

Massacre of the Innocents

Painting by Dego

Written by Aissa Martell

Introduction

Looking at Dego's reinterpretation of "The Massacre of the Innocents" I immediately feel a sense of the media, in his work. It is clearly a work inspired by the times. My eye is instantly drawn to the man in the suit, and the dead children beneath him. Though at first glance I do not know who he is, I know he is responsible for the death of the innocents at his feet. The masked figure over his left soldier holds a child above his head, it seems to me, as in sacrifice for whatever power he feels he needs or must maintain. Over the other shoulder of the man in the suit, is a soldier who seems to weep, or yell in agony. Beside him a soldier of Isis, threatens to plunge a knife into a woman's chest. A viewer sits comfortably in his seat, holding a remote control and watching the scene as if it is his entertainment, and the view is fictional. Behind him lies a destroyed city, and an exodus of refugees. Behind the chair of the viewer, a young boy tries to clean blood from the floor, and beneath him, children meant to enjoy their youth, lay dead and injured.

Dego's painting is a reinterpretation of Peter Paul Rubens' "The Massacre of the Innocents". In Rubens' painting, he relates the story of King Herod's execution of all male children, to maintain his role as the King of the Jews. In Dego's painting I see the media as a lens to the political destruction of innocence. The death of childhood virtue, to me, is like leaves falling from a tree, piece by piece, with the recognition of the cruelty that stems from greed, ego and the desire for power. Though the voyeurism of watching from a safe distance is a close reality, loss of hope, despair and the death of child like innocence is universal. Spanning throughout our hearts, there was once a child who believed the world was a different place.

Deigo and Rubens

Peter Paul Rubens was a master of color, sensuality and vitality. His first painting of “The Massacre of the Innocents” is a violent scene of naked soldiers rampaging through Bethlehem, tearing sons out of their mother’s hands and discarding their dead bodies to the ground. Painted between 1611 and 1612, in Antwerp, after spending eight years in Italy, Rubens showcases his inspiration that stems from religion and the angelic realm. A Flemish Baroque artist, Rubens was amongst the most famous in the 17th century. The term “Rubenesque” originates from his love of painting curvy, robust female figures. he was titled “the prince of painters and the painter of princes” by an English Ambassador, due to his many commissions from nobility as well as the church. With an extraordinary production of 2,000 paintings in his lifetime, Rubens was a prolific artist, whose energy, he himself possessed in life, was mirrored in his paintings. “The Massacre of the Innocents” captures a blood thirsty hunt, a desperate fight for survival, and heart wrenching loss. The theme of brute force, religion and the death of innocents as well as innocence, transcend time and is re discovered throughout the ages.

As a child Deigo was always drawing, making images and had a fascination with paintings in books. His grandmother saw the potential of the artist he would become, but due to cultural, social and political environment, that he believes we are all products of, nurturing his true artist self was not a priority, and he spent most of his life ignoring his true artistic nature. Though it took time to break the mold, Deigo was an apprentice at the age of 15, at a stained-glass studio that allowed him to learn a trade related to art. He completed his master’s degree in the guild of Cologne, as well as a Glass Technology degree, at the Glass College in Rheinbach. A contemporary painter, Deigo feels he might be in the process of a morphological transformation, which will infuse more figurative integration to his practice as a painter. Moved by Rubens’ original “The Massacre of the Innocents” and feeling a connection to his life, Deigo unfolds a story of our times.

Rubens was born in Siegen Germany in 1577, while his father was in exile. A year after Peter Paul's birth they returned to Cologne, Dego's hometown, until his father's death in 1589. Upon his father's death his mother moved her three children back to Antwerp where Rubens later became an apprentice as a painter. The idea for the painting came to Dego when he was watching a YouTube documentary of the Thompson's two-year battle to purchase it. After succeeding, they bought it for 76 million dollars, and it now resides at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO). Its display is in a room to itself, which gives testament to the significance of the piece.

As well as a bond by their boyhood home town, Dego is also an immigrant to Canada. He was inspired to re interpret the work of Rubens, a painter that lived 400 years ago, and is one of the great masters of all time. His interpretation is a homage to Rubens for pathing the space and cultivating time, by driving cultural evolution. For Dego art is always a kind of mirror of society, and shows signs of things to come, because he believes artists in general are constantly tuned in and aware of the world around us. Even more so today with the presence of the internet and the absolute overwhelming access to images on all levels.

Central Figures

As I noticed when first seeing Dego's re interpretation, he has incorporated images from the media into his work. He expanded the size of the Rubens painting by a factor of 1.6 because he felt his version had to be larger, to give the impact related to today, and give transparency to what he is trying to say. While keeping some of the dynamics of the narrative and compositional elements in Rubens' painting, Dego keeps his reference to his characters obvious, relating them to contemporary issues. With the pleasure of being able to communicate with Dego, we can look inside the mind of the artist, as he constructs a canvas of our society.

Aissa: Comparing your re interpretation of Rubens' masterpiece, I see some of the central figures remain in the same position, the man on the right raises a child over his head, is nearly naked but his appearance is very different.

