



Taliban Bullet Holes

and

Crude Oil Silkscreens

Piers Secunda

Introduction

In 2009, whilst on an artist's residency in Shanghai, a friend persuaded two soldiers at an army firing range to shoot a few sheets of paint for me. The intention had been to gather some texture with geopolitical references. The resulting bullet holes were spectacular and unmistakable flower like shatters, their beautiful forms denying the physical reality of their making. After finishing several works made with these shot pieces of paint, I decided that to continue this strain of work, the idea ought to be pushed as far as possible. With the sentiment in mind, that the most militarily and politically significant people were in Afghanistan, in August 2010 I flew to Kabul, with the intention of casting Taliban bullet holes.

Two suicide bomb attack sites had been located for me, at which we were able to confirm that the bullet holes were Taliban, as opposed to security forces or police. The first site was an attack on a private security firm in a residential area of Kabul. At the start of the Taliban's assault on this building, two drivers for the security firm were shot and killed inside a car in the street. The works in this exhibition are from the casts of bullet holes made as the Taliban shot through and around this car, killing the drivers and pock marking the wall behind.

Amongst the dusty rubble at the second site, we found an English language surgical manual which had been machine gunned. The book covered subjects from scrubbing up, to complex operations and delivering babies. The destruction of such a book summed up the horror and severity of the attack, and I'm fortunate to be able to show it in this exhibition.

In the Taliban works, the sheets of paint are not shot directly, the bullet holes are a preserved record of the damage made in anger on the street, cast on site with a fast curing silicone putty. The texture differs from the conchoidal fracture of a bullet passing through paint, as the casting material takes the texture of clay bricks. The Taliban works are compelling in part because the paint is so convincing in emulating the texture of a Kabul wall.

Piers Secunda, 2011



A conversation between the artist and Gordon Cheung

Gordon Cheung: I think it was around 7 years ago that we first met and saw your work. You've developed a series of works that have solidified into defined bodies. For example the early casts of oil paint tubes with paint have developed from their paradoxical state into fully functioning casts of clamps, nuts and bolts and wire. The oxymoronic paint tubes made of solid paint cannot be used anymore but suggests a frozen symbol of potential. When you developed the casting of fully functioning objects with industrial paint the conceptual dynamic changed to the real possibility of being able to use these objects for what they were originally intended for. Not only does the paint represent the object it also functions as the object and insistently paint. Of course inherent in this is the failure that it will ever live up to the strength of it's original steel clamp or iron bolt but this is precisely one of the most human aspects of your work in that here there was also pathos.



Painting, 2003
Cast custom manufactured acrylic paint
200 x 150 x 10cm

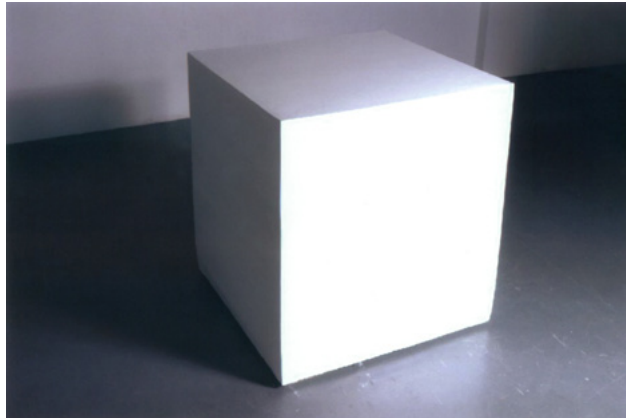
Piers Secunda: You're right, the paint tubes were a first serious foray into casting paint.. as functional objects they were as useful as Oldenburg's soft works. Their usefulness stopped at being pixels in a colour field painting, which was how I used them. (*Painting 2003*) I'm sure that, had they been more functional, they would have played a far more assertive role. The industrial floor paint pulled the castings into a far more useful realm, out of the passive position of stagnant pixels, into an operational sphere. Ultimately I wanted the individual cast paintings to be more than just workable. I wanted them to operate as a vocabulary.

