

STEVE HURST  
WAR TOYS





Steve Hurst in his  
Oxfordshire studio

# FOREWORD

To call Steve Hurst simply a 'war artist' would be a naïve underestimation. He is an artist, educator and historian, committed to his own research and artistic practice regardless of his audience and the vagaries of fashion. Rather Hurst prefers to chip away steadily at what lies beneath immense and complex conflicts both current and historical - a physical paradox to the speed at which these situations can escalate fuelled by aggression and arrogance.

Hurst's passion for craftsmanship in his own work whether cast, carved or assembled as seen in this exhibition is only a small proportion of the enormous amount of work he has fostered and encouraged through his teaching and guidance in making sculpture around the globe. *War Toys* brings together four decades of Hurst's own personal imagery, which as he admits himself, is inextricably linked to conflict. As Hurst noted for his recent major show at the In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres:

*'By the end of the exhibition in Belfast I was exhausted and I wanted to turn away from war as a subject. The horror and indescribable folly of all the European nations, the sacrifice of the best of their men depressed me. I concentrated on a mathematical, abstract form of art. Commercial galleries liked these sculptures as much as they disliked The Somme Series. The sculptures in chromium plated steel or bronze, sold. I was a success but I was not myself and gradually the war came creeping back.'*

Hurst's direct experience of conflict zones in the military in Malaya and during the Troubles in Northern Ireland where he was teaching combined with his indirect but intensely personal forays into family history at the Somme or his dedication to making a drawing each day during the Iraq War, in military terms, form the Main Supply Route for his rich and varied subject matter. They have led to powerful images that themselves form a lasting history of a century of global struggles.

In this much-publicised centenary year it seems appropriate to celebrate Steve Hurst's work and the fact that he has dedicated a lifetime of making to explore many lifetimes of destruction. His is a study of humanity during conflict and its inherent contradictions; its power and fecklessness, its compassion and stupidity, its fear and numbness, its reality and its myth.

POLLY BIELECKA  
PANGOLIN LONDON



# WAR TOYS

Steve Hurst in conversation with Clare Gormley,  
June 2014

**All of your work is concerned with the nature of war and conflict. Do you recollect when and why this became a major interest of yours?**

Childhood. Children imitate the world around them in their games, drawing and, in my case making. I was aged about 10 or 11 when I first made toys in wood and painted them. Recent work in the current exhibition recreates childhood enthusiasms. The series *War Toys* were all made during and immediately after the period of an artists residency in the In Flanders Field Museum in Ypres. After I had recovered – to some extent – from the sense of horror and loss that anyone feels walking the killing ground that the British call The Salient, the Flemish West Hoek, I became more interested in the City the way it is now.

Can an artist make work about war? Indeed should he do it at all? One needs a parable, a way in. I found mine in those extraordinary enterprises, the Battlefield Café-museums around Ypres. The bizarre mixture of horrific relics, covered in mud and rust, and coloured kitsch objects gave me what I needed. These included plastic flowers, garden gnomes, Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy and, most strange of all, a bright painted slot machine dispensing sweets shaped like skeletons. This was the way in but the genesis of *War Toys* goes back much further than the residency, to my childhood.

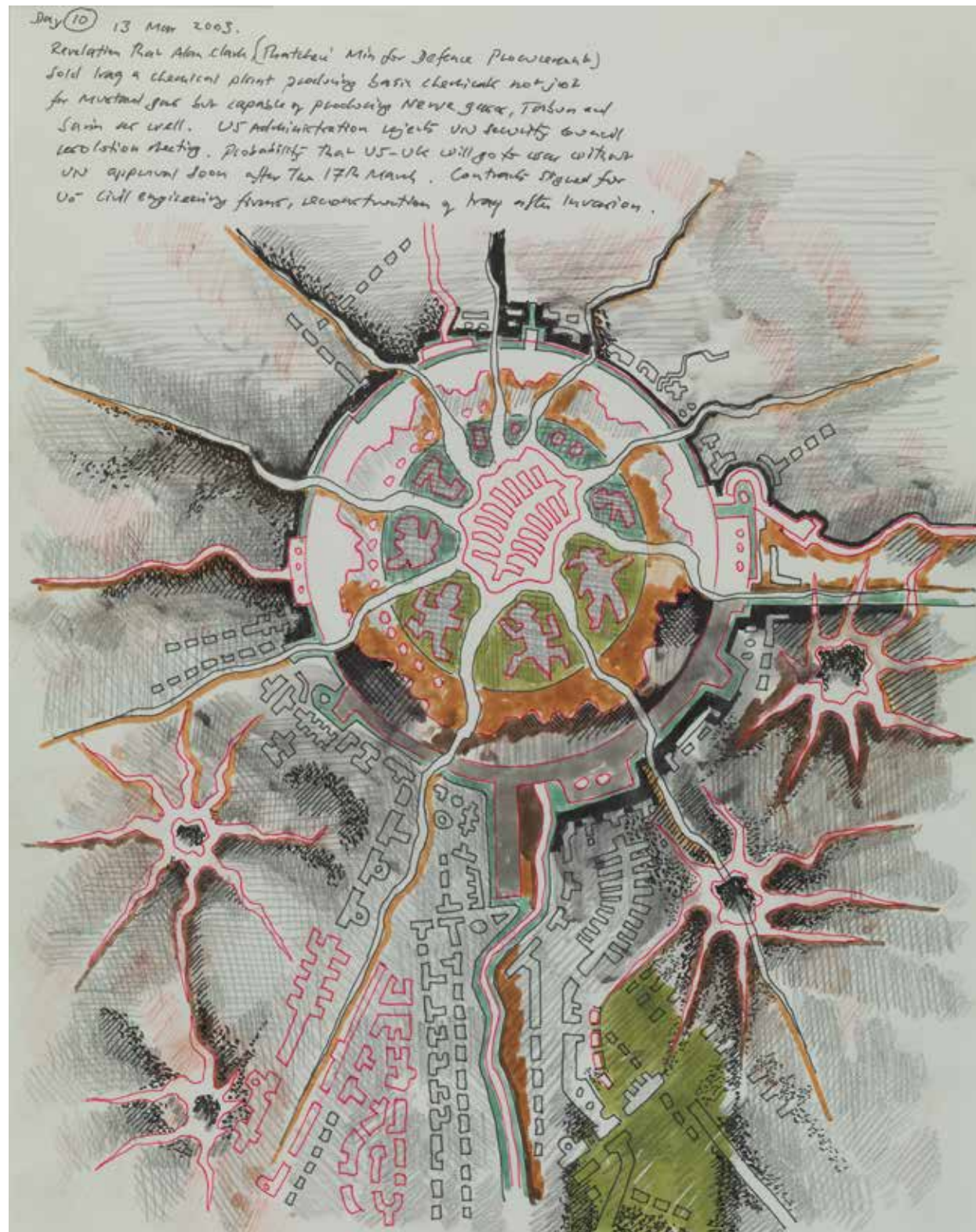
**There are distinct periods within your work, each relating to specific wars and conflicts, from the Somme and Ypres series on the First World War to the work made during your time in Northern Ireland at the heart of the Troubles and your works on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Do you see these bodies of work as interconnected or distinct from each other?**

Broadly speaking I think they are interconnected, but I work in phases, or enthusiasms. All my work has dual concerns both with the subject (e.g Ypres) and to my childhood during WWII and youth spent on national service in Malaya from 1953 – 55. I spent ten years connected with the army: two with the regular army in Malaya, eight on the active reserve, either Army Emergency Relief or Territorial Army, through part of the Cold War when many of us thought WW3 was coming and there was no point in becoming civilianised.



