



# George Gittoes

on being there

8 February – 26 April 2020



## FOREWORD

Newcastle Art Gallery is proud to present *GEORGE GITTOES: on being there*, an exhibition dedicated to the creative practice of highly awarded Australian artist and documentary filmmaker George Gittoes AM.

The exhibition provides an opportunity for the Gallery to develop a project that showcases an important contemporary artist from the collection and features ceramics, film, paintings and works on paper generously loaned from the artist and private collections. Drawn from the Gallery's holdings are works of art from the *Heavy Industry* series (1989–90) created in Newcastle during an artist's residency where Gittoes documented the industrial landscape of the BHP Steel Works.

*On being there* provides an extraordinary insight into the art and life of George Gittoes, beginning with the *Yellow House* cooperative he co-founded in Sydney with artist Martin Sharp during the 1970 Vietnam war protests; through to his work in some of the world's most notorious battle zones – Afghanistan, Cambodia, Palestine, Rwanda, South Africa and more recently in 2019 – South Chicago, USA where violent gun crime is at

its highest level. Represented in public collections nationally and internationally, Gittoes has been recognised for his humanitarian and peacemaking efforts, awarded an Order of Australia (AM) and the prestigious 2015 Sydney Peace Prize.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the dedication and vision of guest curator Dr Rod Pattenden who has provided the Gallery with unprecedented access and research into the artist's archives and personal collection enabling us to showcase works of art together for the first time. Sincere thanks also to George Gittoes and the private collectors for agreeing to loan significant works of art to the exhibition.

*On being there* is a unique opportunity to view and understand the artistic career and motivation of George Gittoes to produce art that not only matters, but also provides the antithesis to the effects of extreme conflict... hope.

Lauretta Morton  
Director, Newcastle Art Gallery

# George Gittoes on being there

The work of George Gittoes is deeply disruptive to the comfortable conventions of our seeing. His work serves to question our values and assumptions and confronts viewers with ethical questions about what it means to be human. Gittoes wants you, the viewer, to think about what it was like to be alive in the anti-Vietnam protest era, to work in the apocalyptic conditions of the Newcastle steel works, in fractured war zones, or in Chicago, site of some of the worst gun violence in the world. These visual investigations push the viewer to consider what it would be like to be there. Gittoes commands considerable talent and ability across many media, and he is using all his skills to bridge the distance between the subject of the work and the world and imagination of the viewer. Gittoes wants to pull us into these narratives and for us to consider what matters most when we talk about what life means and the nature of survival and human thriving.

Rather than the usual structure of an artist survey, this exhibition offers a unique opportunity to get under the skin of what motivates this artist. It seeks to address the questions about why he goes to such inhospitable places to make art and why he puts his life at risk. His answer is as simple as it is profound. 'I feel privileged to have been able to spend much of my life creating beauty in the face of the destruction of war. I have been waging a personal war against war with art.'

These works offer insights into the manner in which Gittoes works and how he sees, what catches his attention, and how this shapes his responses through his art making. Against the backdrop of dangerous and emotionally charged contexts, Gittoes is drawn to empathise with the human person, as a site for bravery, resilience, hope and despair, inviting our involvement as compassionate participators in a world that has moral and spiritual implications.

From across a career of 50 years my own eye has been drawn to a number of crucial episodes that best illuminate his practice. Gittoes' way of working is somewhat unique as it has increasingly become mobile, in the field, embedded in environments that would seem highly resistant to creativity and art making. These visually chaotic and splintered scenarios are shaped with sensitivity and compassion through the artist's eye. What is also apparent is an increasing capacity to collaborate with other creative people, such as artists, musicians, film makers and actors etc. There is a profound social aspect to his art making which pays great respect to the cultures where he works, sympathetically immersing himself in the local stories and cultural forms. These mobile collaborations have at heart the deep concerns that motivated Gittoes at the age of 18 to fly to New York and immerse himself in the art and the politics of the time and to then return to Sydney in late 1969 and produce politically charged expressive work in the collaborative environment of the *Yellow House*.

*The Yellow House* was a community of artists in Sydney's Kings Cross. Through the Puppet Theatre, Gittoes was able to play out the human dramas of heaven and hell, and life in between. His deeply imaginative work made a sharp response to the Vietnam War and his work contains some of the strongest responses found in Australian art. Gittoes speculated at the time about how he could take the *Yellow House* experience, of incubating a creative artists community to Vietnam, in the midst of this terrible war. In many ways his life work has been to play out that possibility.





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Following the Yellow House, Gittoes went on to explore documentary film making as a means of reaching wider audiences and in 1986 travelled to Nicaragua to make 'Bullets of the Poets' with women revolutionaries at the height of the Contra war. The harsh realities of Central America prepared him to tackle the world of the steel works of Newcastle, Whyalla and Wollongong during 1989-1992. *The Heavy Industry* series dignifies the role of the worker in large industrial settings and examples, Gittoes ability to enter hostile environments, build trust with those who occupy such spaces, and create a portrait of human survival and dignity.

