

## GEORGE GITTOES: I WITNESS

### TEACHERS' NOTES





## INTRODUCTION

**“I believe in art so much that I am prepared to risk my life to do it. I physically go to these places. I also believe an artist can actually see and show things about what's going on that a paid professional journalist can't and won't do, and can show a level of humanity and complexity that they wouldn't cover on TV.”**

- George Gittoes

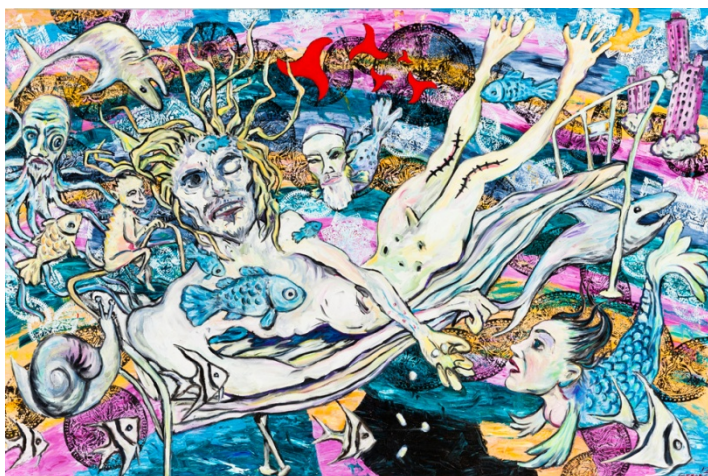
*George Gittoes: I Witness* is the first major exhibition in Australia of the work of artist and film maker George Gittoes which surveys the last 45 years of his incredible career.

Internationally recognised for working and creating art in regions of conflict around the world he has been an eye witness to war and human excess, and also to the possibilities of compassion.

Beginning his career in the late 1960s, Gittoes was part of a group of artists including Brett Whiteley and Martin Sharp who established The Yellow House artist community in Sydney. This was followed by his move to Bundeena in the Sutherland region where he became an influential and instrument figure in community art projects and the development of Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre.

In the 1980s Gittoes began travelling to areas of conflict and his tireless energy for pushing the boundaries of art making has since seen him working in some of the most dangerous and difficult places on earth. He first travelled to Nicaragua and the Philippines, then the Middle East, Rwanda and Cambodia in the 1990s and more recently to Iraq and Afghanistan. He has created an extraordinary body of work drawn out of his mobile studio of a camera, video, and visual diary.

Gittoes explores the nature of being human even in the most difficult of situations. He is a unique artist with an ability to help us see more clearly the times in which we live.



***Belly Up 2013***

oil on canvas

My son Harley enjoys describing me as being like a shark: 'If he can't keep moving forward he will die.'

2013 is when I nearly went 'belly up' like a dying shark.

First it was surgery for prostate cancer followed by replacement of both my knees and finally internal bleeding that had me getting transfusions at the notorious Bellview Hospital in New York where I started to feel I had a monkey on my back from all the painkillers.

***I am an artist product of the Protest Era. Because the Yellow House Puppet Theatre was a whole environment it kind of covers up what my other art of the period was about and that was horror at the Vietnam war and the divided society - what we called the Establishment versus the Flower Power People. The Puppet Theatre was for the Flower Power people and these and other works were protests against the Establishment which was particularly neo-lithic in those days. It was the time of Premier John Askin's 'run over them' Sydney. It was full of corruption and a hatred of anything artistic or free, totally reactionary.***

***Sometimes it takes a lifetime to begin to see things clearly. All my work has been a continuing protest against brutality. Things are even more polarised now than they were then.***

George Gittoes (b. 1949) grew up in the southern Sydney suburbs of Bexley and Bardwell Park. He was interested in art from an early age and often performed puppet plays for his primary school friends. This interest in art was nurtured by his mother, Joyce, a ceramicist, and his sister, Pamela, a celebrated printmaker.

He enrolled in Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Laws degree at the University of Sydney in 1968. After hearing Clement Greenberg give the inaugural Power Lecture, Gittoes was encouraged by the art critic to travel to New York later that year where he studied with African-American realist painter Joe Delaney.

On returning to Sydney in 1970, Gittoes became one of the founding members of the Yellow House in Potts Point, an homage to Vincent Van Gogh's unrealised dream to establish a centre for artists to live, work and exhibit. Fellow artists included Martin Sharp, Brett Whiteley, Peter Kingston and Jonny Lewis. Here, Gittoes created the Yellow House Puppet Theatre and held regular performances and exhibitions.

