed a history PhD here at Carleton University. My thesis was published in 2006 as *Art or Memorial? The Forgotten History of Canada's War Art*.<sup>1</sup> Influenced by the then relatively new memory theories, especially those pertaining to monuments as "sites of memory," I argued that through the act of looking, whether on the part of an artist, curator, or viewer, everyone associated with a military-related work of art assigns meanings to that work – meanings that constantly change and evolve in relationship with one another. Today I will contend that war art can also be a "site of emotion": a place to

which you bring things you know and have experienced emotionally and with which through a dialogue with the artwork, its interpreters, and other viewers you not only enrich your own understanding of what you already recognize or have knowledge of emotionally but you also contribute to the emotional understanding of others.

My presentation today looks at a single piece of contemporary war art in the context of emotional theories. In questioning whether we respond emotionally to a painting because we know the artist has created it under emotional circumstances, in asking whether emotion is inherent in any formal qualities of the piece itself, for example, in the colours used, or in the nature of the brushwork, and in exploring whether a familiarity with the artwork's subject matter enables us to project our own existing emotions onto an essentially inert composition I conclude that war art can be a "site of emotion."

This is the painting under consideration: Gertrude Kearns' 2006 Afghanistan composition *What They Gave*. It is a large painting – each panel is 152 x 102 cm. It was painted in Toronto nearly nine months after Kearns returned from a four and a half week visit to Afghanistan lasting from 28 December 2005 to 27 January 2006. She was an embedded artist with the Canadian Forces (or CF for short) and had a commission to produce five finished canvases relating to events and personnel she witnessed. Kearns

is a well-known Toronto-based artist. She began painting military subjects in the aftermath of the 1990 to 1991 Gulf War and, 20 years later, military portraiture remains at the heart of her practice. Her approach combines a certain accuracy of detail born of her interest in historical documentation combined with the more abstract content that typifies her non-military work. This 1992 piece is called *Containments*.

Four interrelated formative personal experiences lie behind my discussion of *What They Gave*. Before I get into the meat of my presentation I would like to speak a little about

**Résumé :** En 2006, la télévision de la BBC diffusait une série de documentaires intitulée *The Power of Art*. S'intéressant à la vie de huit artistes célèbres et à leur époque, l'historien et l'historien de l'art Simon Schama y analysait la création de plusieurs œuvres significatives pour démontrer que celles-ci avaient non seulement changé le cours de l'histoire de l'art, mais aussi modifié la perception que se faisait le public des événements, à l'époque et par la suite. L'article, une causerie présentée à l'Université Carleton, en novembre 2011, étudie ces théories affectives et le pouvoir de l'art dans un contexte canadien. Il examine les circonstances qui ont amené l'artiste Gertrude Kearns à peindre *What They Gave*, un œuvre sur la guerre d'Afghanistan réalisée en 2006. L'auteur se demande si la réaction affective de l'artiste s'est bien inscrite dans l'œuvre et si le public a pu y réagir directement ou en ressentir une émotion suscitée par d'autres sources d'information.

**Abstract:** In 2006, the British Broadcasting Corporation launched a television series called *The Power of Art*. Historian and art historian Simon Schama selected eight famous artists and in the context of their lives and times explored the creation of several significant compositions, arguing that the artists' works not only changed the course of art history but, in some cases, profoundly altered public understanding of events in their own time and after. This article, delivered as a lecture at Carleton University in November 2011, explores those emotional theories and the power of art in a Canadian context. It examines the circumstances that led artist Gertrude Kearns to paint *What They Gave*, a 2006 Afghanistan war composition, and questions whether the artist's emotional response to the tragedy she witnessed is conveyed in paint and whether viewers respond directly to the work or are moved by other information sources.



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Gertrude Kearns – *What They Gave* (2006).

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them. They are, after all a part of the personal emotional luggage I bring to this study. They centre first, on the concept of art as a site of memory, second, on the role of language in our understanding of visual imagery, third, on the so-called power of art, and fourth, on emotional theories.

I have already touched a little on the first – art as a site of memory. In arguing in my thesis for the existence of a relationship between works of art and their publics as far as memory is concerned, I conclude (and I'm quoting myself here) "that no study of social memory can determine the limitations of agency, the mechanisms of control, or the power of language that determines the changing authoritative viewpoint collectively accepted as memory." Broadly translated this states that in my view collective meaning in art as understood through memory is a never-ending construction site. In discussing *What They Gave* as "a site of emotion," I will make a similar argument.

Second, earlier this year, I published an article in the *Journal of Canadian Art History* that argues that it is their accompanying words not the pictures themselves that give meaning to some specific official war photographs.<sup>2</sup> In looking for atrocity in Canadian Expeditionary Force First World War pictures, I found almost none. Instead, I found tragic but certainly less than atrocious images of damaged churches, graveyards, villages, and orchards that in albums and exhibitions were accompanied by emotion-laden text that inferred far more awfulness than was depicted. The exhibition caption for a photograph of felled trees reads: "The wanton destruction of these trees can only be stigmatised as 'murder.' To prevent their being of any use to the advancing troops, the Germans took the life of each one by severing its trunk." This research left me with an understanding that how I or anyone else for that matter reacts



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**Top: Gertrude Kearns under contract overseas with the Canadian Forces serving with TFA Roto 0, January 2006.**

**Middle: Gertrude Kearns – *Containments* (1992).**

**Bottom: The emotional exhibition caption for a photograph of felled trees reads: "The wanton destruction of these trees can only be stigmatised as 'murder.' To prevent their being of any use to the advancing troops, the Germans took the life of each one by severing its trunk."**

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to a work of art is not necessarily the consequence of looking at it. There are many other factors at play that include language. Since I am going to argue that *What They Gave* is not

intrinsically emotional in its own right, language will prove critical in establishing the painting as a "site of emotion."