*Ship of Fools*  
2003, Painted wood  
Unique  
68 cm high





*Iraq Diaries: Day 10*  
2003, Coloured ink &  
pencil on paper  
Unique  
35 cm high

**You have commented that during your time as Head of Sculpture at the University of Ulster between 1979 – 1981 few local artists and students were exhibiting work about the Troubles. How did it feel at the time to be making work about the conflict in Northern Ireland as an ‘outsider’ and how do you assess the work of this period looking back?**

Very few Northern Irish artists showed work concerned with the Troubles during the Troubles – prudence being the main deterrent – but that does not mean that they were not making it. To the new arrival the divided and turbulent nature of Belfast and Derry appeared to create surges of emotion, not all of them negative. By a paradox, fear, anxiety and loss ran parallel to an outburst of creativity. Novels, the theatre and the visual arts needed time to appear. Partly this was due to the amount of money which was pumped into the economy of the Province, but mainly it was the creative potential of ordinary Northern Irish people being drawn out by the extreme situation.

Work made by outsiders showed little merit compared to work made by those living in Northern Ireland, whether these were Irish Catholics, Irish Protestants, or agnostic English. Many visitors came to the Art and Design Centre in York Street and the Ulster Museum in Stranmillis. They were excited by the Troubles. They were also the only people who had neat theories about a solution. Those living in Belfast held views similar to the writer of graffiti under Lagan Bridge: “Anyone who understands the situation, doesn’t understand the situation”.

I have to admit that my reactions, when I first arrived in Belfast, were similar to these exotic birds of passage and the drawings and models that I made during the first months were correspondingly superficial. But this work was not totally wasted because it helped me to understand my surroundings. Soon after I arrived I asked a mature student from Andersonstown what he made of it all. He replied. “It’s like two eejits fighting on a strand unaware that the tide is coming in”.

Apart from the exotic visitors mentioned earlier, the art produced in Northern Ireland between 1970 and 2000 has been neglected, one could even say ignored. It is time that it was re-examined and valued for the remarkable phenomenon that it is.

**Your work (*The Somme* and *Ypres Series* in particular) seems to interrogate the concepts of memory, remembrance and indeed the notion of an ‘official history’ when it comes to war and conflict. Is your work as much a critique of how we deal with the after effects of war as war itself?**

Yes, the approach to the centenary and to war commemoration made by the political establishment, the monarchy and the military is disgraceful. The official manipulation of the history of the Great War is not only mendacious, it shames our country. Most unpleasant is the portrayal of poets and artists as either effete or neurotic. These men showed great courage, many were killed in action.

A number of battlefield still lives in this exhibition were inspired by a section of the front line exposed by a JCB near La Boisselle in the early 70’s. Fish tins, a knife and fork, medical instruments and bottles were revealed for the first time for 60 years.



They happened to be German but might have been part of the daily life of either side. These relics of the ordinary lives of ordinary men are far more eloquent than waving flags and displays of polished killing machines.

The sculpture, *Chocolate Menin Gate* refers to something I mentioned earlier; the juxtaposition of kitsch and marketing alongside what the First World War poet Wilfred Owen called “the pity of war and the pity war distills”. All along the old line of The Western Front farmers dig up shattered steel helmets. Like unexploded shells these are reminders of the power of industrialised warfare and what that power does to human flesh. And yet, only a mile or so from this terrifying – now invisible – line the tourist can buy chocolates shaped like British helmets. While we stayed in Ypres my wife Sylvie discovered in a confectioner’s shop a model of the Menin Gate – in chocolate.

**What are your feelings about your work in the context of the Centenary commemorations?**

The Centenary has made little difference to my attitude to my own work. Of much greater interest is the difference in public attitude to the 100th anniversary compared to the 50th. During the 1960’s interest grew from the bottom upwards. Many of those who survived the slaughter of The Great War were still alive and could tell their own stories. Since the death of Harry Patch, the last soldier to serve on the front line in WWI, the Government and right wing historians can print whatever they like. The 50th anniversary had a great influence on my sculpture and drawings. The illegal attack on Iraq had a similar effect. The current official celebrations have no impact.

**There is certainly an implicit cynicism in the title of the exhibition – *War Toys*. Does this reflect your general feeling towards the wars and conflict you explore in your work?**

The joy of sculpture is ambiguity. Yes ‘*War Toys*’ is cynical. Most men love the toys of war. The sexual/sadistic interest in war is stressed in the phallic canons and also the vaginal tanks – after all it was women who handed out White Feathers to ununiformed men between 1914 and 1918 to shame them into enlisting in the army. Like George Fullard (Head of Sculpture when I started working for the Chelsea College of Art) my attitude to war is ambiguous. I have never regretted serving in the army. Unfortunately recent wars have been those of aggression rather than defence.

**The sculptures in the exhibition show the wide range of materials you have worked in from bronze, aluminium and steel to wood, paint and found objects. Are your works led as much by process and material as they are by concept?**



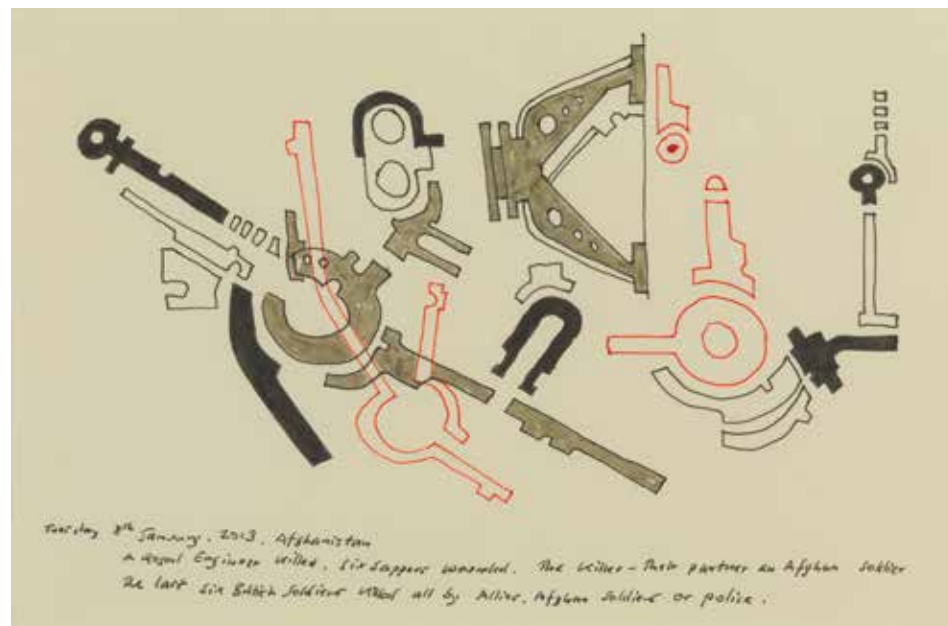
ABOVE LEFT  
*Crucible*  
2000, Bronze  
Unique  
35 cm high

ABOVE RIGHT  
*Wheeled Tower II*  
1998, Bronze  
Unique  
50 cm high

Yes, the starting point is always the material. During and immediately after the Second World War I had the use of my Father’s workshop while he was in Egypt, working on Nile projects for most of the year. I owe my love of materials and crafts to him. While I was a student at the Ruskin I thought that ‘Art’ meant painting and drawing. The things I made in the workshop were not ‘Art’ and I didn’t show them to anyone. The series *War Toys* is made out of wood and painted with lacquer very much as I made toys as a child. Making them is partly choice and partly necessity. I no longer have the stamina to work in metal. I regret this, but wood is a practical substitute.

