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Constituent Parts

Recent Portraiture in Canadian Military Art

LINDSEY V. SHARMAN

Abstract: Not common within the art historical record of the Canadian Military, the work of a number of visual artists participating in the Canadian Forces Artists Program demonstrates a keen and growing interest in portraiture. In this article, the work of Gertrude Kearns, Mary Kavanagh, and Erin Riley will be highlighted to illustrate the recent trend. Their work is contrasted with one another as well as with portraiture created by Canada's war artists in the First and Second World Wars to bring to light the tensions of representation inherent in military portraiture. It will be shown that shifting perceptions found in the wider employment of portraiture and freedom given to participants in the Canadian Forces most recent official art program have encouraged depictions of members at all levels of the Canadian Forces.

A NUMBER of recent participants in the Canadian Forces Artist Program (CFAP) demonstrate an interest in portraiture. Given portraiture's historic ties to power one might assume it would be well represented in the broader scope of a Canadian military art history canon. This is, in fact, not the case. Although many military artists have created portraits over the past one hundred years, landscape has long been the preferred subject matter of Canada's military artists.¹ Furthermore, even if First and Second World War official war artists' "sympathies [were] with the common soldier" they also shied away from "hero-worship," a contradiction that I see as greatly limiting portrait representations, that as well overshadows all other

¹ Maria Tippett, *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art, and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 69.

representations.² In 2004, art historian Shearer West noted that portraiture “flourishes in cultures that privilege or favour the notion of the individual over that of the collective.”³ And while Western cultures certainly do, military culture does not. Thus, with the exception of portraits of commanders and medal winners, portraits of less-exalted military personnel are historically rare. I would argue the lack of historical military portraits goes much deeper than shying away from “hero worship,” as Tippetts suggests, but is tied to the difficulty in representing individuals that also represent institutions. There is a tension in depicting the individual and defining the whole within a military context to which portrait representations of any other people or groups of people do not quite compare. A portrait of the Queen, for example, is the depiction of the human embodiment of the monarchy; a CEO, a symbol of a company; a celebrity, a depiction of a type or even personal brand; depictions of a soldier teeter more precariously between the self and the institution (or multiple selves and multiple institutions) an inherent contradiction that until recently was not rectified within the genre. Art Historians Donna Gustafson and Susan Sidlauskas, furthermore, demarcate the genre of portraiture into those of individuals, doubles, and groups.⁴ Military portraiture does not easily fit into this trichotomy, creating a tension inherent in all of the below artists’ work between depicting the individual and defining the whole.

Starting in 1916, Lord Beaverbrook established the Canadian War Memorials Fund to commission official war artists to paint and record the Canadian war effort in, ultimately, both world wars.⁵ The Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artist Program (CAFCAP) sent artist to record Canadian Forces in primarily peacekeeping roles from 1968–1995.⁶ Starting in 2001, the Canadian Forces Artist Program (CFAP) accepts applications and supports selected artists to capture the Canadian military experience through short-term residencies

² P.G. Konody, “On War Memorials,” *Art and War: Canadian War Memorials* (London: Colour Ltd., 1919), 14.

³ Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 17.

⁴ Donna Gustafson and Susan Sidlauskas, *Striking Resemblance: The Changing Art of Portraiture* (New Jersey: Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, 2014).

⁵ Laura Brandon, *Art or Memorial? The Forgotten History of Canada’s War Art* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006), xiv.

⁶ Laura Brandon, *A Brush with War: Military Art from Korea to Afghanistan* (Ottawa/Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation, 2009), 20.

of one to two weeks that take the artists into contexts of their choosing wherever Canadian Forces are serving. The Department of National Defence's Directorate of History and Heritage supports artist participation in CFAP every two years.⁷ CFAP artists do not receive commissions as a part of their residency and their roles as Canadian Forces artists are not to build national collections, as it was 100 years ago. There is no obligation to create work; the intent is to give artists access. The most recent CFAP participants have not witnessed Canadian Forces in active combat or active peacekeeping roles. Canada's most recent combat operations ended in 2011 and it withdrew from Afghanistan in 2015. Participating artists have therefore increasingly painted military art rather than war art and also worked more creatively with the non-combat subjects to which they have access. This has allowed an opportunity for an increase in portraiture. Artists Gertrude Kearns (born 1950), Erin Riley (born 1971), and Mary Kavanagh (born 1965) will be examined here to illustrate this trend. Their respective employment of the genre of portraiture varies dramatically from one to the other but all are testing conventions and expanding the very definitions of both war art and military portraiture through contemporary portraiture while drawing from those few military portrait painters who came before them.

To fully appreciate the portraiture practised by these three artists a brief historical precedent must be established. Portraiture was once a genre reserved for the highly decorated and those in command. The genre, circa First World War, is exemplified in the work of artists like Florence Carlyle (1864–1923) and J.W. Beatty (1869–1941). *Lady Julia Drummond*, c1918 by Carlyle and *Private Cecil John Kinross*, VC by Beatty (Figures 1 and 2) are the result of War Memorials commissions.⁸ Beatty worked with Kinross in formalised sittings to portray this Victoria Cross recipient. Carlyle moved into the home of this dedicated Red Cross activist to capture her likeness.⁹ The motivations behind this living arrangement are not entirely clear but this way of working alludes to an artist wanting to capture an

⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁸ Florence Carlyle, *Lady Julia Drummond*, c1918, oil on canvas, 102.3x76.8cm. and J.W. Beatty, *Private Cecil John Kinross*, VC, oil on canvas, 102.2x76.7cm, both Canadian War Museum's collection.

⁹ Tippet, *Art at the Service of War*, 57.