Third, somewhat late in the day, very recently in fact, I finally got around to viewing the British Broadcasting Corporation's 2006 television series *The Power of Art*. In it historian and art historian Simon Schama explores the creation of several significant compositions by eight famous artists in the context of their lives and times. He argues that their works not only changed the course of art history but, in some cases, profoundly altered public understanding of events in their own time and after. As writer Frances Spalding notes in the UK *Independent* newspaper of the Picasso segment in her October 2006 review of the accompanying book:

When in February 2003 the United Nations Security Council decided to hold a press conference about the likelihood of armed intervention in Iraq, someone noticed that hanging in the chosen location was a [1955] tapestry reproduction of [Picasso's] *Guernica*, with its burning houses, screaming women and dead babies. It was hurriedly covered over with a sky-blue UN drape. Schama is not alone in seeing this as the ultimate backhanded compliment to the power of art.

This left me with an understanding that assumptions are made about the power of art to cause change that can also exclude the role of language and knowledge, as well as other factors in forming that power. In my discussion of *What They Gave* I will underline this point by referencing how few people noticed this painting when it was on display in Victoria, British Columbia. Without some point of entry – a shared experience, for example – it was essentially invisible.

Fourth, the kicker for me in developing this presentation was

this year's subject: history and the emotions, and the instructions – dare I use this word – to make sure I said something about emotional theories and did not just concentrate on the history and art parts. I have to confess that up to this point in time I had given no significant consideration whatsoever to emotional theories so I had to do some reading. It has been pretty basic but it has not been wasted. My approach to analysing a work of art has changed. I have learned to reject easy assumptions about meaning in art in favour of what can only be described as a more evidential approach. I have learned that what we understand in emotional terms in an artwork is not necessarily there, shared, or even intentionally conveyed by the artist. Most importantly, this reading has led me to conceive of art – in this case *What They Gave* – as having the potential to be a “site of emotion.” Late in my research, I found one comforting precedent for my analysis: philosopher William Lyons' chapter “On Looking into Titian's *Assumption*” in the 1997 book, *Emotion and the Arts*.<sup>3</sup> Prompted by an elitist contention on the part of nineteenth-century writer Henry James in reference to this painting – a contention with which Lyons does not agree – Lyons examines the emotion in and from the painter, the emotion depicted, generated through, and discovered in the painting, and the emotion provoked by and connected to the painting.

What do I understand by emotion? Basically I subscribe to a no doubt debatable definition that describes emotion as originating in the affective – the point at which we are initially moved by something. In the context of our then internal or external environment, there is a subsequent period where we evaluate or are motivated by that which has moved us. Our own wishes, values, interests, and goals and the potential to us for harm or benefit whether

real or empathetic are part of this evaluative process. When these factors come together and trigger an abnormal physiological response, we have what we commonly label emotion. One typology of emotions I came across includes anger, anxiety, compassion, disgust, envy, fright, guilt, happiness, hope, jealousy, love, pride, relief, sadness, and shame. These are all emotions that one can feel in front of a work of art. What I am suggesting in this presentation, however, is that an artwork becomes a “site of emotion” when such emotions are shared and/or discussed in relation to both the creation of the artwork, the event depicted, and the reception of the artwork.

My contention that art can be a “site of emotion” is influenced by the work of a number of academics examining emotion through the lenses of philosophy and psychology in particular. These include R.G. Collingwood, John Dewey, Derek Matravers, Jenefer Robinson, Alan Tormey, and Bruce Vermazey. In my reading, I found Jenefer Robinson's analysis in her 2005 book *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* particularly helpful.<sup>4</sup> In this book, Robinson convincingly shows how the expression and experience of emotion play a central role in the appreciation and creation of artworks. Furthermore, as much of her analysis is influenced by studies centred on the emotion of fear, her work is pertinent to my subject matter of war and injury. For Robinson, emotion is a process that begins with an “affective appraisal” that induces physiological and behavioural changes and is succeeded by cognitive monitoring or a period of reflection. If feelings play a less significant role in her analysis, she allows that the experience of art is often an emotional one (art can arouse the emotions or resemble them). She also largely defends R.G. Collingwood's

1938 theory of expression that embodies the idea that the main function of art is to express the artist's emotions. While less enamoured of Alan Tormey's counter-theory that artworks simply have expressive qualities, she welcomes, as do I, Bruce Vermazey's important dual emphasis on the interaction of audience and interpreter, which she believes brings emotion to consciousness. In some ways, this analysis reflects John Dewey's 1934 writing in *Art as Experience* that argues that where the experience of emotion is concerned reception is as necessary as delivery.<sup>5</sup> Derek Matravers further contends in *Art and Emotion* that reception can be second-hand; an emotional response can be described to a third party.<sup>6</sup> The discursive process I have just briefly described forms my conclusion that a work of art can be a “site of emotion.”