Through my working life I earned a living in the metal casting world, sometimes through my own small foundry, at others as a teacher or as advisor to small foundry businesses in Asia, Africa and South America. Moulding, metal casting and sculpture are inter-dependant. They feed off each other. My metal casting life divided into three stages and this is apparent in the sculpture. *Sea Head* was cast when I was a foundry student at the Royal College of Art. *Wayland* and the aluminium parts for *Crab Castle* and *The Somme Series* reliefs were all cast at Chelsea School of Art where I taught for more than eight years between 1971-79. Teaching in a variety of art schools in London and the Midlands gave me access to specialised equipment and the expertise of skilled technicians.

The second stage, in my own foundry, relied on simpler equipment and limited resources but allowed me complete control over all aspects of the process. I could modify the design to suit the casting - the reverse to the procedure in foundries casting work for clients. *The Somme Series* still lives and the *Wheeled Towers* grew out



of this experimental period. My employers (ITDG) gave me a grant to study West African casting in Foumban in West Cameroon. The direct modelling in wax I recorded while living in Le Village des Artisans had a major influence. The Bamoun craftsmen modelled in wax or used pieces cast in open moulds. I experimented with different materials combined with wax, grass, cloth, leaves, twigs and insects. Usually I accepted the result as it came out of the mould, doing as little metal finishing as possible.

The third and current phase involves working with others. This is a major change because I have always been a solitary artist. My connection with Pangolin Editions foundry goes back to its birth, or even earlier, before conception. In making and casting my own work I set myself impossible problems. Today I do the same thing, leaving the solution to the problem to Pangolin's expertise.

Apart from a few minor jobs the first series of works that I had cast at Pangolin, *War Toys*, were made of wood (wood is notoriously difficult to take a mould from). The cast bronze results are quite extraordinary. I am full of admiration at the skill with which they were moulded, and cast and the metal finished. If you look at the bronze versions of the *War Toys* from the casting view you will understand what I mean.

The development of foundry technology at Pangolin opens up a variety of possibilities for the sculptor. Vacuum casting and computer based 3-D design are examples. Changes in methods influence sculpture as much as sculpture influences methods, it is a creative exchange.

ABOVE  
*Afghanistan Diaries:*  
*8th January*  
 2013, Pen on paper  
 Unique  
 21 cm high

RIGHT  
*Sea Head*  
 1969, Bronze with  
 wooden base  
 Unique  
 60 cm high







LEFT  
*Kite*  
2006, Painted  
plywood, aluminium  
& found objects  
Unique  
190 cm high

RIGHT  
*Against the Clock*  
2005, Painted  
plywood &  
aluminium  
Unique  
125 cm high

**You draw in your sketchbooks daily and this seems to be a vital form of visual research for you. Do you see your drawings as a body of work in their own right or do they act primarily as a precursor to your sculptural work?**

Very rarely do I make drawings for sculpture. It is the material and sometimes a maquette which decide what form the sculpture will take. Sometimes I make drawings to sort out a technical problem when the sculpture is well advanced. The sketchbooks have always been a separate activity.

Only during the five years of travelling to and from Ypres did the sketchbooks become a working tool. Now, post-Ypres, the sketchbook has become purely a pleasure. I love the oddity of human beings.

When I left the Ruskin in 1953 (the school was then in one wing of the Ashmolean Museum) I did not sufficiently appreciate the training I received in a traditional type of drawing. But now, sixty-one years later, I appreciate it more and more. After the Ruskin I had four years when I made no painting or sculpture but I continued to draw. The Suez/Hungary crisis shocked me back to reality. I went back to Art School – Goldsmiths – then went through another bad patch, which proved to be the necessary precursor to a period of intense creativity.

In 1963 I had a one-man exhibition at the New Vision Centre, Marble Arch and two person shows at the Arnolfini, Bristol and the Bear Lane Gallery, Oxford in 1964. That year I met Sylvie. We married a year later and emigrated to America. I learned, working in the USA that a sculptor could survive and prosper more easily there than in England, and yet in the Autumn of 1968 we returned to London. The experience of America, like a similar length of time in South East Asia, brought home to me that I depended on my European roots. The fratricidal struggle that Mao Ze Dong called 'the European Civil War' seemed a good place to unearth these connections. There was no better way of achieving this than drawing. That summer I took a bicycle, a drawing board and paper and set off for Amiens and the Somme and spent three days cycling and drawing. It was those drawings that inspired the bronze casting I called *The Somme Series*.

**The last piece in this exhibition was completed in 2013, which implies you are very much still practicing.**

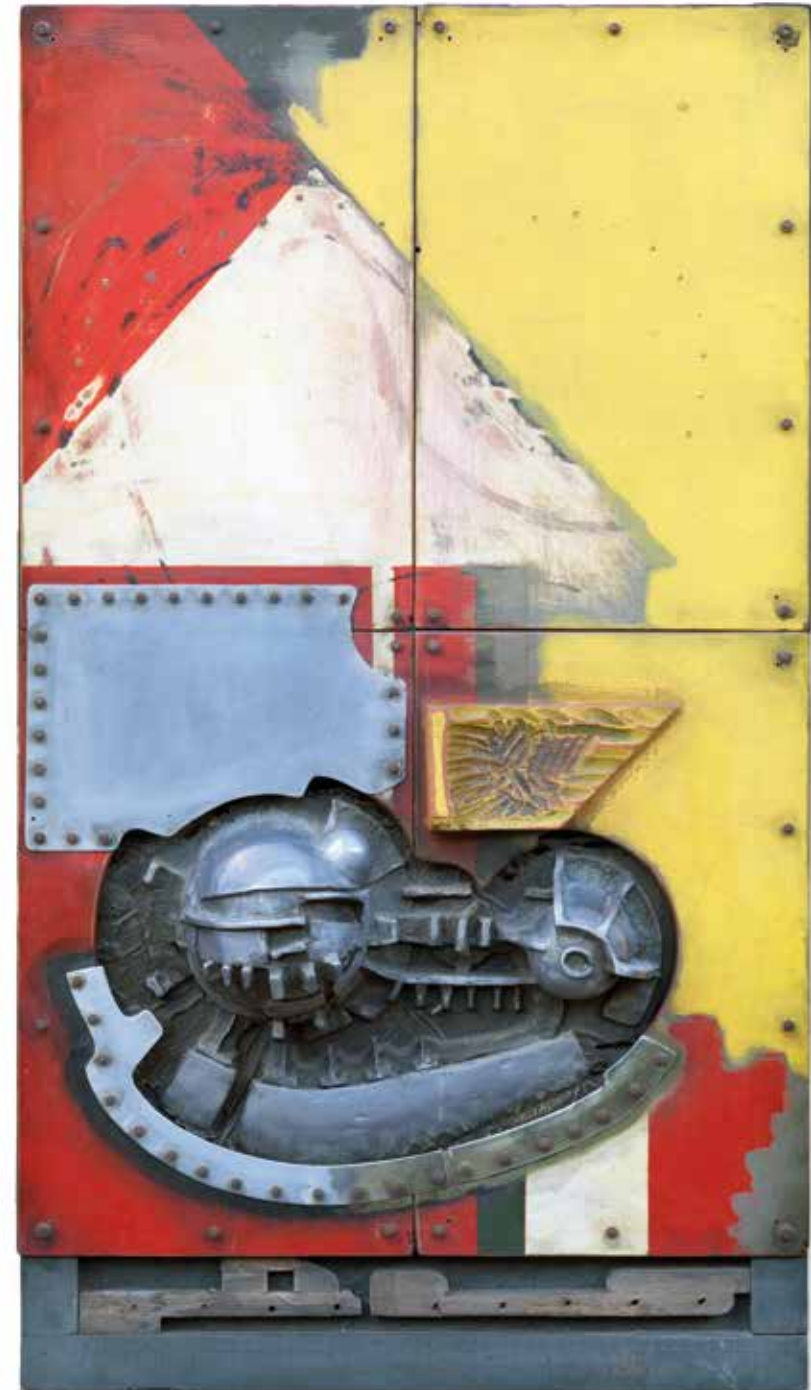
Yes. Sculptors don't retire. In the studio now I have three pieces that one could call post-Ypres. They are all made of box wood and will be cast in bronze. The major piece, and the one that demands the most urgency, has to be completed by September for the exhibition *Crucible 2* at Gloucester Cathedral, curated by Gallery Pangolin. *Gloucester in Berlin* refers back to an earlier series *Die Himmel Fier*, which was first shown at The Courtauld. Two works from that series, *Kite* and *Against the Clock*, are now in this exhibition.

