

Mourning America's War Harms: Alan Magee's *Trauerarbeit*

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In early October 2002 the neorealist painter Alan Magee in a conversation with the writer Barry Lopez reflected on the reason for art: “John Weiner sent me a wonderful paraphrase from Proust a while back: everything has already been said but since nobody pays attention, it has to be repeated every morning. So, I suppose that’s why we keep reshaping these ideas continually, trying them out with different materials, different narratives, but we keep repeating some essential story that we know shouldn’t be forgotten.”¹

Magee’s realization that the purpose of art is to prompt us to be attentive to the world around us and to the human story we share dates back to his work as a freelance illustrator, designing book covers for writers like Graham Greene, Bernard Malamud, and Saul Bellow, following his graduation from the Philadelphia College of Art (now University of the Arts) in 1969.

“I could see what these writers were doing—bringing personal experiences and their own convictions to their writing; this is what, for me, distinguished these novels as art,” Magee says of that period in his life. “I understood that a career in illustration wasn’t going to work for the long haul. About that time I walked onto a pebble beach on Block Island. I thought those beach stones were some of the most astonishing, beautiful things I had ever seen.

“Within the next year I made a painting of stones and I could see that from the beginning this engagement with stones was important and that it was going to take more than one picture. I believe it was that *stable* quality of the stones—they were a symbol of something permanent that would wait for me.”²

Magee’s first exhibition after making the transition to fine art occurred in 1980 at Staempfli Gallery, a prominent art gallery in New York City. Featuring stunningly precise representations of the compelling beach stones and pebbles (see figure 10.1) that had arrested him on Block Island as well as of commonplace, natural objects (asparagus stalks, gourds, peppers, a braid of hair, etc.) in watercolor, acrylic, and graphite, the show was sold out within days, prompting *New York Times* art critic John Canaday to announce the arrival of a “dazzling new realist painter” and to seize the occasion to proclaim that it was “one more proof that the current development of realism in American art is a genuinely modern movement, not a relapse . . . with 20th century potential to continue the

role it had played since antiquity as the most flexible form of expression available to artists.”³

Evoking the coming and going of ocean water shaping the surface textures and arrangements of the stones over eons of time, the paintings record an epic story of cosmic forces at work in the formation of the earth. On another level they narrate a parallel story of ebb and flow in the period of uncertainty and unrest while Magee was making the transition from illustration to fine art. “I was looking for that quality in the stones that I wanted to bring into my own life, that stability that wasn’t really present in my work as an illustrator,” states Magee.⁴

As with the stone pictures, the paintings of emerging and fading asparagus stalks and peppers relate a similar story of flux and mutability. Removed from their contexts, their vital forms seize our attention, “relaying,” as Canaday aptly states, “a sense of the miraculousness, the incredible complication yet perfect logic in the structure of the simplest everyday things. Magee’s “microscopic exploration of what he sees is an experience so absorbing that the plain visual excitement of close observation and the equal excitement of exercising technical prowess become indissolubly blended into a kind of philosophical statement.”⁵

Paintings and drawings of other objects, some in jarring combinations, followed in subsequent years. Like literary conceits, the drawings brought together disparate objects—stones, screws, bones, teeth, envelopes, postcards, stamps, spark plugs, paint tubes, sharpened pencils—suggesting an underlying unity binding together all things, however dissimilar, into a network of correspondences. Arising from Magee’s psychodynamic encounter with the stones, they narrate by inference and multiple associations the story of the human journey in time and memory, of mutability and the natural processes of life, particularly in the details of the paintings featuring letters and tools, water and mildew stains, creases, tears, and rust. As with the stones most of these subjects arrived involuntarily and were charged with the same numinous effect.

On that point Magee has said, “There is some quality of the mind wherein it seeks the particular subject or symbol that we need at any one time, and I’ve had this happen on many occasions—the stones, for example, the tools in my studio, my attraction to handwriting, to script, to stamps and marks. Only later did I see what those fascinations were for.”⁶

There is no better example of a narrative subject emerging spontaneously to Magee than his monotypes of wounded faces reflecting the harm America has done in the world through war, shown at the Goethe Institute in New York City in 2006 along with his photomontages and collages deconstructing aggressive American capitalism leading up to them (see figure 10.2).

Collectively titled *Trauerarbeit* (work of mourning), a concept inspired by the German psychologists Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, the monotypes speak to Magee’s feeling that just as “young Germans needed a conscious period of acknowledgement and mourning in order to heal the enormous, unarticulated burden of the Nazi years and the war, we Americans need an equivalent word and an equivalent concept to help us to know our own history.

