

# Blasted by the noise of conflict

## VISUAL ARTS THE UNQUIET WORLD

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), 111 Sturt Street, until July 23  
Robert Nelson Reviewer

THE exhibition *The Unquiet World* at ACCA is timely in a chilling way. Curator Juliana Engberg could not have known about the war in Lebanon when she hatched the exhibition, which expresses premonitions of global failure, military eruptions, unsettled security. As she says, the world "seems restless and edgy and uncertain and full of white noise and static".

True to its title, this prophetic exhibition is unquiet: it carries the sense of disturbance into the space, which is confusing, full of overload and suggestions of danger. It demands a lot of study (a bit like world politics) with an uncompromising dialectical air.

Sound, text and light jostle busily for attention, sometimes intrusively, as when you find yourself dodging flying stones. The ducking reflex is induced by a video of three vigorous men slinging missiles in your direction.

This tough exhibition concerning conflict has already drawn controversial responses. In the latest issue of *Art Monthly*, Julie Roberts asks bluntly: "What's art got to do with it?" This is a telling reversal of the famous phrase, "What has this to do with art?" We identify world suffering as the earlier issue, ahead of art.

Roberts credits the intention of artists wanting to get around the media, because TV, especially, gives you reportage in artificial doses designed to maximise ratings. Meanwhile, artists can ponder the unsayable and express more complex reactions.

Alas, for Roberts, this is a tall order, and few works shape up to it. Instead, the risk lies in demonstrating the opposite: the

impotence of art in the face of conflict.

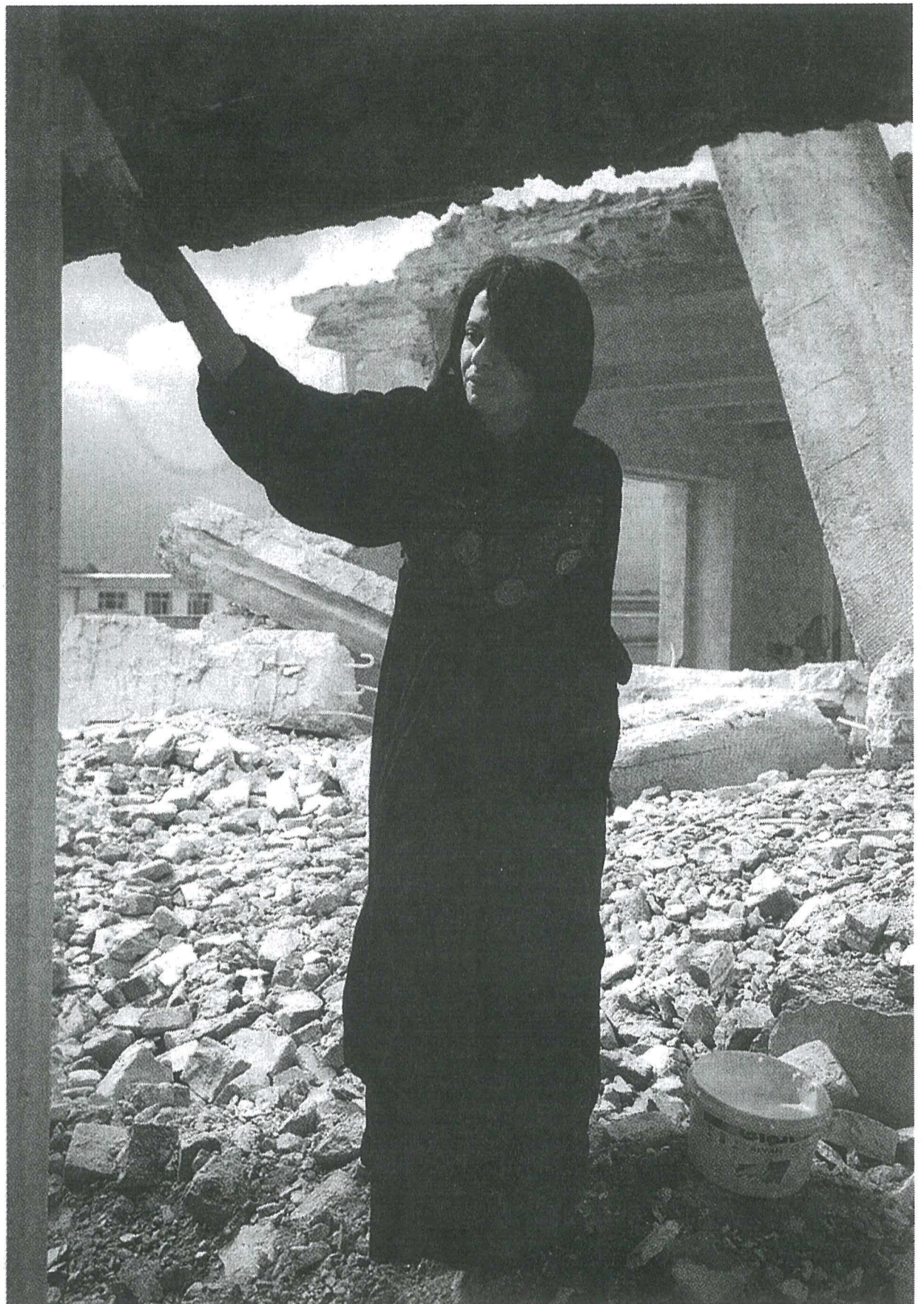
So the question remains: what can artists do, other than deplore the idea and consequences of armed conflict? Poets and artists have done this for a long time and it hasn't made much difference so far. So what special consciousness does this generation of artists possess that might make for a more compelling case?