Somewhat informed by these four personal explorations into emotional theories, memory, the power of images, and language you and I will now turn to Gertrude Kearns' *What They Gave*. Together we will look into the circumstances that led her to paint it, explore how she felt when she painted it, dissect public, artist, subject, and art historian reactions to the piece to ask whether any combination of subject matter, paint, and canvas or paper support has any intrinsic capacity to convey or create an emotional response or if, when it comes to visual imagery, it is other information repositories that play the greater role. I will conclude with an argument in favour of this painting as a “site of emotion.” My main sources are Kearns' 2006 interview with CFAP, the acronym for the current military art program, the Canadian Forces' Civilian Artists Program, her 2008 (revised in 2010) artist statement, and several recent email communications from a number of people plus interviews and discussions with colleagues.<sup>7</sup>

Kearns was at the Provincial Reconstruction Team, or PRT, Camp



Canadian Forces photographs

**A suicide bomber attacked a Canadian convoy near Kandahar in Afghanistan on 15 January 2006. Diplomat Glyn Berry was killed and three Canadian soldiers, Private William Salikin (left), Corporal Jeffrey Bailey (middle), and Master Corporal Paul Franklin (right), were severely wounded.**

Nathan Smith, near Kandahar when a suicide bomber attacked the vehicle carrying Canadian diplomat Glyn Berry on 15 January 2006. She had had breakfast with him that morning and was waiting to follow behind in another convoy. In an interview she gave to the *Ottawa Citizen* on 9 April 2006, she said, "We heard the explosion." Berry was killed at the scene and Private William Salikin, Corporal Jeffrey Bailey, and Master Corporal Paul Franklin were severely wounded, Franklin losing a leg. After a Black Hawk helicopter evacuated them to the Role 3 hospital at Kandahar Airfield or KAF, Kearns helped clean up. In the *Citizen* interview she is quoted as saying, "We were mopping the infirmary, mopping the blood." Kearns' unprecedented access the following day to the medical facilities to which the wounded were taken inspired a number of works, including *What They Gave*, which in part derives from a photograph of Franklin she took that day. I cannot show you this and, indeed, have not seen it. To quote Kearns in a July email this year, "it is against regulations to show the faces of [Canadian] soldiers....it is because

they were interpreted as art that [my works] have not been questioned." The next day, the injured were transported to Germany.

From now on, you will hear a lot of Kearns' voice and it will become familiar. She is remarkably articulate and it has sometimes been hard for me to choose what to exclude from her detailed explanations about her war art. As the following extract demonstrates, she thinks deeply about what she does. Commenting on the overall creative process after her experiences in 2006 she wrote:

It can be easier to present a platform, take a position, the less you experience. That does not mean it won't be done justice. The educated imagination can do quite well. But the real taste of fear, uncertainty, danger, bravery, atrocity is a burden which must be wrestled with. It can wear down your creative powers. It is depression inducing and philosophically debilitating...until your energy and drive is back. Even then maybe it will never be the same.

Reporting in 2006 on her experiences in Afghanistan to the

CFAP officials who were facilitating her trip (the actual invitation had come from Department of National Defence (or DND) personnel on the ground) Kearns begins cheerfully. Then, a few days after her arrival, her mood changed: "Today [this was likely 1 or 2 January she recalled] I had my first taste of disaster. I had heard about the two recent vehicle accidents near the end of 2005 in one of which there was a CF death, and injuries in both....I inquired if I could see the LAV III [Light Armoured Vehicle] and the G-Wagon [Geländewagen or cross-country vehicle] on an adjacent lot; both mostly under tarps. It was moving...They are haunting images, brutal in their foreboding, the first of many." Two weeks later, describing 15 January, the day Glyn Berry died, she writes: "It was a day of thunder and dampness...a very dramatic atmosphere." After the event, she relates, "There was a communications cut for hours. I knew news would be out about a civilian being killed in Kandahar. I wanted to phone my sister...to say I was fine...I get my sister. It was my first call home.... she has seen the news. Her voice is loaded with emotion. Mine feels dry

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**Gertrude Kearns – LUVW (G-Wagon)  
under Tarp; IED hit (3 January 2006)**

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and it hurts to speak.” The next day several people told her they thought she might have been a victim.

In the hospital with the wounded the next day, Kearns was clearly affected. In response to my March 2011 request for more on her emotional response to events, she described the day fully. “In the infirmary at the PRT Franklin was screaming uncontrollably. At KAF the next day he was drugged and we chatted very briefly. He wanted to call home...and was so concerned about his family. I only said a few sentences. I couldn’t impose on his space anymore than that.” In 2006, she summarized her mood: “I was shook up, or rather subdued after the January 15th happenings.” Elsewhere she notes, “I would return to Theatre Support Element [TSE] on January 23, quite changed by events and experiences in Kandahar.”

In response to a colleague who said it was better to move on, Kearns’ reaction was, and I quote from her 2006 report, “But I HAVE to dwell on it. This is in part the nature of what I do.” When I asked her in my



March 2011 email, five years after her experiences, whether in fact she curtailed her emotions in the eventual six canvases that form the official commission, she answered with one word, “maybe.” That may be, but three of the six commissioned paintings are associated with the 15 January suicide bomb, which underlines the impact the event had on her. I would argue, however, that although the tragedy dominated her thinking at the time, Kearns did not curtail her emotions as much as she let her interest in the formal properties of

each composition increasingly frame her emotions. I think this is clear from the descriptions of the canvases she provided to the CFAP office in her 2006 report, a report from which I will be quoting extensively. I think what also becomes apparent is that she utilised many lived experiences, whether photographed, heard, or drawn, in all her compositions – not just the memorable events of 15 January – to create single images that were, in fact, a synthesis of many. This approach is common to war artists. Viewed as a witnessed event, Alex Colville’s famous 1946 *Infantry near Nijmegen*, for example, is actually an amalgam of photographs, sketches, and compositional experiments.

I would now like to turn to three of the six official commissions before I discuss *What They Gave*, which was painted after these were handed in to DND. In my descriptions, I am quoting extensively from Kearns’ own words, albeit abbreviated.