This period saw Gittoes produce a series of important etchings including *The Hotel Kennedy Suite* and *The Kent State Suite* that responded to events in the United States, including anti-Vietnam War protests and the Kent State shootings at Kent State University, Ohio.

In 1972 Gittoes established a studio at Bundeena on the outskirts of the Royal National Park south of Sydney. His art practice was influenced by the light-filled waters of nearby Port Hacking and the patterns of bush in the National Park. He also met and began working with visiting Aboriginal artists from Mornington Island off the northern coast of Queensland, leading to an exploration of several aspects of Aboriginal culture. These two influences led to his development of the *Rainbow Way* series which was inspired by the Aboriginal creation myth of the Rainbow Serpent and based on themes of the sea and the physics of light.



**The Street 1971**  
etching, aquatint

*At the age of 18 I travelled to New York to experience Modern Art first hand. Upon returning to Sydney I wrote my novel *The Romances*. This etching is inspired from the line '... a hunched backed freak always fighting the half boar pig man monster behind the Hotel where Kennedy entered'.*

*Nicaragua politicised me on Central American history and politics. That was a turning point in my art. I started describing myself as an 'externalist' because my work was based on external reality.*

*This term comes from Externalist Poetry as developed by Ernesto Cardinale and featured in my movie *The Bullets of the Poets*. Externalism has a huge appeal to me and informed all the work that came after 1986.*

*The impact of Central American art and poetry was refreshing as it reaffirmed the importance of figurative painting as much as it brought back poetry about direct experience that was relatively free of symbolism. Strong in metaphor from the things of life rather than high and mighty ideas or intellectual constructs and games.*

In 1986 Gittoes travelled to Nicaragua in Central America and visited the arts collective on Solentiname Islands, collaborating with Miriam Guevara, Olivia Silva and Ernesto Cardinale. During this period he filmed footage for the documentary *The Bullets of the Poets* which focuses on six women who recount their struggles during the Sandinista Revolution and their reliance on writing poetry. The experience was the beginning of Gittoes' long-term involvement in the documentation of war, conflict, art and culture.

Gittoes directed and co-produced the subsequent feature documentary *The Bullets of the Poets* with Gabrielle Dalton (co-producer) and the film was released in 1987 and screened on ABC Television.

In late 1989 Gittoes began the large-scale project, *Heavy Industry*, which documented the working conditions at industrial sites in Newcastle, Wollongong, Broken Hill and Whyalla. The series showcased his strong graphic skills and explored the humanity of men working in difficult and dangerous conditions in mining and steel factories. An exhibition of the series travelled extensively, exposing Gittoes' work to a wide audience.



### **Portrait of Dora Maria Tellez 1986**

compressed charcoal on paper

*In 1986 Dora Maria Tellez was at the top of the CIA's most wanted terrorist list. Originally, she was a medical student and poet but the deplorable medical situation in Nicaragua made her turn to revolution. She led a group, including her girlfriend Daisy Zamora, to capture the whole of the Nicaraguan Senate. Holding them hostage she demanded money, a plane and the release of high profile political prisoners like Daniel Ortega (who later became President). She succeeded with all of these demands and then became Comandante Dos and led a victorious army against the tyrannical Somoza.*

*Dora is a small woman, tough but a poet and depends on her hand gun for protection, travelling without body guards. With the success of the revolution she became Minister for Health in the Sandinista Government. More recently she has been on a hunger strike to protest the corruption of the government she helped to establish.*



In 1989 Gittoes travelled to the Philippines to work with Filipino artists during the civil conflict. He produced an extensive series of work documenting individuals caught in the crossfire.

*I did the Crows Over Cane Fields series of works in the Philippines as a collaboration with Nunelucio Alvarado, an artist who belongs to a group called the Concerned Artists of Negros – a progressive coalition of artists that took an active role in promoting nationalist consciousness in the arts – on the Island of Negros.*

*At the time there was a civil war going on with the NPA (National People's Army) and the Ruling Government. I saw this work as an extension of what I had been doing with the Externalist Poets in Nicaragua as both groups subscribed to Liberation Theology concepts.*

*Smokey Mountain is a notorious rubbish dump in Manila where the urban poor struggle to make a living from what they can scavenge. The Jesuits run a help centre and support artists to work with the community on awareness raising projects. One of these artists came up with the idea of doing Stations of the Cross processions to places of social and environmental disgrace. He was particularly targeting the US bases.*

