



THE ART OF *War*

A **STUDY GUIDE** BY MARGUERITE O'HARA



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War

Introduction

In *The Art of War*, Betty Churcher brings her unique perspective to a series on Australian art inspired or provoked by our involvement in conflicts over the past century. From the First World War to the 'war on terror', it reveals how dramatically attitudes to war have changed, and how radically the trauma of war has changed art itself.

The Art of War is a personal exploration of art rather than a comprehensive history. With images from official war artists, soldiers on the frontline or in POW camps, civilians in concentration camps and those on the homefront, it is a story of unknown artists and famous names such as George Lambert, Nora Heysen, Wendy Sharpe and Sidney Nolan.

The range and diversity of the works is remarkable, from dramatic battlefield panoramas to pencil-on-paper sketches of individuals. Some were created to encourage patriotic sentiment; others protest a senseless loss of life. Almost all capture something of the Australian identity – our humour, courage and endurance.

The series is made up of four programs, each focusing on a particular period in Australian History.

Episode 1:

Birth of a Legend

Episode 2:

The Human Tragedy

Episode 3:

Far From the Frontline

Episode 4:

Cold War and Conflagration

Using *The Art of War* in the classroom

This documentary is of specific interest and relevance to teachers and students of:

- **Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE/HSIE);**

- **Australian History and Society;**
- **Cultural Studies;**
- **Studio Arts;**
- **Art;**
- **English;**
- **Media Studies;**
- **Visual Arts.**

The themes and activities developed in this study guide will have interest and relevance for students from the middle to senior years of secondary school and relate to the following learning outcomes:

- **Critically compare representations of people, events and issues.**
- **Analyse the core values of groups and societies.**
- **Consider the context in which the works were created and explain how this is reflected in the works.**

Glossary of key terms

ANZAC – Australian and New Zealand Army Corps

Gouache – Painting medium made by mixing opaque colours ground in water and thickened with gum.

Cold War – Period following World War Two where tensions and an uneasy peace existed between Western powers and the Soviet Bloc. A conflict of ideologies between capitalism and communism.

Conflagration – a great and destructive fire, great outbreak of war.

Abstract expressionism – non-representational art. Compositions using colour, line, forms and patterns to express inner feelings and emotions.

Frontline – the place where fighting is taking place.



Before watching

Read the following questions and record your responses.

- **Why do you think any artist would be interested in visually recording war?**
- **Where do most of our images of war come from today?**
- **What do you know about the Australian War Memorial?**
- **Name any paintings or drawings of war themes you have seen or know of (not necessarily Australian).**
- **What advantages might paintings or drawings of war scenes have over film and photography?**
- **What might be the difference between an 'official war artist' and other artists who record scenes from wars?**
- **Should war artists record history or interpret it for posterity?**

You will be looking again at these same questions after you have watched the programs, so keep them in mind as you watch.

Australian involvement in wars (and peacekeeping forces) since 1900

1. **World War One – 1914-18**
2. **World War Two – 1939-45**
3. **Korean War – 1950-53**
4. **Vietnam War – 1962-72 (USA involvement until 1975)**
5. **First Gulf War – 1991**
6. **INTERFET peacekeeping force in East Timor – 1999**
7. **War in Iraq – 2003-**

Episode I: Birth of a Legend

Although there were no 'official' war artists to record that most significant moment in our nation's history – the landing at Gallipoli in 1915 – there was ample artistic talent among the servicemen who fought in World War One. These soldier-artists left us eyewitness accounts, from Turkey and North Africa to Palestine and the Western Front. This episode looks at their legacy and that of CEW Bean, the

inspiration behind the Australian War Memorial and Australia's official war artist scheme. In particular, it explores the work of two government-appointed war artists: George Lambert, who depicted the heroics of great battles won and lost; and Will Dyson, who focused on the horror of trench warfare.

To my mind this little watercolour tells another story. It may not shout art but it does shout humanity because it's been drawn, not just with the hand and the eye but also with the heart.

– Betty Churcher talking about Captain George Hore's sketches of Turkish dead lying in No Man's Land at the Nek

In each of these four programs, Betty Churcher makes a personal link with her own family experiences of war.

- **What is the connection she establishes in this program?**

While there were no official war



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artists at Gallipoli, some soldiers, including Ellis Silas and Captain George Hore, came ashore with sketch pads in their packs.

- **What would be some of the difficulties these 'soldier artists' may have encountered as they made visual records of their experiences?**
- **List some of the subjects they sketched at the Gallipoli landing.**

Charles Bean was at Gallipoli as a war correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He decided to compile a book of soldiers' stories and drawings.