“We seem to live in a sustained and voluntary blindness to the harm we’ve done and that we continue to do,” Magee says. “So German history has helped

me to better understand American society and its current reticence in speaking out against even the most grievous wrongs.⁷

Explaining this darker, social-political turn in his work, which began in the mid-1980s, Magee has written the following account:

The end of that period we call the '60s, which really extended well into the next decade, left me with a profound sense of disappointment. Through the Vietnam years, as deeply distressing as that war was, there was an undercurrent of hope in many people of my age—a sense that we would soon be able to influence policy and that militarism might begin to give way to diplomacy. That belief was naïve, but it shaped my expectations and those of tens of thousands of my generation. So many of us took the time to inform ourselves about society and politics—in no small part because we were lined up to take part in an incomprehensible war.

I read Senator J. William Fulbright's *The Arrogance of Power* in 1966, along with Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*, and Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer*. I followed I.F. Stone's *Weekly* and listened to Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs—songwriters whose lyrics were another form of journalism. By the late 70's that collective optimism and spirited dissent of the 60's was disappearing. Then, during the Reagan years that followed, a wide range of benevolent policies came under assault. Social welfare, the advancements in civil rights and in women's rights, environmental protection, and the fundamental notion that government should help to defend citizens from the predatory tendencies of big business—all seemed in jeopardy. Monetary success was supplanting decency as an ideal, and the insider trader was emerging as the new cultural hero.

During the 1980's my attention was drawn toward Latin America and to the long history of American violence and intimidation there. In El Salvador and Nicaragua, for example, it was clear that our policies were callous and anti-humanitarian—with the U.S. in Nicaragua training and funding the right-wing Contras. In El Salvador the United States supported a corrupt regime that routinely killed or “disappeared” dissenters. These concerns had become so pressing for me that by the mid-1980s I put aside my realist painting to address these issues, and those that were to follow in the Middle East, through my work.

My series of large India-ink drawings of children were indeed spontaneous, but even while working on them, I knew that they were parables for the world events that were troubling me. The drawing of the two boys hanging a dog from a tree was about the Contras, about Salvadoran death squads, about America, and about my own inadvertent complicity in these distant events.⁸
[See figure 10.3.]

In a 1988 PBS interview, Magee describes how his involuntary drawings of children behaving cruelly gradually evolved into images that address capitalism, political life, and war, adding “I remember thinking, there must be a face I could put to this, because on the surface things look so benign. There has to be a face for this composite act—something you can peel away and see the will, the composite of little wills that get together and produce something monstrous.”⁹

Magee continues,

After the revelations of the Iran-Contra scandal, I began a series of small collages made from cut and reassembled photocopies. I was looking for the real

face that lay behind the benign looking television heads atop their carefully knotted ties. My collage *Disinformation* (1988) was sparked by the Iran-Contra hearings and by a book I was reading at the time: Wendell Berry's *Standing by Words*. Berry's book contains a chapter about the grotesque distortion of language by the powerful—by corporations and governments. At that time the phrase 'plausible deniability' was being used, without irony, to distance Reagan and George H.W. Bush from the Iran/Contra episode. And the term 'Freedom Fighters,' used to describe the Contras, seemed to me the epitome of the twisted language of disinformation.¹⁰

Note that Magee's collage, *Disinformation* (figure 10.4), features a face peeled of all its flesh, leaving intact only the organs of survival—eyes, ears, mouth. Appropriately, it is a commentary on the disintegration between language and truth.

With *Disinformation* Magee now began a series of new works exploring an interior landscape of the human psyche, particularly the state of America's soul in the technological age. Recalling Carl Jung's concept of the shadow, the archetype consisting of the repressed, primordial contents of the mind, the photomontages and collages that followed exposed with prescient clarity the spiritual bankruptcy that had befallen the corporate and bureaucratic centers of the country, calling into question not only the social, political and financial systems that had orphaned the American people from their spiritual centers but also the values by which they were living their lives in the last years of the twentieth century. (See figure 10.5.)

Representing a striking departure in style and content from his contemplative studies of natural forms, Magee's arresting portraits of bureaucratic patriarchs and predators with their snaky expressions of adult venality were some of the most compelling and irrefutable, visual metaphors of the death of American innocence that had been rendered by an American painter up to that time. Embedded within their deep structures were not only the contents of the archetype Jung identified as the shadow but also at least two of the others he was able to name—the persona and the trickster. In their expressive power to awaken viewers to the moral condition of the time, some of the pieces were reminiscent of the Dadaist collages of the 1920s made in Berlin by Hannah Höch, Otto Dix, John Heartfield, and George Grosz, all of whom Magee credits as influences.

