



RAW/WAR: a visual essay

BY JOAQUIN BADAJOZ

For almost twenty years the most pacific man on Earth—if a creature of that sort exists—has devoted himself to performing a meticulous and disturbing autopsy to war—and to create his anti-war machines—laborious, intricate and discrete as Trojan horses.

Arnaldo Simon knows well that the war beast is a servant of many masters. And while violence, aggression or retaliation could be part of any primal or animal behavior, war is the result of a more sophisticated human ritual, one which has been developed, improved and refined to the level of deserving treatises since at least fifteen centuries ago, amongst them the *Sun Zi Bingfa* (Master Sun's Military Method), later translated into the western languages as *The Art of War*. There is not such as an art of war—the name is just an erratic and inconsistent western exaggeration like many others—but there is no doubt that war has influenced art since the caverns—and vice versa.

Thenceforth art and war have merged in a sort of ideo-aesthetic marriage, resembling each other in their deceitfulness. Both based on deception, sustained by the practice of spreading fictional narratives, their success depends upon their most credible lies, their sustainable mythologies. And while decoding some of them, Arnaldo Simon has recreated them anew.

Raw/War deals with the recycled old paraphernalia and warns about the fact that what we create creates us, and as Claude Levi-Strauss pointed out «et à leur insu» —unknowingly. Unmasking one of the most complex expressions of social euphemism, carnivalesque transvestism in which high crime and genocide are mystified and ritualized, and stripped of all its intrinsic violence as a “call of duty”, a high honor and supreme service to the homeland.

Overture

Human is a reckless creature that “cannot bear very much reality,”¹ as the great poet T.S. Eliot noticed. All our relation with the environment lies upon iconographies, signs, ideograms, ideologies, and rituals and it is embedded into this thin filter that connects us with, at the same time that keeps us apart from, reality. War, like any other human ritual, is a cultural process, another structural myth that reproduces and transports itself in a binary relation from an emotional-instinctual plane to a rational-gnosologic one.

Behind wars, there are many hidden reasons: love, whim, greed, and economics. Mostly economics —like in the snowclone, *The economy, stupid!* coined by James Carville. But rather than inborn, war is an acquired sophisticated social practice. The result of the “cultural transformation” of our most raw instincts, cooked and canned by ideology and propaganda, until producing a socially accepted recipe of violence of State, that in order to be de-codified must be compared within a set of binary pairs: War vs. Crime. The refined, culturally processed rightful social violence versus the natural transformed, rottenness, unlawful —and therefore punishable— individual violence.

Interruption

In *The Structure of Power in American Society*² (1958), C. Wright Mills ventured the idea of an America shaped by the triple alliance of economic, military, and political power into a private military corporation and a permanent war economy—a militaristic power within which “virtually all political and economic actions are now judged in terms of military definitions of reality”. But, what does this really means?

It is in this “military definition of reality” that the pertinence and validity of this major survey of the last years of Arnaldo Simon artwork rely upon, an exhibition that is also a radical essay of social criticism. One must notice that since the man is the absent protagonist of his work, we are been confronted with pure ideology. His goal is not to introduce us to the obvious representational, to evoke compassion, but to guide us through a subtle labyrinth, in which men barely appear but fill everything with their absence.

Let us imagine for a moment this scene: “Several dozen bodies scattered in a club, in front of a stage. They’re everywhere, left and right. The only noise we hear is the noise of their cellphones. Some are on ‘vibrate’ mode and others are ringing. Some dead people had their phones in a pocket. You can see through their shirts or jeans the phone screens that read ‘Mom’ or ‘Dad’. That was really tough. All the loved ones are calling the people who are still inside”.

The previous passage is not a fiction but the actual recount of the Bataclan theatre massacre, in Paris, in November 2015, by one of the police officers in charge. What impacts the most in this narration is the idea of all the phones ringing in vain, the sense of desperation. And this is precisely the most overwhelming component of Arnaldo Simon artwork: its aseptic museography, its eerie dramatics, the sense that we are visiting, from a sort of protohistoric temporal pocket, the archeology of our own lost civilization. The ideological machine is ringing, but there is nobody alive to answer. We are the subjects and the targets of his anthropological explorations.