- **What is this book called?**
- **Describe some of the images from this book.**
- **Do they seem particularly Australian?**

The Great War claimed many Australian lives, particularly at the great battles on the Western Front in France and Belgium, but also on other fronts. The battle at Lone Pine on the Gallipoli Peninsula in Turkey claimed 2,300 young Australian lives over four days. Charles Bean lobbied the Australian High Commission in London to extend the work of soldier artists through the establishment of an official war arts scheme to honour the soldiers and record their deeds.

- **Who was the first official Australian war artist appointed in May 1917?**
- **What was he especially keen to show in his pictures?**
- **Do his pictures 'mythologize' the lives of the soldiers?**
- **Name and briefly describe two of his pictures.**
- **Does he romanticize the heroics of war?**
- **Name Australia's most celebrated official war artist of World War One.**
- **What is the subject matter of one of his largest, most dramatic pictures?**

- **What is 'The Legend' he depicts with such passion?**
- **How did the artist manage to carry oil paintings around on his travels as he recorded the sites of great battles?**

The image on this page is one of the most famous and loved images of Australians at war. The portrait is titled *A Sergeant of the Light Horse in Palestine*, painted in 1920.

Churcher describes this figure as 'the archetype of the Aussie Digger: lean, muscular, sinewy and resilient.'

- **Describe the picture in your own words.**

All artists are formed by the

society and times they come from. Their responses and their selection and style of images are influenced by many factors, not just by their own preferences.

- **In what ways do you think both Dyson and Lambert, as Australia's first official war artists, display both individuality in their pictures and limitations as a result of their official position?**
- **How does their work reflect the time in which they lived and worked?**
- **Is their attitude to war apparent in their pictures of war?**



George Lambert, *A Sergeant of the Light Horse in Palestine*, 1920

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Episode 2: The Human Tragedy

Extraordinary changes took place in European art as a result of World War One, with the development of a visual language to express internal trauma and mental anguish. Australian artists such as Albert Tucker drew on this in their responses to the Second World War. One of those who documented the 1939-1945 conflict was official war artist Ivor Hele. His epic pictures of the Middle Eastern and North African campaigns and dark images of New Guinea can be seen in this episode alongside the work of Academy Award winning cinematographer Damien Parer and drawings by concentration camp survivor Bernard Slawik.

Nowhere are the problems facing the cameraman and the war artists better illustrated than when Damien Parer and Ivor Hele recorded the same military burial in New Guinea.

– Betty Churcher

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- **What is the connection she establishes in this episode?**

By the time World War Two started in 1939, there had been enormous changes in the ways artists worked and depicted their worlds. Some of these changes can be linked to the political and social upheavals resulting from 'The Great War' of 1914-18.

- **Why does Churcher believe the reaction against war might have been greater in Germany than elsewhere?**
- **What effect does she suggest this had on the work of German artists?**
- **Name three of the 'new' art movements originating in Europe that were to have such an impact on**

artists in Europe and Australia.

- **Describe three of the pictures shown that depict 'the turmoil of the inner psyche under stress'.**

In Australia these European art movements were beginning to change the way Australian artists perceived and depicted their changing world.

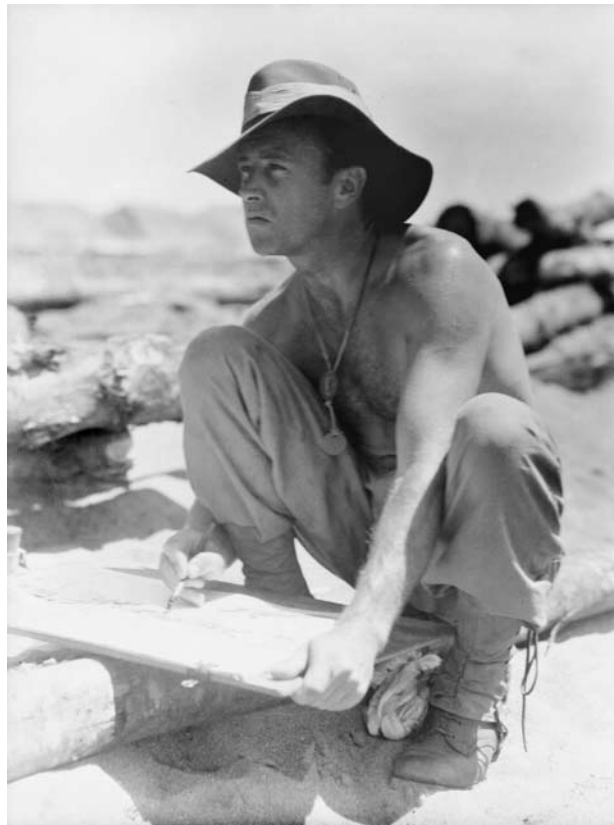
- **Where was the artistic centre for the new art movements in Australia?**
- **In the 1930s and 1940s, why was information about radical**

innovations in European art slow to reach Australia?

