

The following labels relate to the artworks as you go left to right through the gallery space.

GEORGE GITTOES

UKRAINE GUERNICA

Warning this exhibition contains depictions and footage of war and graphic images of death.

Visitor discretion is advised.

George Gittoes

Diaries

hard cover books

'Since I first left Australia in 1968, when I was 18, for New York, I have kept visual diaries. All the paintings in this exhibition originate in preliminary drawings I do in these diary-sketch books. The writing I do between the pages of the drawings puts them in context along with the news clippings about the events I am living through'.

– George Gittoes

UKRAINE GUERNICA DEAKIN UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

3 JULY – 16 AUGUST 2024

Originally staged at Hazelhurst Arts Centre in Sydney, the exhibition is an immersive and arresting experience for visitors, highlighting Gittoes' unflinching belief in the power of art to counteract war.

Gittoes, a former recipient of the Sydney Peace Prize, has established himself as one of Australia's most uncompromising artists, activists, and documentary film makers; with his earlier anti-war works addressing United States gun violence (*White Light*, MIFF 2019), life under the Taliban (*Snow Monkey*, MIFF 2015) and war's impact on music (*Rampage*, MIFF 2006).

In this latest work, created in collaboration with his partner, producer/musician Hellen Rose and Ukrainian artist Ave Libertatemaveamor, he brings his fearless, compassionate eye to a landscape devastated by ongoing atrocities; finding optimism in the process of creation in the hope that humanity might put an end to violent conflict.

Not long after Russian armed forces invaded Ukraine in February 2022, George and Hellen left Australia for Kyiv.

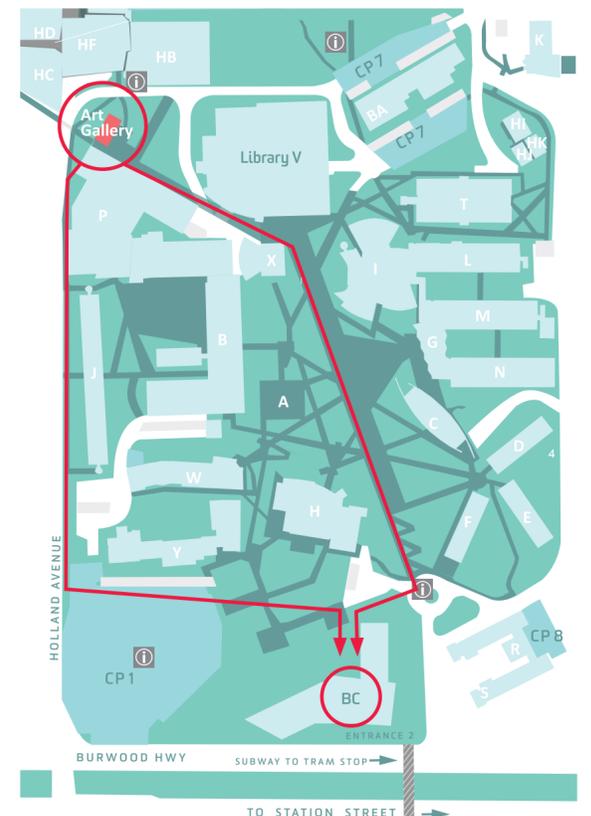
During two separate trips to Ukraine, George and Hellen spent time with residents as their cities were being bombed, uncovering their experiences, and documenting the devastated urban and rural landscapes through film, performance and painting.

They developed friendships with artists, poets and other creatives in Kyiv, Irpin and Odessa which led to the development of collaborative works, including the re-birth of the destroyed House of Art in Irpin and the large KISS OF DEATH mural.

A series of Afghan Girl portraits that George Gittoes completed at the Yellow House Art Centre in Jalalabad Afghanistan in 2024 can also be found on display in the Burwood Corporate Centre, BC level 2. Location below.



George Gittoes on location April 2022, Borodyanke, Ukraine. Painting in progress title *House Where Children Lived*, 2022. Photo by Kate Parunova.



George Gittoes

Punisher Palace, 2022
oil on canvas



'*Punisher Palace* represents a real building in Borodyanka which young Russian soldiers, high on drugs, used to torture and kill prisoners and pack rape women and girls. The walls and entrance were sprayed with graffiti depicting the Marvel Comic anti-hero, the Punisher, whose motto is that "*the end justifies the means*" even if it means kidnapping, torture and rape. A brave farmer's wife had asked me to be there when she unearthed her husband from a shallow grave in their backyard. He had been shot when trying to prevent his daughter being taken away to be raped. I went to where she had been dragged to and as I walked into the building, I felt like I was "entering the heart of darkness" (in reference to Joseph Conrad's novel about genocide in the Belgian Congo during the colonial era).'