*Suicide Hit #1* is based on classified photographs that I have not seen but which Kearns retains that are combined with figurative elements and vehicles that she observed and




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**Gertrude Kearns – LAV III under Tarp;  
rollover (7 January 2006).**

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**Alex Colville – *Infantry Near Nijmegen*.**

place, in time, though one lives and one has died. I have meant for the key which dangles below his index finger to ask the question, as facile as it may seem: What is the key to all this? The time of the hit, 1325h is lodged between the forearms of the two men. The bomber's face is hard to decipher. It can be read as a visceral mess too. The distressed G-Wagon moves through the upper chest of the Canadian soldier and leads to the medics and soldiers providing initial stabilization to the injured soldiers...Other things are intentionally obscure. Coming out from the LAV III tire are the three hands of two investigators. It is hard to make them out. This is addressing the subversive requirements of intelligence work.

sketched in different circumstances – the G-Wagon and the LAV III I showed you before, for example. A full-scale drawing completed after her return to Toronto preceded the canvas painting.

In her own words from her 2006 report:

*Suicide Hit #1* is about the urgent response activities after [the] attack: medical, surveillance, intelligence. The Canadian soldier is merged with the suicide bomber via his weapon. The bomber's beautiful face is a shattered flat bag, his hand is still in the position it was in [at] the moment of detonation. Our Canadian soldier's face shows alarm and maybe fear, but he is tough; he is young so this may well be his first taste of gruesome war. There is a lot to look at in this piece. It is sketchy. The painting works horizontally, vertically, and diagonally, synthesizing all the movements and platforms, yet having them all equally apparent

though vapourous [*sic*] as time, and yet vital. This was the challenge of the piece. [The soldier's] figure is partnered on the other side of the canvas with the glowing orange pylons. One has been knocked down, the other stands. From them, his hand on the trigger of his C7 [rifle] points...past a key on his pants to the upside down face of the suicide bomber. They are married via this

Within hours of the 15 January suicide hit just described, Kearns drew Colonel Hussain Andiwali of the Afghan National Police, or ANP. Although this subject is not directly associated with the suicide hit Kearns was undoubtedly emotionally-affected at the time she did the



**Gertrude Kearns – *Suicide Hit #1* (2006).**



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**Top left: Gertrude Kearns – Col M Hussain Andiwali ANP (15 January 2006 after suicide attack).**

**Top right: Gertrude Kearns – STUDY for ANCIENT/MODERN, Col M Hussain Andiwali ANP (2006).**

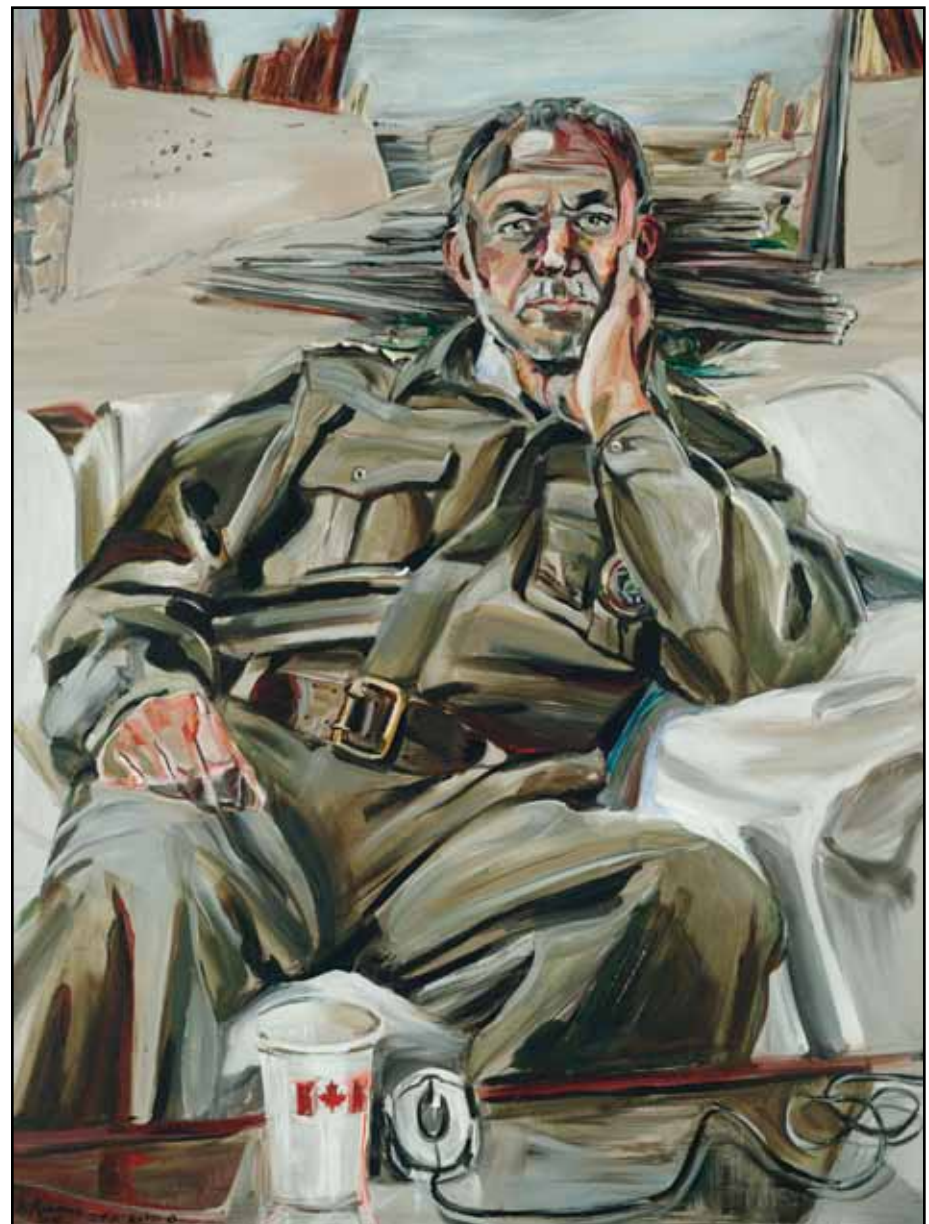
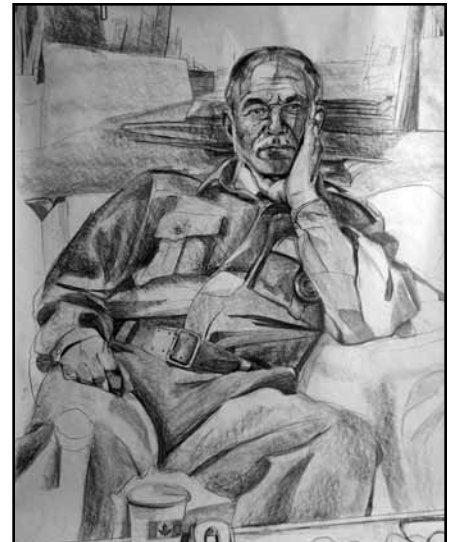
**Right: Gertrude Kearns – ANCIENT/MODERN, Col M Hussain Andiwali Afghan Ntl Police (2006).**