- **How did artists generally find out about art from other countries without travelling overseas?**

Albert Tucker, an Australian artist working at this time, shows the influence of new European styles when depicting his sense of the horrors of war.

Tucker was drafted into the army in 1942. He caught a brief glimpse of a soldier being admitted to a psychiatric hospital and captured his expression.



Captain Ivor Hele sketching in the Anamo Area, New Guinea, 1944. Photographed by Colin Thomas Halmarick, Australian War Memorial.

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- Describe how Tucker shows the mental state of the soldier in his picture titled *Psycho, Heidelberg Military Hospital (1942)*.
- What does the image tell us about both the young soldier and Tucker's response to his subject?

As in World War One, Australian troops were sent to the deserts of North Africa in the Middle East. Private Ivor Hele was appointed at the end of 1940 as an official war artist to cover the conflict.



- Describe some of the subjects Hele sketched in North Africa.
- Why was it too difficult for Hele to set up a studio where he could paint 'on site'?
- Name the Australian war artist who painted the epic picture of Australian troops at El Alamein.
- How does this painting capture the scene in a way that no photograph could at this time?

When Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1942, Australia's attitude to war changed. In February of the same year, Singapore fell to the Japanese and four days later Darwin was bombed.

- How would these events change Australians' attitudes to the war?

Ivor Hele was sent to New Guinea to cover the very different conditions of jungle warfare.

- Apart from the usual ways of dying in a war, such as being shot or bombed, what were some of the other dangers soldiers confronted in these theatres of war?
- Name the Australian cameramen who filmed some of the most compelling and terrifying images of jungle warfare in the region.

TOP: Albert Tucker, *Psycho, Heidelberg Military Hospital*, 1942.

BOTTOM: Ivor Hele, *Study for 'Australian Troops Disembarking at Alexandria'*, 1942.

Painting versus Photography

Churcher shows us a stark example of the different strengths and contrasting styles of the two mediums of painting and photography in the hands of two fine artists: Hele the painter and Parer the photographer. (Parer won an Academy Award in 1943 for Best Wartime Documentary. The following year he was killed in action by Japanese machine gunfire while filming a landing of US troops.)

- Describe the different depictions of the same burial scene in New Guinea by each artist.
- Time chosen to show the burial
- Compositional elements
- Use of light and shade
- Mood established

Not all war art is official commissioned work. Many of the most compelling images are from non-professional artists – civilians caught up in the horrors in different ways.

Bernard Slawik, an architect by profession, was interned in a Polish concentration camp by the Nazis during World War Two. After the war he and his family came to Australia to live, but it was not until after he died in 1991 that his wife discovered an extraordinary collection of drawings her husband had made while a prisoner in the camp. Consider some of the extreme difficulties of creating and keeping safe such a collection in a prison camp under horrific conditions.

- **How would Slawik have got his materials to make these visual records?**
- **When and how would he have done the drawings (as discovery would have meant death)?**
- **Where did he conceal the pictures?**
- **Select two of Slawik's images shown and explain how they are both a realistic record and a psychological image of extreme pain and suffering.**

In the prisoner of war camps closer to Australia, such as Changi in Singapore, other artists recorded the daily horrors and stoicism of interned Australian soldiers. One of these was an official war artist, Murray Griffin, who became one of the prisoners in Changi and recorded their experiences. Eight thousand men died in these camps.

- **What are some of the qualities of the prisoners captured by Griffin in his drawings and paintings of the camps and of the men working on the notorious Burma railway?**
- **In what sense do they constitute a very important historical record?**

Episode 3: Far From the Frontline

In World War Two women such as Sybil Craig, Stella Bowen and Nora Heysen were recruited for the first time as official war artists, recording in particular the contribution of women to the war effort. On the homefront, Margaret Preston, along with the Sydney trio William Dobell, Donald Friend and Russell Drysdale provided a different perspective of the war experience. Later, other artists would explore in their paintings legendary stories of courage and endurance that survive through the decades, with Sydney Nolan starting his Gallipoli series in 1955

and Jan Senbergs revisiting the 1942 sinking of HMAS Armidale nearly half a century later.