– George Gittoes with Janet McKenzie, *George Gittoes: Ukraine Guernica*, catalogue essay

George Gittoes

Kiss of Death, 2022
oil on canvas



'*Kiss of Death* grew out of my favourite drawing in the Graphic Novel of the same name.

Vladimir Putin chose as his sexual partner the much younger, Olympic Gold Medal winning rhythmic gymnast, Alina Kabaeva. At a press conference in Italy Putin threatened a journalist who asked about their relationship. Ave and I realised this is Putin's one soft point and as a way of waging artistic war against him, we did a series of surreal drawings of the couple, where Putin is often shown as insect like. In this close-up image of them kissing Eva's head merges with the skull like Punisher mask from Marvel Comics.

The background depicts exploding timber, rubble, and body parts. The paint is applied with my palms and fingers, working like my ceramicist mother did with her hands in clay'.

– George Gittoes

George Gittoes

Through the Glass, 2022
acrylic on canvas



'Every building home and apartment in the city of Borodyanka had been destroyed but a classical Ancient Greek marble statue remained standing in the rubble, undamaged. The female figure appeared to be holding a mobile phone in her hand with her head down looking into its screen. This is the first war I have experienced where everyone has become a photojournalist and is sharing images of what they see and experience on social media. I was amazed to see people watching the small screens of their phones more intently than the aftermath of bombs and missiles that were hitting the buildings around them. Flames were flickering above their heads while their eyes remained glued to images filmed by a neighbour or someone a few blocks away'.

– George Gittoes

George Gittoes

Russian Bear, 2022
oil on canvas



‘As the Russians retreated from Borodyanka they left many booby traps in the apartments and countless landmines, making it dangerous for people to return.

A large stuffed toy bear was filled with explosives and wired to explode if anyone tried to remove it. The bear with its mocking smile remained, in its prominent position until specialists could de-activate it. The bear is a symbol of Russian Power and its use in the painting became a metaphor for the destruction of innocence in wartime.

With me painting works like this on site and Hellen singing we fitted in; we opened people’s hearts to us. They had all experienced the bear and then it was there in my painting’.

– George Gittoes

‘Russian Bear is based on an actual child’s toy stuffed with explosives as a booby trap at Borodyanka. Along with the child’s party dress, it became a potent metaphor for the destruction of innocence in wartime. The spontaneous application of paint is reminiscent of artist Asger Jorn in the 1960s and of Georg Baselitz in the 1980s. Russian Bear, which was placed theatrically for everyone to see as a symbol of Russian supremacy as they left the city in ruins. It remained smirking defiantly until the bomb disposal unit disarmed it’.

– Janet McKenzie, *George Gittoes: Ukraine Guernica*, catalogue essay

George Gittoes

Dead Russian, 2022
oil on canvas



'In *Dead Russian* many Russian soldiers are ignorant of their superiors' motives. After the Ukrainian army ambushed and destroyed a column of Russian tanks the survivors explained to their captors that they had been told they were on an exercise in Russia and did not know they were at war in Ukraine. I spent 3 days sitting on the back hatch of one of these destroyed tanks, drawing and painting a crew member whose charred corpse resembled a Giacometti sculpture – no longer human. But he would have had a family who loved him. I thought of the many US soldiers I befriended when making *Soundtrack to War* in Iraq. They were poor people who had joined the army out of necessity and were sent to fight other poor people with no say in why they were there'.

– George Gittoes with Janet McKenzie, *George Gittoes: Ukraine Guernica*, catalogue essay

George Gittoes

All Things Must Pass, 2023
oil on canvas



'1970 was the height of the Vietnam War when George Harrison's first solo album came out titled *All Things Must Pass*. Back then I belonged to a group of Sydney artists dividing our time between creating the first Yellow House in Kings Cross and helping to organise anti-Vietnam war protests. George's song washed over us with the assurance that however bad things might get they will pass. We believed the LOVE NOT WAR movement would win and Vietnam would be the last war.

I need to play music while I work and amplified this old album of George's through the House of Culture in Irpin as we removed unexploded ordinance and defused booby traps, left by the Russians, in order to bring creativity back from destruction. A pigeon had nested above the rubble and hatched three little chicks. When she flew out through the broken shards of glass in the stairwell's window she was like a living symbol of peace and made time dissolve. I have been opposing war for over 50 years and for my Ukrainian friends their war seems endless. I painted the pigeon to represent our hopes for peace knowing "all things must pass".

