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For *132nd Ordinary Meeting of the Conference*, 2004, French photographer Luc Delahaye combined elements from different shots to heighten the intensity of a scene of journalists working at an OPEC conference.

HISTORY in the MAKING

BY ANN LANDI

Like their predecessors Géricault and David, a number of painters, photographers, and video artists are creating ambitious works that take on major world events, from apartheid to the war in Iraq

THERE WAS a time when history painting was the highest genre to which an artist might aspire. The French Academy, in the 17th century, declared it the most important and serious branch of painting, far superior to still life, portraiture, and landscape. Glorious and grand scenes drawn from classical mythology and history took top honors, with paintings like Jacques-Louis David's 13-foot-long *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) marking the culmination of the trend toward using episodes from ancient times to uplift and instruct. Even when artists turned to recording and memorializing contemporary events—the death of General Wolfe at the Battle of Quebec, Washington crossing the Delaware, or the coronation of Napoleon—the impulse to make a big statement in the most grandiose terms remained.

The first painting to cast a critical eye on the momentous events of the day may have been David's elegiac and breathtakingly understated *The Death of Marat* (1793). In the century that followed, Goya (*The Third of May*), Géricault (*The Raft of the Medusa*), Manet (*The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian*), and other artists found in painting a way to condemn the powerful. Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), a mammoth indictment of the Franco regime, brought home the horrors of war on a heroic scale and in a new vocabulary. It was history painting at its most scornful and savage, a complete upending of the lofty aspirations of the Academy.

Is anyone still making history paintings? "The world is completely different today, and the function of those paintings is no longer the function we have now," says Peter Galassi, chief curator in the department of photography at the Museum of Modern Art. "Most history paintings were made before museums even existed. But if you put the question this way: Are there visual artists today who are artists—not photojournalists—who have the ambition to address in major artistic statements big important things that are happening in the world? The answer is, in fact, probably yes."

Ann Landi is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

Through virtually every means available, artists have been addressing the major issues of our times with as calculating an eye as David's. Yet defining contemporary history painting is difficult. "Nobody would hold to a strict definition of history painting now," says Elisabeth Sussman, curator of contemporary photography at the Whitney Museum of American Art. "There are so many different ways of slicing up the past, present, individual, or collective—you name it. You have to look for aspects of history painting in all kinds of practices without thinking any of them are going to duplicate the history paintings that art history might think of as history paintings."

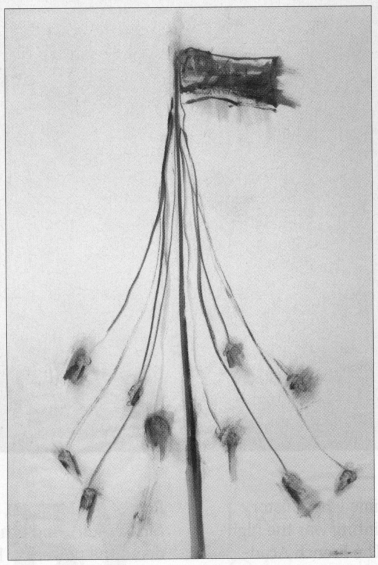
ARTISTS SEEM fascinated by the upheavals and conflicts of the last half century, but the impulse to create history paintings as vehicles of protest or of celebration has shifted to something more elusive, questioning, and often personal. An-My Lê, born in Saigon in 1960, fled Vietnam as a teenager. Her photographs and films take as their subject memories of her childhood home and reenactments on American soil, in which she has taken part, of key battles from the Vietnam War. Dinh Q. Lê's recent project at MoMA featured a helicopter hand-built from spare parts by two Vietnamese workers and a three-channel video interweaving personal recollections of the war with clips from Western war documentaries.

The heroes and heroines of that turbulent period have also provided compelling subject matter: the Irish-born artist Duncan Campbell has combined archival footage and animation to tell the story of Bernadette Devlin, the radical feminist and Catholic activist who was elected to Parliament in 1969. In 2001–2, Sharon Hayes reenacted the audiotapes made by Patty Hearst and her captors after her kidnapping, in 1974, and filmed them for the series "Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds." Reenactments have also been central to the work of Jeremy Deller, the 2004 Turner Prize–winner, who restaged the Battle of Orgreave, a violent clash between picketing miners and riot police in Yorkshire in 1984, in videos subsequently shown on television.