In the 1940s, three women – Nora Heysen, Stella Bowen and Sybil Craig – were appointed as official war artists specifically to record the contributions of women to the war effort ... Overall the women introduced a new perspective ... a more personal note.

– Betty Churcher

In each of these four episodes, Betty Churcher makes a personal link with her own family experiences of war.

- **What is the connection she establishes in this part of the series?**

Up to this point there had been no official women war artists, nor depictions of women in the wars. Yet they were there, both at the war front and in Australia, working as nurses, munitions workers, drivers and in a range of military support roles. It is true that women were not allowed to be frontline combatants, however their contributions to the war effort were very significant both at home and on the war fronts.

The war 'came to Australia' when Darwin was bombed in 1942; defences were reinforced across the country and women were encouraged to pull their weight for the war effort and work in jobs that had previously been the domain of men.



Sybil Craig, *Changewoman McGillivray Soldering* (Stasia McGillivray), 1945, Australian War Memorial.

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Margaret Preston depicted these changes to the city landscape in her paintings of *The Tank Traps at Manly Beach* and *The Side of the Sydney GPO*, the columns boarded up against the possibility of war.

- **As oil paints could be difficult to get in wartime, what materials did these artists use in their compositions?**

As Dobell was too old in 1942 for active service, he worked in the civil constructional corps, building camps around Australia and captured iconic images of Australians at work. Some of his most famous works from this period include: *Cement Worker*, *Billy Boy* and *Souvenir*.

- **In what ways do these images show the laconic humour and wry take on the world of both artist and subject?**
- **What is the 'souvenir' referred to in the painting of the same name?**

Donald Friend was appointed as an official war artist in 1945 and produced a large body of work both in Australia and overseas.

- **Which English artist influenced his style?**



Nora Heysen, *Transport Driver (Aircraftwoman Florence Miles)*, 1945, oil on canvas, Australian War Memorial.

Women War Artists - a different perspective

Nora Heysen, Stella Bowen and Sybil Craig were recruited as the first female official war artists, specifically 'to record the contributions of women to the war effort'. Nora Heysen wasn't too happy about this directive.

- **Why might Nora Heysen have been unhappy about the terms of her commission?**
- **Describe the qualities of aircraftwoman Florence Miles that Heysen shows in her painting *Transport Driver*.**
- **How might the experiences offered to women to work for the war effort have been liberating?**

Sybil Craig was appointed as an official war artist in 1945. She painted several scenes of women working in

munitions factories, including *Weighing Cordite*, *Commonwealth Explosives Factory*, *Maribyrnong* and *Small Arms Ammunitions Factory*, *Footscray*, Melbourne.

- **How is her empathy with these women evident in these images?**

Stella Bowen, an expatriate Australian artist living in London, welcomed her commission in 1943 as it provided her with both recognition and an independent income as an artist.

Her most famous painting is of members of the Royal Australian Air Force in England titled *Bomber Crew*. (see the front cover)

This picture was painted from drawings made of each crew member before they set out on their final bombing raid. Only one survived.

- **What are the elements in this composition that make it a moving memorial to the pilots?**

Another of her pictures recording the significance of aircraft and crew in World War Two is that of a Lancaster bomber being loaded with bombs for flight.

- **What did Bowen say the giant plane with its outstretched wings reminded her of?**
- **How would you describe the mood of this picture?**

Some years later, in 1955, Sidney Nolan, one of Australia's best-known artists (most famous for his *Ned Kelly* series of paintings), began work on his *Gallipoli* paintings. There are 180 pictures in the

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series, with paintings grouped around four themes.

- **What are the themes Nolan selects to explore the role the Anzac 'legend' plays in Australian life?**
- **How do his technique and choice of images differ from those of artists like Lambert and Dyson working at the time of World War I?**
- **To whom are these pictures dedicated?**

Other Australian artists, including Jan Senbergs, have also celebrated wartime tragedies and heroics from the past.

What is the subject of Senbergs' series of paintings?

In August 1945, shortly after the atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, celebrations were held by the Allies for Victory Pacific Day, as the Japanese had surrendered.

What does Churcher recall about this day for her personally?

How does John Brack's painting *Soldiers* reflect the mood in the streets?

In what ways might the two bombing events have changed both the nature of wars and how artists responded to them?