Figure 1. *Lady Julia Drummond* by Florence Carlyle. Oil on canvas, 102.3 cm x 76.8 cm [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum 19710261-0119]



Figure 2. *Private Cecil John Kinross, VC* by John Beatty. Oil on canvas, 102.2 cm x 76.7 cm. [Beaverbrook Collection of War Art Canadian War Museum 19710261-0098]

accurate physical representation by way of personal interaction. Working ahead of her time, theorist Lee Siegel posited that it was not until after the Second World War that the psyche was recognised as something that can be seen like “an atlas” on the face, and that



Figure 3. *Sergeant P.J. Ford*, by Charles Comfort. Watercolour, 38.8x57.1cm. [Canadian War Museum 19710261-2189]

artists could represent a shadow of the inner world in the physical.¹⁰ In viewing the works, however, both of these portraits offer more of what has been described by Robert A. Sobieszek as the “dispassionate Twentieth-Century portrait. Blank, bored, and consummately empty ... they emote nothing at all, appearing to exist solely for us to stare at and in turn project our associations, desires, fantasies, and feelings onto them.”¹¹ Drummond and Kinross certainly do hold and project back on the viewer their established associations of their standings as a decorated soldier and advocate for the war wounded. They also both emote a certain calm dignity or assuredness in their historically important societal contributions—those contributions also being the motivations for their portrait commissions.

A striking portrait such as *Sergeant P.J. Ford* (Figure 3) by Second World War artist Charles Comfort (1900–1994) painted after Ford witnessed the death of a fellow soldier and good friend

¹⁰ Lee Siegel, “On the Face of It,” *Strange Resemblance: The Changing Art of Portraiture* (New Jersey: Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, 2014), 61.

¹¹ Robert Sobieszek, *Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul, 1850–2000* (Los Angeles/Cambridge: The Los Angeles County Museum of Art and MIT Press, 1999), 91.

in Italy demonstrates an important shift in how individuals were both represented by artists as well as how those individuals in turn represented war and the military.¹² Beginning in the Second World War, artists increasingly were freed from the constraints of documentation and specific commissions and this freedom is evident in their portraiture of a wider group of subjects. No longer were portraits reserved for commissioned representations of Victoria Cross recipients and the highly decorated. Instead, the decision to create a portrait was beginning to be propelled by the artist's personal convictions as with Comfort's *Sergeant P.J. Ford*. Comfort believed that the war artist was dispatched with a very important and serious task and that the artist's emotional interpretation should not be incorporated into war art. His representations of the Second World War focus on machinery and are dramatic but not emotional. This portrait is rare in the artist's oeuvre and offers a glimpse into the emotional strain of a soldier. Comfort allows viewers to see the difficult human experiences of war in this piece but restricts that emotion to the lived experiences as seen through the eyes and forlorn expression of this private. This is less an artistic attempt at the depiction of a person but of an event or lived experience tied concretely to one specific place and time.

Carlyle, Beatty, and Comfort would have all been considered war artists and thought of differently than Henry Lamb (1883–1960) who was a portrait painter working on a specific military commission. Lamb was tasked through this commission to represent the diversity of the Allied fighting force by painting and drawing often unnamed English Canadian, French Canadian, and First Nations soldiers. Outside of this work, the artist was also given extensive freedom to create likenesses of individuals of his choosing—men who simply interested the artist as subjects, not those identified by the forces as those who must be painted for distinct ends.¹³ More interested in the depictions of individual subjects, Lamb benefited from loosening requirements on artists in the Second World War. Artists began to be able to choose subjects that appealed to them as individuals, as is

¹² Charles Comfort, *Sergeant P.J. Ford*, 1944, watercolour, 38.8x57.1cm, Canadian War Museum's collection.

¹³ Brian Foss, "No Dead Wood": Henry Lamb and the Canadians," *Canadian Military History* 6, Issue 2, Article 7 (1997), available: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol6/iss2/7>, [accessed 2 May 2016].



Figure 4. “Pop” Pitcher, 1941 by Henry Lamb. Oil on canvas, 50.8x40.7cm. [Canadian War Museum 19710261-6102]

the case with a work like “Pop” Pitcher, 1941 (Figure 4).¹⁴ Equally, the striking, and at times difficult, depictions of airmen in the midst of post-combat facial reconstruction surgery as rendered by Second World War official artist Charles Goldhamer (1903–1985) depict

¹⁴ Henry Lamb, “Pop” Pitcher, 1941, oil on canvas, 50.8x40.7cm., Canadian War Museum’s collection.



Figure 5. *Burnt Airman with Wig*, 1945 (Sgt. James Gourley) by Charles Goldhamer. Mixed media on paper, 50.1x39.3cm. [Canadian War Museum 19710261-3067]

individuals that affected the artist on a very personal level.¹⁵ These works are not created for specific documentation and are not offering blank canvases for a viewer to project pre-established associations but are presenting subjects that are framed by the artist and the artist's intentions.

Goldhamer's representations such as *Burnt Airman with Wig* (Figure 5) do not impersonally document the war effort but bring war's tragedy and cruelty into focus. This work points towards a growing artistic freedom not constrained by political or military prerogatives. Goldhamer is one of the few Canadian war artists from

¹⁵ Charles Goldhamer, *Burnt Airman with Wig*, 1945 (Sgt. James Gourley), mixed media on paper, 50.1x39.3 cm, Canadian War Museum's collection.

the First or Second World War that presents the human collateral of war. Where most Canadian war artists present the destructive nature of war through destroyed landscape, Goldhamer's depictions do not analogise loss in war. Such a body of work that examines the realities of one specific segment of the Canadian Forces could easily be created by one of Canada's contemporary war artists. Much like Goldhamer, Gertrude Kearns has tackled some of the most taboo and controversial subjects related to the Canadian Forces and often figures those injured by war and likewise reflect a relative and increasing openness of Canadian Forces artist programs. Since 1991, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the Somalia Affair (1996), the Rwandan Genocide (2002), and the physical traumas caused by Improvised Explosive Devices from 2006 in Afghanistan have all been subjects of Kearns' artistic investigations and interventions. Her latest endeavour, what she calls the Core Command Series, examines the roles of specific highly ranked individuals who not only fought in, but also commanded, Canada's war in Afghanistan. The works have recently been shown in *The Art of Command: Portraits and Posters from Canada's Afghan Mission*, exhibited at both Fort York in Toronto and the University of Calgary's Founders' Gallery in Calgary.¹⁶ Although work in this series can be traced back to 2006, the majority of the series was produced between 2011 and 2014, when Canada had ceased combat in Afghanistan and started its transition out of that country.