*I arranged to meet him at Smokey Mountain but before we got to our meeting point I spotted his body under a bridge. He had been 'salvaged', a term used by terror organisations who torture their prisoners in every possible way to make a point to those who do not fear death that there are worse things than simply being killed. When the victims die their bodies are dumped in front of the home of those who loved them. Marco's body was dumped where the poor from his workshops could see it. Marco was a Liberation Theologist and artist and I have come to see this work as a kind of crucifixion. He had entrusted me with his paper-maché mask of Jesus Christ. I feared for my own life but stopped to photograph a boy posing with the mask, arms out in a crucified stance.*



**Salvage 1989–90**  
oil on canvas, 170 x 250cm

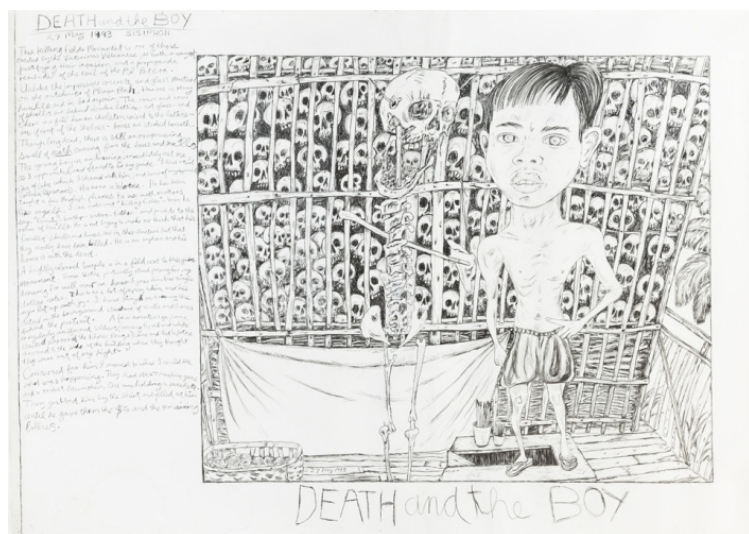
In 1993 Gittoes documented the work of the Australian Defence Force participating as part of the United Nations peacekeeping force while travelling independently in Somalia (March) and Cambodia (May–July).

Many of the works began as photographs or drawings combined with diary entries and were later developed into large-scale works on paper or paintings in his studio at Bundeena. Some of the works document the human casualties of landmines and famine while others are based on night-vision goggles used by the peacekeepers in Somalia.

The following year Gittoes travelled to Western Sahara, Algeria, Sinai, Israel and Southern Lebanon with Australian forces to document the work of Australian United Nations peacekeepers and truce observers.

He travelled to South Africa as an independent observer to document the lead up to and results of the general elections held on 27 April 1994. The elections were the first in which citizens of all races were allowed to take part and marked the conclusion of the four year process to end apartheid. The African National Congress won the election; with Nelson Mandela elected president and South Africa's first black chief executive.

Many of these works were included in Gittoes' groundbreaking solo exhibition *The Realism of Peace* which opened at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in 1995 and toured nationally until 1997.



**Death and the Boy 1993**  
pencil on paper

*The Killing Fields monuments in Cambodia were erected by the victorious Vietnamese as both a way of justifying their invasion and a propaganda reminder of the evil of the Pol Pot era. Unlike the impressive concrete, stone and glass structure on the outskirts of Phnom Penh this one is humble and in disrepair. The rows of skulls are behind wooden lattice – not glass – and there is a full human skeleton wired to the lattice in front of the shelves with bones stacked beneath. Though long dead, there is still an overpowering smell of death coming from the bones and skulls.*

In 1995 Gittoes travelled to Rwanda with the Australian Army Medical Support Force. Here Gittoes and a small group of United Nations (UN) troops witnessed the slaughter by machine gun and machete of thousands of Rwandans who had gathered at a camp for displaced persons looking for UN protection. Australian soldiers serving as part of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda estimated that soldiers of the Rwandan Patriotic Army killed at least 4000 people.

Gittoes' visual response is focused on the nature of compassion and vengeance. As an eyewitness he invites the viewer to sit with profound moral and ethical issues about complicity in injustice.

Gittoes has returned to this harrowing event many times and it is the focus of his most significant works including the 2013 series, *Nothing is Enough*. Created using an innovative method of digitally adding detail from original photographs to a drawing, Gittoes presents a series of ghost-like images that almost stain the page alongside sharp and expressive drawings. The result is images that are unstable to the eye, hovering in space like a premonition. The works are a statement about the horror of war and violence, and an affirmation of the beauty of being human, even at the point of death.