GC: At that time the main context that you seemed to want your work to operate within was that of Western Modernist painting and to contribute to that intellectual and aesthetic discourse. There was a strong emphasis on the purity of the process to only involve paint and in a way the cast tubes of paint could have been as far as you could go as objects of pure painting, but you managed to take it further which culminated in the 1 ton block of white paint, in the shape of a perfect cube. The tubes to me were a kind of single statement of a philosophical game that questioned what painting is, leaving us to grapple with what, when and where defines a painting. With the cube of paint we were pushed into the realms of what might be called a spiritual dimension with its ambitions or focus on creating a perfect object. The fact that it's white adds to the allusions of the transcendental and a state that might represent a clarity of ideology. Of course it could still be read as a kind of game but the sheer scale of the final object and the finish convinced otherwise, and took it into other complex perceptions of contemplation and beyond a simple philosophical game.

PS: The cast paint tubes were a literal interpretation of a basic initial notion: remove the 2d support/restraint from the painting practice, to release the material into the 3D. The most direct way that I could imagine this happening is for the paint to shed the sleeve that contains it- in this instance the tube. In the process casting and treating the paint as a traditional sculptural material. I thought of those tubes at that moment as the furthest I could take the idea: don't do anything with the paint, other than having it replicate itself. A painting without painting.

Better perhaps than even opening the paint pot, and calling it a potential painting, as this way meant there wasn't even a paint pot. Once I thought of removing the cast details and abstracting the finished object, I started to imagine a floor based work, large scale, obelisk like, and perhaps somewhat absurd in a post-minimalist form. Hence the cube work. If it was rendered entirely in paint it would be impossible to read as a standard format painting. The white colour was simply because I felt that any other colour would be a distraction. Working and reworking the sides with plastering tools, to make the flat faces and sharp edges was very meditational. More so than any other work I've made before or since in fact, and I think it shows. (White Manifesto, 2001-2003)

GC: The removal of any support such as the container and the avoidance of using any other support for the paint to stick and adhere to gave it the notion of pure self sufficiency and relative autonomy. It was in many ways as pure a painting as you could get. It's interesting that it had a meditational process for you as with smaller variations of the cube you would smash up any that you felt didn't work with a sledgehammer.



White Manifesto, 2001-2003
Cast custom manufactured acrylic paint
76 x 76 x 76cm

Importantly it marked the beginning of a new type of work too. Violence began to permeate through the process and eventually into the content of your work. When you fragmented the variations of the solid cubes of paint to reconfigure the debris of paint blocks into new works you shattered your process to include the energy of destruction. From here you would make thick sheets of industrial floor paint and hammer them into shards of paint so that you could stack them like geological stratas. The colours were often muted pastel shades of blue, red, yellow and white and along with the containment within a frame or box it subdued and focussed the inherent process of violent creation into formal ideas of showing the edge of painting. But with so many cumulative edges and cross sections it also became the surface.

PS: I started to take the sledgehammer to the sheets and cast blocks of paint in about 2006. I started partly because the shattered line it produced appealed visually, and it involved a type of devastating gesture that seemed to provide more options whilst undoing- increasing the number of useable pieces. The reductive nature of the breaking down of large forms and sheets of paint started to become truly useful, once the sledgehammer developed into the jigsaw, the drill (to allow nut and bolting of pieces together, with cast paint nuts and bolts) tearing of the paint (the torn line looks torn, a texture I'm unable to produce by any other method) etc. All these techniques started to accumulate a "toolbox" of systems, that allowed increased options across the board. The assemblage works that ensued were as a result increasingly complex. Cast forms started to enter the work at the same time: cast hooks, tension clamps, steel cable for tying pieces together, etc. With the cast paint nuts and bolts in use from then on, more often than any other devices...

GC: It was as if you were pulling pieces of a ruin back into a cohesive whole. Self shattered remnants reformed into modernist aesthetic forms held by the paint cast tools. There was a dialogue from the traditional modernist discourse of form and function where the tension between being held together by cast objects like clamps and wire made of paint created spatial dimensions of reformation from destruction. It's as if there is a constant

desire to tame a repressed violence. When you extended your concepts through the direct referencing to political events such as the London 7/7 bombing, through to oil fields and right up to date the Taliban works, the sense of political violence is introduced in a far more confrontational and direct way.