"Political-protest art has more or less absorbed history painting," says Daniel Belasco, associate curator at the Jewish Museum in New York. As forerunners of contemporary artists who turn to world events for their subject matter, Belasco cites the late Leon Golub and his wife, Nancy Spero. "They tackled some of the biggest political questions of the 20th century, trying to find new means to get at the personal offense they took from the atrocities of the 20th century, and also addressed how to translate popular mass-media imagery into the format of painting," he says.

"Many artists don't feel as comfortable putting a strong message into the work as they might have in the 1960s and '70s," Belasco continues. "A lot of it's a sense of frustration—the revolution failed, the goals of artists stated in the '60s and '70s weren't met—on the one hand. But on the other, there have been more voices included in the conversation, more diversity in terms of race and nationality and gender, and the work has become more personal."

German painters and sculptors in the '70s and '80s, in particular, invoked the terrible history of their country as a way of coming to terms with it. "Artists like Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, and Jörg Immendorff made paintings roiling with repressed history and biting political criticism as a means of exorcising the demons of a society gripped by legacies of violence and denial," pointed out Toby Kamps, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Menil Collection in Houston, in his catalogue essay for "The Old, Weird America," an exhibition about folk themes in recent art that he organized for the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston in 2008.



Nancy Spero, *Kill Commies/Maypole*, 1967. Spero tackled many of the major political questions of the 20th century.

To that list one could add Gerhard Richter, who painted portraits of his Uncle Rudi wearing his Nazi uniform and chilling depictions of dead Baader-Meinhof terrorists, along with Sigmar Polke, with his appropriation of such Nazi imagery as swastikas and concentration-camp lookout towers. "The legacy of World War II became important to many different artists because it was such a huge disruption of history," says Gary Garrels, senior curator of painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Garrels believes that "the idea of history painting has more of a legacy and an interest in Europe."

He cites the Romanian painter Adrian Ghenie, who has done a series based on the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, who was forced out of office in 1989 and summarily executed. For Ghenie, "this was a traumatic event," says Garrels. "He was a teenager, and grew up under the totalitarian regime. The transformation of Romanian society has been very difficult, and it's a subject a group of incredibly gifted and well-trained younger artists are tackling." Ghenie has also painted pictures of nuclear explosions.

Wars and political upheavals have long been a topic of consuming interest for artists, eliciting both the curiosity of the reporter and the biting wit of the satirist. Almost every conflict has provided rich subject matter, whether it was Vietnam

ABOVE For ***Small Wars***, three photo series printed in one volume, Vietnamese-born An-My Lê shot Vietnam War reenactments in North Carolina. BELOW Mary Reid Kelley's 2010 video ***You Make Me Iliad*** is set in German-occupied Belgium during World War I.

***Nougat 2*, 2010, by Romanian-born painter Adrian Ghenie. Operation Nougat was the code name for a series of underground nuclear tests conducted at the Nevada Test Site in 1961–62.**

for Golub or the Troubles in Northern Ireland for Richard Hamilton, a painter known as the father of English Pop art. Hamilton's trilogy of paintings based on the Anglo-Irish conflict "are probably some of the most powerfully accomplished, iconic history paintings of our time," says Garrels.

Hamilton was also one of the first artists to weigh in on the Persian Gulf War, with an image of a TV screen showing news footage from the 1991 invasion atop a pool of blood. In an equally scathing condemnation, Peter Saul presented *Bush at Abu Ghraib* (2006), depicting the former president "humiliating a prisoner whose face is a tortured scramble of misplaced features, open wounds, and bullet holes," in the words of Toby Kamps. (Saul has also done wickedly zany reinterpretations of Washington crossing the Delaware and Custer's Last Stand.)