This project contains two parallel but related compositions of eighteen individuals identified by the artist as pivotal to the war in Afghanistan. The first component comprises large portraits rendered in charcoal and acrylic paint (Figure 6). Most of Gertrude Kearns' sitters are depicted in the greens and ochres of their field uniforms. Often, the distinctively Canadian Disruptive Pattern or CADPAT does not end with the cuff or collar of their fatigues but rather is sketched into the faces and hands of these commanders. In Kearns' representations, they quite literally become one with the uniforms they have chosen. Each face, although individually recognisable, is intensely detailed; every line, wrinkle, and crack on their face is amplified to show how these commanders' time abroad is not worn only in patches

¹⁶ *The Art of Command: Portraits and Posters from Canada's Afghan Mission*, Fort York National Historic Site, Toronto, March 5–June 14, 2015; Founders' Gallery at the Military Museums, Calgary, July 4–October 30, 2016.

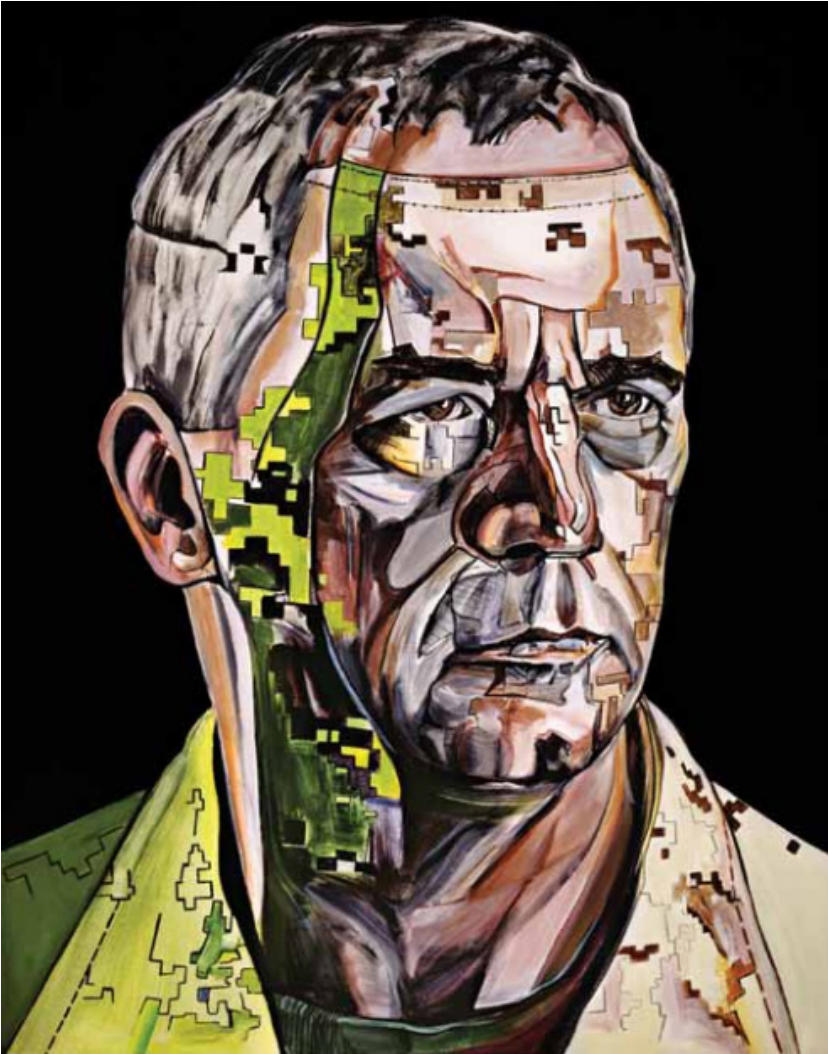


Figure 6. *Colonel (ret'd) Pat Stogran, 2011* by Gertrude Kearns. Acrylic on canvas, 137.2 cm x 106.7 cm. [Collection of Gertrude Kearns Studio, Toronto]

stitched to uniforms. These individual commanders, mostly restricted to shoulder and waist up views, confront viewers directly or in three-quarter profile. These men—and only men—participated in lengthy sittings with the artist in the production of each portrait. When seen together their glaring maleness and whiteness is not an artistic choice but an accurate depiction of those who commanded the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan. In an email the artist stated if the project was

not so closely related to command, she could have depicted a number of women at lower levels to include more diverse faces but did not want to skew reality or create the illusion of diversity.¹⁷ The sitters are representative of those at the highest levels of command.