# THE SOMME SERIES





*29th Division*  
1971, Aluminium & painted wood  
Unique  
107.5 cm high





LEFT  
*Beaumont*  
 1971, Aluminium &  
 painted wood  
 Unique  
 122 cm high



RIGHT  
*Crab Castle*  
 1971, Aluminium  
 Unique  
 86 cm high





*Y Ravine*  
 1978, Aluminium, steel,  
 mahogany & wooden base  
 Unique  
 85 cm high



*Tambour*  
2000, Bronze  
Unique  
40 cm wide



# THE YPRES SERIES



*Ishtar*  
2011-13, Painted  
wood & steel  
Unique  
260 cm high







*Eriskegal*  
2012-13, Wood  
on shell case  
Unique  
145 cm high





LEFT  
*Scarlet Major*  
 2012, Bronze  
 Edition of 6  
 52 cm high

RIGHT  
*Snake Pistol*  
 2012, Bronze  
 Edition of 6  
 58 cm wide





*Chocolate Menin Gate*  
2013, Painted wood  
& found objects  
Unique  
86 cm high





*Jacob's Ladder*  
2012-13, Steel,  
cast iron & bronze  
Edition of 3  
300 cm high

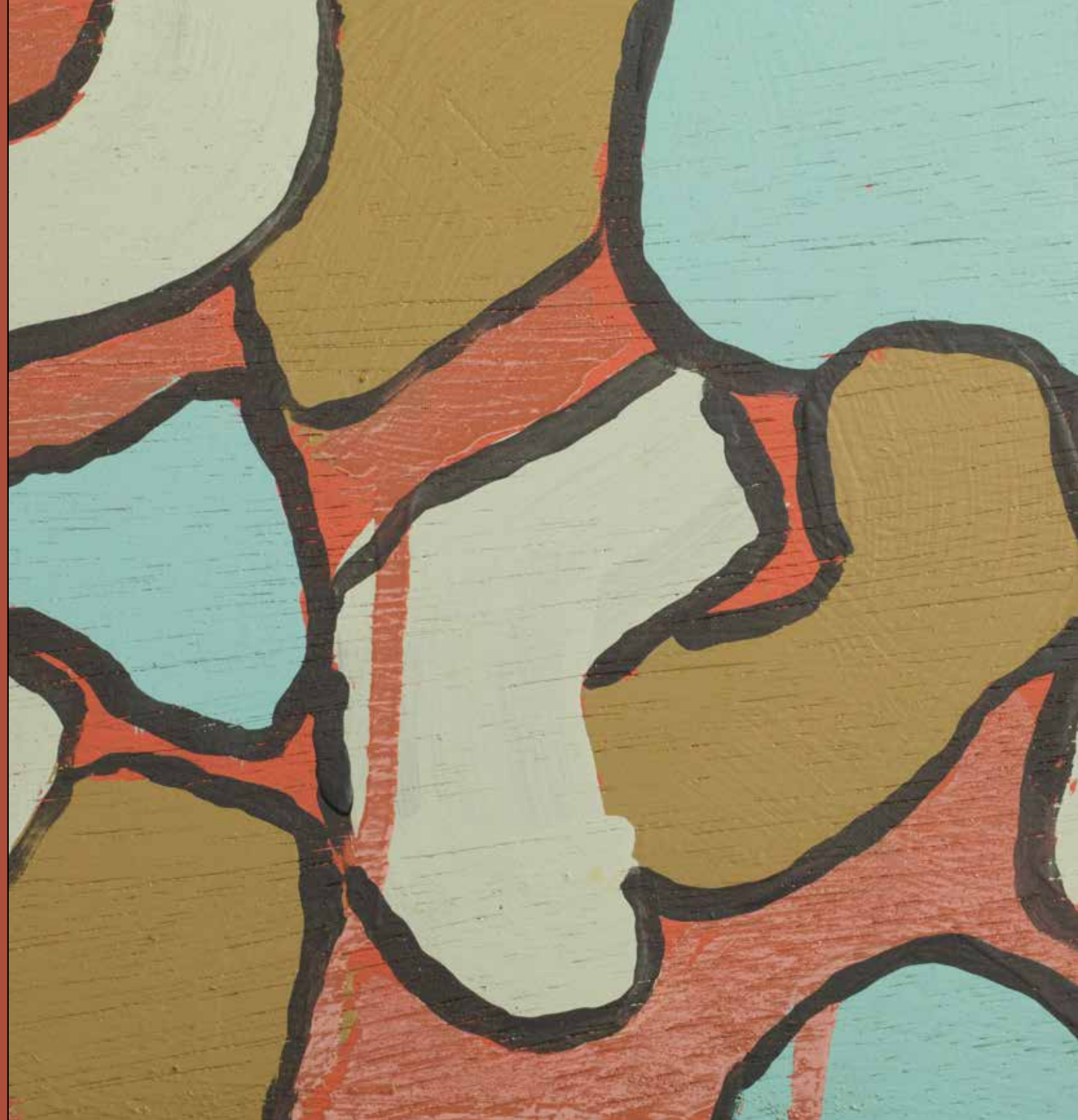