In his drawings and paintings, Steve Mumford has taken a more reportorial approach to the war in Iraq. Mumford entered Baghdad in 2003, on the day the statue of Saddam Hussein in the city's Firdos Square was toppled, and has periodically returned to the region since then. "He started making drawings not only of the war but also of daily life," says Claire Gilman,

Allison Smith's installation *Victory Hall*, 2005, features five life-size ceramic dolls dressed as Civil War Zouaves and Vivandières, women who were attached to military regiments as battlefield nurses or canteen keepers.

curator at the Drawing Center in New York. "The stories he tells are correctives to the mechanistic presentation of facts of news reporting. That was his motivation to go there. Somehow drawing brought him closer to the event or created a personal relationship with people. He got to know their lives. It was a very intimate experience of the war."

Some might call his work straightforward reportage, in the tradition of the illustrational genre of old-style war art, but in Mumford's more recent large-scale paintings, Gilman says, "he is literally modeling himself in the 19th-century tradition of history painting. They're very theatrical, very constructed, and they use compositional tropes from famous paintings by artists like Rembrandt and Eakins."

MANY ARTISTS are tackling history through video, photography, and installations. For her installation *Victory Hall* (2005), Allison Smith fashioned life-size dolls in her own image, dressed in the red and blue uniform of the French Zouaves, which was adopted by both Union and Confederate

soldiers in the American Civil War. Smith created a kind of "history tableau" that addresses the issue of gender politics, since many women joined the Zouaves as Vivandières, or battlefield nurses, and also the contemporary divide between red and blue states. (The artist also likes the Zouave costume, with its short jacket and baggy trousers tucked into leggings, for what she calls its "queerness.")

In a similar vein, Yinka Shonibare, the British-Nigerian conceptual artist, dresses headless figures in African-looking fabrics to explore themes of postcolonialism. For his mixed-media sculptures, San Antonio–based artist Dario Robleto uses materials from what might be called the fallout of war: paper pulp made from soldiers' letters to their loved ones, shrapnel, excavated and melted bullet lead, recordings of the last known Civil War veterans' voices, and hair lockets made by soldiers' widows.

"History is embedded in the materials of his work," says David Rubin, curator of contemporary art at the San Antonio Museum of Art, which owns Robleto's *The Pause Became Permanence* (2005–6), a six-foot-tall sculptural assemblage that incorporates a plaque inscribed with the obituary of the last surviving Civil War widow.

Matthew Day Jackson, inspired by the example of the Russian Constructivists, also uses nontraditional materials to create "wallworks," sculptures, and other pieces that deal with an ambivalence about American history and its more shameful events: the Trail of Tears (the forced relocation of Native Americans from their homelands), for example, or the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. But he has also exhibited a lighter touch in a portrait of Eleanor Roosevelt (made from wood, feathers, and tooled leather), a Conestoga wagon constructed from recycled industrial plywood, and a Viking ship whose hull is fashioned from his own discarded sculptures. Jen Mergel, senior curator of contemporary art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, says work like Jackson's is "not about what we heroicize. It's more questioning: What are we forgetting and what do we want to forget?"

The ubiquity of today's information outlets—TV talk and news shows, the Internet, and conventional print journalism—has made the artist's task of interpreting history even more daunting, and many have responded by mingling fact and fiction or manipulating found images. In a 2004 series of photographs, Thomas Ruff dramatically enlarged news photos of the 9/11 attacks downloaded from the Internet, expanding the matrix of pixels so that a familiar and iconic scene assumed the epic scope of history painting even as the event itself appears to be distorted and unfathomable.

Thomas Ruff, *jpeg ny01*, 2004. In Ruff's dramatically enlarged and manipulated news photo, an epic event assumes an unfathomable quality.

Luc Delahaye, who began his career as a Magnum war photographer, combines different elements from different shots taken at the same event to create a more powerful image of the scene. In the *132nd Ordinary Meeting of the Conference* (2004), a nearly six-foot-long tableau, the chaotic intensity of a throng of journalists at work is reminiscent of the theatrical nature of much traditional history painting.