***In early 2013 I had the opportunity to collaborate, for one month, at Light Work in Syracuse, New York, with the master printer, John Wesley Mannion. My challenge was to find a way, with John's help, to express the inexpressible finiteness of the lives I had seen blinking out. Before and since Kibeho I have seen a lot of war but Rwanda was by far the worst. Rwanda is a theme I never stop struggling with and when I look over my life's work in painting and drawing one third of the images produced are about Rwanda.***

***While caught up in the massacre I took photographs and did drawings but neither were adequate to show what it was like to be an artist amidst hundreds of people who were dying. I was intimately spending time with people as they passed from this world to the next. John and I started with the key image, Eyewitness. I had dodged a lot of bullets to get a young woman, Immaculee, to the only UN doctor, Carol Vaughan-Evans, who had improvised an outdoor treatment centre. Immaculee had a deep machete slash across her face and another deep wound across her skull and into her brain. A girlfriend had stitched up the skull wound but this had only sealed in the infection. Carol told me there was nothing she could do and that Immaculee probably only had another twenty minutes to live. I suggested I give her some morphine but Carol said, 'Why don't you just sit down and draw her? What she needs is company.'***

***When I took out my drawing paper and began to sketch, Immaculee asked me what the drawing was for. I said, 'The world needs to know what has been allowed to happen to you.' From that moment we worked together to make this 'witness' drawing something that would move whoever saw it. As my pencil inscribed the paper Immaculee was flickering between life and death like a faulty neon light. When I showed it to her Immaculee nodded, satisfied to have achieved something with the last moments of her life. I kept my word to Immaculee and made Eyewitness into many large paintings that have been exhibited around the world, but none of these captured what I had experienced as I sat with Immaculee while her soul seemed to be leaving and then returning to allow me to finish.***

***The hope with these works is that by allowing the drawing to show through the photograph and combining the two media this sense of the transience of the subject's life has been captured. It is up to those who view these to decide whether we have come closer to expressing something so disturbing and profound that nothing can ever seem enough.***





**Blood and Tears 1997**

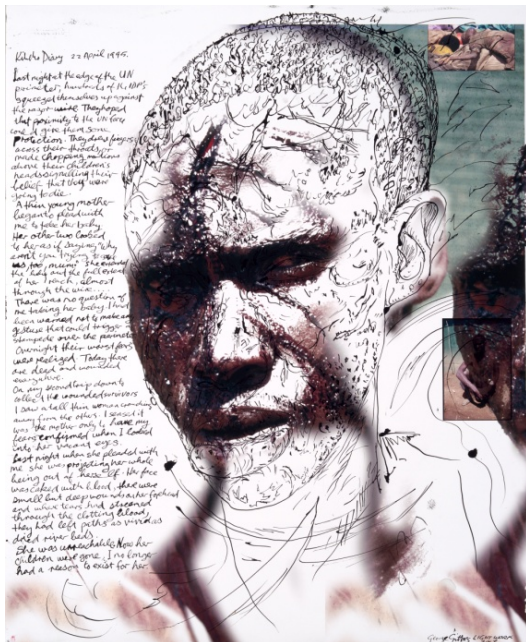
oil on canvas, 305 x 172 cm

Kibeho, Rwanda

Diary entry: 22 April 1995

*Last night at the edge of the UN compound, hundreds of refugees squeezed themselves up against the razor wire. A thin woman began to plead with me to take her baby. Her other two small children looked up to her as if to say 'mummy, why aren't you trying to save us.' There was no question of me taking her baby. I had been warned not to make a gesture that could trigger a stampede of refugees over the UN Perimeter. Overnight their worst fears were realised. Today there are dead and wounded everywhere, mainly from horrific machete wounds.*

*On my second trip down to help collect the wounded I saw a tall thin woman .... I sensed it was the mother - only to have my fears confirmed when I looked into her vacant eyes. Her face was caked with blood, there were small but deep wounds on her forehead and where tears had streamed through the clotting blood, they had left paths as vivid as dried river beds. She was unreachable now her children had gone, I no longer had a reason to exist for her.*



**Blood and Tears 2013**

ink and digital print on paper



Following the terrorist attack in New York on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent United States military invasion of Afghanistan, Gittoes travelled to the region with Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders) for six weeks in 2002 and visited the refugee camps which had been established. While in Afghanistan, Operation Anaconda was launched by the United States against Al-Qaeda fighters on 1 March.

Later that year he travelled to Washington and witnessed the protests against the impending war in Iraq. He saw the importance of reaching the MTV and rap-music generation of younger Americans, many of whom would be fighting in the war, and the potential to address them about war and conflict through the medium of film. He began developing ideas for his documentary *Soundtrack to War*.