*Colonel Cathcart*  
2012, Bronze  
Edition of 6  
62 cm wide

# WAR TOYS





*Tank Two*  
2011-12  
Working model  
Unique  
54 cm wide





*Tank One*  
2011-12  
Working model  
Unique  
43 cm wide



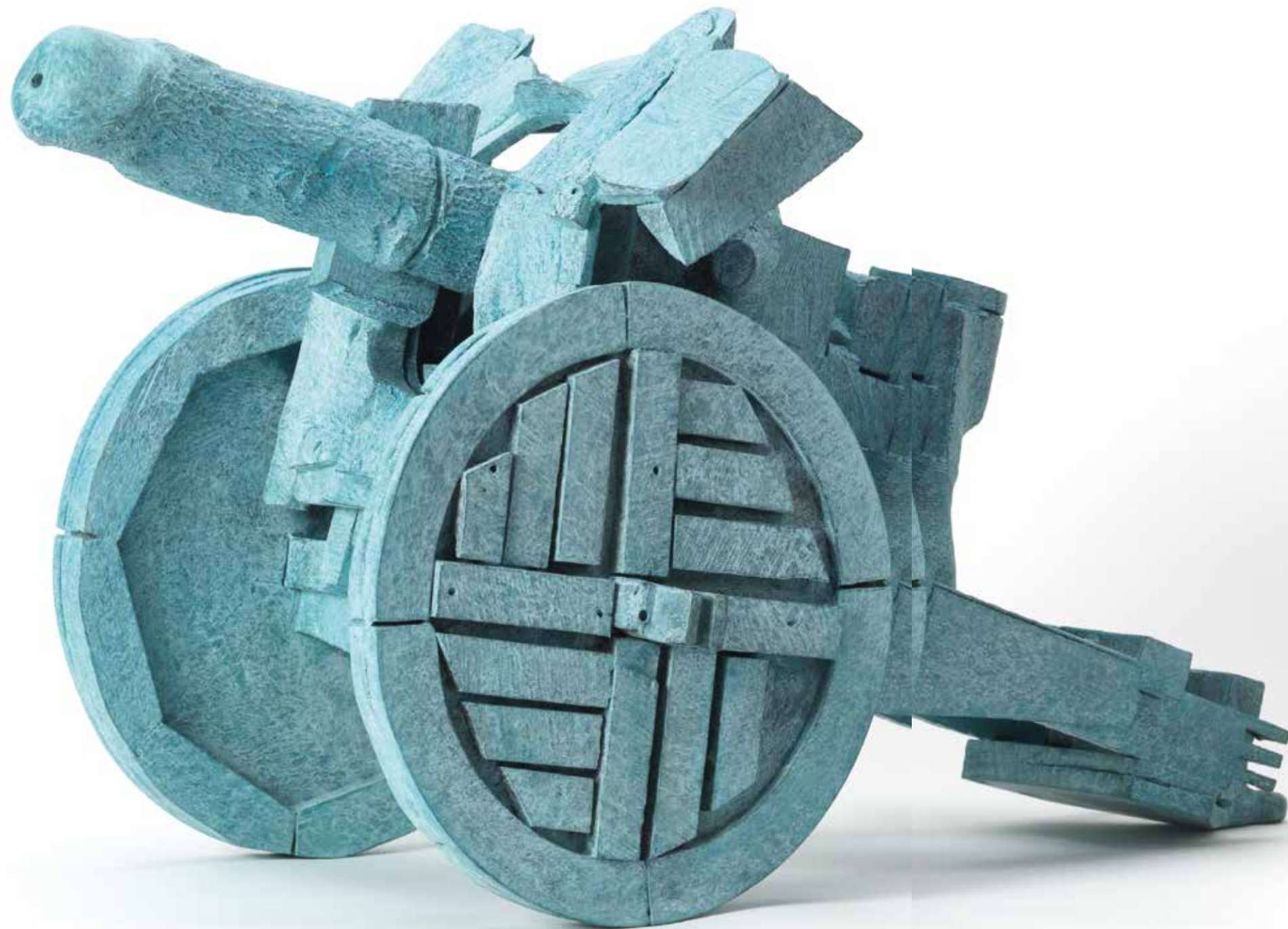
*Howitzer*  
2011-12  
Working model  
Unique  
51 cm wide





*Cruise Missile*  
2011-12  
Working model  
Unique  
82 cm wide





*Canon*  
2011-12, Bronze  
Edition of 6  
56 cm wide



# HUMAN CONNECTIONS







*Human Connections: Main Figure*  
1990, Bronze, cement & wood  
Unique  
107 cm high x 113 cm wide







*Human Connections: Male and Female Masks*  
1989-90, Bronze, wood & glass cabinets  
Unique  
44 cm high each



*Four Victims*  
2000, Bronze with  
wooden base  
Unique  
40 cm high

# NORTHERN IRELAND







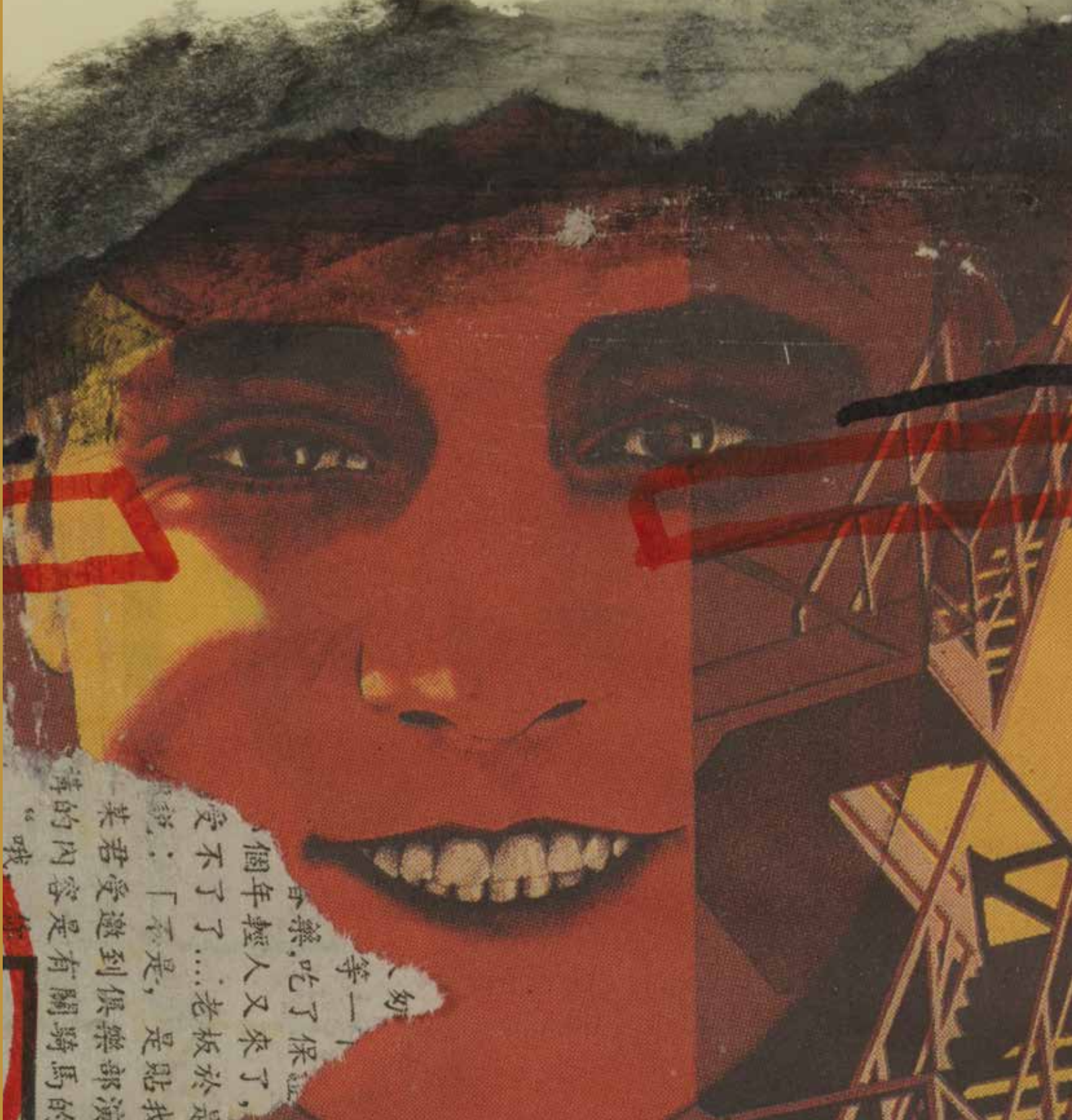
*Egypt, From Fred to Dad*  
1981, Painted plywood  
& found material  
Unique  
81 cm wide

