

Terry Atkinson

Greaser sculptures and drawings from the series 'Berlin, East Prussia and the Desert' and 'American Civil War'

27.11.21 – 27.02.22

Josey proudly presents a solo exhibition of the British artist Terry Atkinson. Following a number of acclaimed international exhibitions over the past fifteen years, this is his first solo exhibition in the UK since 2004. Installed across two venues, the exhibition comprises 'Greaser' sculptures of the early 1990s, complete drawings from the series 'Berlin, East Prussia and the Desert' (2014–17) and a selection from the 'American Civil War' (2018–ongoing) series.

Terry Atkinson was born in the village of Thurnscoe, Yorkshire in 1939. He is the co-founder of two of the most influential artists' collectives in post-war contemporary art: Fine-Artz (with John Bowstead, Roger Jeffs and Bernard Jennings), in 1963, and Art & Language (with David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin and Harold Hurrell), in 1968.

Art & Language was central to the critical development of conceptual art of the 1960s. By the mid-seventies, however, Atkinson recognised that conceptualism had calcified, noting the beginning of its 'marshal[ing] the resources of an official history... and, to a sufficiently worrying extent, foreclosing the provisions of theory which it had done so much to plenary'.<sup>1</sup>

From the mid-seventies onwards Atkinson grew increasingly concerned with the figures and events of World War One, an interest that first emerged in the early 1960s while still a student at the Slade school of art. Throughout the following decades, motifs and figures of war – Iraq, The Falklands, Lebanon, Ireland – have merged, relayed and returned with those of history painting, particularly Goya's monsters.

'Berlin, East Prussia and the Desert' and 'American Civil War', exhibited at Josey, were made, Atkinson has written, from a desire to report the fact that the experiences of his generation were overseen by a form of political rivalry, the events of which are still omnipresent – the Cold War. It was two colossal civil wars, the American Civil War (1861–65) and the Russian Civil War (1918–21), which led to the superpowers that incubated, conducted and maintained the Cold War.

'This conflict,' Atkinson writes, 'permeated every aspect of the lives of my generation, not least the art world in which my own art practice was imbedded from 1958 onwards. The Cold War was fought and marshalled through many proxies and conveyed into every cultural aspect of the so-called West and East.'<sup>2</sup> Interspersed with 'Time Travellers' such as Goya's monsters, ET the extra-terrestrial, Picasso's bulls, and Bart Simpson – figures of non-linear history interrupted – these works stand as an historical reportage and re-examination of major events that formed the Western world.

In these studies Rifleman of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sikh Regiment fight at Mera Matruh, Egypt in 1942. ET, time traveller, observes the 1945 assault on Berlin having witnessed the 2004 US assault on Fallujah.

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<sup>1</sup> See Terry Atkinson at Yale Union, Portland, 2014: [http://yaleunion.org/secret/exhibition-catalogs/atkinson\\_pamphlet.pdf](http://yaleunion.org/secret/exhibition-catalogs/atkinson_pamphlet.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> 'Terry Atkinson', SIX di Sebastiano Dell'Arte, 2019, p.23.

Two Curtiss P40 Tomahawks of the Desert Air Force fly over Indian soldiers of the British Desert Force forming up for a review in Libya, January 1943. Atkinson exposes the complacent and sanctified clichés of World War amnesic celebration: the rituals of myth, national self-consciousness, ethnocentrism, and imagined pasts and presents.

Likewise, in the ‘American Civil War’ works Atkinson draws white supremacists into proximity with counter protestors, including heroes of Black Lives Matter, the Civil Rights Movement of the fifties and sixties, post-war African-American popular culture, and the black and white soldiers who fought and died in the American Civil Wars. Seventeenth-century English suprematism, aligned with the holy values of rationalism, industry and liberty, as well as moral justifications for slavery, created the battlegrounds of this ‘New World’.

Grease, as volatile material, offered, so Atkinson writes, a means to convert ‘the image/voice/text residue’ of these history works into a more explicit concern with ‘inscription and a kind of mark-recording art-grunt’. First produced in 1986, constructed of standardised building materials and petroleum grease, the ‘Greaser’ sculptures operated between two- and three-dimensional states: Grease, like wet paint, moves, automatic, sculptural, suggesting a breadth of material-conceptual propensities. Some of these, excerpted below, were listed by Atkinson for his exhibition ‘Mute 1’ at Galleri Prag, Copenhagen, in 1988:

- 1) Grease the axle.
- 2) Grease the Henry Moore Medallion for proper art behaviour.
- 3) Grease seriousness.
- 4) Grease the European Treasure House.
- 5) Grease The Wall.
- 6) Grease The Diamond.
- 7) Grease the Brit.
- 8) Grease Rock n’ roll.
- 9) Grease consciousness.
- 10) Grease minimalism.
- 11) Grease God (in John Milton’s vision heaven was landscaped—perhaps by God himself! It is rumoured God is still a he!)
- 12) Grease language (in John Milton’s vision God spoke—from whom did God learn the language?)
- 13) Grease the autonomous surface.
- 14) Grease the materials of art.
- 15) Grease the practice.<sup>3</sup>

The wall-mounted works ‘Slat Greaser Trough 5’ (1991/2021), installed at Ten Bell Lane, and ‘Slat-Greaser 4’ (1990/2021), installed at Willow Lane, were produced at a time when Atkinson’s thinking about grease had shifted. Where the initial appeal had been its material volatility, by the end of the eighties Atkinson began to think of the grease in the trough as an analogy of the distinction in computer science between software and hardware. Subsequently, from 1992 onwards, ‘Grease Works’ were planned to incorporate a projected image and/or computer software.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Terry Atkinson, *Mute 1*, Copenhagen, Denmark: Galleri Prag, 1988, p.22.

<sup>4</sup> Terry Atkinson’, *SIX di Sebastiano Dell’Arte*, 2019, p.23.

In retrospect, writing more recently, Atkinson recognised that the ‘Grease Works’ seemed to pick up many unanticipated meanings. This, for him, was a reflection of the instability of the material itself: ‘the fact that the grease would shift was only too predictable. I also view this characteristic of ongoing process as reflecting the continuous paradox of my permanent uneasiness toward and permanent addiction to practice itself’.<sup>5</sup>

Atkinson’s work, both as a member of Fine-Artz and Art & Language and individually, is widely known and critically acclaimed internationally. His works have been exhibited extensively in Great Britain, Europe, Canada and the USA at venues such as: the Whitechapel Gallery, London; KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; MoMA, New York; Documenta, Kassel; the Venice Biennale; and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin. In 1985 he was nominated for the Turner Prize. More recent, in either solo or group format, international exhibitions have occurred at MoMA, Vienna, 2013; Yale Union, Portland, Oregon, 2014; ICA San Francisco, 2018; and Galeria Six, Milan, 2019.

Terry Atkinson lives in Leamington Spa, England with his wife, artist Sue Atkinson, with whom he has frequently collaborated.

This exhibition will be accompanied by a new publication featuring correspondence between Terry Atkinson and the art historian T.J. Clark. Clark will join Atkinson in conversation at the gallery at a date to be announced.

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<sup>5</sup> Terry Atkinson, ‘Grease: Mute and Malleable’ reproduced in the catalogue for ‘Mechanism’ (curated by Anthony Hubermann), Wattis Institute, San Francisco, 2017–18.