To even further visualise the experiences of the sitter that continue to play out internally, the second component of Kearns' Core Command Series is realised in text-filled art prints that take the aforementioned drawn or painted portrait and incorporate words that curator David Liss compares to rap album covers and action movie posters.¹⁸ Flanked and framed in bold, bright script are snippets of phrases as innocuous as "Je Me Souviens" and "No Time for Hollywood Moments" or as provocative as "Unfuck the System" and "I Loved Killing the Enemy."¹⁹ When the commanders are sitting for Kearns, she is not only sketching facial features, posture, or demeanour, but she is taking notes and interviewing them as well, as one of her sitters conveyed, putting pen to paper as often as brush to canvas.²⁰ She does not just study her sitters generally but researched specifically how they handled and reacted to their time in control of various aspects of the mission in Afghanistan. The quotes in the prints are pulled from their conversations and the artist's research, though she allows her sitters to review and consent to her text selections before the pieces are finalised and printed. Curator Wayne Reeves claims of this process that, "Forced to confront her interpretations of their experience, the soldiers become unusually complicit in the making of art."²¹ Rather than viewing this approval of text in a democratic way that includes the sitters in their creation, or an implication of forced complicity of subversion as Reeves puts forth, the text should be viewed at least in part as a masking enacted far before any text is "approved." Reeves argument alludes to an assumption that these commanders may have revealed more than they wanted to in their conversations with the

¹⁷ Personal email from the artist to the author, 27 July 2016.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹ Gertrude Kearns, *Je Me Souviens* (*Lieutenant-Colonel Steve Jourdain*), 2013, Giclée print on Hahnemühle paper, 152.5x111.5cm; *Concept and War* (*Brigadier-General Jonathan Vance*, 2013, Giclée print on Hahnemühle paper, 152.5x111.5cm; *Art of War* (*Colonel [ret'd] Pat Stogran*, 2011, Giclée print on Hahnemühle paper, 152.5x111.5cm; and *Hope of War* (*Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Hope*, 2012, Giclée print on Hahnemühle paper, 152.5x111.5cm, artist's collection.

²⁰ Wayne Reeves, ed., *The Art of Command: Portraits and Posters from Canada's Afghan Mission* (Toronto: City of Toronto, 2015), 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

artist and therefore viewers are being given some sort of all access pass into the psyche and experiences of these commanders, which is likely false. And while Kearns states that this review process has never resulted in a change to the text, the sitters are aware both that their comments are being recorded as part and parcel of their portrait and that their right of refusal to those words after the fact is doubtful.²² This allows the sitters to perform their myriad roles as soldier and commander representing or performing their hybrid self as both and neither purely individual or wholly representative of the Canadian Forces. It is unavoidable for the sitter not to offer some perceived image of what the artist or potential viewer might expect, as well as presenting oneself as an idealised version. While less relevant here in our discussions of performing myriad individual and group identities and responsibilities simultaneously, there is space for further investigations into the deeper layers of performativity ingrained in an all-male cast performing for a woman artist as well as the level of perceived legitimisation and authority required of a woman artist to enter into certain all-male military spheres.

West points out that all portraits are visually codified and imbedded with symbolism.²³ Art Historian Richard Brilliant adds that portraits are always created according to the standards of the time tying portraiture both to a specific place and time and to a specific community.²⁴ Within any given community, visitors may understand visual cues but they may be unknowable to audiences in any other context. As a text-literate society, Canadians readily absorb short-format text-based cues, enabling an easy “reading” of Gertrude Kearns’ portraits. Gustafson and Sidlauskas assert that portraits rely on a viewer’s knowledge of the sitter to fully grasp the magnitude of what is represented in a portrait.²⁵ I believe Kearns’ use of text circumnavigates this assertion to make these very military-specific works accessible to a wider audience. Kearns capitalises on the use of text for a contemporary audience that offers varied interactions for military, non-military, art and non-art audiences alike. In the piece *Art of War*, (Figure 7) the ambiguity is playful yet guided. “You’re a warrior! Get on with your life!!” written in

²² Ibid., 27.

²³ West, *Portraiture*, 57.

²⁴ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books Limited, 1991), 31.

²⁵ Gustafson and Sidlauskas, *Strange Resemblance*, 40.



Figure 7. *ART OF WAR [Colonel (ret'd) Pat Stogran]*, 2011 by Gertrude Kearns. Giclée print on Hahnemühle paper, 152.5 x 111.5 cm. [Collection of Gertrude Kearns Studio, Toronto]

uncredited quotations is interpreted as both heard and uttered by the sitter. For each viewer this could be seen as harmful toxic masculinity or as encouragement and comfort when no other words are available. “Art of War” is dismissive and complementary. “Unfuck Your Head” is blunt acceptance of PTSD. “Unfuck the System” is an acknowledgment that the military and support systems are fucked.²⁶ Some of the posters allow for this ambiguity and play, most are more concrete in their sitters’ stance. *The Long Fight* states the sitters unwavering assertion on Afghanistan in straightforward language: “Multiple possible futures all better than the past. Despite failures we were right to intervene.”²⁷ Viewers are not permitted to interpret the sitter’s meaning here but could speculate whether this statement originated from the sitters own critical assessment of the outcomes of the mission in Afghanistan or key talking points from “official” assessments. Others still like *Don’t Call Me Dude, 2013* contain both unambiguous text as well as phrases such as “twenty second AFG hug” that might only be fully understood by those experienced with Canadian combat in Afghanistan.²⁸ The text that any viewer does not understand reminds civilian viewers of the foreign world into which they are looking. The artist concedes, “These posters seem to appeal to civilians even if some components are unclear. Even when they function as ‘just guys in uniforms,’ and by extension the military in general, there is often some common ground which bridges civilian and defence interpretations.”²⁹ The text included in these prints allows both for guided interpretation as well as a multiplicity of viewpoints and allows the sitters to be seen as multidimensional beings. The contradictions inherent in these images have become acceptable according to Sobieszek who observes, “Since the late nineteenth century [artists] have been increasingly involved with investigating and depicting the polity of multifarious denizens inhabiting each human being and taking their turns expressing themselves.”³⁰ The acceptability of this multifarious

²⁶ *Art of War (Colonel [ret’d] Pat Stogran)*, 2011, Giclée print on Hahnemühle paper, 152.5x111.5cm, collection of the artist.

²⁷ *The Long Fight (Colonel Ian Hope)*, 2014, Giclée print on Hahnemühle paper, 152.5x111.5cm, collection of the artist.