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original drawing. In 2006, she wrote “When I had drawn the Colonel, after myself and a soldier had cleaned the infirmary, the tension in the air could have been cut with a knife. He had waited for two hours for me after a prearranged yet impromptu setup in which I approached and introduced myself in the moments after the hit.” While drawing him, she noted in her report that she had “learned that Colonel Hussain’s 21-year-old interpreter son had lost both his legs in a hit on a Canadian convoy.” On the basis of this additional exposure to grievous bodily injury, it is hard not to anticipate that the loss of limbs was going to play a role in future Kearns compositions. This drawing was followed by a large-scale drawing completed in calmer circumstances after her return to Toronto. This formed the basis of the canvas composition.

*Injured Medic* includes a portrait of Master Corporal Franklin the day after he was seriously injured in the suicide hit. Kearns wrote in 2006

I was so impressed with MCpl Franklin when I saw him in the hospital. I had seen his leg carried to the Black Hawk, stood with his buddies, heard his prolonged screams, mopped up his blood after. Saw him go in, saw him being carried out to the Black Hawk. And then to be talking to him, albeit briefly, the next day the 16th and to see how measured he was, albeit through a drug induced stupor [*sic*]...






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**Gertrude Kearns – *Injured Medic* (2006).**

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children, the youngest of whom is having his face examined by the two women. MCpl Franklin in the centre is trying to inspire “trust and confidence” in the older boy, who looks towards his mother who he sees in comfortable absorption with the physician. So the medic, though now a patient, and forever changed himself, has been a part of attempting the best change possible in this desolate part of the world.

Kearns is wary of narrative illustration in art and the potential for a dramatic composition based on this subject matter gnawed at her. As she wrote in 2006, “All along I felt I should be painting much more darkly and disparagingly. This hospital piece, so full of the sky blues of the bedsheets [*sic*] and burkas made it more difficult to create a sense of pathos. Maybe it was just a pretty bedtime illustration. It would have been easier and maybe more compelling to do this in greys: all monochrome.”

In response to my March 2011 email Kearns made it clear that while she expended much personal emotion on this work, it was not of itself, in her opinion, an inherently emotional piece:

I spent my emotion and energy on *Injured Medic*, the more bland work, ironically. It was too illustrative; losing its evocative power I felt. What I really wanted to do was a big piece, 9 ft tall, of Franklin in bed injured and nothing else. But being too conscious of feeling I should pack it all in, i.e. using other images to fill out his professional time on the mission, I did not produce the stark reality of his figure in the bed, which I should have done. My inclination was dismissed. I was sucked in to

Based on a photograph Kearns took at the time, which I can't show you, followed by a finished large-scale drawing completed in Toronto, the final painting, as she wrote in 2006, “also refers to an image of MCpl Franklin maybe a week or so earlier in Provincial Reconstruction Team clinical activities around Kandahar.” It was important to her, that he not be simply painted as a victim. As she wrote in 2006, “It was more than tempting to just paint him alone in the hospital bed with nothing else. A very minimal piece. However I felt it would be too brutal an approach for this series and it would appear to monopolize specifically on the medic's personal suffering.

He needed to be in a context that expressed the valid work he had been doing with PRT that led to this. Why he was there in the first place.”

While, in the end, she was not satisfied with this approach, Kearns included examples of his work in her composition noting in 2006 that

The spring water bottle and syringe both held in his “before and after” hands are about basic sustenance and medical hence military intervention in this case: security and assistance. This relationship is partnered by a bridge at the base of the painting created by the hands of the Canadian female doctor and the lady in the blue burka, the mother of the two

**Top: Gertrude Kearns – *Kandahar Hospital, Jan 16 2006, KAF* (2006).**

**Middle: Gertrude Kearns – *Mission: Camouflage* (2002).**

**Bottom: Gertrude Kearns – *Study of Paul Franklin medic* (2006).**

the illustrator's modus operandi just in this piece.

