

THE SAATCHI GALLERY MAGAZINE

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# ART & MUSIC

## The Great British Art Debate

questions and answers inside...

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Andrew Gilbert, 'The storming of the Dervish  
zareba, 1898 (Second Sudan War)' (2010)  
Courtesy Collection Toje, Oslo

# Death <sup>or</sup> Glory, Boys

PATRICIA ELLIS

Scottish artist **Andrew Gilbert** is invariably spoken of in guarded whispers that insinuate both awe and terror: a great man, an idealist, a hero of Empire, crusader of Christianity and commerce; a decorated commander, for some time now feared AWOL, lost to the rapture of jungle fever and juju. It's rumoured he lives at a southern African outpost, so deep in the forest it can't be found, where he's revered by the natives as a vengeful, monstrous god, expelling a beautiful truth in horror. Others report sightings in The Crimea and India, of a gaunt-faced, skeletal man, bathed in blood, war weary, syphilitic and mad – but never without an officer's decorum – enjoying tea in the blistering afternoon sun under the fearsome attentions of servants, conversing profound matters with magi. It was after considerable effort that I was finally able to locate him in Eastern Europe engaged on a temporary campaign, completing a residency for the glory of Queen and country at the MeetFactory cultural centre in Prague. He sits imperious and caffeine-twitchy in the dank shadows of his studio, surrounded by prized, ghastly relics, mumbling of abominable prophecies and divinely bestowed visions with a Kurtz-like semi-lucidity.









Andrew Gilbert, 'British National Gallery' (2009)  
Courtesy Collection Toje, Oslo

Andrew Gilbert, 'Andrew's  
Honeymoon in India, 1857' (2010)  
Poster for solo show at Gallery  
Kabinet T, Zlin, Czech Republic

*"A man chosen to wield life  
and death on the battlefield  
must be an artist, if he isn't,  
he is simply a murderer."*

— Shaka Zulu, in the TV series *Shaka Zulu*, 1986

What is your interest in Colonialism? How did you get started? What areas are you specifically interested in and why? And most importantly, whose side are you on?

Military history was my main interest as a child. I have been drawing the Zulu War since I first saw the film *Zulu* (with Michael Caine), [and learned about] the Jacobite Rebellion, and hand-painted toy soldiers. When I can't sleep I imagine I am surrounded by fellow soldiers in identical uniform and we are all safe and warm together. I studied Primitivism in Modern Art under Elizabeth Cowling (Senior Lecturer in Fine Art, University of Edinburgh). We went to the African masks section of the museum in Edinburgh – I loved to draw these objects as they seemed alive. There were many blonde English girls in the class, and I saw their reflections in the vitrines. I wanted to put them behind the glass and hammer nails into them and make them the disgusting primitive objects; just as I wanted to recreate the panels of paintings destroyed in The Reformation and draw a link between the idols of Europe and the idols destroyed by Christian missionaries in Africa. There is nothing better than imagining rank after rank of Redcoats with white helmets in a brown landscape, and being one of them drinking coffee around the campfire. So it is sad to kill them every day in my drawings, but I have no mercy for the modern armies. Shaka Zulu was also like Christ, just as the lost officer believes he is the Messiah.

*"The Horror! The Horror!"* are Kurtz's famous last words in Conrad's novel *Heart Of Darkness*; your imagery is unconscionable, but also humorously sympathetic. Is the violence in your work critical? Is it a purging or purification, an unchecked self-indulgence, or a simply a truth of the human condition?

The violence is essential. The subject demands it. The Zulus charged Gatling guns carrying cow-skin shields. In Belgium today you can buy little chocolate, hand-shaped snacks, referring to piles of hacked off hands

in the Congo. I drew, but I did not invent the image of a baby ripped from the womb of its mother and shot through the head or stamped to death. Also, I love the contrast of beautiful elaborate uniforms with total carnage. Drawing a spear in a face, or a woman impaled on a stake (the Zulu capital punishment) certainly makes one feel more relaxed, but so does a simple uniform study or drawing the exotic flowers I encounter in India. It depends on my mood and on how many coffees [I've had], but as you said, humour is important as well.

How you approach your practice is extremely involved. Your work stems from an evolving fiction that you invent and continuously embellish, it's like an ongoing visual novel. Do you see yourself more as an author or artist? Can you give a synopsis of the 'story'? How autobiographical is it?

There really was a Major General Andrew Gilbert Wauchope killed in South Africa in 1899 in the war against the Boers. Perhaps he did not die and he headed off to build his kingdom in the timeless jungles of Africa, where he meets Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, who is already mad with malaria, and they paint beautiful black woman together all day. They discuss Zola, and tell each other how great their drawings are, while Emil Nolde cooks their prawn-flavoured dinner.

I am trying to write the story as a book titled *The Man Who Would Be Queen* ("The best book I have ever read." – Shaka Zulu). It's like the film with Michael Caine and Sean Connery [John Huston's *The Man Who Would Be King*], but a young and beautiful Ingrid Pitt will play me. I've already made posters for the book and a film version. The handwritten transcript is a sacred object, found by one of the 17th Lancers after the battle of Ulundi. It describes my journey to Jerusalem by foot in Part One, and, in Part Two, I go on to Afghanistan where I die in my red uniform and white gloves. I am always veiled like Mohammed in Persian manuscripts. Sometimes my helmet is so large – especially on Friday nights – that ten bird servants have to walk behind me and support it with poles. Everyone is drinking coffee in my drawings, as I drink no alcohol now and I am





working with adverts for Paterson's Camp Coffee; so some elements are very autobiographical. It really is my dream to have a garden where I can build an entire army, a British version of the Chinese emperors' army, with many different regiments, cavalry and artillery. But in the lost officer's outpost he must also build companions against loneliness. In the American Civil War, fake cannons were constructed to deceive the Union as to the strength of the Southern numbers, so my officer builds his army to stop being murdered in the night at the hands of savages.