– George Gittoes

George Gittoes



Box of Memories (diptych)

2022-2024

oil on canvas

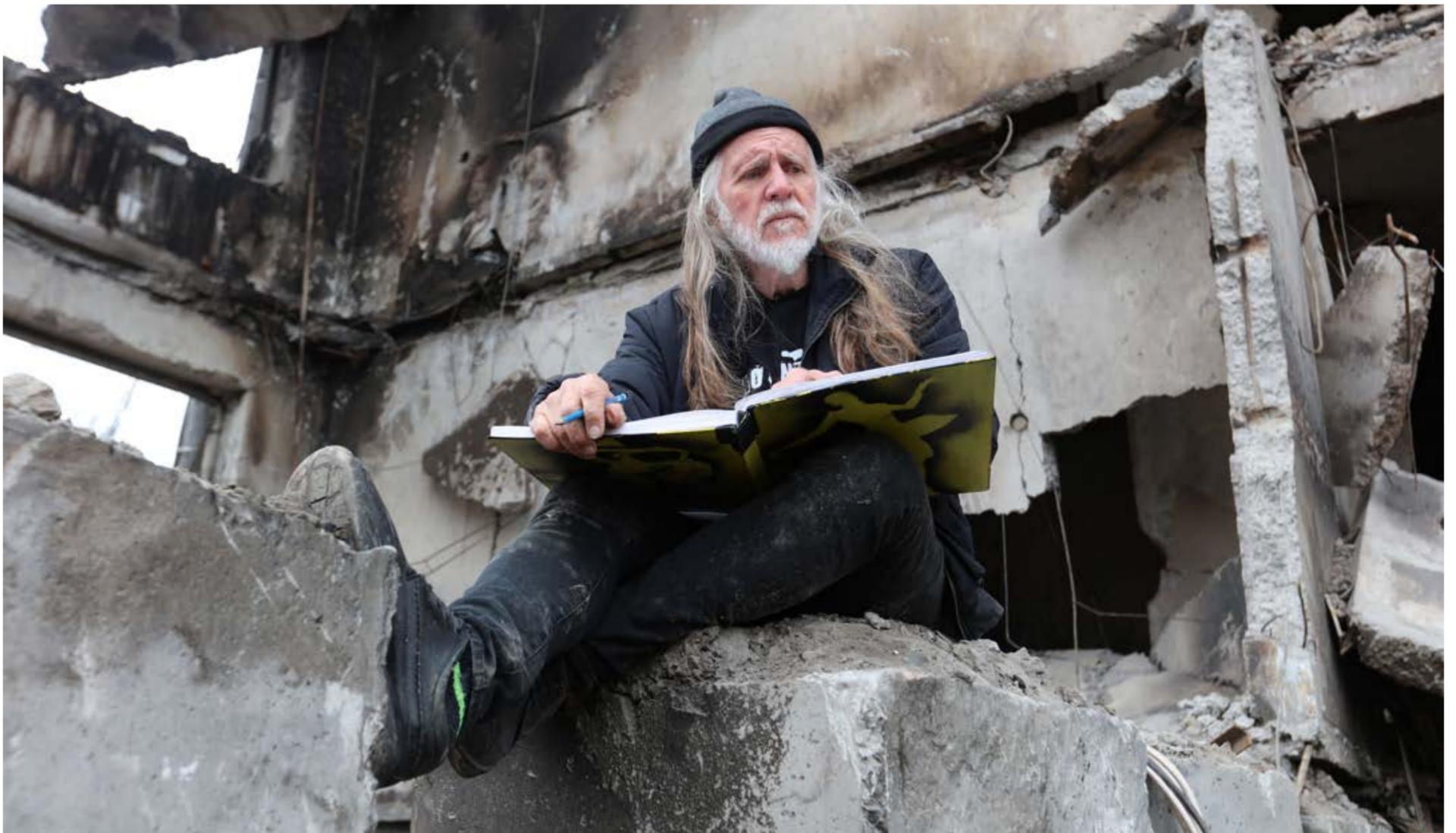
'Eva is 9-year-old girl who is a neighbour to the House of Culture. With her younger brother and mother, she huddled for weeks in a cellar below their house which was destroyed, above them, by bombs. Two boys who were her closest friends were killed by the Russians. Like children all over Ukraine Eva is traumatised by what she has witnessed and still lives in fear, as the war continues. She is often unable to sleep at night, tormented by nightmares.