The strength of Gittoes' graphic drawing skills is further demonstrated with a suite of works which record his stand as an artist at the frontline of conflict zones. Included here are works from Cambodia, Palestine, South Africa and Rwanda in the period 1992 - 1995. The works describe the *Artist as Witness* and highlight Gittoes' ability to record the circumstances of physically drawing these in the field while narrating the sometimes shocking circumstances of the encounter. Reading these stories is to be confronted with the sharp difficulty of the conditions of war, and to also hear the voice of the artist as compassionate witness. These are beautiful and difficult images. One can see the record of the agitation of the artist's hand and read the observations of what it is like to be there. What emerges is the compassion felt in those moments that arises in the space between the subject and the artist.

Since 2011 Gittoes has worked regularly in the eastern part of Afghanistan, with the *Yellow House Jalalabad*. Here he worked with local film makers and actors renewing his earlier experiences of artistic collaboration. This process is documented in the award winning film 'Love City Jalalabad'. The creation of this community of creatives has left an



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ongoing mark on the development of the local Afghan film industry. Gittoes' ongoing collaboration has also included Australian actor and musician Hellen Rose who was one of the founders of the *Gunnery Artists' Collective*. Hellen has travelled with Gittoes since 2008, co-founding the Yellow House Jalalabad where she ran drama and music classes and collaborating on the music score for his film projects. They have become life partners. Another key collaborator has been Waqar Alam, who is a Pashtun from the tribal belt in Pakistan. Since 2007, Waqar has worked on many of Gittoes' film projects. In 2015 Gittoes was honoured for using his art as a form of protest against war and creating a model for artist run collectives at the Yellow House Jalalabad through being awarded the distinguished Sydney Peace Prize.

Crucial insights into Gittoes' process is found in the artist diaries where through collages of words and images, he responds to the cultural conflicts of our times. The diary pages are evidence of Gittoes' process of scrutinising the world before him. While he may be recording history as it unfolds, he is also activating history by funding new imaginative responses. Gittoes draws attention to the manner in which art and cultural products create human futures. They are an essential part of social healing and offer alternative futures that invite human habitation rather than spaces for exploitation. His diaries evidence how Gittoes sees the world, and more importantly how he sees the world might be.

Gittoes' most recent collaborative process has been the *Yellow House South Side Chicago*. His latest documentary 'White Light' released in 2019, explores his encounters with the communities of Englewood in South Side Chicago, uncovering the social impact of gun violence and the stories of individuals wanting a better life. It is a film filled with tragedy, pathos and hope, developed while living and

working together with the local residents. 'White Light' is his most beautiful and evocative film, yet it is filled with the harsh social impact of gun violence. It is a moving and deeply empathetic narrative that uncovers the vitality of human beings looking for conditions that will allow them to reach their full potential.

A series of large works at the conclusion of this exhibition, *Seeing History*, uses grotesque devices to express the possibilities that history presents us, strange creatures for even stranger times. Gittoes has often been described as a war artist. This is a limiting description because his work is so much more. From being there in these difficult places we get to see in its most gritty forms what it is to be human and the possibilities for survival into the future. A summary response to the reflective episodes found in this exhibition is literally contained in the magnificent ceramic ewer - *To Cleanse the World of War 2019*, which is a collaboration with ceramist

Cameron Williams. What is the nature of this imaginative vessel that it might cleanse our hands from the necessity for violence and retribution?

George Gittoes provides an extraordinary record of an artist willing to create in the face of chaos and potential destruction. Gittoes invites us to examine our own cultural fears of what it would be like to be over there, in places that only appear in our evening news. This exhibition gives privileged access to his process through paintings, prints, visual diaries, field drawings, photography and film. Through these forms we experience an amazing human journey that holds out the hopeful power of creativity in the face of prejudice and fear. This is a magnificent visual record of an imagination that is an essential resource for the difficult times in which we live.