Smoke and mirrors

Raw/War is a visual essay on the crudeness of war—the raw—as a result of ideological conflicts in contrast with the superficial asepsis of the official ideologies—the cooked narratives. Following a minimalist aesthetic approach, Arnaldo Simon delivers a strong visual message about the dichotomy and symmetry of Ideology and Violence on the stele of Lévi-Strauss’s seminal anthropological essay *The Raw and the Cooked* (*Le Cru et le cuit*, 1964). The series included in this major exhibition point to the binary opposition of categories that disguise, camouflage and mirror themselves—the word Raw contains in itself the origins of the War when reads backward.

It summons what we intrinsically are, plus what we have become, in a continuous vicious circle. Our savage mind prevails, inspiring us to feed and fall for the modern myths and incoherent allegories, to develop absurd theories of conspiracy, to behave as gear parts of a social experiment. As Edmund Leach affirms in his clever review of Levi-Strauss’s *Mythologiques: le cru et le cuit*³ for American Anthropologist, “A structure of any kind has a tendency to reproduce itself in a form of a mirror image.”

The curatorial vision behind Raw/War intends to dismantle that great imaginary hidden behind the military culture creating a battlefield in an almost topographical sense, like an inverted pyramid. The route of the first floor focuses on the ideological superstructure. We find in it the series dedicated to the representation of violence “cooked” by centuries of symbolic social manipulation, advertising bombing, and propaganda. Medals, decorations, strips and bars, military promotions, allude to the ideological confrontation, the ascent in the social ladder based on meritocracy, the construction of a professional caste devoted to built, reproduce and fulfill a nomenclature of abstract categories as glory, honor, power, and triumph.

On the second floor, the pieces of the “National Pattern” series, which are manipulations of the design patterns of the camouflage that identify different armies, drawn with ink mixed with blood of the artist into a beautiful idiosyncratic abstraction, show that on this trip to the underworld there is still an arm wrestling between the representation of power and the human tragedy, but at a more “crude” and radical level, they become “hunting trophies”, a more intimate and sadistic memorabilia, like secular relics, the last trace of those killed in action, a shred of their clothes. War is seen as a purification ritual, a catharsis, and soldiers as votive or pharmakoi.

There is also undoubted beauty in the siren songs of war, legends and heroism behind the tragedy. This poetics of sinister is also expressed in the curatorial concept. In the center of the upper room, a reinterpreted roman iron campaign folding stool made from bent and burned crutches is a remembrance that every victory step on many individual defeats, every triumph is made of death and wounds. The Curule chair or *sella castrense*, used by magistrates and generals, from which also derived the *sella imperatoria* (throne), reminds us how intertwined are all the imaginaries of domination: the endogamic system of legitimation.

In his artist statement, Simon explains that his artwork is a deconstruction of the military myths from socio-historical and political points of view, and a critical esthetic approach to their vast iconographies. Highlighting the fact that despite identities and singularities expressed in a “diversity of forms” there is a homogenous spirit and ‘aesthetics stereotypes’ in all of them, that is “widely recognized by all cultures and nations”.

He is particularly invested in the exploration of the role of hedonism in the ‘normalization’ of war as a culturally accepted form of violence, and how the graphic design rigged to this industry influence the militaries and civilians behaviors. In Arnaldo Simon conceptual work, visual propaganda plays a purpose as intellectual agent linking the horror of the war with the military machine and making us accept death as a collateral damage, as practical sub-products of development and progress, a necessary evil for the social survival.

In a philosophical moral, Raw/War compels a secret epiphany, in which the audience exit history’s myth machine, illuminated and able to break—at least individually—with the tragic deterministic juggernaut and start from scratch. It would be “the end of history” as we currently know it, and the beginning of a more liberating and responsible age. In which we would point to history and design not as tools of submission and propaganda but as part of an aesthetic process of liberation.

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Stockholm-Manhattan, October 2018.