

Dagens Nyheter

By Jessica Kempe 2005-02-19

Visual art dealing with politics is back. But this time the mission is different from the 70s: to ask questions rather than to declare.

The visual art of today, that criticises and scrutinises the political powers of today, is as unhierarchical and hard to grasp as a "World social forum". There is not a place in the world that eludes the eyes of contemporary artists.

Without distinction between the large and small, artists put their eyes on the spider's web, like Nina Katchadurian; the proprietorship of the canopy of heaven, like Yoko Ono; the digestive system, like Mona Hautom; the architecture of the Israeli occupation, like Rafi Segal and Eyal Weizman. Without being judgmental, visual art takes on the symbolism of the hotplate, like Rosemarie Trockel.

Modernism gave the artist the right to interpret. Contemporary art wants the sanction of the subject.

Careful dialogue is the method used by Erik Pauser. Over four years, he interviewed the Vietnam veteran Roman Martinez and his wife Miriam. The purpose was political, artistic and personal. As a son of a World War II veteran, Erik Pauser looks for the inner and outer processes which transformed Roman Martinez from a young conscientious objector to a murderous frontsoldier and family tyrant. In the film installation currently showing at Konsthallen in Gothenburg, Roman tells the story of how his chaplain in Vietnam immediately killed his conscience by the words "We need you as infantryman. God will not hold it against you for killing people. May God be with you, my son". With his soul executed, Roman ceremonially buries himself, his God, the altarboy inside him, and lets his alter ego Hopper take over the ruthless mass killing of the soulless creatures - his enemies.

Only when his wife, herself a daughter of a war veteran, decides to leave the capricious and violent Roman, does *he* decide to deal with his trauma through therapy and manages to save his marriage.

Although his split personality seems like a magnificent defence against the unbearable shame, I don't think I have ever come this close to the mental processes that make the killing of other humans possible. At the same time, I realise that Erik Pauser's non-linear film installation on three screens would not have been possible before.

His open and investigative way of carrying out the interviews disappeared with the realistic political art of the 70s, not to appear again before the beginning of the 90s. Miriam Martinez' refusal to see herself as responsible for Romans violent outbursts would not be possible without today's feminist view on male violence towards women.

Artist and subject on an equal footing? How did that come about? The fact that Post Modernism blurred the boundaries between high and low, questioned the conception of truth and the traditional normative system and definitions of gender, ethnicity and so forth, can only be part of the answer. The professionalization of the curator is another part of the answer. The role of the movement for democracy and justice during the 1990s is also highly significant. Political art was slowly freed from its loyalty to party politics. The democratic resistance movement of the 21st century does not aim for power, but to criticise and dethrone the political powers-that-be. Visual art

stopped declaring and started to ask questions. It opened up the concept of politics and created a forum for human right, animal right and justice issues.

Aftonbladet

By Anders Paulrud. 2005-01-29

”When they surrendered we killed them”.

“The enemy fired on us and we fired back. There was a saying, “Cho Hoi”, which means, “Open arms – I surrender”.

We hollered out to them, “Cho Hoi“, and when they surrendered and came out with their hands over their heads we killed them. That was my first experience of how things were done”.

So speaks the Vietnam veteran Roman Martinez in Erik Pauser’s deeply touching installation, shown simultaneously on three screens.

As a child, Roman was an altar boy. He enlisted in 1969 and was sent to Vietnam. He was a conscientious objector and wanted to serve as a chaplain’s assistant. That was the plan but it didnt come through: Roman ended up with an elite platoon whose sole objective was to get the highest possible body count. Roman buried himself and the person he had once been. He didn’t want the altar boy to see what he took part in. So “Hopper” was born, Roman’s alter ego, who could take the blame for all the horrors and the carnage. ”As Hopper I didn’t have to care. They where the enemy. They where soulless creatures”.

Erik Pauser is an ethical artist who works at a slow pace. The scope of this new work connects to an earlier work, the documentary 466 Ly Thai To street, whose title refers to the street in Saigon where the South Vietnamese general Loan executed an alleged FNL guerrilla prisoner in front of the eyes of the world. The photographer Eddie Adams long believed that this picture, revealing the horror of war, was taken by coincidence, because he happened to be there. What proved to be the case was the opposite: that the prisoner was shot because the photographers where present.

The strength of Erik Pauser’s installation lies in the depiction of what happened after the war. The Roman Martinez, who let his hair grow and pretended he never went to Vietnam, now goes to therapy, together with other war veterans, recalling the dangers, the questions, the difficulties, being a ticking bomb, the feelings of guilt, the memories, the smell of burnt human flesh reminiscent of a McDonald’s hamburger restaurant; in order to reach the hardest thing of all, the grave with the little angel boy. And, finally, to return to who he once was, the altarboy, he who belived in God, the conscientious objector. The Roman that still wore his first face.

Hallands nyheter
Lotta Bergström 2005-01-26

It's a long way back after the horror of war.

“They came out with their hands over the head. They laid down their arms and gave up. We killed all of them”.

Roman Martinez, a Vietnam veteran, is trying to understand who he is and who he once was. How can a deeply religious altarboy become transformed into a killing machine? How can a person move on and find a way to deal with the madness of war?