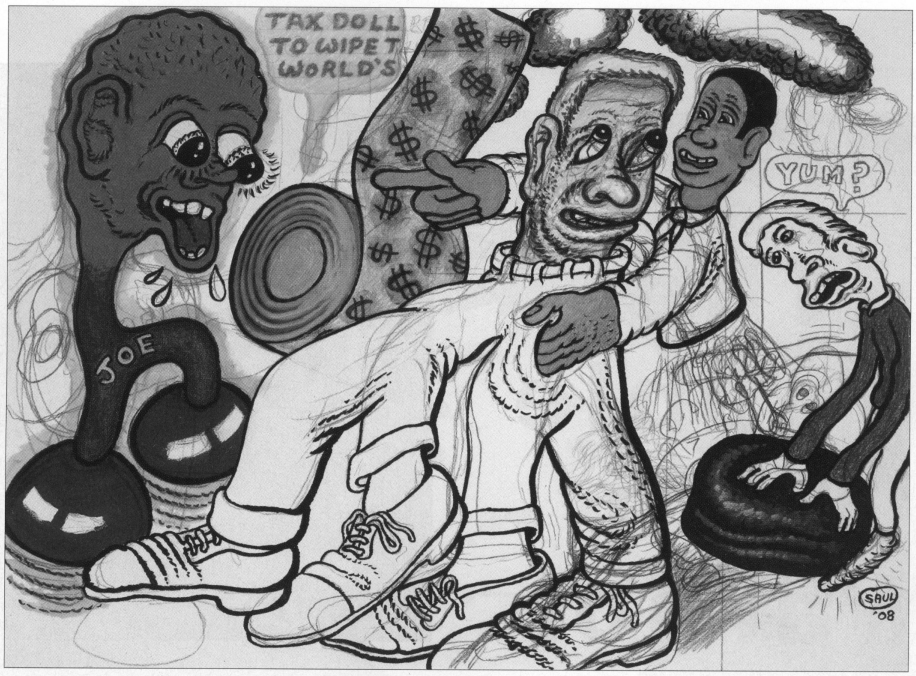
Many curators and critics see Canadian photographer Jeff Wall as one of the pioneers of this brand of historicizing, which draws from the compositions of past masters to say something about the present. "He does photographic history paintings," says Elisabeth Sussman. "But they're not about the past. They're about this society."

PERHAPS NOT surprisingly, video has provided a medium in which artists can freely push the envelope in tackling politics, society, or recent events. "They choose film mediums because they can deal with questions of reality, of fiction, the whole notion of memory, and how you construct history," says Sabine Breitwieser, chief curator of media and performance art at MoMA.

Among the pioneers in addressing social issues through video is William Kentridge, whose films are based on images successively drawn, erased, and redrawn, giving a sense of fading memory and the passage of time. In telling the adventures of a pair of fictional characters, Soho Eckstein and Felix Teitlebaum, the South African artist explores the effects of apartheid, depicting the emotional and political struggles of ordinary citizens in the pre-democratic era.

Video has also proved an especially potent form for looking back at history in startling and unexpected ways. Mary Reid Kelley's short, punchy films look at the roots of modernism and the upheavals of World War I through the eyes and words of women who declaim a constant patter of rhyming verse. Andrea Fraser, perhaps best known for her performances as an out-of-control museum guide, produced a work called *Soldadera* (1998/2002), juxtaposing scenes of herself posing as Frances Flynn Paine, an associate of Abby Rockefeller who worked in Mexico in the 1930s, and as a Mexican revolutionary.

None of these contemporary works, of course, has achieved the iconic stature of *The Death of Marat* or *Guernica*, but future historians of history painting will have at their disposal an incomparably rich array of mediums and images that record and reflect the sorrows, shocks, and travails of our times. ■



ABOVE **Peter Saul, *Plumber Joe*, 2008. "It's all history," Saul says of subjects ranging from former President Bush to Joe the Plumber and Bernard Madoff.** BELOW **Steve Mumford, *Empire*, 2010. Mumford's drawings and paintings of occupied Iraq are based on his own experiences.**