Deگو: I turned his upper body and head into a monstrous appearance to symbolize it as inhumane to kill and destroy children, and make them suffer. Since the painting is a witness of our times, I try to make people think of our world, and who we are as a species. In this context I also decided to maintain the central figure of the Rubens' painting the female that has he back turned to the viewer, and is holding a boy in her hand behind her back, defending it, obviously, from the danger that is there. But in my work instead of her protecting the child from a warrior like in Rubens' work, I entered the Ex-Prime Minister of Iraq Nuri Al Maliki, into the narrative. He raped the entire country and facilitated that Isis could move into Iraq in 2014 and caused so much death and suffering, just to force a state of emergency, and then take back power that he had just lost in the election to the current Prime Minister Al-Abadi. Under his regime, after the fall of Sadam Hussein the Iraqi people suffered more atrocities again, and he created a sectarian divide and continued to further hatred and killings only for his financial power and greed. He also surrounded himself with corrupt people who kept the country in despair by stealing wealth the and suppressing the population for their own ill gains.

Aissa: So, in that piece of the painting, you've moved the massacre from Bethlehem to Iraq. What did you do to convey this to the viewer?

Deگو: The woman is, instead of in Rubens painting, a light haired or blonde female, I made her dark haired and more Middle Eastern looking. Rubens dressed her in a beautiful dress, I instead draped her in the Iraqi flag, which Maliki is clutching in his hands, but his face is turned away and his gaze is oblivious to the drama and suffering around him while the woman is grabbing at his face as a gesture of defense, as well as accusation. Her right shoulder is tilting outward towards the viewer as to almost exit the pictorial space and therefore I

tried to pull the viewer into the scene a bit more like it feels in Rubens Painting.

Aissa: My eye was drawn to Maliki when first seeing the painting. Though he does not look like the brutal warrior in like Rubens' painting, he is the person behind the brutality, the Herod who ignites the flame and sends in the troops. In your version, Maliki has caused the destruction as well as opened the flood gates for Isis.

Dego: The other woman that I also maintained close to the Rubens painting is in my work attacked by an Isis terrorist and this represents, to me, not only the violent act but symbolically an attack on our western civilization that is a part of Isis and many fundamental Islamists ideology.

Aissa: Your painting takes place all over the globe, with scenes from various places telling the story. I get a strong sense of the media in your version of "The Massacre of the Innocents" what images from the media did you focus on?

Dego: I purposely chose images of children that are either dead or wounded, that went through the media on several occasions, and that millions of people have seen worldwide and therefore these images are familiar to a lot of people. It is also a reference to the fact that media imagery and the internet is by now an integral part of contemporary image making in painting as well as in other disciplines, and in my opinion, are also a reason why we see painting as strong as ever even though it was declared "dead" so many times. Today I think we experience painting in a much broader way than ever before, and I, a contemporary painter living today am no exception to this phenomenon.

Taking a Closer Look

Looking further into Dego's painting, the difference between Dego's massacre and Rubens' is in the narrative as well. There are many stories being told here, though the message stays the same. A man holds his dead or dying child, a young boy is smoking something and

holds what looks like a gun, but it could be a toy as well. There are children dead and alive, and one of the most noticeable differences is the man watching TV in what I would assume is his favorite couch. These images are painted in a contemporary manner. The father holding his child looks to me as if he were painted as if he were on fire, the man watching TV is made of paper mache, and there are splashes of paint on the canvas. These different scenes look like an overabundance of stimulation from the media. As if I am with my remote control flipping through channels and seeing the stories on different channels. The characters may have a different story to tell, yet the theme remains symmetric.

Aissa: You use abstract images to relay your message, what was your thinking behind your choices?

Deigo: There are symbolic and metaphorical meanings attached to my choice of figures and the part they play in the narrative of this work. For example, the boy soldier in the right lower corner holding onto his gun that I morphed into a green rubber toy gun, he is staring straight ahead at the viewer, holding a smoking cigarette in his hand, and obviously represents a human being that is neither a man nor is he a child anymore. He might have already killed another human being and looks smug, but also lost because he has no real place in this world. On the right behind him in the dark, is the image of a little girl, she is hurt and looks shell shocked at the viewer.

Aissa: What does the man holding the child represent, and why is it abstracted?

Deigo: On the left side of the boy holding the Gun, is the grieving father that I abstracted or painted in a way that is more abstract expressionistic to push the sense of grief and anger in this way. He is holding the body of probably his child boy that is staring at the viewer as well with broken eyes that have just lost their life, and you can see the double side of his head like his soul is leaving his body.

Aissa: The most noticeable difference in your painting's narrative as compared to Rubens' is the figure in the chair.

Deگو: The figure in the chair is a metaphor for us western societies looking at the human suffering through our TV sets, and by the click on the remote control it is all going away. I purposely did not paint the figure except for the head and his hands, but created it through newspaper print collage. Whereas collage is a part of my artistic practice, it is also a metaphor on how much the media influences us and our behavior as we are manipulated by it. On his chest is a particular section that was of a sexual nature and still has the word “seduction” still readable, also to indicate that there is a voyeuristic element to the news and watching tragedy and suffering while in a safe place. You can also see the stream of refugees from the destroyed cities appearing under his arm. Images we are all familiar with and that are part of a brutal reality, of parts of the world, that don’t make any sense to me.

