

ARTLIES

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Artists and Photojournalism [excerpt]

By Lyra Kilston

Artistic representation is expected to present a subjective perspective. This becomes more complex when an artwork is representing an image that, by its nature, is supposed to provide an *objective* perspective. What is the effect of transforming a news image—something supposedly factual and unaltered—into art? Are concrete facts lost or is the veracity of the image itself called into question?

New York City-based artist **Joy Garnett** paints directly from images she downloads from the Internet. Searching with keywords, such as “guerrillas,” “fundamentalists,” “heroes” and “martyrs,” she downloads dozens of images at a time, prints them and then waits until their context has evaporated from the public memory. The images thus become signifiers not for a specific political situation but for violence, mourning or warfare in general. Portraits of devastation, shock and desperation are depicted in Garnett’s vivid brushstrokes, while titles add to their anonymity and imitate the laconic shorthand so prevalent in rushed, online communications, such as *Demo*, *Burn 1*, *Burn 2*, and *Nomad 1* (all 2001–2005).

Like **Leon Golub** and **Gerhard Richter**, painters who draw heavily from mass-media imagery, Garnett is interested in how we read photographs of violence, what they withhold from us and how painting affects their content. Painting these images, she believes, “interprets them through the slow filter of the body, and remakes them as purely subjective, contemplative objects.” This transformation changes the image at a fundamental level. Sifting through the endless number of online image banks, Garnett selects but a few images for a new life—ones that demand a very different kind of looking. The shelf life of an image that under normal circumstances expires within a day is thus magnified. Looking at paintings, Garnett adds, is something we seek out, whereas “media images come to us when we are at our most passive.” When images appear in a newspaper, we simply read the caption and are finished with it, perhaps allowing ourselves to be struck momentarily by the desperation in the faces of the subjects; ultimately, however, we would move on to the next article. In viewing a painting, we tend to create our own narrative tension, which increases our involvement with the image. Garnett questions how formal composition shapes our emotions—and, by extension, our opinions.

Finnish artist **Pia Lindman** is also concerned with our reception of media imagery, particularly its ability to manipulate us in an emotive capacity. For her work *New York Times 09/02–09/03* (2002–present), Lindman reenacted gestures based on images of Americans, Palestinians and Israelis depicted in moments of grief in *The New York Times*—private moments of horror and mourning broadcast internationally for consumption. Questioning why personal displays are publicized so relentlessly, Lindman first traced outlines of the images onto vellum and then performed them on camera. Without imbuing the gestures with emotion, she duplicated depicted gestures, like an outreached hand or slack jaw. She writes: “By exhibiting both the tracings and the re-enactments, I aim to illuminate some of the relationships between a photograph, its mediation, and the idea of original content, in this instance, human emotional reaction to terrorism.” The result is a set of simple drawings and gestures emptied of context, available for authentic—rather than manipulated—projections of grief.

Garnett and Lindman, while using very different approaches, both draw from the factual premise of photojournalism and translate the mediated distance of images to a human scale, filtering them, as Garnett says, *through* the body. At issue is not whether photographs depict something true but, rather, how images are presented to us and what we in turn do with them—how we absorb, block, relate to or distance ourselves from them.