Those who tried to escape by car were slaughtered on the nearby Bridge of Death. In my painting the haunted cars have become nightmare monsters as Eva clutches her box of memories. Eva told me that she has collected these relics to show her children, when there is peace, and she tells them stories of what she lived through'.

– George Gittoes

'Perhaps the most moving work on show is Box of Memories, (2023-2024) a five metre wide work that evolved from a series of drawings the first of which I received via email in April 2022. A perceptual drawing of a traumatised child, clutching her worldly possessions captures the devastation of war on the most vulnerable: "Eva is a neighbour to the House of Art in Irpin. She is traumatised, shattered by what she has witnessed: living underground while bombs went off destroying her family home above; she has recurrent nightmares of cars as monsters. Eva represents my greatest concern, the mental health of the children"'.

– Janet McKenzie, *George Gittoes: Ukraine Guernica*, catalogue essay



George Gittoes pictured in the Ukraine, 2022, photograph by Kate Parunova, image courtesy the artist.

GEORGE GITTOES PERSONAL BIOGRAPHY

I was a post war baby, born in 1949 and grew up at 39 Villiers St Rockdale. I had wonderfully supportive parents. My dad, Claude, caught the train into the city every day to work at the Department of Main Roads to help finance our artistic dreams. My grandmother was an artist. She had a white enamel-top table in her kitchen which she encouraged me to draw on and when I had finished, she would critique it and then wipe it away with a dishcloth. That is how my passion for drawing started. My mum, Joyce, was a more bohemian artist and had her own ceramic studio. We often collaborated to make surrealist sculptures.

I won a scholarship to Sydney University in 1967 and studied fine Arts. Our esteemed Professor, Bernard Smith invited the American Arts Writer, Cement Greenberg to give the first Power Lecture. Bernard showed my minimalist abstract paintings to Greenberg who was impressed enough to invite me to come to New York in 1968, I befriended Andy Warhol and experienced his Factory but was more influenced by the great African American Artist Joseph Delaney who took me under his wing and turned me away from pure abstraction and back to portraying humanity.

When I returned to Australia, I helped to create the Yellow House, between 1970 and 1972 in Sydney's Potts Point, with Martin Sharp. I installed a Mosque like puppet theatre in a second-floor room (I had been doing puppet shows since I was a kid in Rockdale). It was the Protest Era, and I was passionately opposed to the Vietnam War. When the Yellow House finished Martin said, "We should have done this in Vietnam." I agreed but neither of us knew how. I have spent much of the rest of my life finding ways to create in the face of the destruction of war.

My first antiwar documentary was *BULLETS OF THE POETS*, made in Nicaragua in 1986 about the women poets of the Sandinista Revolution. Since then I have been a witness to conflicts in the Philippines 1989, Somali and Cambodia 1993, Western Sahara, Israel/Palestine, Southern Lebanon and South Africa 1994, Rwanda and Mozambique 1995, Bosnia 1996, Northern Ireland 1997, Tribal Belt of Pakistan and Afghanistan 1999, Congo, Moscow, Bougainville and East Timor 2000, Gaza and Hebron 2001, New York 2001-2, Iraq 2003-4, Segregated Brownsub Miami 2006, Southside Chicago 2018, Ukraine 2022. Note: All these dates are for my first-time arrival in these war zones, but I have kept returning to them, repeatedly.

I established the Yellow House creative centre in Jalalabad in 2011 with my wife and fellow artist, Hellen Rose. The Yellow House has continued to grow and function under Taliban Rule. Our aim is to prove that Art and empathic communication can win where war has failed. From 2022 to 2024 Hellen and I have been committed to Ukraine and Afghanistan spending more time there than home, at Werri Beach.

Since 1976 I have made films parallel to my painting and drawing practice. They include *Warriors and Lawmen* (NT Australia) *Soundtrack to War* (Iraq), *Rampage* (Miami), *Miscreants of Taliwood* (Tribal Belt of Pakistan), *Love City* and *Snow Monkey* (Afghanistan), *White Light* and *No Bad Guys* (Southside Chicago) and *Ukraine Guernica* (Ukraine).

I have been Awarded a Member of the Order of Australia 1997, Centennial Medal 2001, Bassel Shehadeh Award for Social Justice USA 2013 & 19, NSW Premiers Award 2014 and the Sydney Peace Prize 2015. I am a Winner of the Wynne 1993 Prize and twice winner of the Blake Prize 1992 and 1995. I was Honoured by a Residency at the Central Academy Fine Arts Beijing 1998.