Erik Pauser's 40 minute film installation, currently showing at Konsthallen in Gothenburg, tells the story of a veteran and his difficult journey back from the horrors of the Vietnam war to a normal life.

It has taken Erik Pauser six years to create this work. He has met Roman Martinez and his wife Miriam many times and, piece by piece, assembled the true picture of a man who is both a war hero and a deeply remorseful man with a need for atonement. The six years it has taken for the work to be completed is nothing compared to the thirty years it has taken Roman to come to terms with his experiences.

The work is shown as a triptych and depicts, in a poetic and intense way, and with good help from music by Jean Louis Huhta, a human destiny like many hundreds of thousands others all over the world. There have been many wars, and even here in the safe haven of Sweden people are walking among us who have lived through the horrors of war and experienced things that no human should have to endure.

Roman testifies to how naivete and innocence quickly can be transformed into callousness, and how the will to survive calls for humanity and compassion.

How the altar-boy symbolically buries himself to be resurrected as the war machine Hopper, who poses like a proud hunter in front of a pile of dead enemies. How men, women and children are killed indiscriminately. The moral of the story: in order to take part in madness you have to become mad yourself.

When Roman came home he pretended that he had never been to war. He married Miriam, had children and tried to forget his war experiences the best he could. But a war veteran is like a ticking bomb. The violence was latent in him, the violent outburst were sudden and the family suffered. Miriam took the blame and the beatings.

“It happened often when Miriam where grilling meat. The smell of burning flesh was a trigger. It all came back to me”.

Today Roman is finding his way back to who he once was with help from his faith, his family and therapy. He can walk along the edge of the water without being constantly on guard. He can allow himself to be touched, to let Miriam comb his hair.

But many soldiers will never get that far. An able soldier is valuable as cannon fodder. A veteran is often greeted with suspicion, hostility and fear. “You came home alive. Is that not enough?”

Apart from the central piece - the film installation about Roman - the exhibition also contains shorter interviews with three generations of war veterans, and an interview

with the writer and psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, who specializes in PTSD among war veterans. A reference library is also part of the exhibition. The film installation is shown with specified starting times – this is a work that should be seen from the beginning to the end.

So what does all this have to do with us, who live in a country that has seen peace for more than 200 hundred years? With “The two faces of Roman Martinez”, Erik Pauser shows the thin line between civilization and barbarism, between good and evil. He shows how an ordinary human being can be transformed into a murderer in the name of nation and honour.

He shows that the sacrifice of these people is often meaningless. The exhibition articulates a manifestation for peace in a time when peace seems further away than in a long time.

.....
Göteborgsposten

Excerpt from an article by Kristoffer Arvidsson. 2005-01-29

Why Roman Martinez became Hopper

Erik Pauser’s harrowing film installation about war veterans, showing at Konsthallen in Gothenburg, is also about the problems that the USA faces once again.

They look like ordinary men living among us. But they have been through things we can’t even begin to imagine. They will carry these experiences with them for the rest of their lives. The eighty-year-old World War II veterans still have nightmares. The invisible and white knuckle grip with which war can hold someone, is something that I become painfully aware of after seeing Erik Pauser’s exhibition at Konsthallen in Gothenburg.

“When were you there?” He says, “When was I where?” “When were you in Nam?” He had no idea that I knew anything about him. And he said “I was there 69–70... how did you know that?”

“You know. Your eyes...” These are the words of Vietnam veteran Brian Turner in an interview shown on one of six monitors in the inner room at Konsthallen.

In the adjoining room, an interview with the psychiatrist Jonathan Shay can be seen. He has specialised in war-related PTSD. These two works, completed by a third, a reference library forms a backdrop and deepens the understanding of the most epic of the works in the exhibition, constitute the work centred around the Vietnam veteran Roman Martinez. The story told here is about the altarboy Roman, how he enlists to be a chaplain’s assistant but is instead signed up as an infantryman. After four months of basic training, he is sent to Vietnam and has to adapt to the brutal reality of war.

Martinez recounts how he carried out a symbolical funeral of himself and his faith after witnessing how a group of Vietnamese is mowed down with their hands over their heads. The altarboy is replaced by the death machine, “Hopper”. When, after barely one year of service, he is sent home severely wounded, he is yet not twenty

years old. But the story does not end here. This documentary installation is more concerned with what happened after he came home.

Flashbacks with memories of the war keep coming back, triggered by smells and images on TV. The peaceful Roman is transformed in a millisecond into an aggressive perpetrator. Slowly, an image of a person with a double identity appears, an identity imprinted by events that happened thirty years ago, imbedded in a personal history that comprises feelings of both guilt and pride.

Pauser tells a very moving story indeed. A story revealing a trauma within the American nation. With the ongoing lengthy conflict in Iraq happening at the same time, the story mirrors a contemporary complex of problems, and gives a notion of the difficulties in store for the USA to deal with yet again. Pauser's way of telling the story, simultaneously on three screens surrounding the viewer, is very effective and, together with the soundscape, creates a charged and claustrophobic atmosphere. He succeeds in coming close to the enigma Roman Martinez without losing respect for the human being.

...