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**SCOTT WATERS** received his BFA from The University of Victoria, his MFA from York University, and served as an Infantry soldier in the Canadian Forces. Recent solo exhibitions include Rodman Hall, The Art Gallery of South Western Manitoba, and The Alternator Gallery. Publications include *the illustrated memoir*, *The Hero Book* (Conundrum Press), *the anthology*, *Embedded on the Homefront* (Heritage House), with features in *Border Crossings*, *Public*, and *Legion Magazine*. A two-time participant in the Canadian Forces Artist Program, Waters has received funding from The Ontario Arts Council and The Canada Council for the Arts. He was recently awarded The Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal. Waters is represented by LE Gallery, Toronto.

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# CIRCLES AND ZEROES

BY DAVID BALZER

“No assholes ever die,” Scott Waters ironically avows, referring to memorials that are constructed for fallen soldiers that “go through the motions of honouring someone.” Waters shares an underreported, fascinating anecdote: relatives of the combat dead are “regularly confronted by people who do well-meaning portraits” of them. Among other things, the phenomenon broaches some fundamentals of realist aesthetics. Can portraiture heal? Can art process death by sheer virtue of representing what it has taken away? Can the act of creating around trauma serve to connect the artist to a stranger who’s experienced it?

Waters’ answers to these questions would probably be “no” or at least “I don’t think so.” The artist is not a cynic; he is a philosopher, however, and thus a born doubter. Works in Waters’ new exhibition *ROTOZERO* are not homogenous: they comprise, he says, a kind of garage sale—fragments of experience. Known as a figurative painter, Waters here combines non-figurative work with photographs, text panels and patches: the cumulative result of his second stint as a selected artist with the Canadian Forces Artists Program (CFAP), which had him spend a total of two months with a unit from CFB Edmonton (Waters’ old battalion, in which he served 20 years ago), both in Alberta and Afghanistan, in 2011.

Death obviously surrounds the works in *ROTOZERO*, but only nebulously. Death, as we are often told, is part of a contemporary experience of war only in complex, fleeting, fitful ways. The artist sent to locate it is thus not dissimilar from the soldier who goes out with the anticipation of facing it. Bathos, it seems, is a common result. The title of the exhibition is a way into this. *ROTOZERO* is the first manifestation of any new mission. The first “roto” isn’t one, but zero—curiously, negation as instigation—and the implication in military culture is,

according to Waters, that “it’s going to be fucked up.”

Since war training is about simulating experience, it contains qualities that relate inherently to creativity. The push-and-pull between what is anticipated and what is lived, for instance, the blurring between vicarious and actual experiences, generates, as *ROTOZERO* attests, a series of metaphors and metonyms. And so Waters’ main themes in the exhibition are repetition and twinning. Within this is, as well, a circling or even an orbiting: the journey towards war, literal and conceptual, is not straight or progressive—even if you never get to come back home. And war makes its own meanings, “closed systems,” according to Waters, “that are read differently from the outside.”

The discovery of the body of an anonymous civilian contractor, found decapitated in a cave after disappearing with Afghan employees during off-hours, is the subject of Waters’ diptych *Cautionary Tale*. One work depicts the entranceway to that cave—which, for the literarily inclined, might recall, in its sublime, muted darkness, the fateful (and fictional) Marabar Caves in E.M. Forester’s *A Passage to India*—and another, the shack where the contractor lived, which, after his death, was made into an *ad hoc* memorial, with the lights being kept on through the night, and no one inhabiting it. “There’s nothing noble about that shack,” says Waters. “It’s a way to remind guys not to fuck up.” He notes that the cave was built by the Soviets during their time in Afghanistan, and both images, devoid of figures, suggest shelters that, ultimately, and despite their built purposes, could not protect.

So, not noble then, but surely existential. *ROTOZERO* also tells the story of Master Corporal Byron Greff—the first Canadian soldier to die in Afghanistan since the country ended its combat role there—who

returned to CFB Trenton, Ontario, last November in a customary repatriation service after being killed in a bomb attack on an armoured military bus. A month later, Waters went to Kabul for twenty-four days as part of the CFAP and witnessed Greff’s legacy. Waters later made two paintings pertaining to him: one depicts a C17 on the tarmac at CFB Trenton, an allusion to all Canadians who died in Afghanistan, as Trenton is both a site of departure and repatriation; another, with the Whistlerian title *Nocturne: Tracers (for Greff)*, shows tracer ammunition fired by Greff before his death. *ROTOZERO*’s symbolic mascot, furthermore, is a cartoon elephant on a coin produced by the soldiers on the tour, likely as an off-colour memento to Greff. The cartoon elephant sucks its own cock, adopting the pose of the famous *ouroboros*—the archetypal image of the snake eating its own tail that, in the words of Carl Jung, “fertilizes himself and gives birth to himself.” The elephant is accompanied by a motto, “It Is What It Is,” which, on a poster Waters has generated for his exhibition, is translated into Pashto: “Dagga tse, dagga da.”

The *ouroboros* attains a feckless, Sisyphean resonance here: things are done because they’re done. “Fertilizing himself” becomes masturbation brought on by loneliness and boredom. (Another painting in *ROTOZERO*, *Contrails: The Elephant and the Snake*, is a more visually elegant embodiment of this concept, though there are of course formal affinities between contrail and semen traces). It is apposite that Waters’ coin also functions as a beer-bottle opener. The tedium of the combat (non-)experience both mirrors and includes that cyclicity of drunkenness—take one down, pass it around.

In addition to photographs of rehearsed maneuvers in Alberta, and fabric patches—some of which Waters designed himself and had made in Afghanistan, a gesture that has ties with punk-rock-fashion nihilism—*ROTOZERO* is defined by text panels.

“There were limits to what I was trying to say via a static image,” Waters says. But the panels are not reportage. In *Absolute Zero*, Waters evocatively describes his experience landing in Kabul in the C17—so large that it is not affected by turbulence and so loud, due to its mechanisms, that passengers have to wear earplugs. The ringing “music” as Waters describes it, and the place where he finds himself, are non-imagistic. Literally sense-deprived, he is between two poles and forced into a space that is inherently anti-monumental, one brought about because of the peculiar circumstances of war, “Nowhere.” “Detached from the poverty of our previous lives,” he writes, “from the peril, tedium and rush of the coming months, in this place you might begin again from absolute zero.”