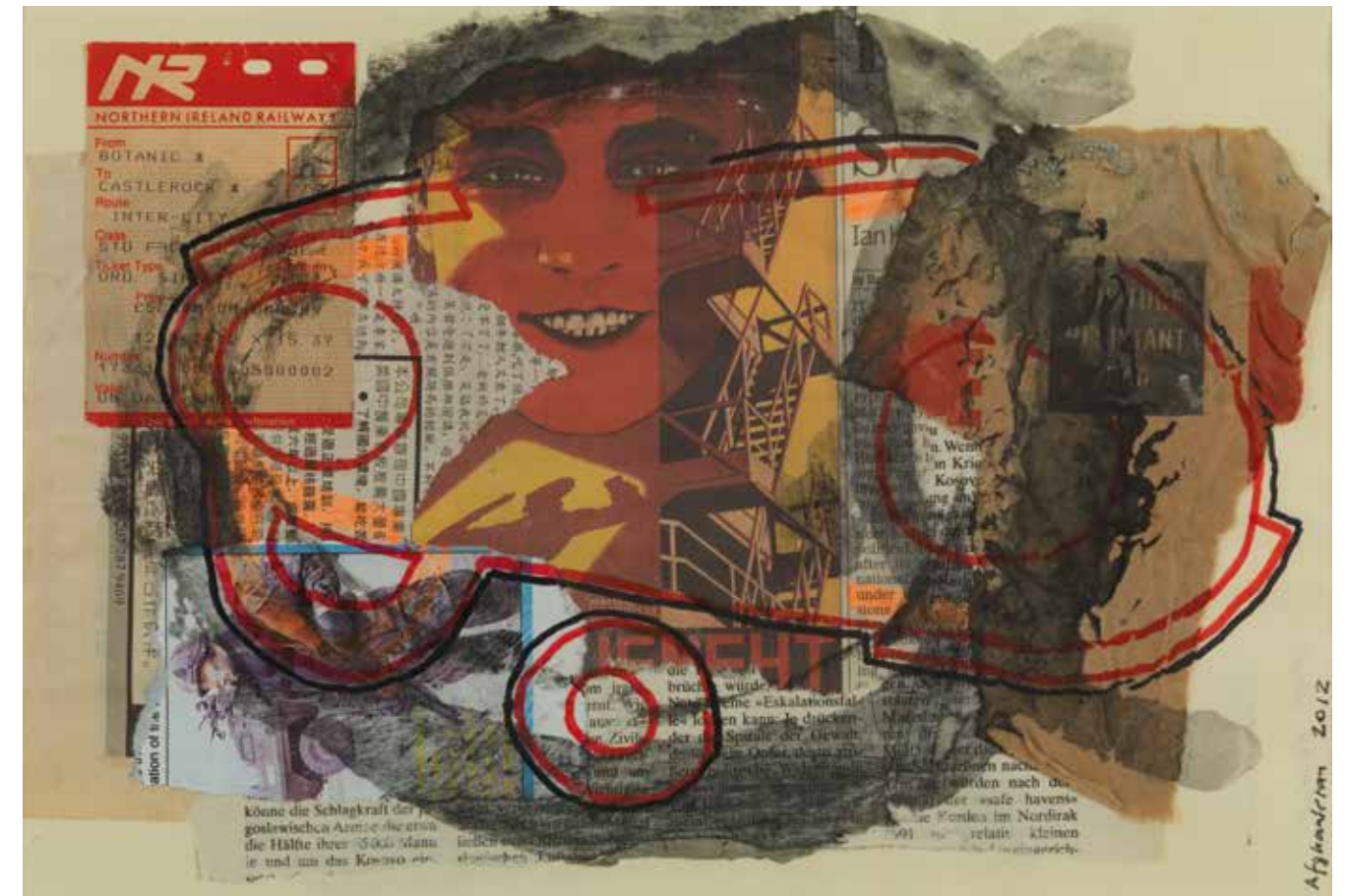


*Helicopter with Lion & Palm Tree*  
1981, Painted plywood  
& found material  
Unique  
122 cm high