To develop this project Gittoes travelled to Iraq four times between March 2003 and May 2004, once while Saddam Hussein is still in office and three times during United States occupation. Here he interviewed and filmed American soldiers on active duty, and Iraqi citizens and soldiers, on the role of music in the contemporary battlefield. The footage formed the basis of the critically acclaimed documentary *Soundtrack to War*.

In 2007 Gittoes returned to the Middle East and travelled to the remote tribal belt of the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan and began shooting the feature docu-drama *Miscreants of Taliwood*, the third film in his *War on Terror* trilogy. The film combined the drama and action of a Pashto telemovie with documentary footage from the Taliban-controlled tribal belt.

While living in Pakistan Gittoes worked with local filmmakers and actors to direct and produce two Pashtun language films. This led to the establishment of the Yellow House Jalalabad in 2011, a multi-disciplinary arts centre in the Pashtun-dominated region south of Afghanistan. Similar to the original 1970s Yellow House in Potts Point, Sydney, it features a cinema, travelling tent circus, rainbow-painting studios, Secret Garden Cafe and Rose Theatre outdoor stages.

***I have been placing myself in war zones, from Nicaragua to Iraq, long enough for it to become clear that 'being there' is art itself separate from what I produce with my camera, pencils and paint. This is not a landscape that needs to be imagined – it is beyond imagination – the only way to know it is to be there, like Goya, see it. The apocalypses in the art of Gittoes are what I enter – the products of these entries are my 'Exits', representations that are fashioned from what I find.***

***If you can create in a war zone, then you are doing that in the face of incredible destruction. It is an important gesture. I have discovered from the conflicts I have covered that violence only leads to more violence. Human beings are creative. All these international situations need love, consideration and creativity. I want to spend the rest of my career doing creative work in the face of violent forces.***



### **CNN 2003**

Pencil and mixed media on paper

*This is one of my drawings done in New York City shortly after the planes hit the Twin Towers. My favourite painting in the Metropolitan Museum is Opening of the Fifth Seal (1608-14) by the Spanish Painter El Greco. It inspired Picasso's early cubist painting Les Femmes d'Alger (1911) and has had a huge influence on all my work.*

*CNN was at the Twin Towers site faster than any other network and has been at the centre of the action of all the wars I have covered since it invented itself with the reports of Peter Arnett during the First Gulf War. In this drawing I imagined CNN broadcasting live from St John's predicted Apocalypse in the last days of the world.*

In 2009 Gittoes travelled to Tarin Kowt and Khost in Afghanistan, Kuwait and Iraq with the Australian Defence Force. He documented in diaries and with photographs the ADF operations in conflict zones and the nature of 21st century warfare including Australian military patrols in Tarin Kowt.

He temporarily relocated to Berlin and began working on *Descendence*, a series of large-scale paintings inspired by the events in Afghanistan, Kuwait and Iraq that tell the fictitious story of the Virus Squad led by Corporal Night.

***Witnessing war as a younger man my focus was on the victims and their stories but as I get older I see what Goya saw in his darkest works, war is horror. I see children hiding their faces and either paralysed with fear or scurrying to where they hope they won't be found. The armed men who scare them would be no more terrifying if they were a pack of werewolves.***

***I do not know how many times I have had a young soldier telling me he wants to experience mortal combat and 'kill the enemy'. I always warn them 'If you kill someone else you will kill part of yourself and the inner pain will strike like a bullet the moment of the others' death.' I have been there when young men have had their first kill and often, that night, they will seek me out because I am not a member of their unit and will not judge them as weak when their tears flow. I remember one saying 'my mother must never know about this or she will never stop praying for my poor lost soul.'***

*The Descendence stories belong to a much larger work called Night Vision, which is a trilogy of three graphic novels yet to be published. Virus Squad and Corporal Night feature in this three part epic, which draws upon my experiences in the other worlds as well as the wars of this.*



***Descendence 2010–11***  
oil on canvas

*The mangled bodies of Virus squad have been dumped on the floor of a hangar inside Baghram Air Base. They might be dead but they are conscious of their surroundings and seem to have been waiting forever to be zipped into body bags and flown back to their families.*

*No one comes and they have begun to feel structural rearrangements in their bodies. They thought: 'This must be what it is like to putrefy'. Then strong fangs pressed out of their gums and their arms got floppy and stretch like rubber. Lance Corporal Day was the first to speak: 'If this is the Resurrection where the hell is Jesus?'*

*They are each attached to two hoses with fluids running into them. Private Green jerks on a hose, which is connected to a bank of computers: 'We must be inside some kind of science experiment.' The section leader, Corporal Night, discovers he can make his body lift up and levitate off the ground. He turns to his men 'We are still Virus Squad, right?' All respond loudly in the affirmative.*