Episode 4: Cold War and Conflagration

The conflicts that have followed World War Two could not be viewed with the same lofty idealism as earlier wars. In looking at the work of Ray Beattie and Ian Howard, this episode considers the search for new symbols and the development of protest art. Churcher begins with the wars in Korea and Vietnam, and then talks to some of the artists – including Jan Senbergs, Kevin Connor, Rick

Amor, Wendy Sharpe, Gordon Bennett and her own son Peter Churcher – who have created works in response to the First Gulf War, peacekeeping in East Timor, the 9/11 attacks and the 'war against terror'.

Television imagery can tend to wash over us, but when it comes to remembering, I think you need the deeper bite of a singular image.

– Betty Churcher

In each of these four episodes, Betty Churcher makes a personal link with her own family experiences of war.

- **What is the connection she establishes in this program?**
- **What do you understand by the terms 'cold war' and 'conflagration'?**

Churcher suggests that since the end of World War Two, we now face wars without end, where innocent civilians and combatants

alike are killed and maimed with computerized weaponry.

- **What are some of the implications of these 'new technological wars' for artists, both photographers and painters?**
- **Do you think artists need to develop a new visual language to convey the complexities of wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries?**

When Australia sent troops to Korea in the early 1950s, Ivor Hele, who had worked as a war artist in World War Two in both North Africa and New Guinea, was one of two artists commissioned to cover the war in Korea.

Forty-two artists were commissioned to cover World War Two, but only two were appointed to Korea and two to the war in Vietnam.



John Brack, *Soldiers*, 1945, Australian War Memorial.

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- Can you explain this difference?
- In what ways is Hele's picture *Medical Evacuation* in the tradition of heroic battle scenes? How is it different?

Ken McFadyen was one of the two official war artists in Vietnam. This war is often described as the 'first television war' because images of the fighting, the destruction of the countryside and soldiers and civilians were daily beamed into living rooms. It was very much a helicopter war and several of McFadyen's paintings convey this different kind of jungle warfare.

- How does Churcher describe his approach?
- Do you agree with her comment that 'it may have been better recorded on film'?

Australia's other Vietnam war artist, Ray Beattie, was conscripted to serve in Vietnam. One of his most famous and admired pictures is not of the fighting itself but a photo-realistic image of loss, *Image for a Dead Man*, completed in 1980. It is a painting about the emptiness and loss felt by comrades, family and friends when a soldier is killed.

- Describe the elements in this picture that create this sense of loss and death.

- Do you think this picture could refer to any war and include the jacket of any soldier?

Many Australians were opposed to the war in Vietnam and there were massive rallies in the streets in the early 1970s.

It was at this time that American Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s was becoming the dominant style in Europe and Australia, but many artists felt that a more realistic approach was better suited to show their opposition to the war. Ian Howard was one of these artists.

- How is his image of the giant personnel carrier (a rubbing directly on to cotton duck canvas) an anti-war statement?
- How can the art galleries and art schools of a country influence the way artists work?
- Do you think that Australian artists are still being influenced by international trends?

When Australians were sent to take part in the First Gulf War, no official war artists were appointed.

- In the longer term, what do you consider could be the effect of having no official records of this conflict?

However, artists did respond to the conflict, which again was on television most nights, though the night-time images were mainly of tracers, flashes, lights and explosions filmed from the air. There were many images but little substance or sense of the human suffering.



Ray Beattie, *Image for a Dead Man*, 1980, Australian War Memorial, © Ray Beattie, Licensed by Viscopy.

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- **How does artist Jan Senbergs describe this situation?**
- **How does his painting *All the News That's Fit to Know* reflect his concerns?**

Unlike Senbergs, Kevin Connor did go to Iraq as soon as the war finished in 1991. The extreme heat meant he could not paint there but he sketched what he saw and painted back in Sydney.

- **Describe some of the compositional elements in his picture of the destruction of the holy city of Najaf.**

Australian artists worked alongside Australian troops in East Timor, when Australians led an international peacekeeping force (INTERFET) there in 1999 to assist in the rebuilding process after the destruction by Indonesian forces.

One of these 'official' artists was Rick Amor.

- **What working method did he employ to show what he saw in East Timor?**

I think artists ... can actually distil a vision – a photograph is a one-off, it's an instant – a painting'd be something that ... leaks out a bit more slowly, and I think that's what the artist does, he gives a more socialized view of something.

– Rick Amor

He wants to establish a mood that will communicate directly with the viewer, so that we can feel what he felt when he saw the ruins of East Timor... Amor wanted to show the emotional effect of destruction on the human psyche.