PS: On a biological level, breakdown is how the natural world operates. It's a relentless process of decay and renewal. Since I started to take the paint apart by tearing, drilling, smashing etc, the process of working has moved simultaneously in two directions, expansion and contraction. The assemblage works are a relentless recycling system. A work is rejected and ends up inside another, or the smallest coloured fragments from the studio floor end up in a bucket full of pieces of similar proportions. I take the sledgehammer to a piece of paint to make an unusable piece into something that may be helpful. If a sheet of paint is struck the right way it will break in a certain fashion. A little like flint knapping, it would appear to be close to impossible to make the paint break in a specific way with a hammer, but it can be learnt. The edge and the point of the hammer have different effects. Bullet holes are another form of texture, they make a different type of shattered hole, but it's deceptive because it's curiously beautiful. The Taliban bullet holes are more unnerving because people died whilst the shots were being fired. The violence, at that moment at least, is let loose to the full, so the paint makes a different type of record.

GC: I think that there is also a strong feeling of architecture in your work due to the nature of the material and the objects that you choose to cast. Industrial paint, wires, clamps and even casting directly from walls which are then drilled, twisted and hammered into forms that are both from destruction and reconstruction. Fragments and shapes that suggest debris of a larger structure could indicate a disaster of some kind which you reform into aesthetic structures for contemplation, similar to the way we poetically view ruins. The sense of destruction is taken to an extreme with the bullet works where in one body of work you go to Afghanistan to cast directly from Taliban bullet holes. It's true that it's unnervingly beautiful to see the marks

of a weapon, that with enormous force has left a crater, and possibly passed through someone's body first. Since I am not a ballistics expert I wouldn't know if this was from a Western army's gun or not, either of which delivers a different meaning depending on who you thought of as a danger to your life, society or country. These works are a logical extension from the huge painting based around the 7/7 bombing, (Untitled 2007) and are very interesting due to the nature of compressing a Western abstract painting tradition with the politics of war. The formal aesthetic sensibilities of enjoying the colour and surface of these paint objects, collides with the impact of the processes used to shatter and fragment it, which adds a simultaneous process of reading the work as both something that is beautiful, but also created through destruction.



Untitled 2007
Industrial floor paint and household paints mounted on MDF
147 x 318 x 100 cm



Piers Secunda casting Taliban bullet holes
Kabul, Afghanistan, August 2010

Fatal Attack on Guesthouse in Afghan Capital

The New York Times, 10th August 2010



By ROD NORDLAND and SHARIFULLAH SAHAK

KABUL, Afghanistan — Two suicide bombers wearing explosive vests and carrying firearms and grenades attacked a guesthouse frequented by foreigners in central Kabul, the police said, killing two Afghans.

The attackers apparently failed to break through the fortified gate and instead detonated their vests in the street after shooting and killing the two Afghan guards, witnesses said.

A police criminal investigation officer at the scene, Abdul Ghafar Sahab Zada, said the guards were employees of Hart Security, a British private security company that operated the guesthouse. Efforts to reach a spokesman for Hart Security were unsuccessful.

Guesthouses in Kabul, some of them run by security companies, have periodically been targets for Taliban attackers. There are scores of such residences for the many international employees and aid workers here; most have light security.

The attack took place a short distance away from Flower Street, an area with restaurants and guesthouses popular with foreigners in a neighborhood called Taimani.

A shopkeeper, Mustafa, 30, said he saw the attackers head up the street with backpacks and suicide vests, opening fire on guards stationed outside.

