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HORSEPOWER HUBRIS

SUSANNE SLAVICK

ABSTRACT *Horsepower Hubris* presents hand-painted digital prints that examine vehicles as both weapons and targets of war. Painted motifs and passages borrowed primarily from Persian miniatures combine with contemporary media images of wartime destruction, exposing what has been lost, offering a tentative restitution, and evoking empathic unsettlement. Images of warrior steeds and more contemporary vehicles of violence reflect our aggressive impulses and their consequences, revealing sad continuities between ancient and ongoing armed conflicts.

KEYWORDS: war, art, violence, horsepower, empathic unsettlement, restitution, Persian miniature, Khamsa, Shahnameh, digital collage, rubble, out of rubble, car bomb



While the automobile and its many-wheeled cousins were instrumental to the industrial transformation of the twentieth century, their role in the twenty-first century continues to grow more complicated. The initial promise of mobility, status, and power has been offset by an insatiable hunger for oil, resulting in recurring corporate and manufacturing crises, spurring dependencies that threaten national autonomy and world

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peace, as well as the environment. Machines on wheels can be seen variously as benign or malignant, as emblems, enforcers, or enemies of “freedom.” They may indulge our sense of leisure and luxury or function simply as conveyors. They protect us but also terrorize us during wartime. Alternately seductive and destructive, the automotive vehicle is exploited as both weapon and target in strategies of violence as a means to an end. Blown up, burned, or pieced back together, these vehicles are at the center of *Horsepower Hubris*, my series of works on paper that present the arrogance of power, dishonest rationales, and tragic follies of wars.

Six years ago, I began working with contemporary images of wartime destruction found on the Internet: images posted on blogs, news feeds, and photo-sharing sites like Flickr and Weebshots. My resulting series, titled *R&R (... &R)*, tweaked the military abbreviation for “rest and relaxation,” converting it to words like “regret” and “regenerate.” I constructed these works by first digitally manipulating found photographs of devastation from across the former Islamic empire—Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, and elsewhere—and then recombining them with a layer of hand-painted scenes



Figure 1
Recall, 2012. Archival digital print on Hahnemühle paper, 11.5 × 15.25 in. (Landscape based on *The Hero Rustam Slays the Witch of the Cosmic Illusion*, an illustration attributed to Qadimi by S. C. Welch, from Firdawsī's *Book of Kings*, copied in Tabriz from Shâh Tahmâsp between the 1520s and 1540s. Fol. 120v. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.) Image courtesy of the artist

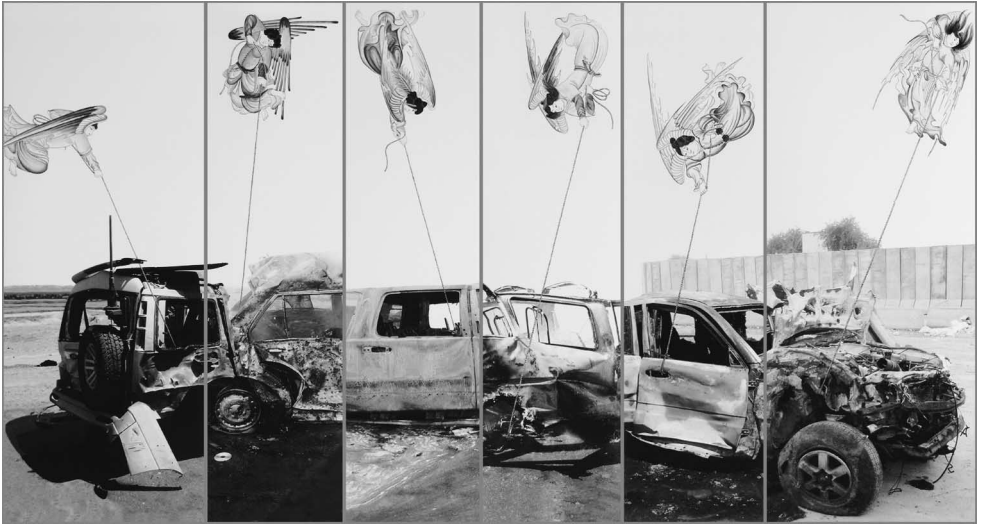


Figure 2

Stretch, 2009. Gouache on archival digital prints on Hahnemühle paper, 72 × 132 in., as six framed panels. (Angels derived from the School of Muhammad Siyâh Qalam, Tabriz, c. 1478–90, Library of the Topkapı Sarayı Museum, Istanbul, H. 2153, fol. 5v.) Image courtesy of the artist

