



WAR AND WORDS

FIONA BANNER MINES HOLLYWOOD,
CONFLICT, AND LANGUAGE
BY LILY LE BRUN



Jaguar, 2010.
Polished SEPECAT
Jaguar aircraft,
28½ x 16¼ x 55¼ ft.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:
*Arsewoman in
Wonderland*,
2001. Silkscreen
on paper,
13½ x 20 ft.

Fiona Banner
in her London
studio, 2015.

“I THINK A SURVEY is an implausible psychoanalytical scenario,” Fiona Banner says, standing in her studio in East London, on the cusp of a comprehensive exhibition of her work thus far, at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham. The artist prefers to think of it instead as an anti-survey. “We deploy the word *survey* because it’s an idea,” she explains, “but it implies an objectivity, that work might be static or fixed in meaning.” For those familiar with the artist’s practice, this objection to the specificity of such a term will come as little surprise—it is very much in keeping with a career that has been spent considering the peculiarities, possibilities, and limitations of language, using a wide variety of media. Still, she has found the process of selecting which past work to “re-present” for the show, as she carefully phrases it, stimulating. “What does it now mean? How different is it? How should you interpret it now, especially as the world has changed so extraordinarily in the last 25 years? The work is un-static,” she says, “and that’s what really interests me about being an artist.”

Banner first turned to language as a medium while a student at Goldsmiths College in London, to help her grapple with what she has called “the impossibility of the image,” which dominated the art of her peers and tutors. “Increasingly, it seemed I couldn’t get into making art through working with imagery,” she says. “I started with words, in order to renegotiate a subject—at least for myself—by looking at it in different forms.” Banner began by interrogating the simultaneous attraction and repulsion she felt toward war films, and in the mid 1990s became known for her “wordscapes” or “still films.” Written while lying on the floor of her flat in front of a VHS player, these were moment-by-moment descriptions transcribed into single blocks of text in pencil on

paper (*Top Gun*, 1994), screenprints (*The Desert*, 1994, based on David Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia*), and a thousand-page book covering *Apocalypse Now*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, *Hamburger Hill*, and *The Deer Hunter* (*The Nam*, 1997). A representative sample from the last: “The sky turns into familiar palm trees then red dust as the chopper touches down. Willard’s voice comes over, he’s really talking close to you, and everything else fades, ‘I was going to the worst place in the world and I didn’t even know it yet!’” Using writing as a means of seeing these films in a new way became, she says, “an exploration of my own ignorance.” She realized how far war films had shaped her understanding of history, and it set off a chain of inquiry that she has been pursuing ever since. The variety of media used in her work over the years—installation, performance, sculpture, drawing, publishing—reflects how she employs form in order to disrupt accepted narratives, a way of questioning how events become fictionalized or pass into myth.

The abundant, seductive presence of violence in the war films led Banner to apply the same exenterating process to pornographic movies, which she did in pieces such as *Arsewoman in Wonderland*, 2001, exhibited when she was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2002. This began a fascination with the nude—its portrayal throughout history, its complex social meaning—and once again, words became her tool. Although she has always drawn, and often begins with drawing (“I like that it is so close to thoughts”), writing provides a way to circumnavigate the “strange voyeuristic systems” that surround the subject.

She started to make written portraits, encompassing what she calls a “striptease in words.” Banner shows me shaky camcorder footage of a 2007 performance called *Mirror*, in which actress

Chinook, 2014.
Helicopter blades
spinning at 28 RPM,
rotor hubs, motor,
gearboxes, steel,
8 x 66¾ x 42¾ ft.

OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT:
Detail of *Apocalypse
Now*, 1997.
Graphite on paper.

Harrier, 2010.
BAe Sea Harrier
aircraft, paint,
25 x 46½ x 12¼ ft.