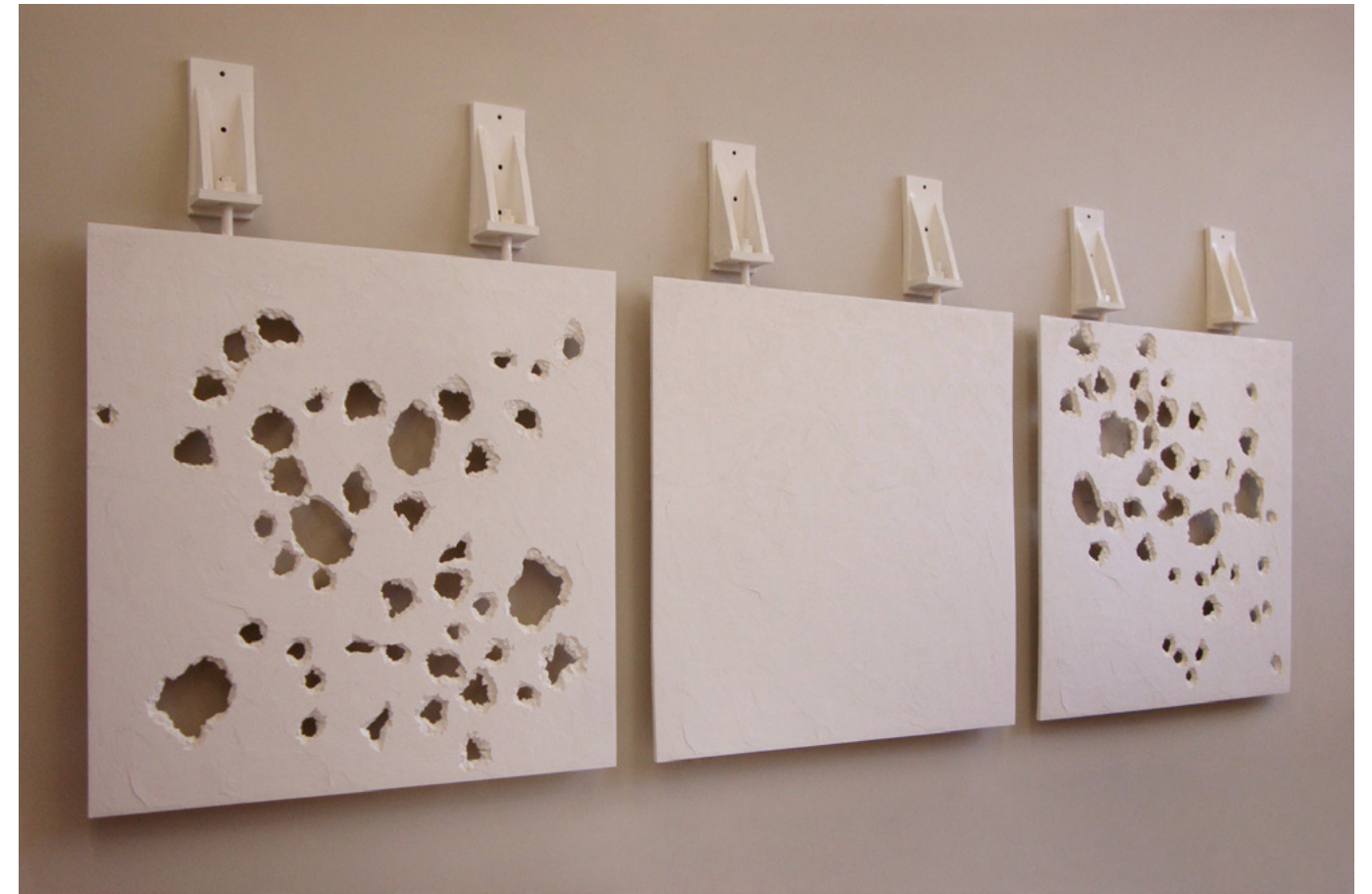
A Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, offered a description of a far more devastating attack. He said that there were 58 foreigners in the guesthouse, that 4 Taliban fighters entered after one detonated his suicide vest and that 23 people were killed.

However, gunfire ceased minutes after the initial attack, and no bodies other than the bombers' and the two Afghan employees' were seen being removed.