Generally speaking, the works fall into two groups: accusatory photomontages like *Disinformation* and distilled collages of the personal and cultural shadow, like *Alliance*, 1988 (figure 10.6), which serves as a commentary on the military/industrial complex. A re-assembly for the purpose of exposing a flaw in cultural logic so that the viewer can, to paraphrase John Berger, see through the lie, it is an unforgettable image of the unholy alliance between military power and big business.

Much less polemical than the photomontages, the collages are visual representations of universal as against particular qualities. Thus, they involve all of us. Symmetrically centered and isolated on highly textured monotype backgrounds, they impart an impression of dense, fluid, endless duration. A particular favorite of mine is *Paperwork*, 1988 (figure 10.7), which portrays an arche-

typical collaborator, whose “small, innocuous acts,” as Magee puts it, systematically carry out the policies of sanctioned evil. The collage calls to mind the writings of Hanna Arendt, whose books *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *Men in Dark Times* speak to the banality of evil.

“In 1990 I had arranged for an autumn exhibition of my work at the new Soho gallery of my first New York dealer, George Staempfli,” Magee goes on. “During that summer the slow and irreversible buildup toward the first Gulf War began. I turned to the medium of monotype to get my hands and body moving—moving in accord with my apprehension about the coming war. One quality of the monotype is that it always tells the truth—it gives you back a record of what your mind and body are experiencing.”

Magee continues,

What emerged was the series of black and white monotypes of scarred and abraded faces that I’ve called alternatively *Archive* or *Trauerarbeit*. Instead of criticizing and condemning the perpetrators of violence, these monotypes are empathetic toward those who suffer. I was anticipating what was to come for the ordinary people in Iraq. I had learned that photos and video of injured and dead Iraqi civilians and soldiers were to be forbidden in U.S. news reports, and my awareness of that increased censorship must have been a factor in making these monotypes. I was also experiencing a dread that the invasion would lead to increasingly violent events in the Middle East and elsewhere, and indeed, that seems to have been the case.¹¹

These black-and-white monotypes were shown at Staempfli Gallery on West Broadway, New York, in November/December 1990, one month before the start of the U.S. bombing of Iraq. (See figure 10.8 an example).

“Here is the map of Calvary for modern sensibilities,” Maureen Mullarkey, artist and art critic, has written about the monotype *Tumultus* (figure 10.9). “Rich in symbolic suggestion, it calls to mind the ‘topography of Golgotha,’ Wilfred Owen’s description of a World War I battlefield. The face is a field of suffering. It gazes out at us from within the remains of a burnt offering, the sum of immolations past. The cosmic necessity of sacrifice stalks us down the ages. The trek began before the sacrifice of Abel and will endure long past the trenches and mass graves of modern war.” Likewise,

Dulce Et Decorum Est, its title taken from Wilfred Owen’s poem by that same name, leaves no doubt that the intimations of war are the fabric of the work. The “old lie” that it is sweet to die for one’s country is implicit in the shock conveyed by a face partially erased, as if overexposed in the white hot glare of a rocket. The stunning surprise of disintegration is conveyed with consummate tact.¹²

Commenting on the impact of Magee’s monotypes at an exhibition in Berlin, Germany, Frank Dodge, founder and director of Spectrum Concerts Berlin, writes,

My first encounter with these pieces [Magee's black-and-white monotype faces] back in the mid 90's spurred a sudden and unreflective urge to explore, at risk, the very deep and inward feelings released within me. I needed time to assimilate the magnitude and significance of their indelible influence on me. I felt as though that which had unfolded in me was permanent.

A few years later I arranged for an exhibition of many of the Magee monotypes in the Berliner Philharmonie. The exhibition took place in conjunction with the American Music Week Berlin 2000. Alan Magee was present. During the six-week long stay of the exhibition I was able to perceive how people experienced these pieces. It was chilling to observe how many aggressively resisted their own impulses, as though the monotypes had violated personal arsenals of security and loosened strong clenches on it. The monotypes are severe. They are naked. They function quite clearly as mirrors to an integral part of a kind of shared universal soul. They are scary because they reach so deeply into one's guts. They disarm preconceptions and studied methods of how one views art—they involve us without our permission. And this for me is what art needs to be able to do, regardless of how beautiful and how troubling it might be. The monotypes are by far some of the most propelling works of art I have ever come in contact with.¹³

Magee's monotypes of faces subsequently became a stimulus for the nine fictional narratives in Barry Lopez's book *Resistance*, a response to the disintegration of democracy in the U.S. following the enactment of the Patriot Act in the wake of 9/11.¹⁴ "Alan Magee—whose monotypes are in *Resistance*—and I began a long discussion during the Gulf War about the social responsibility of the writer and artist," Lopez relates. He continues,

The central question for us was, "If we're not activists, then how can we live up to our social responsibilities? What can we do?" Those monographs are part of Alan's answer and *Resistance* is part of mine.