²⁸ *Don’t Call Me Dude (Lieutenant-General [ret’d] Marc Lessard as Major-General)*, 2013 Giclée print on Hahnemühle paper, 152.5x111.5cm, collection of the artist.

²⁹ Reeves, *The Art of Command*, 22.

³⁰ Sobieszek. *Ghost in the Shell*, 184.

human could in part explain the increase in military portraiture in Canada overtime, where once the soldier as both individual and representative of military was a contradiction incompatible with the genre of portraiture, now these inconsistencies are less problematic to a contemporary viewer. In alignment with post-modern concepts of the self, the contemporary viewer can accept that the subjects of military portraiture may have internal beliefs and fragmented selves and that simultaneously contradictory beliefs and experience are not only possible but unavoidable. Furthermore, the text allows the sitters to transcend their positions of being on display. Brilliant describes portraiture as “communication, almost a conversation” between sitter and viewer.³¹ Kearns’ sitters are not merely stoic, silent, passive sitters, like Carlyle’s Drummond or Beatty’s Kinross. With the inclusion of text they are given a voice which asserts that this is not merely *almost* a conversation but they are active even enthusiastic participants. They are representative of the military and are representative of their post but the inclusion of the text allows them the authorship of individuals, however fractured and performative, who bear the human scars of their unique experiences.

The text included in the works of Gertrude Kearns figuratively and literally draws viewers in. The largest blocks of text often serve as the titles of the pieces giving an overview of the work. As the text decreases in size they offer more context and reveal progressively more of what the sitter projected to the artist. One must physically encroach on the artworks’ space to read the smallest text of some pieces. At close range, the sitter also seems to crumble, the harsh brushstrokes and abstractions that are mostly imperceptible at a distance are revealed—the physical breaks down as the psychological and experiential takes form. The text provides an entry point into the works and into the stories of these men and the broader story of Canada in Afghanistan to any viewer who is textually literate. Curator Wayne Reeves argues that Kearns’ body of work, while revealing much of the individuals and their experiences of Afghanistan, does not offer a clear narrative of the broader situation in Afghanistan. I would argue that the fragmented and un-unified voice is presenting precisely the situation as it was in Afghanistan.³² The mission was variable and unfolded in distinct stages that lasted longer than the

³¹ Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 72.

³² Reeves, *Art of Command*, 29.

First and Second World Wars combined, those who were there at different times over the course of Canadian Forces involvement had drastically different experiences and impressions on the goals, successes, and failures of this mission. So taken together they do offer a clear narrative through the fractured professional and personal narratives of those who commanded over the myriad of Canadian experiences of Afghanistan.

Erin Riley, is similarly interested in how text can situate her military sitters. Riley was first selected for the Canadian Forces Artist Program in 2011 after which she undertook several projects that investigated military subjects including a second CFAP residency in 2015. Parallels can be drawn from her work to Henry Lamb, not aesthetically, but in their motivations and ways of approaching military subjects are similar. Lamb was a headstrong, independent artist mostly capturing what he wanted and was not a depicter of military subjects. Today, the boundaries are less distinct. The already existing individual interests of the artist are now often the primary driving force in the contemporary Canadian Forces Artist Program and that Lamb stands out among historical Canadian military portraitists for working in such a self-motivated way illustrates how drastically different the artist program for the Canadian Forces has become in recent years.

In 2011, at Riley's request, she worked extensively with chaplains in the Canadian Forces to create a project entitled *Vocation*.³³ The artist uses several visual tools and practical techniques to draw out the seemingly contradictory nature of a dual life of faith and chosen military service involving state-countenanced death. Canadian Forces chaplains are Christian, Jewish, and Muslim—all of which have tenets of love and non-violence at their core. And although each of the world's major religions do not teach violence, I would describe most recent conflicts as religious wars, echoing the contradictions that Riley is trying to tease out. These men and women do not take up arms but fight without weapons; they fight with and for something else entirely. As Padre Timothy Parker, one of Riley's sitters, clarifies, "Because Chaplains don't bear arms. Praise be to god. Part of our function is to show people—the fighting men and women—what they

³³ Erin Riley, *Vocation*, 2011, Series of photographs, various sizes, artist's collection, available: <http://www.fotographer.ca/index.php/vocation/>.



"I think so many of us in the military are - how can I put this? - There is no avoiding the cross roads when you are a serving member of the Canadian Forces. There is no avoiding the moral questions. There is no avoiding having to step into the abyss. There is no avoiding the risks. . . .

We have to step into the cross roads. It's what we do there that marks us as men and women of courage. And if we as chaplains can somehow help people through these cross road moments, then I think we will have completed our mission - to be people of God who walk with people of honour."

Padre Michelle Staples

Figure 8. *Vocation*, 2011, by Erin Riley. [Artist's collection]

are fighting for. And that is a world without arms."³⁴ Many of her sitters explain this calling by arguing that their strength in faith is precisely because of their first-hand experiences of what they can only explain as evil.³⁵

Riley spoke at length with her sitters before asking to photograph them in prayer, after which she asked each for a passage summarising their military religious calling. Instead of using her standard 35 mm digital camera, Riley selected a medium format film camera for the project. This forced her to slow down and be more thoughtful and meditative in capturing images—a practice she found more fitting for the subject. She couldn't just "blow off 100 frames" with a digital camera, as she normally would in her practice.³⁶ Each roll of film contained only twelve frames after which she would have to reload—an act that is on its own a sort of meditative artistic devotion.³⁷ The limited frames altered the artist's mindset, forcing a more deliberate process of capturing images. And through this active contemplation of her artistic tools she found inspiration in the

³⁴ Jacob Wilson-Hajdu, "Erin Riley Explores Religion in the Military," *Humber News*, 11 November 2014, available: <http://humbernews.ca/erin-riley-explores-religion-in-the-military/>, [accessed 2 May 2016].