Art could have a role in helping familiarise belligerent groups with one another's values and humanity. As Engberg says, "Artists have a tremendous ability to make connections with people. Because they are unofficial and at the best of times open to discovery, they allow us to witness a very personal account of things that are often obscured by the restrictions of commercial interest, government interventions and policy."

It would be great if artists could contribute to peace on this basis, because war depends on detachment from the enemy. To fight aggressively, your population must preserve emotional ignorance of the adversary. You can't easily kill people whom you've come to know; it's apparently much easier to kill them if you don't know them, if you can "take out" their "facilities" and not reckon with the fact that they're people much like us.

Social or artistic familiarity with the enemy will cripple the fighting zeal of armies and wreck the righteous morale of the electorate. Warlike nations cultivate zero sensitivity and sympathy for their foes.

Through shows like *The Unquiet World* and the Sydney Biennale, Australian audiences are getting to know artists from cultures very different from ours, in which men and women wear different things on their heads. The problem is that art is not a convenient way to get to know people. Its terms are more



Laid to waste: devastation on the outskirts of Kabul, from Lida Abdul's film *The White House*.

abstract and argumentative. The best works in *The Unquiet World* are not of a hand-shaking nature but an aesthetically challenging one. Like the better works in this year's Sydney Biennale, they're a bit obscure and forbidding; they would make connections with ideas rather than people.

I loved the film *The White House* by Lida Abdul, where the artist whitewashes a ruin in a wasteland on the outskirts of Kabul, lately harrowed by blasts. The installation includes videos

stationed around a Persian carpet, one of which shows the artist dragging a model house around. It's monumental, absurd and sublime; but — like Calin Dan's video at the MCA in Sydney showing a man carrying a door around on his back — it's a poetic construct with mischievous appeal to aesthetic knowledge.

Painting the rubble, which at times includes the dirt: what does that mean? It's a thing of great pathos, like a mammal lick-

ing its dead offspring. What makes this art is the ambiguous but unmistakable link with lofty Greek temples which are a morbid silhouette, vernacular Afghan house-painting, and powerful institutions (the White House) which still cause other houses to crumble. A great work but not really about people.

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### LINK

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