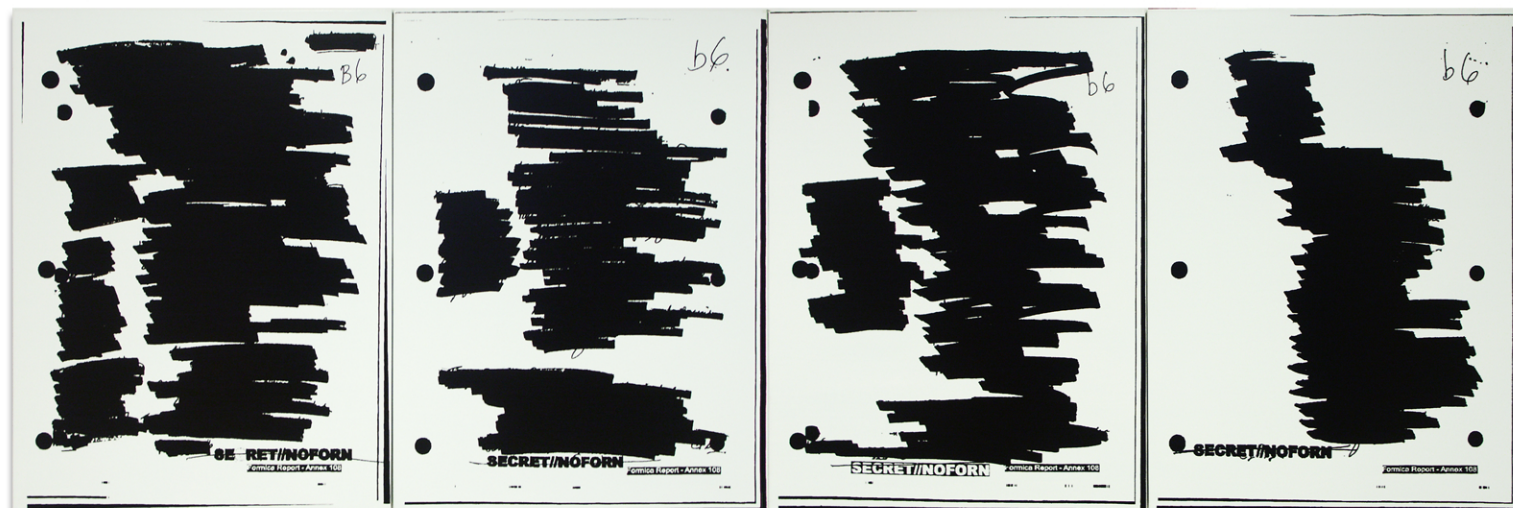


In two exhibits, politics and war are held up for scrutiny



Jenny Holzer created "Formica Report (Green White)" out of government documents she obtained through the freedom of information act.

As the war in Iraq grinds on toward no very clear end, collective reaction to it by contemporary American artists remains muted and uncertain. Two exhibitions responding to the war -- one directly and the other indirectly -- are now on view in Boston: a powerful solo show of recent paintings by the celebrated political artist Jenny Holzer at Barbara Krakow Gallery, and "War and Discontent," a well-meaning but muddled exhibition of historical and contemporary works at the Museum of Fine Arts.

Neither exhibition solves the problem of what to do about Iraq, but together they afford a good opportunity to think about how artists grapple with terrible events in the real world.

Holzer is best known for provocative aphorisms and poems she writes herself and presents as scrolling light-board texts. Lately she has turned to offering copies of actual documents relating to the Iraq war that she obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. She has presented them in the form of light projections on public buildings and as silkscreened oil-on-canvas paintings. A selection of paintings from the new series at Barbara Krakow is sobering and politically arousing.

Each piece has as its base a smooth, single color -- white, mostly, but red and green in a couple of cases -- on an easel-scale canvas. Printed onto these surfaces are enlarged copies of photocopied documents, with the pages of multipage documents reproduced on separate but adjoining canvases. The grainy printed matter with certain words whited or blacked out by censors does not immediately invite close reading, but once you start, it is gripping.

One piece presents a handwritten report by a US government interrogator graphically describing and protesting the mistreatment he witnessed of prisoners in Afghanistan by other interrogators. Another is an official autopsy report on the death of an Iraqi prisoner concluding that the cause was homicide. And perhaps the most distressing piece of all is a handwritten account by an Iraqi high school student of his arrest, detainment, and abusive treatment by American soldiers. (If you go to Barbara Krakow's website, you can download copies of the actual documents that Holzer has used.)

Holzer's paintings are clearly meant to arouse suspicion of and opposition to the conduct of the war in Iraq and the campaign against terrorism under the leadership of President Bush. It's not a very controversial position to take at

Jenny Holzer: Archive

At: Barbara Krakow Gallery,
10 Newbury St., through Nov. 29.
617-262-4490,
barbarakrakovgallery.com

War and Discontent

At: Museum of Fine Arts through
Aug. 5. 617-267-9300, mfa.org

By Ken Johnson
GLOBE STAFF

this point, but what makes the paintings especially effective is that they depend not on the personal expressive urgency of the artist but on the coolly objective presentation of alarming factual information. The late Mark Lombardi used a similar strategy in drawings that he made in the '90s diagramming alleged international conspiracies by many different corporate and governmental entities.

