

Space, Movement and Consciousness” by Peter E. S. Freund and George T. Martin. They explore the “embedded material infrastructure” and the less visible but equally pervasive “social infrastructure” that has grown in the wake of mass motorization. In discussing the “hegemony of the automobile” with regard to the use of public space, they alert us to two emerging, and troubling, trends. The increasing numbers of larger and heavier vehicles creates “an attendant ecology of vulnerability.” This new “‘harder’ hyper-automobility” makes increasingly “stressful demands on the consciousness of those who participate in traffic (in any capacity—even as pedestrians). These demands are for constant ‘sobriety.’ (This term is used in the broadest sense, meaning general psychomotor competence.)” A practical consequence of this hardening of the collective fleet is that “When a car collides with an SUV, the driver of the car is thirteen times more likely to be killed than the driver of the SUV.”

Crashworthiness is a relatively recent addition to the lexicon of automobility. When auto dealers use the term to market bigger and beefier trucks and

SUVs, they are selling more than personal safety. Freund and Martin write:

The emphasis on the crashworthiness of cars glosses over the fact that the individual car is part of a traffic matrix in which vehicles mix with varying degrees of protection. This way of thinking ... is analogous to the logic of an arms race, which would argue that roads will be safe when all softer means of mobility are banished and all that are left are tanks. ... Such a Hobbesian traffic condition has obvious social drawbacks, including the fact that it seriously disadvantages traffic participants who are walking, cycling or using relatively light autos.

However, to shift blame for highway carnage from drunk drivers to those who make the “defensive” purchase of an SUV is not likely to be a fruitful strategy. (The need for the future disarmament of our roadways, however, may be less of a science fiction than it seems.) Freund and Martin’s key insight is that “There are structural limits to universalizing high social standards of self-regulation. These systemic limits constitute the boundaries of accident prevention techniques, which focus on individual behaviour.” So-called driver

improvement initiatives, be they the modification of driver behaviours involving the use of alcohol or cell phones, or the attenuation of consumer desires for bigger and more powerful vehicles, can only ever be partial solutions. Freund and Martin conclude:

It is not so much that the present safety orthodoxy is wrong but that its focus on technical and individual interventions leaves collective and structural factors unaddressed ... . At its root, much of the roadway-safety issue centers on a competition for the most desirable socio-material space of daily mobility — the built environments created to provide people with channels for access to sites where they work, shop and live.

Yes, Gordon Campbell should not be allowed to pour his own martinis. And we are probably safer if he doesn’t drive an SUV. And yes, my son should take some additional safe driving and crash avoidance training. Both of them should read *Driving Lessons*.

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## Lifeworks

# Camouflage and exposure

Canadian General Romeo Dallaire’s heroic efforts to prevent the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and his subsequent battle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the powerful subject matter of *UNdone: Dallaire/Rwanda*, an ambitious cycle of paintings by Toronto-based artist Gertrude Kearns. Kearns, whose earlier work about the United Nations’ mission in Somalia is now in the collection of the Canadian War Museum, presented *UNdone* last fall at the Propeller Visual Arts Centre in Toronto. *UNdone* consists of ten large-scale works painted in sign enamel on camouflage fabric: six head-and-shoulders portraits of General Dallaire, and four monumental figural works depicting scenes of the massacre.

Kearns evokes the sustained nightmare of Dallaire’s Rwandan experience through an intricate combination of formal and symbolic devices. Her approach invites the viewer to respond to the work on both an emotional and an intellectual level. Its



**Gertrude Kearns, 2002.** *Mission: Camouflage*. Enamel and acrylic on nylon, 295 cm (max) × 440 cm.

impact is felt most immediately through the enormous scale of the paintings and through the emotionally charged brushwork, vividly suggesting both Dallaire's psychological torment and the chaos of the carnage he witnessed. Additional layers of meaning are achieved through an extensive vocabulary of references and allusions, extending even to the titles of the works and the spatial relationships between them on the gallery walls.

Kearns painted the series of portraits of General Dallaire to correspond in number with the six stages of PTSD.<sup>1</sup> In *Dallaire #1*, she portrays Dallaire as the resolute mission commander, sporting the blue UN beret. With utmost care and compassion, she moves on to convey the profound erosion of Dallaire's power and psychological state through broadly exaggerated changes in his expression and gestures. In *Dallaire #6*, the final portrait, she portrays the general as physically and emotionally nullified. His face is no longer visible, but the contours of his cheeks and the strong lines of his chin still reveal his identity. His hands are raised in front of his face in a gesture of both defeat and supplication. A prominent red, cross-shaped mark bisects his forehead: an overt reference to the martyred Christ.

The portraits are executed in the simple, schematic style of comic-book art. Dallaire's features are rendered with the strong-jawed, macho stoicism of an action hero, perhaps to contrast his experiences with the exploits of a comic-book hero in a comic-book world. This approach allows Kearns to subvert the notion that a GI Joe or Superman can single-handedly save the world, emphasizing the impossible demands of Dallaire's mission in Rwanda. Ultimately, Kearns projects the sad truth that in real life the good guys, however good they may be, don't necessarily vanquish the bad guys.

The figural works are executed in the same schematic style as the portraits but with a much more complex composition to evoke the horrifying chaos of the slaughter. They are carefully placed on the gallery walls to create links with

the portraits. We read the torment on the general's face — and, like him, we witness the scenes that cause his torment. Murdered victims lie in a brutally careless tangle underneath a UN vehicle in *Mission: Camouflage*, the largest piece in the exhibition. The larger-than-life scale of the figures magnifies the extent of their suffering and degradation. Absolutely no sense of their individuality remains. They have been reduced to a horrifying sum of their body parts, ground into the Rwandan mud by the tires of a UN truck.

Kearns's use of the camouflage fabric as the ground for her paintings provides the underlying physical and metaphoric structure for *UNdone*. The figures and forms in the paintings emerge and recede in and out of the camouflage pattern, creating visual confusion to suggest the disequilibrium induced by PTSD and the random and insidious way it alters the sufferer's perceptions. It also suggests the enormous deception perpetrated on not only the Rwandan victims of the genocide, but also on General Dallaire and his men by the UN in its paradoxical role as a trained, but unarmed, "quasi-military" force, to use Kearns' own term.

*UNdone: Dallaire/Rwanda* is a hard-hitting body of work. It is best resolved in the figural works, which convey the indescribable chaos of the 1994 genocide without invoking specific individuals, thereby transforming them into far more universal statements on the tragedy of human suffering.

By contrast, because Dallaire's face in the portraits remains so highly recognizable, it is hard to ignore the feeling of intrusion into what in fact are his particular and personal experiences. In her close scrutiny Kearns runs the risk of objectifying her subject. I am reminded of late 19th and early 20th century photographic case studies of patients afflicted with innumerable cruel



Courtesy of the artist

Gertrude Kearns, 2001. *Dallaire #6*. Sign enamel and oil on nylon, 180 cm × 155 cm.

conditions, their exposed and vulnerable faces peering out from vintage prints, their identities forever defined by their infirmities.<sup>2</sup> The Dallaire portraits become their modern equivalent: a permanent, visual case study of PTSD. Given that the historical context of *UNdone* and General Dallaire's very public struggle to come to terms with his experiences are still in the recent past, perhaps it is impossible to avoid this effect. Kearns herself anticipated it in creating this work; as she explains, "I didn't want the viewer to need to rely on interpreting and/or knowing events in order to be deeply affected by the final series" (personal communication, 2003). In the end, it is up to time and its merciful capacity to heal wounds to make it so.

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#### References

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