Aissa: The children beneath the man sitting in the chair are dead, injured and active.

Deگو: The young boy sitting shell shocked next to a ball with a dead girl behind and another boy a bit higher up pushing blood around the floor in one of the many make shift hospitals in the places of conflict.

The War Rages On

The cityscape to the left, in the background, is modern buildings, and resembles the architecture of my neighborhood in NYC. The sky is at dusk and fades from pink to orange to yellow, a foreshadowing that the approaching of night may conceal or heighten the chaos. The stillness there alludes to the silence of a destroyed and abandoned city, while just around the corner the violence rages on.

Aissa: The city in the background lays quiet, and destroyed, yet remains close to the turmoil.

Deگو: I stayed within the Rubens compositional ideas by placing the open view into a destroyed cityscape to the left and into the distance, similar as in Rubens’ painting. The soldier with his distraught expression between the figure of the politician is also purposely placed in this position because that’s how it works, politics and an antagonist

always employ and enable the military response which I painted with kind of an abstract environment behind to signify the chaos.

Aissa: Can you tell me of the other evils the politician represents in the painting.

Deگو: On the lower left side of the politician we see money that I also integrated as a collage object and stained with red to emphasize that it is blood money and I put it in a place, right behind the flag clutching hands of Maliki. I also portrayed his hands as rather “beefy” because in my research I found out that he was a sort of butcher in his previous life, in exile in Iran and Jordan and I liked that as an image.

Contemporary Versus Figurative

First and foremost, Deگو is a contemporary artist, using his talents; he expresses himself and the world around him, as he sees it. His spectrum of work includes paintings and sculptures, using materials such as glass, metal, wood and stone. In his reinterpretation of “The Massacre of The Innocents” he uses both contemporary and figurative expression to tell a story. With both abstract images and realistic figures, we witness his view of globally shaped modern society.

Aissa: What is it like for a contemporary artist to reinterpret a figurative work, especially by one of the greats?

Deگو: I was contemplating for almost two Years, to do this Painting based on the Rubens work, and it is also part of my belief, that I could not do this Painting without Rubens and all the other great Masters of the past having done what they did. In a way it is almost natural to say, for me that I can be inspired by their work and rightfully so. At the same time, I was trying to also create a work that is truthful to my time and space that I’m living in right now and be Authentic. I don’t really consider myself as a figurative Painter in the sense that most People understand it, but I do use the figure or “figuration” wherever I feel I want to in many different ways. In general, I pursue in my work

whatever interest's me and things that I want to explore, I don't really think about adhering to a very strict stylistic program that becomes then very easy a variation of a theme. But having now done this painting which is a very figurative work of course it might put me in to the figurative category simply because that's what People like to do.

Aissa: Do you think the contemporary world will see this as a contemporary piece or a figurative piece, since you are integrating the two?

Dego: Well it is both of course, it is a Contemporary work because it deals with current issues that are increasingly sensitive to all People in the world, but also in the way that I specifically used imagery that already has been seen thru the media and the Internet as well as a source material for the Painting which is a contemporary practice for many Artists today and I'm no exception. I transformed some of the figures in a symbolic way to create a narrative but still tried to stay a very close similar compositional dynamic course to connect to the Rubens Painting and cross the times so to speak.

Aissa: How does this work speak to your own identity, culturally and as a contemporary artist?

Dego: That is a very interesting question and I'm not sure if I can fully answer it at this time because I still struggle with it myself. Many times, I'm told that my work looks and feels European and it might, but if it does it is not a conscious thing, it just might be who I am, and it comes out that way since I am European by Birth. The Painting however does say the one thing that I think was the driving force for me behind it and that is that I, as an Artist have a skill and a voice that enables me to send a strong message out in to the World that People have feelings about and can understand and Identify with as well as becoming more aware of, and that is a very special power and at the same time a freedom that is very unique to artists only.

Final Phase

Deigo's work is a compelling and emotional scene on the state of the world. The subjects are images we have all seen, that are hard to witness and process emotionally as well as make logical sense of, if that is at all possible. As a writer these subjects are difficult to tackle, and express without delving deep into the heart, and head to map out our thoughts and feelings held within. As artists, there is a duty to translate emotion and reality honestly, to bring forth. The task is not easy and requires growth on a daily basis. Growth that is revelational goes hand in hand with the pain. As a citizen of the world, I feel grateful to artists like Deigo who take on the complicated and emotional journey to bring this work to the world. In the final analysis, Deigo's "Massacre of the Innocents" compels us to think, feel and untangle our own emotions and cognition of the environment in which we live.

Deigo: I worked for 18 months on this painting, on and off, because it was a struggle for me to make this work, and giving the subject, as well as the reference to Rubens' painting justice, while at the same time creating a work of art that could stand on its own. My goal was to make the viewer think about my intentions to express my feelings about our world that we live in, and therefore using the only vehicle that I can possibly use to create that moment of contemplation and reflection, because that is the only and great power that I have as an artist.