³⁵ Padre Dwight Nelson, "Vocation" 2011, available: <http://www.fotographer.ca/index.php/vocation/>, [accessed 2 May 2016].

³⁶ Wilson-Hajdu, "Erin Riley Explores Religion in the Military."

³⁷ Ibid.

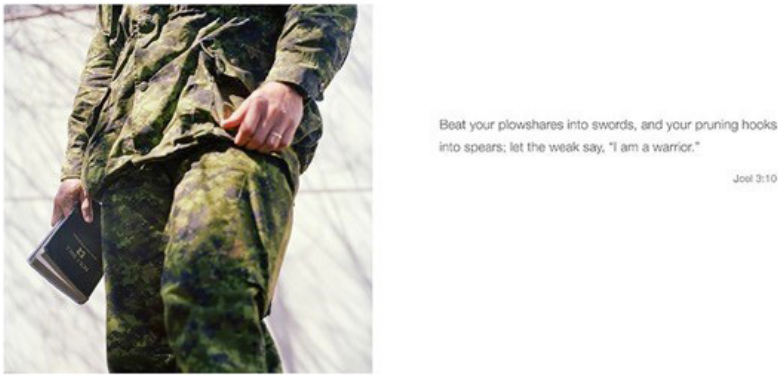


Figure 9. *Vocation*, 2011 by Erin Riley. [Artist's collection]

chaplains' religious tools. Echoing Lee Siegel's observation of recent portraiture trends that "the face hides so much of a person's reality that the true markers of autobiographical revelation are anything but the person's face," Riley, too, turned away from literal representations to investigate alternative ways to show her sitters.³⁸ Channelling the Baroque sculptor Bernini who once said of the troubles in portrait representations that "if a man stands still and immobile, he is never as much like himself as when he moves about. His movements reveal all those personal qualities which are his and his alone,"³⁹ this artistic gesture posits that those in *Vocation* are not encapsulated within their facial features or their gaze but by the transformation of their uniformed bodies in religious contemplation. What she was looking for was any change to posture, stance, or air that could possibly be captured on film—aiming for a glimpse of the altered inner state reflected in the physical.

In *Vocation*, the sitters are not only represented by their photos but are also accompanied by a quote. (Figures 8 and 9) As with Kearns, Riley employed an interview process which was pivotal to the work; the artists familiarising themselves with their sitters in hopes of being able to better visually represent them. In Riley's work, she used these extensive conversations to build trust before asking

³⁸ Siegel, "On the Face of It," 72–73.

³⁹ Bernini as quoted by Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 10.

the chaplains to engage in prayer before her. At the conclusions to their time together, the artist asked each of the chaplains to share with her a passage from their chosen religious text describing their call to serve both as men and women of faith and as members of the Canadian Forces to shed further light on their hybrid positions of military religious adviser. Riley then utilised either that passage or a quote from their discussions to pair with the portrait, creating not only a caption or description for the image but a diptych where the artist gives the quote as much visual weight as the portrait itself.⁴⁰ The resulting double portrait serves to re-personalise the chaplain, so even though we may only see a hand upon a book, they are not anonymous. The quotes transform the studies of pose, body, and uniform into representations of real people wanting to convey their experiences within the world, within religion, and within the military.

It is this desire to convey these very particular experiences and convey them with precision and accuracy that drives the inclusion of text. The pairing of portraiture and text in this way is utilised artistically for contemporary Canadian military subjects at a much higher frequency than other contemporary art practices and is also seen in Scott Waters' *Sgt. Collette* (2007) (Figure 10).⁴¹ Not unlike the double portraits created by Riley, Sgt. Collette's double portrait consists of one panel painted portrait and one panel silkscreened text reading:

If he dies over in Afghanistan, the avuncular Sgt. Collette worried this depiction might become propaganda for the Department of National Defence. If he dies, will I paint this image over to avoid such a possibility? Perhaps a topical tan but surely not a melodramatic black or burgundy. Perhaps I will retire it and only occasionally peek at it, checking if his death resonates in me. Checking also to see if this painting allows for time travel, takes me back to his easy-going pragmatism of CFB Gagetown—supplanting his death in the high desert.

Sergeant Collette's fears of his portrait being made into propaganda if he should die illustrates that there is much at stake in creating

⁴⁰ Erin Riley. "Vocation." Erin Riley: Photographer, 2011, available: <http://www.fotographer.ca/index.php/vocation-project-statement/>, [accessed May 5, 2016].

⁴¹ Scott Waters, *Sgt. Collette*, 2007, oil and acrylic on plywood panel, 77.5x24cm (two panels), Canadian War Museum's collection.

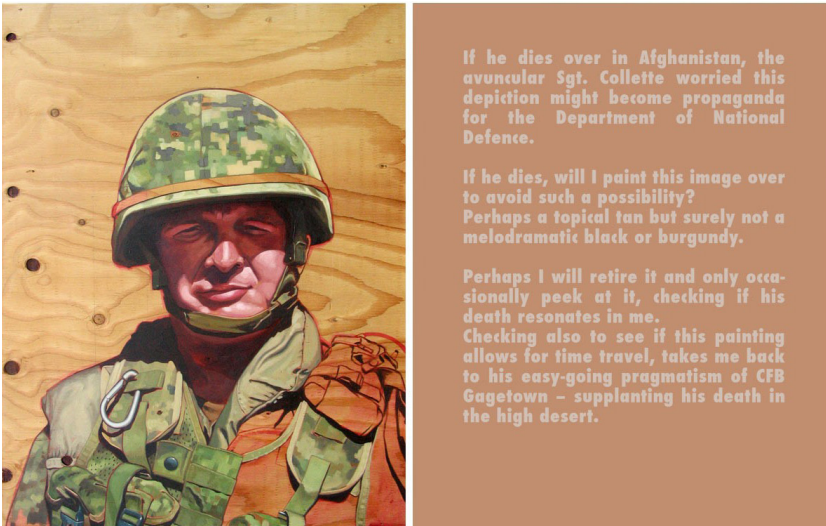


Figure 10. *Sergeant Collette*, 2007 by Scott Walters. Acrylic on plywood and silkscreen. [Artist's collection]