Samantha Morton reads Banner's dexterously written description of herself posing naked in the studio. She is performing the text unrehearsed, without having seen it in advance, and it is compelling viewing. "Eyes like jewels, a comma above each," Morton reads, taking off her glasses and playing restlessly with her hair. "Her waist curves in, then out, wide hips stretching her baby-fucked stomach." Morton is visibly uncomfortable, struggling for ownership of the text while negotiating the personal information that reveals itself as she speaks.

"That is where we are in contemporary society," Banner muses as we watch. "It's all about trying to understand your own image, and own it, and yet that is impossible. There's so much visual culture, especially for women, dedicated to a faux control of your image."

Attempts to wrest control over accepted systems by subverting their form and context are in evidence throughout her works. Also in Banner's studio is a stack of books encased in a vitrine. Closer inspection reveals them to be an installation called *Life Drawing Drawings*: handmade replicas of life-drawing manuals and a comment on the practice itself. "Every life drawing, good or bad, is an attempt to stall time," Banner has said, "to assert some kind of control over our own image, in a way that is absurdly literal, hopeless, but also tender. We have to view the nude politically. It is an attempt to portray ourselves. There's something very touching in that direct attempt to make static time, whether it's amateur or high art."

Hanging on the wall opposite is a long sequence of numbers, roughly formed out of fragile pink neon tubes. "Neon is a medium that bears a similarity to how I view language," she says. "It is both fluid and brittle, fragile and expressive." The neon number is an ISBN for the Vanity Press, Banner's own imprint, through which she produced *The Nam* and other books. This project is a playful commentary on the way in which ideas are represented

and circulated, "publishing as performance." In 2009 the artist even registered herself as a publication, under the title *Fiona Banner*. She has the ISBN number tattooed on her back.

One book in particular has been the starting point for several projects: *Heart of Darkness*, which she first arrived at through *Apocalypse Now*. An important discovery for her was Orson Welles's original screenplay for Joseph Conrad's bleak novella. She was captivated by the powerful themes of hubris and failure that thread through the script and were echoed in Welles's own life. The film was never made—judged to be too expensive and challenging, as well as contentious, given that it was written in the politically unstable late 1930s. Collaborating with the organization Artangel, Banner devised a one-off of the work in 2012. It was performed by actor Brian Cox in A Room for London, a bedroom-size pop-up space perched above the Hayward Gallery and inspired by the *Roi des Belges*, the steamboat upon which the action takes place in *Heart of Darkness*. The monologue was streamed live into the Southbank Centre below.

Banner's fascination with literary renditions of war and conflict is mirrored by an equal fixation on the actual military and its hardware, especially fighter jets. For the works for which she is perhaps best known, *Harrier* and *Jaguar*, both 2010, she installed two decommissioned RAF jets in the neoclassical, barrel-vaulted Duveen Galleries of Tate Britain. In this "extraordinary, grandiose space" with "phallic pillars," as she describes it, a Sea Harrier, more than 46 feet in length, was suspended vertically with its nose centimeters off the ground. Behind it, a SEPECAT Jaguar lay upside down, belly exposed, its metal surfaces polished to a luxurious mirror shine. Captured and immobile, the qualities they share with their namesakes are emphasized: a hawk hanging from its talons with clipped wings; a fallen jaguar, stripped of its speed, suddenly vulnerable. The disjuncture between their purpose and their submissive