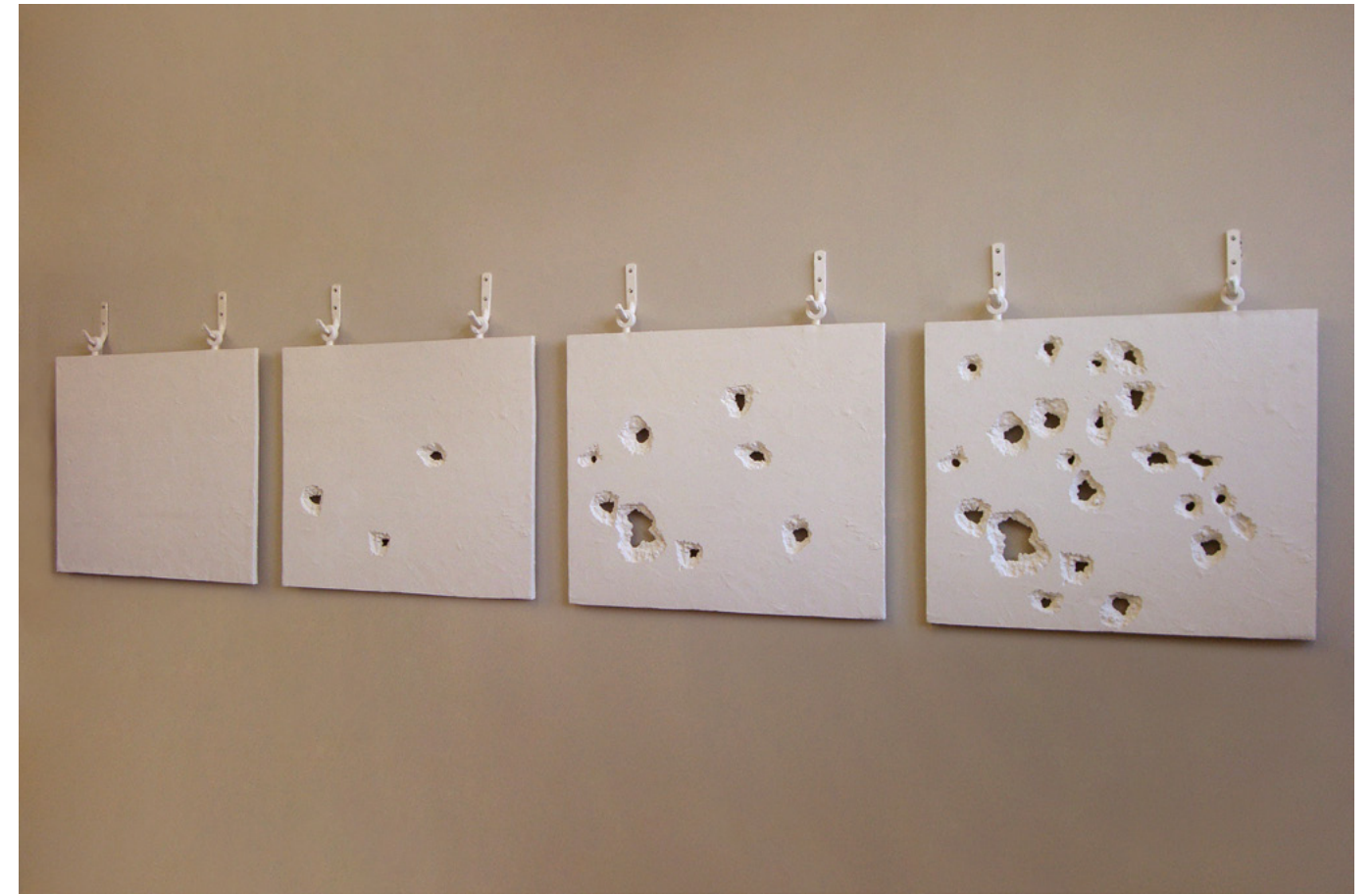
Last October, Taliban attackers managed to enter a United Nations guesthouse, killing eight people, including six foreign staff members. On Feb. 26 this year, simultaneous attacks on two guesthouses killed 16 people, 9 of them Indian citizens, as well as a Frenchman and an Italian.