Kearns had completed a finished large-scale drawing showing a busy hospital room and in the background the three figures that comprise *What They Gave*: Franklin, Bailey, and the never-identified Afghani boy. The figure of Bailey came from an earlier sketch. But it never became a finished canvas. Instead, she revisited the single figure of Franklin in a new sketch. As she wrote in response to my March 2011 email, "I always felt [the original sketch of Franklin] was too bland and did a small more violent depiction in my sketch book, 14 x 11 inches, after the [commissioned] canvases were completed and delivered, based on the same photo of mine." This small drawing, the figure of Franklin over-inked in livid red and black strokes lies at the heart of her new approach to the subject matter of 15 January. No full-scale finished drawing followed on this small sketch although the three figures in *What They Gave*, as mentioned before, are clearly those apparent in the finished large-scale drawing that never became a painting that preceded this sketch. Everything in the small sketch is present in the finished painting: the red background, the red vertical line that runs across Franklin's body, the emphasis on the place where his leg is missing, and the red diagonal cross that marks its absence. Kearns first used such a cross in a much earlier work to signify something that had gone grievously wrong in her 2002 Rwanda piece *Mission: Camouflage*. You can see it above on the jeep.



In her personal diary from 2006, Kearns noted, "I started a large paper piece November 21, 22 & 23,... Maybe completed in 3 days...?" In her 2011 email to me, she wrote of the finished painting:

The colours are basically pale blues, contrasted with hot orange and reds, and black and white. The black slashes create a prison like backdrop which enter[s] the head of Franklin as long shadows of doom. The cool and comforting pale blue of the sheets and the pretty turquoise borders of the hospital pads assert the foreground in a pleasant and



**Gertrude Kearns – Major Andrew Beckett MD (2011).**

calming hospital reality, punctuating the darkness behind and the stark reality of the war zone. The red behind the central figure indicates his conscious state albeit drugged. What will remain of his person is suggested by the black slashes over the red.

In her 2008/2010 artist's statement Kearns had already explained in more detail why she abandoned the original full-scale drawing for this new work.

Having done a detailed 3 x 4 ft drawing showing the same three patients, surrounded by various medical staff, I had exhausted the more illustrative approaches. I slashed this time, expressing for the first time since my return from Afghanistan, the sadness and volatility of emotion I had contained for so long as far as this war work was concerned. The idea of a panorama, but an irregular one as a concept, led to including Cpl Bailey, co-driver of the vehicle who suffered Traumatic Brain Injury [TBI]: concussion and shrapnel to the lungs, according to my notes at Kandahar Air Field hospital at the time, and the comatose handsome young Afghan male who I had seen for days, his intestines out repeatedly for removal of shrapnel and dirt. The tragedy all round, and yet the strange sense of a changed reality being dealt with. What more soothing than the pale blue of soft hospital sheets, or more disquieting than wide strokes of black ink.

In response to my March 31 email Kearns recalled the studio environment where she created *What They Gave*:

I hadn't painted in the small dark back room for several years. The light was always bad and I hadn't improved it. Yet it felt so good to be in a new space again, hidden away, with no exterior agenda. I felt very

sure of myself as I approached first Franklin's single figure in the bed with plans also to do flanking panels of 2 other patients I knew from visits to the KAF Role 3 [Hospital]....It was cathartic in that I was painting with some aggressive abandon, yet it was still very calculated with a mix of cool clinical attitude with emotional tenor. Recalling the time standing with a group of soldiers with the Black Hawk having just landed and Franklin's leg still with the boot on being rushed to the chopper, that sense of finality for someone else, that whatever improvement there could be, his life was irrevocably changed forever.

Kearns continued,

Equal to any emotional aspects that drove the work was a rationale as to the subjects represented, structural form and visual impacts. I realized with the soldiers in this vehicle hit that I could address the signature injuries of this war; TBI and Multiple Ventilators, represented by Bailey on the left facing, loss of limbs/ extremities (initially as here he had lost one leg, but eventually lost the other) as had Franklin, and violent intestinal assault as per the figure of the right facing. I could have put Salikin (also TBI) in the painting instead of the black haired youth, however after much deliberation I wanted a non CF casualty with a distinct injury from the Canadians....I also had observed this patient several times pre the January 15th hit and felt so badly for him as a human being. He was small with very thick curly black hair. I could almost sense his hair growing while his self was mute....I tried to suggest both the professional calm yet violent environment and care that can transpire in a ROLE 3 hospital. I was trying to create a heightened sense of pathos and despair. The orange X over [Franklin's] severed left leg...set the tone for this central

figure. He was the only conscious patient of the three. So I signified that with the X and the black spikey [sic] slashes around his head, his floating in and out of stupour [sic] and realizations. The other two patients were "just there." In comas. The anger of the orange X centred the work and established a danger zone mood. "X marks the spot...." I was also projecting into the future on their behalves. The cataclysmic finality of the young male...Afghan, and the TBI reality of Bailey the engineer.

I would argue that this is pretty emotion-laden writing. But it is important to note that Kearns is revisiting experiences and not experiencing events for the first time. In essence, she is reflecting on the emotions she first felt in the hospital settings and the emotions she felt when she reconstructed those emotions in paint. She is in an emotional dialogue with her subject matter on a variety of levels. These various accounts I have given you clearly show that in her case emotion is a reflective, cognitive process. For her the painting is a "site of emotion."