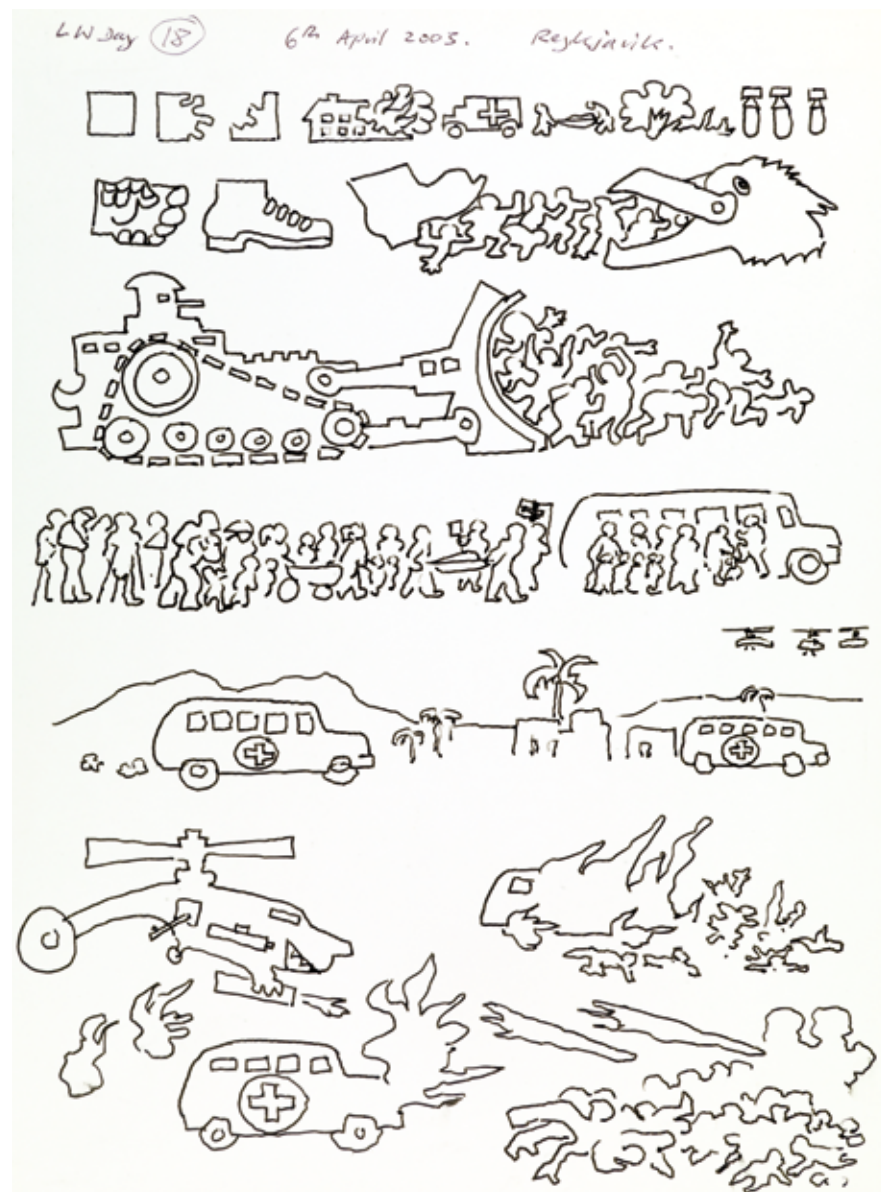
# IRAQ & AFGHANISTAN



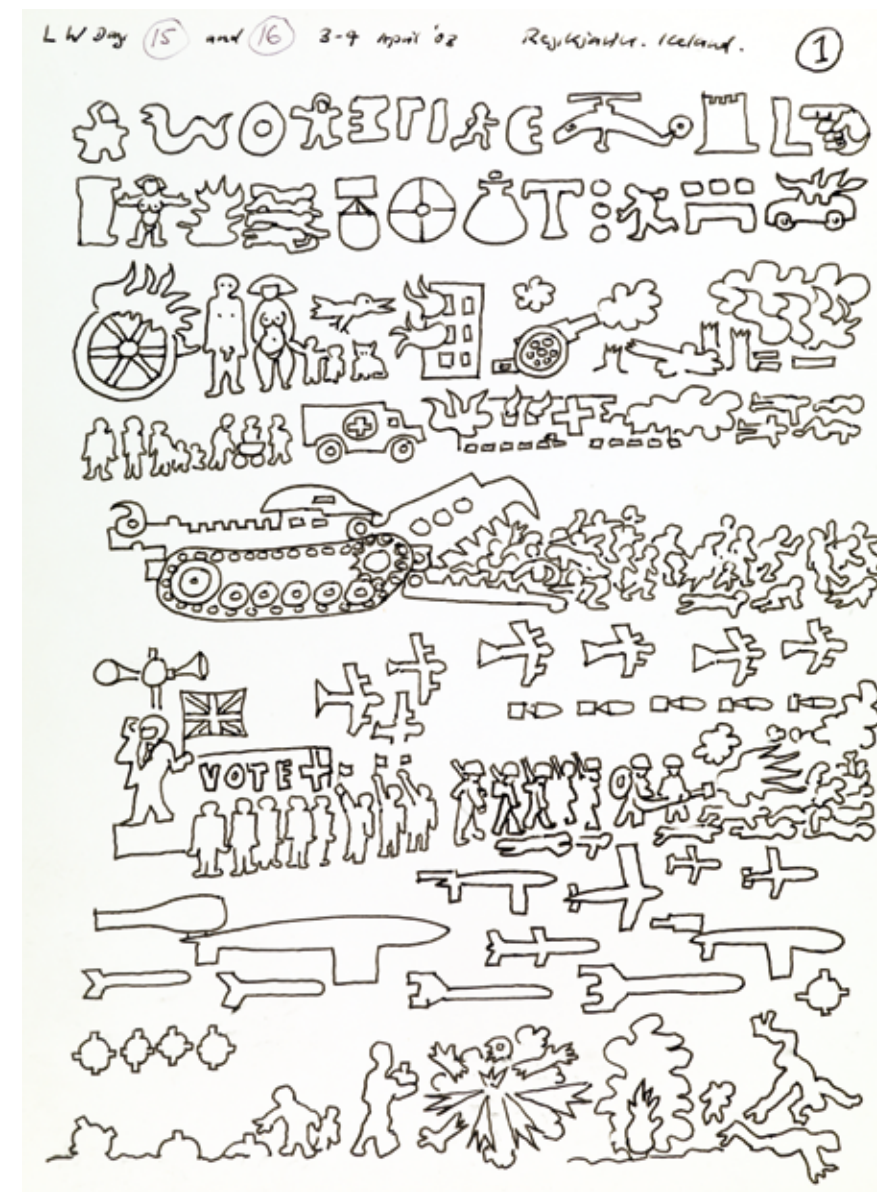


*Afghanistan 2012*  
 2012, Mixed media  
 collage with ink  
 Unique  
 21 x 29.5 cm