Dr Rod Pattenden



## LIST OF WORKS

<i>Photographs of Yellow House (1-6)</i> c1970 Artist collection	<i>Naphthalene Plant (Newcastle)</i> 1989 compressed charcoal and pastel on paper 99.5 x 140.0cm Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by George Gittoes 2019 Newcastle Art Gallery collection	<i>The Long Awaited Kiss of Freedom, South Africa</i> 1994 pencil on paper 44.0 x 62.0cm Artist collection	<i>Rickshaw Heroes and Villains</i> 2015 oil on canvas 172.5 x 305.5cm Artist collection	<i>Photographs of Yellow House South Side Chicago (1-4)</i> 2018-2019 Artist collection
<i>Yellow House Puppet Door</i> 1970 mixed media 203.0 x 179.0cm Artist collection	<i>Our Chair</i> 1989-90 oil on canvas 227.0 x 168.0cm Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Gabrielle Dalton 2010 Newcastle Art Gallery collection	<i>Departure, End of Ramadan, Hebron</i> 1994 pencil on paper 44.0 x 62.0cm Artist collection	<i>Photographs of Yellow House Jalalabad (1-6)</i> 2015-2018 Artist collection	<i>Words</i> 2019 stencils, oil on canvas 152.5 x 122.5cm Artist collection
<i>Puppet (1-12)</i> c1970-2018 mixed media dimensions variable Artist collection	<i>Our House</i> 1989-90 oil on canvas 168.0 x 220.0cm Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by George Gittoes 2015 Newcastle Art Gallery collection	<i>Mohad Jabary</i> 1994 pencil on paper 44.0 x 62.0cm Artist collection	<i>Film Posters - Pashtun Language local films (1-8)</i> 2015-2018 Artist collection	<i>Soljah, Love and Pain</i> 2019 stencils, oil on canvas 152.5 x 122.5cm Artist collection
<i>Bullies in the Garden (Kent State Suite)</i> 1971-2 etching, aquatint 30.0 x 45.0cm Artist collection	<i>Photographs in the field (Somalia, Hebron, Iraq, Pakistan 1-4)</i> 1991-1995 Artist collection	<i>Eyewitness, Rwanda</i> 1995 pencil on paper 62.0 x 44.0cm Artist collection	<i>Artist diaries (1-8)</i> 2015-2019 visual diaries, mixed media dimensions variable Artist collection	<i>The Scream</i> 2019 oil on canvas 152.5 x 122.5cm Artist collection
<i>Pan Am (from the 'Hotel Kennedy Suite')</i> 1971 etching, aquatint 19.5 x 22.0cm Artist collection	<i>Something to Chew on, Cambodia</i> 1993 pencil on paper 44.0 x 62.0cm Artist collection	<i>Staying Alive</i> 1998 oil on canvas 167.0 x 259.0cm Artist collection	<i>The Beast</i> 2016 oil on canvas 196.5 x 273.5cm Mike Betar collection	<i>White Light</i> 2019 film Directed by George Gittoes 96 minutes Artist collection
<i>Pussy (Kent State suite)</i> 1971-2 etching, aquatint 30.0 x 45.0cm Artist collection	<i>The Legless Bike, Cambodia</i> 1993 pencil on paper 44.0 x 62.0cm Artist collection	<i>Legless Bike 6 Years on, Cambodia</i> 1999 pencil on paper 44.0 x 62.0cm Artist collection	<i>Locking Horns</i> 2017 oil and gun metal on canvas 189.5 x 274.0cm Artist collection	<i>Yemen Store</i> 2019 oil on canvas 122.5 x 152.5cm Private collection Sydney
<i>Westmoreland - Kent State (Kent State suite)</i> 1971-2 etching, aquatint 30.0 x 45.0cm Artist collection	<i>Trick Mine, Cambodia</i> 1993 pencil on paper 62.0 x 44.0cm Artist collection	<i>Super Power - New York - Baghdad</i> 2004 oil on canvas 212.0 x 292.0cm Mike Betar collection	<i>Ishtar</i> 2018 oil on canvas 214.0 x 183.0cm Artist collection	<i>Keep Out</i> 2019 oil on canvas 170.0 x 260.0cm Artist collection
<i>When it is Over (Kent State Suite)</i> 1971-2 etching, aquatint 30.0 x 45.0cm Artist collection		<i>Knight, Death and the Devil X</i> 2006 oil on canvas 167.5 x 137.0cm Artist collection	<i>Two worlds in Harmony (Sufi)</i> 2018 oil on canvas 153.0 x 197.5cm Artist collection	<i>To Cleanse the World of War</i> 2019 ceramic vessel, three pieces 218.0 x 84.0cm Artist collection Collaboration with ceramicist Cameron Williams
<i>Vietnam</i> 1971-2 oil on canvas 101.5 x 71.0cm Artist collection		<i>Love City Jalalabad</i> 2013 film Directed by George Gittoes 96 minutes Artist collection	<i>Lil Mac</i> 2018 stencils, oil on canvas 152.5 x 122.5cm Artist collection	
			<i>Diary Page (Final Destination)</i> 4-6 November 2018 diary page reproduction 36.2 x 55.0cm Artist collection	

## CAPTIONS

Front cover: <i>The Beast</i> 2016 oil on canvas 196.5 x 273.5cm Mike Betar collection	2. <i>Staying Alive</i> 1998 oil on canvas 167.0 x 259.0cm Artist collection	4. <i>Yellow House Jalalabad</i> 2014 Photographer: Waqar Alam
1. <i>Our House</i> 1989-90 oil on canvas 168.0 x 220.0cm Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by George Gittoes 2015 Newcastle Art Gallery collection	3. <i>Naphthalene Plant (Newcastle)</i> 1989 compressed charcoal and pastel on paper 99.5 x 140.0cm Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by George Gittoes 2019 Newcastle Art Gallery collection	5. <i>Trick Mine, Cambodia</i> 1993 pencil on paper 62.0 x 44.0cm Artist collection
		6. <i>Soljah, Love and Pain</i> 2019 stencils, oil on canvas 152.5 x 122.5cm Artist collection

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