I saw this painting at the end of January 2007 in Kearns' small studio, tacked to the wall. The paint was on the wall as well – not just on the painting itself. It totally overwhelmed the space. In her response to my March 31 email Kearns cited her diary entry. "Laura reacted powerfully and immediately to it. She wanted an image of it and the best I could provide was a homemade shot in the small space." I can't really improve on those words in terms of my initial reaction. I did not then know any of what I have just related to you. I just knew that I thought I was standing in front of a critically important Canadian work of art that encapsulated a very important aspect of the Afghanistan experience and that I wanted to exhibit it and share its power. I definitely responded to

the painting emotionally. One could argue that there was something of the abject in my response. These mutilated figures were in a space of abjection that I did not want to share even as I acknowledged it. There is no doubt, however, that as much as I was aware of the events behind this composition's genesis, my personal avenue into it was the artist's approach – the broad brushstrokes, the dramatic colour contrasts, the sheer energy of the paint application. I do not believe that I then took on board in any conscious manner the tragic personal experiences imbedded in the forms of the three silent, severely injured figures who confronted me, as much as I responded to Kearns' technique. This came later after reflection and discussion with others and, of course, access to Kearns' writing. My personal emotional landscape widened as I reflected on the work.

It was only two months ago that I made contact myself with Paul Franklin, the central subject of the series. He sent me a long email about his reactions, which I will quote in some detail. I expected expressions of grief – a military medical doctor had told me that thinking of such wounds brings on grief – but this is not what I got. Indeed, Franklin uses *Injured Medic* in his own presentations. He originally saw *What They Gave* about two years after the suicide hit. "I was confounded by the title more than the work itself," he writes. He wondered if it was a political statement of some kind. The title seems negative, he thinks, "when in fact Jeff [Bailey] and I have recovered and are doing very well. The Afghan kid I'm not sure and could never know. That being said Role 3 hospital has a 99% save rate."

More soberly he admits that "We gave up parts of our lives...We gave up our families...We gave up parts of our minds (I changed and I know Jeff [Bailey] has changed)...We gave up our careers." But most of what he writes is positive:



**Above: Corporal Paul Franklin, a medic with the Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team, looks into a young patient's ear at a free medical clinic for the local population of Kandahar, 7 September 2005.**

**Left: Master Corporal Paul Franklin pays his respects at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier following Remembrance Day ceremonies in Ottawa, 11 November 2007.**

to death. I see me at a new starting point. A rebirth if you will. January 15, 2006 is considered by Jeff [Bailey], Will [Salakin] and myself as my "alive day". Our birthday for a new life. So I guess I feel that what we gave was worthwhile and very few get a second chance at life. I have that honour.

From the limited evidence available to me the military medical community's response to *What They Gave* and Kearns' related work is positive. Trauma surgeon Andrew Beckett is writing an article on Kearns' medical art for the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. He wrote to Kearns in February 2011:

I looked at your "patient 2006" pieces and they really struck home to me, they capture the feelings, experience and misery of modern combat surgery. The open abdomens, the

extremity injuries, and the multiple ventilated patients. I think this work will always stay in my mind, we have patients like this today in the ICU [Intensive Care Unit]....

The broader art community also reacted favourably. Members had the opportunity to see the painting when it was included in the Canadian War Museum's *A Brush with War* exhibition. Toronto's Power Plant gallery's curator Jon Davies saw it at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection outside Toronto in 2008. He told Kearns that "he thought it was the best piece in the show." Two further unsolicited responses from the art community at the opening of the exhibition in Victoria in June 2011 were also positive. Four artists had been present over the opening weekend (Kearns was absent) and two came up to me independently to say that the outstanding painting in the show was *What They Gave*. They both commented on it from a painter's perspective – mentioning brushwork, colour, composition, gesture, and impact. This response was echoed in an interview with Mary Jo Hughes, chief curator at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, who commented that she felt "the artist is angry with the situation and painting it with violent colours and brushstrokes; sharp, active [strokes] suggest agitation. [It's] [n]ot carefully painted with love." Hughes commented on its mix of abstract and realistic qualities and I quote: "bits like [Franklin's] teeth and lips make it realistic; there's a person there; it hits you." She also commented on the lack of eye contact, not a normal occurrence in formal portraiture. "How dare we look at them when they can't look at us," she said. For her, the painting's impact lies in its invasion of privacy.

General visitor reactions in Victoria were very different from those so far mentioned and form a

significantly important contribution to balancing this catalogue of favourable commentary. It is important to note, however, that it would not be as likely for someone who did not respond positively to the work to contact Kearns personally nor would she be expected to seek out non-positive responses. That being said media coverage has been broadly positive if limited where this work is concerned. “*What They Gave* reaches into territory beyond the immediate realm of frontline personnel and military hardware” writes Dick Averbs, also a CFAP artist, in *Canadian Art* earlier this year.<sup>8</sup>

Part of this presentation, therefore, centres on the response of viewers who had no prior knowledge of this work. My sample is small and based on visitors I interviewed at the Victoria art gallery on 25 June this year. All the visitors interviewed were from western Canada: Victoria especially but also Calgary, Penticton, Red Deer, and Vancouver. I spoke with 15 individuals who had not attended any of my presentations so could not have been influenced in any way by my spoken words. It was also clear from their wider responses that none of the visitors had read the accompanying exhibition guide either, which was available for consultation in the gallery.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note also that none of the paintings had information on the labels beyond their titles and the artists’ names.