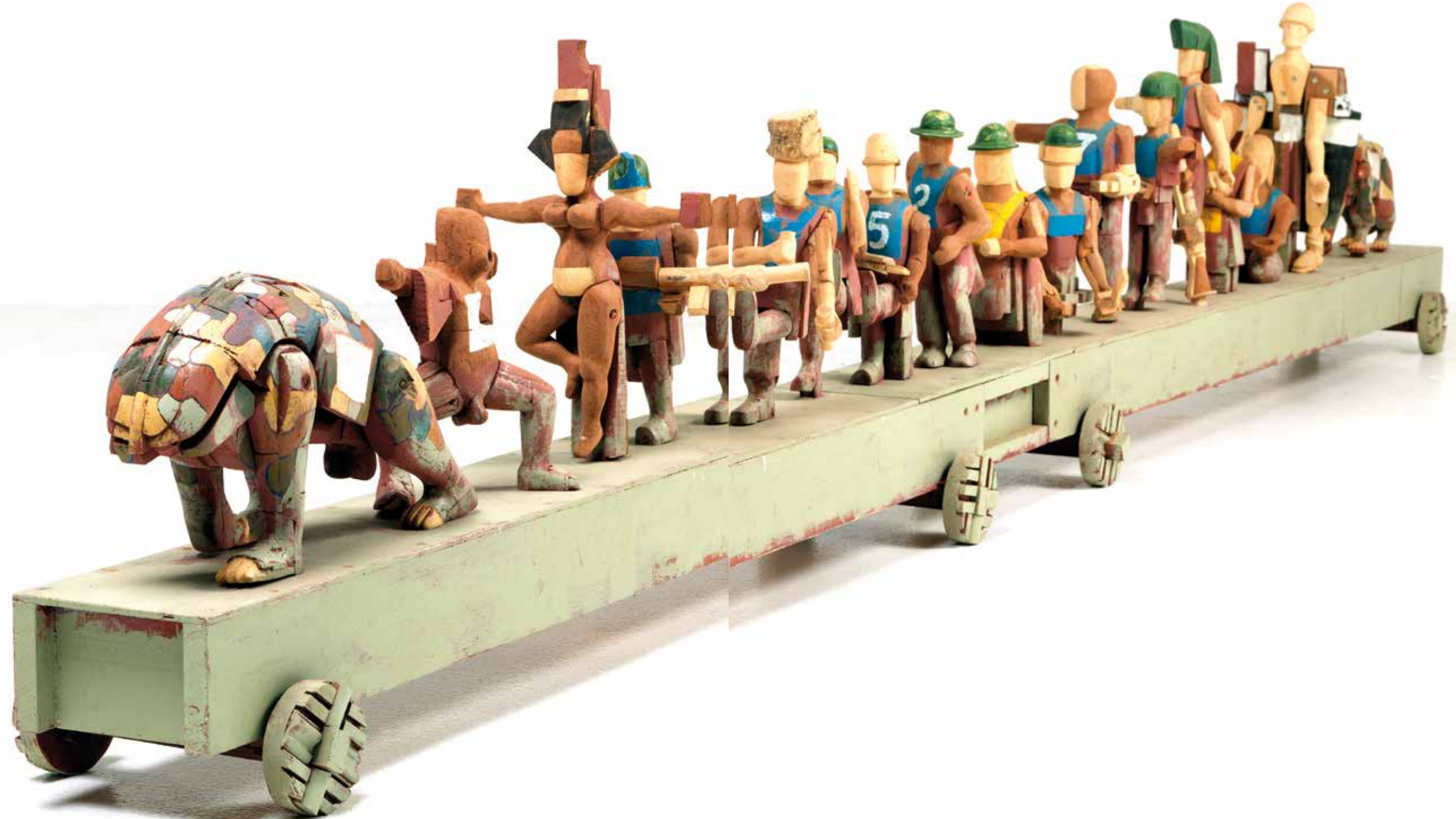




*Iraq Diaries: Day 18*  
2003, Pen on paper  
Unique  
35 x 29.5 cm



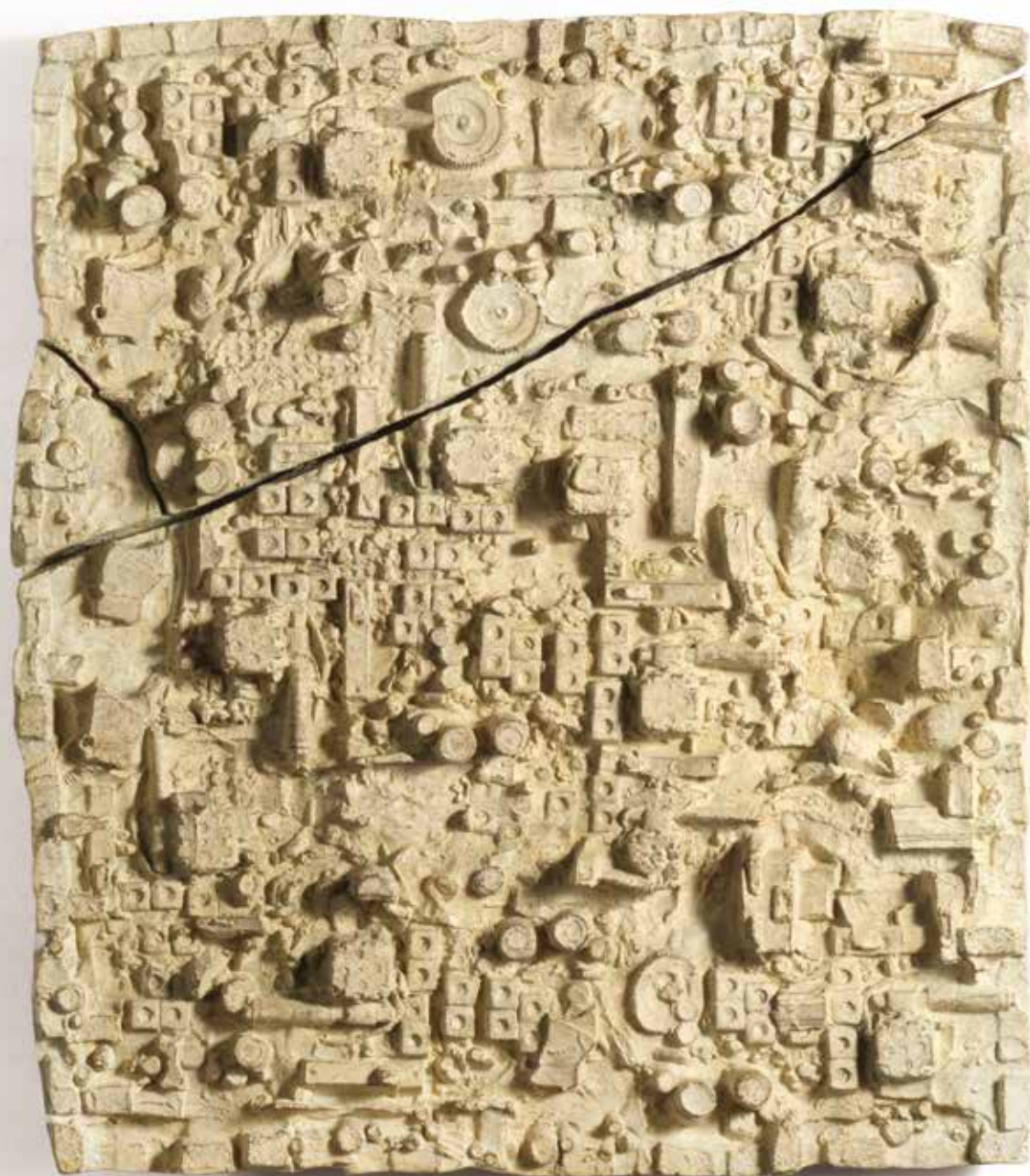
*Iraq Diaries: Day 15 & 16*  
2003, Pen on paper  
Unique  
35 x 29.5 cm



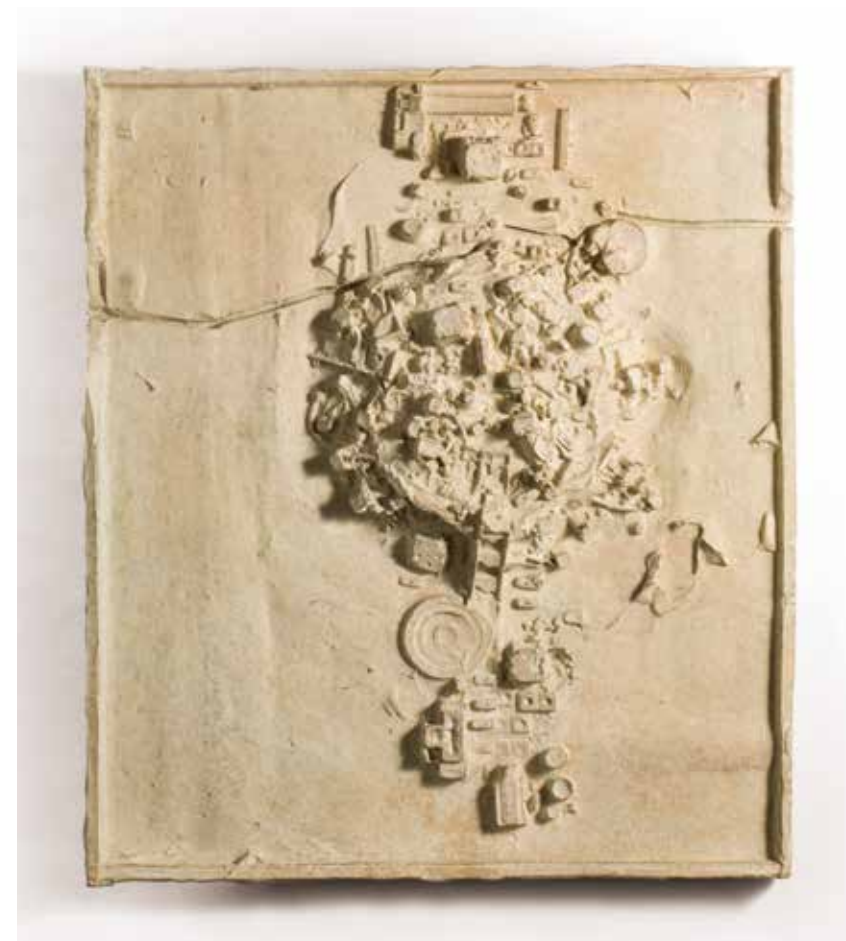


PREVIOUS PAGE & RIGHT  
*March of Folly*  
2005, Painted wood  
Unique  
350 cm wide





LEFT  
*Ruined City 1*  
 2000, Bronze  
 Edition of 6  
 40 cm high



RIGHT  
*Ruined City 2*  
 2000, Bronze  
 Edition of 6  
 46 cm high



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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