military portraits, perhaps more than in both civilian portraiture and any other form of war or military art. Waters' observations also convey the artist's feeling of obligation of protecting (with paint or otherwise) his sitter from outside motivations and (mis)interpretations. Any visual genre hands over a huge amount of meaning production to the viewer. Perhaps as a reaction to and as compensation for viewers' assumed preconceived notions of the military, and the very easy slippages that happen between representing an individual and representing entire institutions, these artists are incorporating text to take back some meaning production from viewers and allow to clarify their sitters multiple and seemingly contradictory allegiances and motivations. The incorporation of text also ensures that, as curators Sandy Nairne and Sarah Howgate posit, contemporary portraiture "provide insight into their character, some essence of their being [...] allow something of someone's personal interior life to be made available in public [...] bring out hidden information" but the text goes even further to make it more likely that that "hidden information" be subject to less debate.⁴² One could surmise that these artists are aware of the biases faced by their subjects and the

⁴² Sandy Nairne and Sarah Howgate, *The Portrait Now* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), 7.

struggle between individuality and group responsibilities and they use text to reduce the unknown, clarify authorship, and therefore limit or more precisely direct viewers in their interpretations.

While the integration of text is implemented by the aforementioned artists in situating their sitters and aiding in their representations it is not the only way in which contemporary Canadian war artists are expanding upon the genre of military portraiture. Mary Kavanagh does not incorporate text into her portraits but like Erin Riley was drawn to an examination of the peripheral personalities of the Canadian Forces accessible to Canada's official war artists. While Kavanagh does have an interest in military subjects, more broadly her work is an investigation into how the personal translates and relates to atomic history. In 2013, she participated in the Canadian Forces Artist Program where she was able to visit Defence Research and Development Canada in Ottawa and filmed the Radiological Analysis and Defence group engaged in radiation and chemical detection training. *Double Portrait, The Expulsion (in white)* and *Double Portrait, The Expulsion (in green)*, (Figures 11 and 12) stills from which have recently been acquired by the Canadian War Museum, are the direct result of this 2013 CFAP residency. These works depict military scientists wearing protective clothing intended for use in Syria to protect against chemical weapons.⁴³ Both works, somewhere between photography and video, confront viewers with side by side portraits of one man and one woman fully outfitted in safety gear but only visible from the shoulders up. These fluid time-lapse portraits are both subtle and unnerving, the at times imperceptible movements, blinks, smirks, of the pair as they stand for their portraits are all captured.

Like with Riley, this selection of medium to capture her subjects was conscientiously considered. Because these sitters' faces are obscured to varying degrees the video format allows for the individual to come into play. The stills read more as a demonstration or modeling of the gear itself but when one engages with the video, the subtle movements capture nuances of engagement with the medium, making the faciality of each individual more engaging. These subtle movements captured on film from within the shell of technology

⁴³ Anne Ewan, "Exhibition statement for "Atomic Suite,"" Art Gallery of Calgary, 2012, available: <http://people.uleth.ca/~mary.kavanagh/current/projects/atomic/index.html>, [accessed 2 May 2016].



Figure 11. *The Expulsion (in white)* by Mary Kavanagh. Still from video portrait of the Radiological Analysis and Defence group engaged in radiation and chemical detection training, Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC), 2013. 1:15min. [Image Artist's collection]



Figure 12. *The Expulsion (in green)* by Mary Kavanagh. Still from video portrait of the Radiological Analysis and Defence group engaged in radiation and chemical detection training, Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC), 2013. 1:15min. [Image Artist's collection]

start to bring the individual into focus. Sobieszek describes twentieth century portraits as “devoid of any inherent subjectivity...seem to be solely about surface, shape, and apparent details.”⁴⁴ This interest in surface that eventually becomes the post-modern mask is literally depicted in these works of Kavanagh through which we see the sitter only reveal themselves overtime with their facial movements.

Rather than try and present some central core of personhood or myriad of performed personas Kavanagh presents ambiguity, so much so that without context one could not realise that these individuals are members of the Canadian Forces at all. Highlighting a distinction made earlier where historically we can see a clear delineation of artists who are official war artists representing war as their duty,

⁴⁴ Sobieszek, *Ghost in the Shell*, 91.

we no longer have that distinction and artists are free to use the members of the forces as their artistic props. These two individuals are playing a part; they play their roles in the artist created narrative just as they perform their own identities within that narrative. Here there is no need to rectify these sitters' identities.

As portraits become less representational of individuals, viewers often visually read them as both generalised and personalised. These images perform double duty by becoming both more allegorical and, also, more functional as blank slates for the viewer to project their own thoughts upon. Although these portraits are seemingly impersonal, Kavanagh's work is primarily interested in the personal relation to history. By approaching her subjects in this manner the artist allows viewers to inject themselves into the body of the sitter, overlaying their own selves onto the narrative presented by the artist. Kavanagh's *Man and Woman* become both no one and everyone. An Adam and Eve prepared to set out, or be banished, from a place of safety. In this post-apocalyptic future these citizen soldiers are everyone.

Kavanagh's intent is to critique the utopian view that technologies can make us safe.⁴⁵ By exploring the technological side of war and warfare she exposes that the advancement of safety gear will always traverse the same lines as warfare and new tools of destruction; the technological advancements of perseverance and destruction happening in tandem. Interesting, when viewed from 2016, is that the primary subject of Kavanagh's portraits is safety gear intended for Canadian soldiers' participation in the war in Syria. Since the creation of these works, Canada has withdrawn its technological contribution to that conflict. In considering the artist's preoccupation with the technological advancement of both combat and protection and Canada's withdrawal because of minimal and outdated technological contributions, this work now could be read as a coincidental prophesy of Canada's own banishment from a sort of military industrial Eden watched over by the United States and its behemoth of military might.