so sick of it. She died shortly after him. "What happened to you, is almost under his breath: "No Apologies" She fiddles with her necklace, and the other. The left doors close behind him. They are alone now, and he keeps his finger on the panel. He is very close to her now. He says: "I kiss. The woman has her arm around now. They have to shout in order to turn to Charlie: "Charlie jump in here anytime now you stay up here and don't you think and your dead " She responds, soberly: "Well that's a big move," she takes off her glasses. Outside the classroom, Marenik heads to the other car screeches to a halt. She doesn't slow down, but leaves having said: "He is stunned- doesn't know what to say. They stand there for a while. Light streams into the room through the blinds. Charlie turns to the competition for the top gun trophy remains tight. First Ice and Woolf sarcastically: "Yea, I'm sure his saying that" "I've got my eye on the nose there. Viper, 3 o'clock low" He spots him. Goose says "Stay with me ahead. I can't believe we're doing this." Planes are darting around that's it: "Viper turns round to look at them through the cockpit. The chesters missile lock flashes on Red. Goose says, "The defence department is and stupid. You may not like the guys flying with you they might be in a noisy, smoky bar. Goose is sitting at the piano in Church... and you, you always go home with the hot women!" "All right. There are hearts breaking wide open all over the world tonight!" "I'm around so that they're feeling each other. They kiss again. Pannandtele a thin line of blue in their wake. Another voice over "Well the score is 1-0 on, give me a shot.... Ice get outta there" Ice says: "I can't get the plane. Goose is panning" "Goose I can't control it. We're in a jet wash. Goose is panning" "Goose I can't control it. We're in a jet wash. Goose is panning" "Goose I can't control it. We're in a jet wash. Goose is panning"



state was strikingly apparent. They had been reduced to bulky trophies, alluring emblems of violence, speed, and power.

The subjugation of these war machines continues in Banner's studio. The Jaguar is now a pile of aluminum ingots lying in one corner; two nose cones from the Harrier plane jut from a wall, like comical breasts; a vitrine contains a collection of dozens of found images, torn from newspapers and magazines over a period of 10 years, neatly labeled and pinned in rows like captured animal specimens.

Conflict has been a leitmotif within Banner's work for more than two decades. In 1997 she made a work called *Helicopter*, which consisted entirely of *wp* (the onomatopoeia for rotating helicopter blades used in comic books and storyboards) written repeatedly in pencil across a large piece of paper. In 2014 she had an exhibition called "Wp Wp Wp" at the Yorkshire Sculpture

Park, where wobbly lines of the repeated two letters were written in India ink across the gallery's walls. It was accompanied by another discombobulating installation: two sets of Chinook helicopter blades that were choreographed, with the help of aeronautical engineers, to rotate in opposite directions just above head height, giving visitors the unnerving sense that they might collide. This contrary movement, which allows the unwieldy, prehistoric-looking Chinook to fly, "somehow parodies the dilemma and contradiction at the heart of our relationship with the military and its hardware," Banner has said.

In the past year, an invitation to collaborate with the Archive of Modern Conflict in London has brought Banner's questioning eye closer to home. The studio she has occupied since the 1990s is in Hackney, one of the poorest boroughs in

"A SURVEY IS AN IMPLAUSIBLE PSYCHOANALYTICAL SCENARIO. IT IMPLIES THAT WORK MIGHT BE FIXED IN MEANING."

the capital, on the fringes of the City of London. Instead of making new work from archived materials, she commissioned Paolo Pellegrin, an award-winning conflict photographer for the Magnum agency, to shoot new images to be accessioned into the archive under the title *Heart of Darkness*.

Pellegrin's brief was to treat the Square Mile of London's financial district as if it were a war zone. Banner then compiled thousands of his images into a six-minute black-and-white film, choreographed to a soundtrack built from samples recorded at the London Metal Exchange and a Pagan parade in East Sussex. It was exhibited last year at the gallery Peer, where Banner riffed on the cliché of pinstripe patterning, creating large graphite wall drawings of the fabric, and added objects, such as a metal stanchion, its surface bearing the City of London's coat of arms, and a magnum of champagne. (The show's title, "Mistah Kurtz—He Not Dead," a deliberate misquote from Conrad's novel, suggested that the greed and savagery he parodied are alive and well.) These were characteristically clever and mischievous pieces. Exposing the strangeness of accepted cultural microcosms and norms by transposing them into a new medium, they demonstrated Banner's continued ability to find new ways to probe, she says, "how creativity rubs up against systems of control." **MP**