– Betty Churcher

- **How do the two observations above help us to understand Amor's images of Rural Destruction and Urban Destruction?**

Wendy Sharpe was another official war artist in East Timor who was profoundly moved by the impact of the destruction on the lives of the Timorese people.

- **How does her painting *Midnight at Suai Cathedral* reflect this sense?**



Rick Amor; *Rural Destruction*, 1999-2000; 2002, Australian War Memorial.

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Betty Churcher's son Peter is the final official war artist whose work is shown in these programs. He went to Afghanistan aboard HMAS Kanimbla and painted scenes and individuals on the troop carrier.

- **How does his portrait of Stoker Emma Conway continue the tradition of war art?**

The 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York was responded to by artists in a variety of ways.

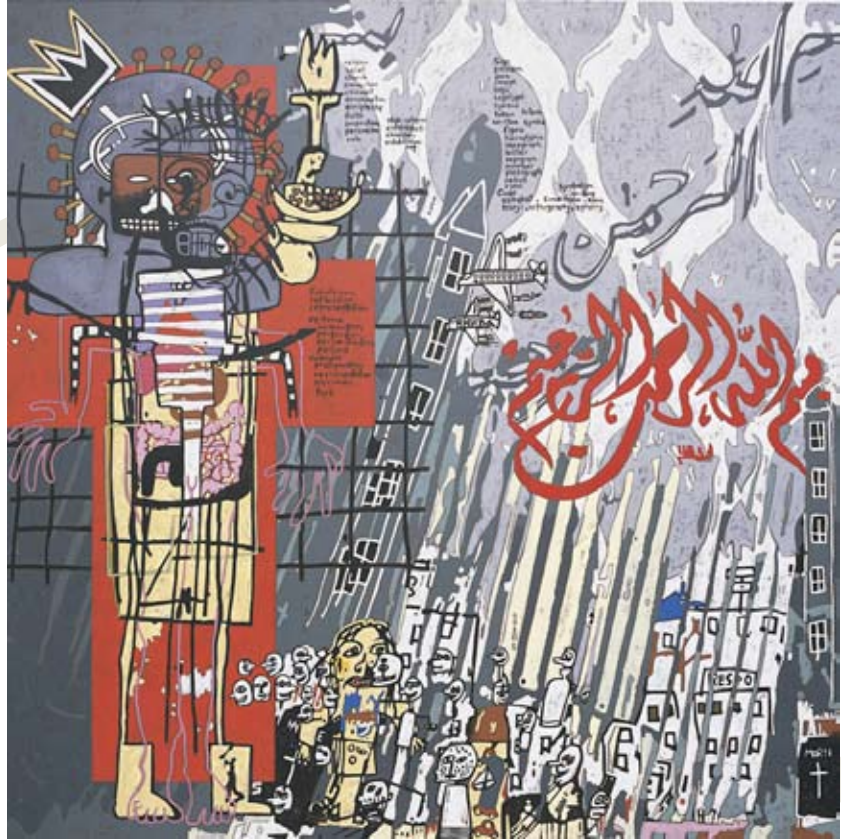
Gordon Bennett uses a combination of symbols and signs. He uses words to support his images titled *Notes to Basquiat 9/11*. (Basquiat was an African-American graffiti artist who in the 1980s used graffiti-like imagery to express racial tensions and the alienation of inner-city life.)

- **How do Bennett's paintings of 9/11 show a lack of understanding between people?**
- **What is the purpose and effect of incorporating text in pictures such as *Notes to Basquiat: The Coming of the Light*?**

Churcher concludes this program with a question: 'Do we still need artists to tell us about modern warfare?'



Peter Churcher, *Stoker Emma Conway: the engine room, HMAS Kanimbla*, 2002.



Gordon Bennett, *Notes to Basquiat (Aspire)*, 2002. © Gordon Bennett.

- **How does she answer this question?**
- **What would you add to her response?**

Revisiting introductory questions

After watching

Now you have watched the series, answer these questions and compare them with your pre-viewing answers.

- **Why do you think any artist would be interested in visually recording war?**
- **Where do most of our images of war come from today?**
- **What do you know about the Australian War**

Memorial?

- **Name any paintings or drawings of war themes you have seen or know of (not necessarily Australian).**
- **What advantages might paintings or drawings of war scenes have over film and photography?**
- **What is the difference between an 'official war artist' and other artists who record scenes from wars?**
- **Should war artists record history or interpret it for posterity?**

Hold a class discussion with small groups of students giving their responses to a particular question.