When viewed alongside historical portraits such as Beatty's VC recipient, *Private Cecil John Kinross* (c1919) (Figure 2), one begins to see strong parallels. While Kearns and Riley both utilise several techniques to draw out the sitter's complex motivational structure

⁴⁵ Ewan, "Exhibition Statement."

and near theatrical performativity of multiplicity for the viewer, historical military portraits can often be read as much as portraits of medals and awards themselves. The medals and modes of dress offering the stage dressings to assist in, as Sobieszek asserts, viewers' projections of their own associations and feelings onto whomever is being figured.⁴⁶ Beatty's pared down monochromatic painting with its dark background that blends into the sitter's olive tunic draws attention to the bright red bar and conspicuously placed wound stripes. When viewed alongside Kavanagh's *Double Portrait (The Expulsion)*, Pte. C.J. Kinross, who does not confront the viewer but rather offers to the viewer his medals, is reduced to a support for these prestigious symbols. Away from any context, there is little available to the viewer to indicate anything about the sitter and one could read this as much of a portrait of a Victoria Cross as of a person, and Kavanagh's works portraits of the products of scientific innovation and technological achievement. Interaction with the portrait of *Pte. C.J. Kinross* highlights the reliance on viewers to connect a named individual to their history. Interaction with Beatty's portrait, like so many others, "depends on recognition for the deepest connection."⁴⁷ Beatty benefited greatly from the knowledge (at least somewhat) of future audiences. As Brilliant asserts, "only audience is ill defined at the time of the portrait's making."⁴⁸ For Canada's First World War military portraitists this was not the case and highlights the shift in working conditions of Canadian official war artists. Official war artists working 100 years ago would mostly be aware of the future collections and context in which their works would be housed and could rely on the informed audiences that would be viewing them to know the roles of those featured in portraits. Contemporary official war artists are mostly creating work for unknown future contexts requiring they imbed context and controlled meaning production within the works themselves.

In discussing one particular portrait of a politician, theorist Brilliant enthusiastically states that the iconic dignity captured by the artist would convey even to those who did not recognise the individual that the portrait was of a distinguished "somebody"⁴⁹ allowing this portrait to be consumable to myriad informed and uninformed

⁴⁶ Sobieszek, *Ghost in the Shell*, 92.

⁴⁷ Gustafson and Sidlauskas, *Strange Resemblance*, 40.

⁴⁸ Brilliant, *Portraiture*, 8.

viewers.⁴⁹ In stark contrast Kavanagh makes no attempt to convey that the people she is rendering on film are “somebodies.” Kavanagh’s portraits are of unnamed individuals. With a little searching one can find this information but their names are not recorded in the artist’s proper titles. Presumably, 100 years from now their names could be lost entirely and as it is the artist’s intention that they are not named in the titling of the work, they become portraits of unknown soldiers, alluding to a completely contradictory notion. Kavanagh’s sitters are protected unknown soldiers. Presumably protected from the uncertain death of the Unknown Soldier, they are living (and visually breathing), they are the anti-unknown soldier.

Gertrude Kearns’ commanders are named but aside from their naming we recognise even in the way that they are presented that they have importance. Military portraiture historically relies on this perceptible “air;” one can recognise and read them as exalted by either their pictorial dignity, physiognomic traits that we associate with status, or, historically, even the genre itself signals importance. Kavanagh does not make any attempts to elevate her sitters. She completely rejects these tropes to present unnamed and lower ranks of the Canadian Forces, the working force of the Forces.

Kavanagh seems to embrace the difficulties of separating the individual soldier from their institutional context where Riley and Kearns work to delineate without rectifying individual and group. Like Florence Carlyle who took up residence with her subject Lady Julie Drummond (Figure 1), Kearns and Riley work to first know their subjects to be able to visually represent their multifarious inner worlds and motivations. Kearns situates her sitters based on their past and how it weighs them down and Riley shows the belief and practice that allows her chaplains to move forward. Riley, initially struggling with a confusing subject, in the end clarifies her sitters’ unique optimism. Kavanagh rejects this personalisation and instead opts to implement more allegorical portraiture tropes.

Canadian’s contemporary understanding of the function of the Canadian Forces is compatible with a representation of its many roles. Canadians also no longer view the military as comprised only of exalted commanders and those led to war but as a multilayered institution with combat and non-combat components. This ever-expanding conception of the roles of military allows for the ever-

⁴⁹ Ibid., 58.

expanding representation of those individuals by war artists. Kearns, Riley, and Kavanagh have created thoughtful and challenging projects through their exposure to the Canadian Forces. Each show in their sitters' individual constituent parts defined both within and against the whole. Each portrait takes into account the multiple levels of representation unique to military portraiture where the artist represents their sitter and their sitter represents, to varying degrees, themselves and their military associations. The prominence of portraiture in the work of these three artists, and many other official war artists of the last several years, could signal a shift in how, as a society, Canadians want to interact with the military. This could evince a desire for personal connections with those who serve and who have served to better understand their motivations and experiences and emblematic of official war artists allowed to explore topics of their choosing. This can also be seen as a symbol of how contemporary Canadians allow for a multiplicity of the self along with a reflection of artistic access. Military artists find subjects in what they have access to and when that access is less dramatic and consuming than active combat, they find more human interest. Regardless of impetus or motivation, if portraiture continues to be explored by the military artists of contemporary Canada at its current frequency perhaps portraiture could become to post-Afghanistan War Canada what landscape was to Canadian artists' relationship with the First World War.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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