

Artist captures war in the Middle East as seen by children

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U.S. photographer Brian McCarty wants you to see the horrors of war, but through the eyes of a child.

There is no blood or mangled bodies. Instead, there are pink dolls and blue tanks. A bird from a video game represents bombs falling from the sky. An elephant symbolises a lost sibling.

McCarty's most recent work was set in Mosul where thousands of civilians were caught up in the fight to oust Islamic State. Social workers say children who witnessed the violence will suffer trauma for years.

He uses art-therapy drawings and interviews with the children to depict their accounts using toys.

"I harness that to tell their stories and give it to an audience that normally maybe wouldn't look," said McCarty, 43.

The children draw the horror, the loss, and the harm they suffered. Often, their accounts are presented with symbols which McCarty then recreates with toys. The result is a mix of the realistic and the absurd, with a hint of pop culture.

McCarty describes it as "reality with a dose of sugar".

"It is from that childhood innocence, that very pure place of telling the story but not telling the story, and that is what is so powerful," he said.

"People will connect to this. Especially for Western audiences where it is so easy to cast people in war zones ... as 'the others'," McCarty said in an interview in Beirut.

"It gets past that because these are just toys. They are just plastic totems of real people."

A boy taking part in one session near Mosul in May drew an adult elephant with two calves. While he coloured in the parent and one of the calves, he refused to colour in the second which he said represented his dead sibling.

In his recreation, McCarty placed a toy elephant in a pool of dirty water standing behind a calf. He then superimposed a faded image of the second calf to represent the dead sibling.

"ONE STEP FROM REALITY"

A recurring image in the children's drawings is the yellow "Angry Bird", a deadly character in a popular video game. For the children, it came to represent bombs. McCarty said it was "just one step from the reality".

A girl who witnessed Islamic State militants stone a woman to death depicted the scene by drawing the shape of a woman only to bury her with circles until she was barely visible.

McCarty's depicted that with a doll dressed in a headscarf and robe being pelted with stones. A shadow of a man in the foreground represents her executioner.

McCarty said the process of visualising the drawings takes days. Once he has chosen an image and found the toys to recreate it, his work on the ground has sometimes put him danger.

On his first visit to Mosul in 2017, McCarty said Islamic State snipers tried to shoot him twice as he arranged a toy tank on the ground near a destroyed car.

His last visit to Mosul was in May.

"I did this entire set up in the old city, the smell of death everywhere. When we were

done we realized there were a skull and a body a metre away, the beard still intact."

"I did this toy photo next to a dead ISIS fighter still in the rubble. That is the weird, bizarre ... the reality of the project."

McCarty said the initial motivation for his work came from his father, a Vietnam war veteran who rarely spoke about the war. His work, which began in 1996 in Croatia, has also taken him to Gaza, Lebanon and Iraq.

"I went into this project from a very academic, artistic point of view and all of that of went out the window when I saw a little girl colouring pools of blood for the first time."