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**Classifieds**

## Artist investigates pain, violence, propaganda

**By John Seven**  
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Friday March 18, 2011  
 North Adams Transcript

ADAMS -- Seeing is not necessarily believing, and artist Joanne Green has fashioned a series of digital images that takes that to heart.

Green's work is currently on display at Greylock Arts, 93 Summer St.

"CONtext" pulls from photographic journalism sources and twists them into a mind-bending -- and eye-bending -- digital collage.

The work began following an experience with knee surgery. Green's surgeons took internal photographs of the entire process, and she was able to use these images to realize a series that would address several things she had in her mind, among them the vocabulary of the Iraq War. She had been reading about the jargon of war -- particularly in regard to the conflict in Iraq -- and began to devise ways to utilize the phrases through linked images of surgery.

Green took news photos and juxtaposed them to surgical ones, inserting not only the military language she had been introduced to but also technical language about her surgery to create a puzzle in which different forms of violence become harder to separate from each other.

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Artist Joanne Green uses photos of her own knee surgery in her... (Images courtesy of Joanne Green)

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"I started to mix them up together so that it becomes less and less clear as you go through the series which refers to fighting war and which refers to war on the body in the form of surgery," she said.

Green's ideas for the series had been brewing in her head for a time prior to the surgery -- she had been developing them through imagery with her earlier work, but they had never all come together in a perfect thematic moment before. Several circumstances and encounters collided to create a big bang for the work that would become "CONtext."

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"Because I have had physical pain for most of my life, it's been something that I have been trying to come to terms with," Green said. "That particular surgery was extremely high-tech surgery -- they literally harvested tissue from one side of the joint and transplanted it into the other side of the joint, which was basically crumbling.

"When I read about the surgery and about how technologically sophisticated it was, and then had my physical therapist, the first time she looked at my knee, say that orthopedic surgery is the most violent of all surgeries, it all started to fall into place for me. This was the way that I was going to develop my thinking further. And then with the Iraq War, and coming across these dictionaries of war jargon that were developed

just for the Iraq War, that's where it all came together for me."

As Green crafted the images, digital manipulations began to pile on in various forms. This created deeper abstractions that blurred the imagery and focused on her concepts about the commonality of violence and healing, both of which are meant to create wounds for different purposes. To craft this visual dialogue, she made patterns out of war images and used them to bleed one image into the next and the next and the next.

"As you move through them, they contain bits of each other," she said. "That is a reference to my thinking about memories and how memories are formed in the brain, and how by repeating certain thoughts, memory becomes encoded in the brain. I'm thinking here about patterns of violence or patterns of thinking and how repetition engraves marks in the mind of individuals and of society about the other.

"I'm also thinking how it's necessary in some respects to think about the Iraqis as the other or think of a part of my body as the other, because people have to distance themselves in order to do violent things to the body, both in war and in surgery."

As the viewer moves through the images, the scenes of surgery Green uses begin to look less like medical imaging and more like planets, eyeballs, even eggs. The perception of what is being shown changes, just one aspect of the metamorphosis that she sets up with the series.

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"They become more and more vibrant as well in terms of color," Green said. "They go from a monochromatic tone to extremely vibrant contrasting colors and then towards the end become almost monochromatic again. I have predominantly purple, green, yellow in some of the last ones. That's just from my years of working with difficult imagery."

In creating this series, Green took aesthetic cues from some of her earlier work created while in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, where she learned of the strange cross-sections between beauty and horror.

"I spent years and years thinking about what being a political artist actually means and whether art that has a certain level of aesthetic beauty to it can be political," she said, "because I use color in this particular series as a way to seduce people. You're pulled in because of the beauty of the colors and the contrast of the colors and the patterns behind them, but the actual message that I'm trying to get across is much more brutal."

Any one image in the series stands on its own, but the real power of the work is realized by viewing them sequentially, which presents the message as a whole. The sequence creates the metamorphosis that is crucial to Green's intent. Even as it obscures the clarity of what the image actually is. It's the muddle that's the message.

Photography has traditionally represented a raw and inarguable truth, but Green maintains that is not necessarily the case. What a photograph actually depicts has a direct relationship with the context given to it. This has been played out perfectly in the [U.S. government's](#) case for the Iraq War itself when Secretary of State Colin Powell famously gave a slide show to the United Nations that misrepresented the subjects of the images as bioweapons mounted on trucks.

"The truth can be manipulated and is every single day," Green said. "It's got to the point now that you can't trust photographs at all because you never know, especially online, you never know how much anything has been edited."

On one hand, this might seem like a paranoid view, but it's really one in which our imaging technology merely reflects the restrictions of our biological mechanisms. Memory in eyewitness accounts have been shown to be unreliable -- there is no ultimate truth to be found through our eyes and brains. The same goes with cameras and computers, through which we are creating a common human replication for our biological limitations in perception. Cameras and computers can now mirror our own fog rather than correct it.

"I worked on these images in Photoshop," Green said. "I could change anything I wanted to change. The deal is now that supposedly something uploaded directly from the streets of Libya to YouTube, we still don't know who's shooting it, whether they're giving us the full picture of that moment in time or if it's just one person's very specific point of view."

In this way, the truth is still featured in the image, but it is at best a representative truth, a more dynamic heightened truth that stands in for the one that can't be gleaned through clinical means. Sometimes this technique is reminiscent of propaganda, which might still be the most direct way to impart political information.

"There's no ambiguity; it's just they represent truth or nothing," Green said. "When I was in the anti-apartheid movement, it seemed to me that the most effective art as far as that was concerned was art that really did serve the purpose of propaganda -- poster art where the message was completely clear. There was no ambiguity to it; people were told how to think."

In political terms, this is a way of keeping people's neurology on message, not to get cluttered by the complicated considerations any one issue might deserve in your thought.

"In a political activism context like that, that's really important," Green said. "You don't want people to start thinking about all of the gray shades. You want them to think in terms of black and white. In a place like South Africa, because it was a race issue, it really was literally about black and white."

Green mixes up the jargon of aggression from several eras into a disturbingly playful poetry on some of her images. She links the phrases blue on blue and blue on red, which have to do with friendly and hostile fire, with more racially loaded juxtapositions like black on black and black on white.

"The phrase 'blue on blue' during the Iraq War was meant to replace the term friendly fire," Green said. "It's a throwback to the Cold War because the reds were the communists and the U.S. was the West and the blue. In those days, it was blue on blue versus red on red, and both referred to troops killing their own brothers."

For Green, just as the images evoke violence across years, situations and disciplines, so do words. Together they create a propaganda that stands a process playing out the techniques they also criticize, while playing with the coded double and triple meanings implied by usage. Visual or verbal, Green manipulates the language of control in order to free those who view it by offering her imagery as a primer to understanding how propaganda works.

"In South Africa, black-on-black violence had a very, very specific negative meaning to it," she said. "It was used by the apartheid regime to convince white South Africans that blacks were so uncivilized that they were literally killing each other because they really didn't know the difference -- or turning on one another because they just weren't intelligent enough to realize that by turning on one another they were defeating themselves. So I've used words a lot within the series to bring out certain meanings in these specific contexts."

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