George Gittoes

House of Art, 2022
oil on canvas



'Ultra-contemporary art can often look like it is not art. Since 1917 when Marcel Duchamp exhibited a toilet urinal in a gallery as a 'found object sculpture' titled *Fountain*, anything can be art. A pile of rubble on a gallery floor can be art. The Russians have targeted Cultural buildings in Ukraine like the House of Culture in Irpin. Putin wants to deny that Ukraine has an independent culture. The House of Culture was gutted but this destruction had a kind of beauty which will be gone when it is rebuilt. Hellen and I brought the place back to functional life by organising Ukrainian artists and the community to make the space safe as a temporary performance and exhibition venue. It was our way of showing that the artistic spirit cannot be destroyed by bombs and bullets. The local community were heartened to see two Australians, from the other side of the world, showing that they cared about culture and wanted to help.

I have mixed commercial floor lacquers with oil paint to create effects that evoke the melting effects of fire on the interior building materials'.

– George Gittoes

George Gittoes

Wreck of Hope, 2023
oil on canvas



'In the first month of the Russian invasion hundreds of women, children and the elderly were waiting in their cars, at a bridge, to escape from occupied Irpin when Ukraine forces blew it up to prevent Russian tanks entering Kyiv. The Russians retaliated by slaughtering all those who remained stranded in their cars. Hellen and I filmed the carnage on what became known as the Bridge of Death. Images of the mutilated bodies of children and babies stay with us. Their hope had been to find safety on the other side, but this hope was wrecked. My painting was influenced by the German Romantic masterpiece, *Wreck of Hope* by Caspar David Friedrich, which shows a sailing ship being crushed by ice with the crew tragically beyond hope. As the war continues and the deaths escalate the people of Ukraine live in hope of peace and pray for rescue'.

– George Gittoes

George Gittoes and Ave Libertatemaveamor

Kiss of Death Prints, 2022
ink on paper

'Prints from the drawings of Ukraine artist Ave Libertatemaveamor and George Gittoes, created during their collaboration in the ruins of the House of Culture, Irpin'.

– George Gittoes

Hellen Rose

Double Double, 2022-2024

video, duration: 3 minutes, 47 seconds

Written and performed by Hellen Rose with SiGiL (NYC)
Stu 'Spasm' Gray (guitar), Bloody Rich (drums), Dennie
Gray (bass), Nikki Dagostino (sax)

Artworks by Ave Libertatemaveamor

Filmed on location: Kyiv Ukraine, Jalalabad Afghanistan,
New York, Australia, 2022-2024 by the Yellow House
Jalalabad team

Edited by Khuram Shahzad, Peshawar

Hellen Rose

Witches of Kyiv – Enlaced 2023

on Zamkova Hora, Sacred Ground, Kyiv, Ukraine

Photograph by George Gittoes

Armies of the Fallen - Invocation and Defiance 2022

Central House of Culture Irpin, Ukraine

Costume designed by Hellen Rose with Tim Fain (Kyiv)

and blue wings on head dress by Ave

Libertatemaveamor (Kyiv).

Photograph by George Gittoes

Witches of Kyiv - Break the Needle 2023

Irpin Bridge, Ukraine

Photograph by George Gittoes

Witches of Kyiv - Enlaced 2023

on Zamkova Hora, Sacred Ground, Kyiv, Ukraine

Photograph by George Gittoes

Self Portrait 'Vesnianky – Hahilky', 2022

ink on paper

Displayed with the wings from the costume as part of the

Armies of the Fallen - Invocation and Defiance

performance by Ave Libertatemaveamor. Cut cardboard and acrylic paint.

Ave Libertatemaveamor

Hellen of Kyiv, 2022

print, ink on paper

Relics from Borodyanka, Ukraine.

Found objects

Collected by the artist in 2022

George Gittoes

House Where Children Lived, 2022

acrylic on canvas

'Hellen and I were among the first people to enter the destroyed city of Borodyanka while the Russians were still retreating and fighting in the surrounding forests. One ground floor apartment had a child's party dress attached to a bedroom window. We were used to seeing bullet ridden cars where the parents had spray painted over the doors, hood and trunk 'CHILDREN ON BOARD' but this made no difference.

A missile was fired through the bedroom wall, past the dress and most likely killed the children inside.

