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'WAR' at Guestroom Gallery
by Prudence Roberts

Over the course of the last five years, Jim Riswold has become known for his large-scale images of history's villains. Hitler, Mussolini, Napoleon and Mao are among his favored subjects, their deeds and personae presented through the medium of toys and models posed and photographed against a white backdrop. For his debut as curator, Riswold chose a few of his own prints to include with that of seven other artists (many from his own collection) in the group exhibition *WAR*. He also brought in other objects, including a small library of books on war and warfare as well as snapshots and press photos, his own toy soldiers and an assortment of military comic books. Much of this material was housed in a war room at the center of the gallery space.

Like his own work, the show was filled with mordant wit and some clever juxtapositions. But more importantly, the paintings, prints, photographs and collages revealed the seriousness of Riswold's own pursuit: an ongoing exploration of the evil that has inevitably accompanied military might, from the Trojan war to this country's current conflicts.

The backbone of the exhibition consisted of a series of large images by the Russian photojournalist Dimitri Baltermants (1912-1990), who documented the campaigns of the Soviet Army in Poland, Germany and Ukraine during World War II. Baltermants was a master of the spectacle of war: heroic soldiers on horseback, or attacking foot cavalry, shot from below, with swirling, full-skirted uniforms. But his best-known image is far from romantic. *Grief* (1942) was shot in the aftermath of the Nazi slaughter of most occupants of a Crimean city. Bodies are sprawled in the snow and mud; two keening women have just identified their loved ones.

Much of the work in *WAR* responded to or played off the themes suggested by Baltermants. Like *Greif*, Eva Lake's two haunting photomontages deal with the aftermath of war. In *Joe is Home Now*, Lakes' composition centers on a section of a young man's face, one eye covered with the image of a burning cross or, perhaps the frame of a window. Above him, a snowy mountain emerges from a bank of clouds. Below him is a bleak hospital bed set between two large fluted columns.

In another interesting pairing, Riswold juxtaposed his own *La Retraite de Napoléon* (2005) with Baltermant's *Behind Enemy Lines* (1941). In Riswold's composition, a mounted Napoleon figure (who looks a bit like Elvis) leads a group of eight cheery-looking wooden soldiers through snowy wafts of cotton balls. In Baltermant's print, hanging on the adjacent wall, a cavalry of Russian soldiers on horseback pounds through the snowy landscape towards us—or towards a direct confrontation with the toy Napoleon. Fact and fantasy converge.

Other pieces in the show included a grid of Susan Seubert's *100 Cheerleaders* (2005), her series of large-scale, elegant tintype photograms reproducing the hooded figure made famous through the Abu Gharib revelations. The grim repetition of this

iconic image suggests not only the continuing revelations of the U.S. involvement in torture, but also, in the context of the exhibition, the dissemination of amorality as it trickles from the top down, infecting both its victims and its perpetrators.

For the past few years, Michael Spafford, who frequently bases his work on images derived from poetry, has focused his attention on the *Iliad*. Five woodcuts from his *Iliad* series, as direct and simple as Greek black figure vases, as modern as a Kara Walker silhouette, make the final case in Riswold's argument. Spafford distills the poetry, the heroism, the tragedy and folly of war to a series of stark black and white compositions. Figures become abstractions and the blank white ground assumes the power of the figure, equalizing substance and void, darkness and light.

WAR closed February 29 at Guestroom Gallery, Portland. You can still see the installation and pics online at www.guestroomgallery.com. Other artists included in the exhibition included: William Anthony, David Levinthal and John Wesley.

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