

Stark material that spells out the realities of war

Artist Jenny Holzer's use of text is captivating and confronting, writes **Liza Power.**

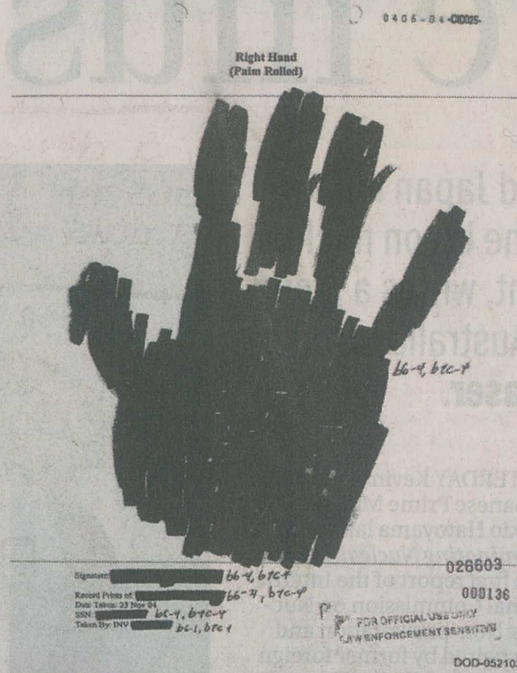
THEY could almost be children's finger paintings. Giant handprints that elicit the sensation of being touched and reached out for. Or perhaps prehistoric rock drawings; signatures left by ancestors. Alas no — these handprints are something else entirely. They're criminal records, and their contours belong to soldiers and civilians who have committed crimes of theft, rape or homicide in the Middle East's war zones.

They have been rendered in oil on linen by American artist Jenny Holzer, a survey of whose work will be exhibited by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art this month. Titled *Left Hand (Palm Rolled)*, one canvas bears the trace of a soldier whose crime and identity remain a mystery — the lines of his skin are blacked out and labelled with military codes. Beside it sits a civilian hand, its fingerprints intact. Together they salute a portrait of war more tangible than any news bulletin. Which, as Holzer will tell you, is precisely the point.

Born in Ohio in 1950, Holzer is best known for her *Truisms* series, in which vignettes of script were projected on buildings from Berlin to Buenos Aires.

Titled *All Professionals Are Crackpots*, the ACCA survey brings together Holzer's more recent work. Sourced from government documents, military records and autopsy reports, it involves the juxtaposition, collision and rendering of words in extraordinary ways. The questions she asks, about war and human nature, may be ugly, but her manner of asking is at once seductive and beautiful.

Holzer has long been captivated by the power of text-based art, not least for its ability to address its audience in confronting ways. "People can struggle and feel intimidated by painting, but language is something they access immediately."



In her ACCA survey, this process of "decontextualisation" takes on a new gravity. *Wish List/Gloves Off* comprises a series of canvases detailing email exchanges between US Army personnel in which "alternative interrogation techniques" for "unlawful combatants" are discussed. Low-voltage electric shocks and muscle fatigue inducement are listed as "coercive techniques that may be employed [but] cause no permanent harm". To see such an email chain framed as an art work is one thing; to understand these documents were declassified under freedom of information legislation at the same time the US press was reporting such abuses weren't taking place is, of course, another.

Holzer's fascination, she says, lies in the multiplicity of views and perspectives innate to all conflicts. "When you read hundreds of pages . . . you learn more than from newspaper reports because you hear so many voices — detainees, interpreters, the White House, lawyers and commanders. You read what they were thinking in the moment, so the material is less mediated, more revealing."

Holzer sourced much of her

material from the National Security Archive in Washington, where swathes of documents sit in annotated form.

One piece is a handwritten letter in which an Iraqi student details his experience of torture. *By the Name of God* is his plea for release. "It's written in the first person so when you read it, you're right there, and being handwritten means it literally carries the mark of a hand," Holzer says. "It imbues the work with another layer of feeling."

The first time the works were exhibited in the US, they met with an uneasy response. "It was 2004-05 and people were still wanting to be loyal to their country. New Yorkers were still recovering from 9/11."

When the paintings were shown at the Whitney Museum last year they met a more open and engaged reception. "Time has passed, the administration has changed, the war has dragged on, the body count has increased and people have become more curious about how we got there . . . and maybe how to get out. This time, people stood there and read. And read."

Jenny Holzer's show at ACCA runs from tomorrow until February 28.