A Christmas tree was at the entrance and the hallway to their room was boobytrapped. I removed the trigger wires which were attached to hand grenades, and we entered to find their toys and books of this place of innocence destroyed below the crater in the wall where the rocket exploded. Hellen sang a nursery song to the spirits of the children past. The party dress remained there for months but when the building started to be demolished, I saved it from a pile of rubbish'.

– George Gittoes

George Gittoes

Party Dress, 2022

found object

'This is the small girl's party dress that was hung outside a children's bedroom by their grandmother to let the Russians know there were children inside. A missile was fired past the dress, exploding on the inside wall. We spent months making enquiries to find out if the children had survived the blast, but we never found anyone who knew their fate'.

– George Gittoes

George Gittoes

SUPREME EVIL, 2024

acrylic on canvas

'During this period of war Ave has had a baby, Penelope, and nurses her at night while bombs explode in surrounding buildings. After Hellen and I left Ukraine for Afghanistan, Ave and I wanted to continue our collaboration. This became possible by exchanging drawings over the internet between Jalalabad Afghanistan and Kyiv Ukraine. *SUPREME EVIL* is a single narrative that can be read visually, like a graphic novel without turning pages. It is about the era we are all living through where Supreme Leaders like Putin and Kim Jong Un bring misery to their countrymen and the world'.

– George Gittoes

Ave Libertatemaveamor

Kiss of Death Prints, 2022

ink on paper

'Prints from the drawings of Ukraine artist Ave Libertatemaveamor, created in the ruins of the House of Culture, Irpin'.

– George Gittoes

Central cabinet 1

George Gittoes

Original Drawings for Kiss of Death, 2022-2023

pen, pencil and marker on paper

'I set up a desk and studio inside the ruins of the House of Culture in Irpin and was joined there by the Ukraine artist Ave Libertatemaveamor. We worked together on small drawings for our Graphic Novel KISS OF DEATH and the design of a large mural which we painted on the outside of the building. I discovered Ave's drawings as large prints in a curated exhibition and was surprised when we met to find they are much smaller. I began drawing on a similarly small scale in a collaboration we both hope will continue for the rest of our lives.

Since my first meeting with Ave Libertatemaveamor, in April 2022, she and I have created a new drawing every day and shared them via the internet or in person. She brought out the surrealist in me, insisting that we work as much as possible from the subconscious. The mural was to be a high point in our collaboration. On this, an amplified scale, the local population could feel that art was coming back, like a phoenix out of the destruction. Buses immediately included it in tours of the destruction left by the Russians for residents who had fled from their homes, it became a reason for optimism for rebuilding the future'.

– George Gittoes

Central cabinet 2

Ave Libertatemaveamor

Original Drawings for Kiss of Death, 2022-2023

pen, pencil and marker on paper

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George Gittoes and Ave Libertatemaveamor

*Original Drawing – Guide design for the wall painting for
Kiss of Death 2023* pen, pencil and marker on paper

Irpin House of Art, Ukraine

The mural *Kiss of Death*, pictured, on the outside wall of the House of Culture, just 21km (13 miles) from Kyiv, was conceived as a symbolic gesture to lead a campaign to restore peace and normality after the destruction of 70% of the city. Similar in size and in graphic black and white, the mural conjures Picasso's *Guernica* in the minds of the locals and is greatly appreciated. The drawing, composition and figurative subject elements depart from *Guernica* in not portraying anguished humans and animals as casualties of war. Instead, it refers to Vladimir Putin's relationship with Alina Kabaeva, a retired Olympic medal-winning gymnast who is known as the "most flexible woman in Russia".

Kiss of Death, the mural and subsequently graphic novel, by Libertatemaveamor and Gittoes refers to Putin's reprehensible political and personal life in wanting to deny Ukraine its own independent culture.

Source: *George Gittoes:
Ukraine Guernica*
exhibition catalogue, essay
by Janet McKenzie, p10,
produced by Hazelhurst
Arts Centre, 2024.



Reproduction of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, 1937.

Picasso painted *Guernica* in 1937 as a reaction to the Fascist bombing of the city of Guernica in Spain, it was a warning which was not heeded, and by 1939, the whole world had been drawn into war.

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has started a chain reaction that could spark a third world war. Like Picasso's *Guernica* the works exhibited [at Hazelhurst] are a warning of what could be expected in the near future. From Australia it all seems far away but I have experienced war over and again and know the cost.

George Gittoes

Source: *George Gittoes: Ukraine Guernica* exhibition catalogue, p26, produced by Hazelhurst Arts Centre, 2024.

Plinth

George Gittoes

Diaries

hard cover books

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