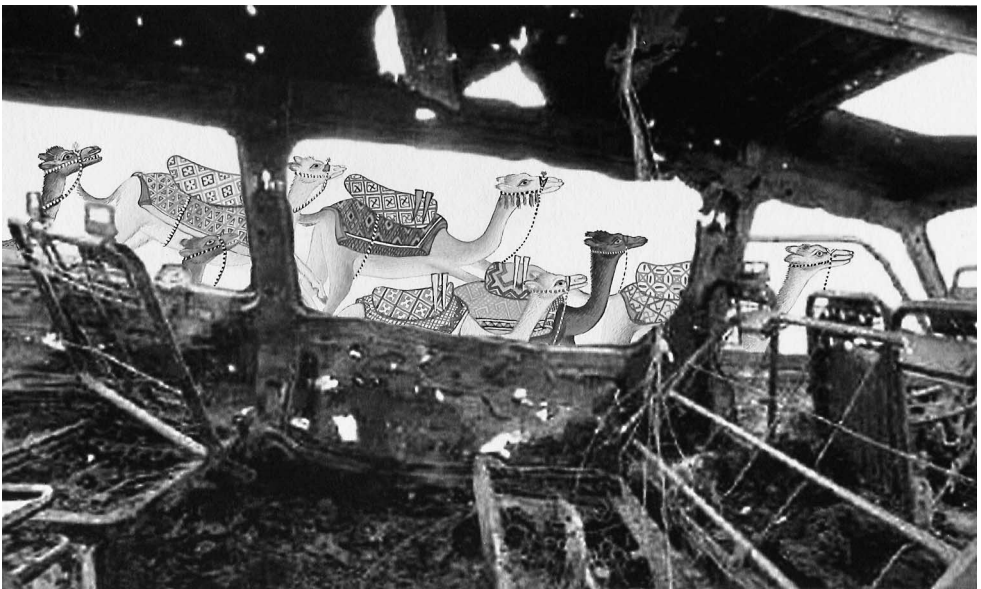


Figure 3

Roam: Riding on Remorse, 2008. Gouache on archival digital print on Hahnemühle paper, 6 × 10 in. Collection of Mary Lou Arscott, Pittsburgh. (Camels based on illustration by Bihzâd for Nizâmî's *Layli and Manjûn* in 1493 *Khamsa*, British Library.) Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 4

Headlong, 2009. Gouache on archival digital print on Hahnemühle paper, 15 × 24 in. (Horsemen based on Firdawsī's *Book of Kings* manuscript copied in Tabriz for the Mongol il Khân Abû-Sa'īd [r. 1317–35], *Antiquités orientales*, section islamique no. 7095, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Altered photograph of car bombed in Sri Lanka.) Image courtesy of the artist

drawn from Islamic art and architecture, mostly from the workshops of Persian miniaturist Bihzād and the court arts of Safavid Iran.

Several images in *R&R(...&R)* focus on vehicles, both animal and mechanical. A painted caravan of sixteenth-century camels saunters behind the charred carcass of a bombed vehicle, oblivious to the human penchant for killing (*Roam: Riding on Remorse*, Figure 3). This process of altering violent images by hand is my attempt at “empathic unsettlement,” and at offering a tentative symbolic restitution that recognizes what has been decimated and replaces the anonymous, ashen monochrome of rubble with scenes of revival and cultivation.¹

The *R&R(...&R)* project led me to a new series, *Horsepower Hubris*, which hones in on the sad machinery of war, from rocking horse to military transport (see *Rocking Horse*, Figure 6). In *Replenish* (Figure 5), a thirsty horse from a mid-sixteenth-century illumination for the twelfth-century Persian poet Nizâmī's *Khamsa* (*Quintet*, or *Five Poems*) stands on the edge of a crater of a bombed bridge in Mosul, Iraq. Its empty saddle suggests a fallen warrior; its tail flows into the cavity like a river of blood. In another work, *Headlong* (Figure 4), I combine digitally collaged and hand-painted warriors based on an illustration in Firdawsī's *Shāhnāme*, or *Book of Kings*. This poetic epic of nearly sixty thousand verses tells the mythical and historical story of Greater Iran from the creation of the world up



Figure 5

Replenish, 2010. Gouache on archival digital print on Hahnemühle paper, 10 × 14 in. (Horse based on *Khusraw Discovers Shirin Bathing in a Pool*, from a *Khamsa* by Nizāmī, mid-sixteenth-century Safavid dynasty from Shiraz, Iran. Altered photograph of a bridge in Mosul, Iraq.) Image courtesy of the artist

through the Islamic conquest of Persia in the seventh century. Dick Davis (2007: xv, xvi), in the introduction to his translation of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, describes how it speaks to the nature of “the good man, the good hero . . . [who asks] not, ‘How do I win?’ but ‘How do I act well?’ . . . [It ends as] a tragedy, the record of a deeply mourned civilization whose loss is seen as a disaster.” In the *Shāhnāmeḥ* illumination, the warriors accompany the hero Faramurz in scattering the troops of the king of Kabul. *Headlong* rearranges these figures to race around a contemporary image of a bombed car in Sri Lanka, another disaster where no one wins or acts well.

Stretch (Figure 2), which is perhaps the most complex and yet explicit piece from the series, sutures together the remains of bombed vehicles from multiple locations, creating a macabre version of a stretch limo. The angels floating above are similar to those in an illustration for Nizāmī’s *Tale of the Turquoise Pavilion*, where they struggle with a seven-headed dragon in an allegory of the soul’s journey through the lower world. In my image, the bullet-ridden, incinerated, and twisted wreckage replaces the dragon, while the weightless angels grip ropes taut and straining from their exertion at hoisting this massive mechanical corpse. They exhibit no hubris—only humility, signaling that we must persist and overcome even our

Figure 6
Rocking Horse,
2010. Gouache on
archival digital print
on Hahnemühle
paper, 12 × 13.5 in.
(Horseman drawn
from *Horseman and
Groom*, attributable
to Qadīmī Qazvin,
c. 1560, Arthur
M. Sackler Museum,
Harvard University,
no. 1958.62.2.
Altered photograph
of southern Iraq.)
Image courtesy of
the artist



best efforts to destroy. Perhaps their struggle mirrors our own in dealing with the proliferation and aftermath of violence.

NOTE

1. “Empathic unsettlement” is Dominick LaCapra’s term as discussed in Bennett 2005: 8.

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