Taliban Relief Painting, 2011
Cast industrial floor paint with cast paint fixtures
224 x 54 x 8cm



Taliban Relief Painting, 2011
Cast industrial floor paint with cast paint fixtures
285 x 118 x 8cm



Taliban Relief Painting, 2011
Cast industrial floor paint with cast paint fixtures
302 x 80 x 8cm



Taliban Relief Paintings, 2011
Cast industrial floor paint
Each 40.5 x 30.5 x 2cm



Dammam No. 7

A defining moment in time, as we witness the birth of Middle Eastern oil, told through its own medium. Crude oil from Saudi Arabia's Dammam No.7 oil well is silk-screened with an image of the well head as it 'blows in' in 1937. It took 13 years of wildcat struggles to prise any oil from this famous well. A string of eccentric prospectors were sick, desperate for cash, ravaged by blasting desert sands and on the brink of despair.

The moment was noticed by only a few, but changed world politics and economics, possibly forever. The small new desert nation of Saudi Arabia, was thus primed to become the most powerful energy supplier in the world.

The majority of human activity is today facilitated by crude oil, which makes the medium a contender as the ultimate paint. It's the life blood of our world, and here it is used to record its own arrival. The petroleum age has brought mankind much freedom and many technological advances, but has also presented many challenges. This moment in time, recorded here, offers a glimpse of an hour in which a die was cast forever and we plunged deep into our thirst for oil.

Adam Nathan and Piers Secunda, 2011

Adam Nathan is a writer and former war correspondent who has written extensively on energy, energy security and climate change policy. He has advised governments, investment banks and energy companies.

Dammam No.7 Blowing In, 2011
Dammam No.7 crude oil and varnish on industrial floor paint with cast paint nuts and bolts
75 x 67 x 6cm



Illinois Blow Out, 2011
Illinois crude oil and varnish, on industrial floor paint with cast paint nuts and bolts
50 x 37.5 x 6cm



Early Oil Storage Fire, 2011
Canadian crude oil and varnish on industrial floor paint with cast paint nuts and bolts
44.5 x 42 x 6cm



Texas Blow Out, 2011
Texas crude oil and varnish on industrial floor paint with cast paint nuts and bolts
49 x 37 x 6cm



Texas Blow Out, 2011
Texas crude oil and varnish on industrial floor paint with cast paint nuts and bolts
40 x 49.5 x 6cm



Texas Blow Out, 2011
Texas crude oil and varnish on industrial floor paint with cast paint nuts and bolts
51 x 44 x 6cm



Early Oil Storage Fire, 2011
Canadian crude oil and varnish on industrial floor paint with cast paint nuts and bolts
49 x 41 x 6cm



Texas Blow Out, 2011
Texas crude oil and varnish on industrial floor paint with cast paint nuts and bolts
655 x 855 x 6mm



Spindle Top Oil Field, Texas, 2011
Texas crude oil and varnish on industrial floor paint with cast paint nuts and bolts
73 x 52 x 6cm



Traditional Saudi Fortress, 2009
Saudi crude oil and varnish on industrial floor paint with cast paint nuts and bolts
490 x 895 x 6mm

Biography

Over the last fifteen years, Piers Secunda has developed a process for using paint as a sculptural material, free from the traditional restraints of two-dimensional application. This started in the nineties with acrylic and subsequently moved on to include a variety of industrial floor paints, the studio practice revolving increasingly around the casting of paint to record the marks and textures generated by political violence.

in 2008 Piers also started working with crude oil, his interest focused by the understanding that all our daily activities are facilitated by it. With persistence, he was able to make oil behave like paint, to tell the story of its own discovery and importance.

These two practices run in parallel, one derived from a modernist discourse, the other from a raw material not usually viewed as an artistic tool - both recording potent human activities of our time.

Piers Secunda was born in 1976 and studied Painting at Chelsea College of Art. His work has been exhibited in galleries and public spaces in a dozen countries, alongside artists including Anthony Caro and Andy Warhol. His work also hangs in private collections around the world with artists such as Frank Stella and Damien Hirst. He lives and works in London.

www.pierssecunda.com

Acknowledgements

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Catalogue designed and produced by Richard Wilding

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