Alan and I talked to each other about this once in a formal setting. The edited interview is part of a book called *Alan Magee: Paintings, Sculpture, Graphics* (New York: Forum Gallery, 2004). What are our responsibilities to young writers and painters? How can we support them? What are we supposed to be doing in our work so it's not solely about our passions but about the fate of our people? The community of people and narrators in *Resistance* actually resembles the community I live in—a group of artists and writers who stay in touch but who are not really activists. It's a community where you continue to champion and to bear witness to acts of integrity, you oppose the way pop culture buries the history of humanity, and you rebel against the movement to commodify everything.¹⁵

Magee's most recent works on the subject of war are representations of toy soldiers suffering from the wounds of war (see figure 10.10). These pieces were made after Magee visited Ernst Friedrich's International Anti-War museum in Berlin in 2007. About Ernst Friedrich, Douglas Kellner writes,

A vehement pacifist and antiauthoritarian, he established the museum in 1924, the same year he published *War Against War*, which contains 200 pages of captioned photographs depicting the gruesome results of World War I and shows

how children's toys, schooling, the church, and other agents of socialization prepare them psychologically for war. Throughout the book he attempts to document how these institutions, groups and practices are allied with big business, the state, and the military in the manufacture of both the machinery and the mentality of modern warfare.¹⁶

When asked about his war toys, Magee explains,

I was indeed making my War Toys as an antithesis or refutation of the commercial war toys sold everywhere. These range from combat-action figures to plastic weapons sets, from GI Joes to the now ubiquitous video and computer games, where children can fly virtual bombers to blow virtual enemies to bits. I was not thinking particularly about the antique, paper soldiers as seen in Friedrich's book, *War Against War*, since those have been so dramatically surpassed by today's high-definition versions. The paper toys were not part of my experience. The paper toys were, nevertheless, of the same class—a means of advertising the excitement of war and military life to children. My toys are representations of the soldier coming out of war, rather than going into it. That is how I am addressing this elementary, but neglected point.¹⁷

In an era when a particularly aggressive form of capitalism has invaded our cultural institutions as well as society in general, it is encouraging that Alan Magee continues on his path with integrity, eschewing the temptation to convert his early representational paintings into a formula for success in order to address issues concerning capitalism, political life, and war. In so doing Magee belongs to a small number of socially responsible citizen artists who view art not only as a means of self-expression but also as a way to remind us to be attentive to the world and the human story we share.

Notes

1. Alan Magee, *Alan Magee: Paintings, Sculpture, Graphics* (New York: Forum Gallery, 2004), 25.
2. Alan Magee, letter to author, December 1, 2010.
3. John Canaday, "A Dazzling New Realist Painter," *Saturday Review* (December 1980): 86.
4. Alan Magee, letter to author, December 1, 2010.
5. John Canaday, "A Dazzling New Realist Painter," *Saturday Review* (December 1980): 87.
6. Alan Magee, letter to author, December 1, 2010.
7. Alan Magee, statement for exhibition at Goethe-Institut, New York, October 2006.
8. Alan Magee, letter to Britta Konau, Cushing, Maine, March 5, 2007, personal file of Alan Magee, Cushing, Maine.
9. Maine PBS, *Alan Magee, Visions of Darkness and Light*, 1988.
10. Alan Magee, letter to Britta Konau, Cushing, Maine, March 5, 2007, personal file of Alan Magee, Cushing, Maine.

11. Alan Magee, letter to Britta Konau, Cushing, Maine, March 5, 2007, personal file of Alan Magee, Cushing, Maine.
12. Maureen Mullarkey, introduction to *Archive: Alan Magee Monotypes* (Darkwood Press, 2000), viii.
13. Frank Dodge, letter to author, July 19, 2010.
14. *Resistance* is a collection of nine fictional testimonies written by a circle of fellow writers, scholars, and artists, who have received an ominous letter notifying them that their active resistance to government policy (alliance with big business, advance of democratic capitalism through war) and to the tyranny and shallowness of America's consumer culture of entertainment, has come to the attention of the Office of Inland Security. As a result, the government would like to speak to them. Flanked by Magee's monotypes of suffering faces, the testimonies are a powerful indictment of the assault on individual liberties that took place during the George W. Bush administration.
15. Christian Martin, "On Resistance: An Interview with Barry Lopez," *The Georgia Review* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 22.
16. Douglas Kellner, introduction to *War Against War* (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1987), 11.
17. Alan Magee, letter to author, October 13, 2009.

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