How much of a difference Holzer's new works will actually make is, of course, hard to say. While opponents of the war and of Bush's policies will have their beliefs confirmed, it's difficult to imagine a Bush supporter being converted. But art doesn't change the world all at once. Its influence spreads slowly like a subtle stain through the social fabric. In any case, Holzer's elegant, minimalist wedding of style and content has an unusually efficient aesthetic and political impact.

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KRAKOW GALLERY

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That can't be said about "War and Discontent," a crowded hodgepodge of artworks variously opposed to war and violence. Organized by MFA contemporary-art curator Cheryl Brutvan, the show is anchored by three works by major historical artists from the museum's permanent collection: Francisco Goya's series of horrific etchings "Disasters of War" (1810-1815); one of Edouard Manet's versions of the "Execution of the Emperor Maximilian," a large canvas dated 1867; and Pablo Picasso's 1963 "Rape of the Sabine Women," a Guernica-style image of warriors on horseback trampling a screaming woman and child.

Those works conceivably could serve as the basis for a clearly focused show, but additional works by 15 artists dating from 1969 to 2006 represent so many different approaches to the theme of war that the exhibition as a whole lacks any coherent point of view.

Particularly unfortunate is the pairing of Goya's series with an etching series that mimics it by the English bad-boy team of Jake and Dinos Chapman. Some of the Chapmans's prints look like respectful homages, but many are crude, juvenile parodies, and the viewer is confused as to exactly what the artists mean to say. It's a puzzling distraction from the ostensible main purpose of the exhibition.

The show does present a number of individually compelling works, including one of the most powerful antiwar paintings made by any artist in recent decades: Leon Golub's "Interrogation I." Near-mural size, it depicts two uniformed officers, one of whom is beating with a club a naked man who hangs upside down. This horrifying painting is one piece in the show that relates very directly to Goya's "Disasters of War." So does the other Golub in the show, "Napalm," which

depicts two bigger-than-life naked men whose flesh evidently has been burned raw by the caustic gel used by American forces in the Vietnam War.

Few other works in the show pack the kind of emotional punch that Golub's do, however. In a more upbeat vein, a giant painting of a densely congested, apocalyptic scene executed by Keith Haring in his signature cartoon style is too delightfully humorous to prompt very serious thoughts about war and violence. Jack Goldstein's wide-screen, black and white painting of bright tracer lines cross-hatching the night sky over silhouetted buildings is more of a Pop-style comment on cinematic effects than on real-world violence. And Philip Guston's beautifully painted "The Deluge" is too abstract and enigmatically personal to work as a commentary on real-world affairs.

More conceptually oblique is an eight-hour video by Phil Collins, who invited youths living in Ramallah, Palestine, to take part in a dance marathon. Two large projections showing the participants continuously dancing to Western pop music might be meaningful to viewers who are well-informed about Israeli-Palestinian relations, but without a lot of background information, its point remains elusive.

A large model ship by former performance artist Chris Burden is also perplexing. It represents a World War II battleship outfitted with sails -- the idea being, according to wall texts, that the ship could be recycled as a green, non-fossil-fuel-using vessel. That's a nice idea, but then Burden adds in a statement of his own that because the ship would lack noise-making engines, it could be used as a "stealth" warship. Which makes his position on war curiously equivocal.

Another video artist, Suara Welitoff, produces a meditative beauty with her haunting, recycled, blurred, and unnaturally colorized films of flying World War II fighter

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planes and bombers and in a slowed-down film of US soldiers loading a cannon. Similarly elegiac is Richard Bosman's 1989 painting of a commercial passenger plane appearing as a distant, ghostly image in a misty sky; a wall label speculates that the painting might relate to the terrorist downing of a plane over Lockerbie, Scotland, one year previous.

Painting in a more cynical mood, Andy Warhol views the Statue of Liberty through a translucent camouflage pattern, and he adds a label in the lower left corner from a French biscuit company to imply that war and the fight for freedom constitute just another form of commerce. Yinka Shonibare suggests something similar in a wall painting called "Black Gold II," which features pieces of African-style textiles on circular stretchers displayed in the middle of a great splatter pattern of black paint that refers to oil as a primary motivation in international politics.

In its haphazard way, "War and Discontent" evokes a humanistic attitude of opposition to war and violence in general. But unlike Holzer's exhibition, which clearly targets US actions in Iraq and in its anti-terrorism program, the MFA show as a whole takes no position on current affairs and offers no revelatory insights about war or dissent. Artistically and historically, it's all over the place, and it's politically risk-free: Who, after all, is going to argue that war in general is good?

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