I asked my sample if any of the artworks they had seen in the exhibition had affected them emotionally. That was my only question and no one was reluctant to answer. Although several interviewed mentioned more than one work, for the purposes of this presentation, I have only included the first artwork or group of artworks mentioned. A total of ten different works or groups of art were cited. Only two of the 15 mentioned that *What They Gave* had

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**Gertrude Kearns**  
***Somalia Without Conscience* (1996).**

aroused emotional feelings. Only two works produced more emotion than *What They Gave* to the tune of three responses each. These were also Gertrude Kearns compositions – a depiction of Clayton Matchee torturing Shidane Arone in Somalia in 1993 (*Somalia without Conscience*) and her massive painting evoking the Rwanda genocide of the same year that I showed you before. Both works were painted after the events took place and were not witnessed. In both cases the visitors mentioned that they responded to the works because they reminded them of something else (Matchee) or it was about something they knew about that had affected them (Rwanda). My conclusion from

this is that for visitors with no prior knowledge *What They Gave* was just one of many paintings and for the visitor to respond to it they had to know about what was depicted or have some prior appreciation of expressive painting.

So what can we conclude from all this? I imagine by now that you are still somewhat overwhelmed by Kearns’ powerful descriptions of her works and the events that gave rise to her compositions. You may also be surprised, as I was, by how few visitors in my Victoria sample even noticed *What They Gave* and how, in the general scheme of things, how limited the media response was. So in the context of emotional theories, what can we say?

There can be no doubt that the events of 15 January had a massive impact on all those directly concerned. In its aftermath, and no longer a soldier, the central figure in Kearns’ composition, Paul Franklin, became a public advocate for military amputees. One can only imagine the event’s ongoing impact on Glyn Berry’s family and those of Bailey, Salikin, and the young Afghan boy. Kearns dealt with the traumatic events she witnessed, which clearly impacted on her, by drawing and painting the event and her responses to its aftermath many times. In *Suicide Hit #1* she reconstructed events with the aid of photographs and her own sketches. In the portrait of Colonel Andiwali she buried the event, acknowledging its presence only in her writing. In *Injured Medic* she dealt with the unavoidable truth that Franklin was a victim in a double portrait that showed him at work before the event that took his legs as well as unconscious in bed. In *What They Gave* she depicted all three of her surviving protagonists as victims and in her brushwork and colour-usage expressed her personal distress at the arbitrariness of fate.

*What They Gave* is therefore a personal response to events created

using expressive means familiar to the artist. Kearns has not painted this work this way so that we, the viewers, will understand how she feels or how her subjects feel although clearly, as I have stated, we can empathise based on previous experience and knowledge. Neither the subject nor the viewers are important here – it is about how Kearns feels or wants to feel and how she chooses to express it. It is about how she sees it. It is, perhaps, a cathartic exercise, an emotional blood-letting. I believe that this is why reactions are so mixed. If you are well-versed in art history you can translate Kearns' visceral slashes into anger and understand, without knowing the story, that it is an expressive response to some sort of trauma. If you know about suicide hits from television or the internet the relationship of Kearns' image to this might escape you – people on stretchers being rushed into ambulances are the common images – so you might walk by it. If your experience is that people with grievous injuries generally are cared for in clinically white hospitals where their injuries do not show, this expressive portrayal in black and red might be puzzling. Over and above all this is the fact that Kearns' reaction to the event is simply not the only one. Franklin's and the exhibition visitors' responses were singularly very different to Kearns'.

Perhaps if we turn again to the four formative personal influences on this paper: emotional theories, memory, the power of art, and language that I believe to be important to any understanding of a work like *What They Gave* we can gain some clarity. First, drawing very loosely on memory theories of the cognitive kind, in my opinion, for an emotional event depicted in art to be understood as emotional the event depicted has to have been shared in some way and expressed in a commonly understood language, whether it be alphabetical,

musical, visual, or something else. A painting can be chock full of the artist's emotions, its subject emotionally powerful in its own right, but like a foreign language, if the vocabulary and grammar is unknown and unshared it will not be understood, or even noticed. In other words, to be a "site of emotion" *What They Gave* requires a conversation of some kind to begin the access process to Kearns' and others' emotions to enable them to be shared and talked about.

The passage of time is also important because it allows for this sort of reflection and discussion. For Picasso's *Guernica* tapestry to be covered up nearly 60 years after it was first created for fear of its power to remind people of the impact of war requires a long history of accessibility. In covering it the UN confirmed that *Guernica* functioned successfully not only as a "site of memory" but as a "site of emotion."

Finally, let us turn to emotional theories. Like *Guernica*, *What They Gave* is not inherently emotional even if the artist felt very emotional when she created it and the subject is an emotional one. It is just paint, and card, and, depending on your perspective, an expressive technical skill that conveys emotion to a trained eye. Paint and card and technical skill on the part of an artist cannot alone convey emotion any more than a well-designed cereal box involving the same materials. However, just as a monument – usually a large carved block of stone – can become a site of memory to past events so too can a painting become a "site of emotion" for the more recently experienced. It does not mean a painting is intrinsically emotional in its own right any more than a carved piece of stone is. But if the artist can through other means beyond his or her craft convey the idea that the work is born of emotion, and is a record of an emotional event,

and has expressed a desire both in the painting of it and by her use of language in describing it to share her emotions and there is some level of reception, then the possibility exists for the work to become a "site of emotion." Returning to Jenefer Robinson's analysis that I cited at the beginning, it is the dual emphasis on the interaction of audience and interpreter that brings emotion to consciousness. This is what makes *What They Gave* a "site of emotion."

## Notes

This paper is based on a talk delivered as a part of the Shannon Lectures in History at Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, 18 November 2011.

Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are courtesy of Gertrude Kearns.

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Laura Brandon is Historian, Art and War, at the Canadian War Museum. She is the author of *Art or Memorial? The Forgotten History of Canada's War Art* (University of Calgary Press, 2006).