Your work spans drawing and sculpture, both of which you approach from a meta-narrative position. Can you tell us a bit about how you develop your 'scenarios' and how this is addressed through making and materials? Perhaps you could explain your last show?

When I visit an ethnographic or military museum I get a feeling of sickness and overexcitement; a feeling that I must possess these objects, which I do by rebuilding them. I try to fuse the primitive with the European military uniform, especially the Napoleonic uniforms; they have feathers and hair like the Zulu warriors' costumes. The uniforms look handmade, as they should embody the texture of African fetish

sculptures – hence the cabbages and teabags – but also they should look like they were built by the General himself: the officers he invents to hold conference and study maps with. Every morning he will stand on his balcony and inspect the vast army standing in formation beneath his colonial mansion, which is also full of handmade black woman servants. One of them is hoovering now, so I start to lose concentration, and I have not had enough coffee... The mansion is full of drawings, which the General hangs with excitement, high on brandy, believing them to be photographs of his past glories.

What's most exciting for me is simply the idea of a handmade empire somewhere in the jungles of Africa. I am happy to know nothing of modern day African geography (as this would ruin the first part of my book). I am there to find prehistoric cave paintings that predict the 17th Lancers riding down Zulus and screaming "Death or glory, boys!" and trees covered in vaginas of the Virgin Mary and wounds of Christ, which I drink from to keep me alive. I prefer this image of Africa to modern motorways and Shakira's breasts at the World Cup opening (unless I hack them off and nail them to sides of the Great War Helmet that comes out of the cupboard, to be worn for very violent drawings, when I hear things that anger me on the BBC World Service).



When I heard I would be in Prague I decided I would, in my mind, be farther east: in India in 1857 on my honeymoon, in the year of the failed mutiny against British rule. I set off with a European woman (she was killed at the Cawnpore massacre), but fell in love with a local, Lady Rajbaj, a rebel leader. There, Shaka Zulu and Napoleon sent me messages. In the Last Supper sculpture, the General is Christ at the centre, with a knife in his face, from which hangs a flying carrot, the Holy Ghost descending upon the Sacred Pineapple, which rests on the head of Shaka Zulu. The disciples are the General's officers. The link between colonialism, Christian missionaries, The Crusades, Jerusalem as the body of a sacred woman raped by the presence of foreign invaders, and Christian propaganda against Islam is important as background to my work.

Your practice entwines history, pop culture, and fiction, and draws from an extremely wide range of references – from military memorabilia and Victorian advertising to Boy's Own adventures and cult TV shows such as *Shaka Zulu*. How do you conduct your research? What's the most offensive thing you've ever come across? Is 'good old fashioned' racism still inherent in popular culture? What are the ongoing or contemporary consequences of this kind of imperial lore or romanticism? What makes your work relevant to now?

I make sketches at various museums; the National Army Museum in London is a palace of treasures. If I see a Zulu shield or a mask I love, I draw myself in the museum marrying the sacred object. My library is constantly growing and I have now found a shop in Berlin that only sells

books on military history. I have a core set of books I constantly return to and I am often sent images by deranged collectors who think I can use a quote about the death of Gordon of Khartoum (which I can). As I'm based in Germany, I rely on the internet for the British war films. My research on the subject of the 17th Lancers continues and I need an original jacket and helmet for my funeral attire.

I published a small book of poems with Possible Press, in Berlin, titled *The Death of the Ten Wives of Andrew the Zulu Queen*. I began with a quote from a book about the genocide in Rwanda, which answers your question about offensive sources. This, and a badge from the German Namibia campaign with the slogan "Willst du nicht mein brueder sein Schlag ich dir den Schaedel ein" ["If you are not one of us I will smash your skull in"], which I used for my Volkswagen Namibia advert: a cart full of brown, Holocaust-esque corpses and a soldier smashing the skull of a native as pictured on the Namibian badge.

I'm from Edinburgh, which is the whitest, blandest porridge on earth, and have lived in Germany for eight years with no television, so I'm not an expert on contemporary culture, but I think the enemy is still there, even if it hides behind a veil made of Shakira's breasts. The machetes must still be turned upon the masters: coffins are coming back from Afghanistan draped in Union Jacks and carried by Redcoats, the battle for the sacred breast milk of Jerusalem continues; the Shaka Zulu statue at the Durban airport, portraying him as a benevolent herdsman, has been removed, and, as I write, I am using [Robert] Mugabe's head as an ashtray. So I think it is relevant, but I also think that fruit is sacred and should not be eaten.

'Andrew's death in Afghanistan, 1842' (solo exhibition)

WILKINSON GALLERY, LONDON – PROJECT SPACE, 16TH OCTOBER 2010

POWER GALLERY, HAMBURG, NOVEMBER 2010

'ANDREW, EMPEROR OF AFRICA', GALLERY POLAD-HARDOUIN, PARIS, JANUARY 2011

Andrew Gilbert, 'Waiting for Daddy' (2010)  
Courtesy Ten Haaf Projects, Amsterdam



Andrew Gilbert, 'These colours don't run' (2009)  
Courtesy Ten Haaf Projects, Amsterdam