**Ian Howard** and **Xing Junqin, Bombed Bridge Dandong (Korean War-damaged crossing, China to North Korea).** Photograph: Ian Howard.

# *Lines Of Connection*

*Borders speak to the diversity of human activity in the face of the state and international relations as well as the irritations of officialdom and state sanctions, barriers to free expression and migration. They are there, too, like society's myriad odd rules, to be challenged, witnesses and relics of human history but still connecting lives, experiences, and hopes.*

By Brigitta Olubas

**Ian Howard** and **Xing Junqin, Japanese Bridge at Hekoucun (Japanese occupation – China and North Korea – bridge, bombed during Korean War).** Photograph: Ian Howard.

Over the past half century, Australian artist Ian Howard has produced artworks comprising installations and rubbings of military vehicles. Perhaps his most iconic work, held by the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), is his 1975 rubbing of Enola Gay, the B-29 Super Fortress Bomber from which the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima 30 years earlier. This work was produced by rubbing black wax crayon over paper taped on to the aircraft body that was then in Norfolk, Virginia, in the United States; the plane has since been fully restored and is, somewhat controversially, now on display in the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC. Equally iconic, but with its original object now only a ghostly trace, is Howard's rubbing of the Berlin Wall, made in 1974 and now held by the National Gallery of Australia. The site photographs of Howard negotiating with the West German police were originally exhibited with the work. They are grippingly expressive, suggesting the narrative drama of a John le Carré film; however, the artwork itself only hints at the knotted story behind its deceptively banal appearance, announcing itself as a generality rather than a specificity; *a wall* rather than that wall or this wall—that is to say, as something indistinctive rather than a very particular political edifice or historic monument. And while the work speaks to the literal trace of the wall's materiality through the work of rubbing, it nonetheless also suggests to us something primarily ghostly, immaterial, unreal, or impossible.

**Ian Howard, Berlin Wall**. Photograph: Ian Howard.

**Ian Howard, Berlin Wall,** site work. Photographs: Susan Dobinson.

A further layer of spectral can be discerned in the method of producing the work, as critic James Gleeson pointed out: when he described the rubbing as a process which subtracts "the actual presence of the object and leaves us with a kind of ghost image, a residue which summons up the reality of the object."[1] For Howard there is something compelling and immediate about the process of rubbing, particularly in the context of globalized mass media and digital images, one consequence of which is "a devaluing of images. The image transferred by a rubbing only appears in your presence because that physical piece of paper or canvas was once on the object. Immediacy is one result. And in terms of reality—if you have the image of the object on the canvas, it must exist."

Further, he observes: "The import, power and poignancy of messages on walls is difficult to represent satisfactorily either through photography or conventional painting and graphic art. The rubbing technique, transferring the wall image onto paper or canvas with wax and paint, seems best suited for capturing the essence of these significant surfaces, signs, and locations. The reason for this is partly because of the very direct, one-to-one relationship between the surface being represented (the stone wall, for example) and the material of representation (the paper or canvas), partly because the artist more easily has a direct vision of the scale and structure of the graphic message and partly because of the 'on location' imperative and the insights this brings, when undertaking a rubbing directly from a place of significance."

**Ian Howard, Enola Gay,** exhibited at AGNSW. Photograph: Ian Howard.

Rubbing is thus a way of generating a visual form of the haptic, of visualizing its immediacy and bringing it into the orbit of the viewer, or the other way around. Gazing at *Enola Gay* and *Berlin Wall* sees us swept back in time; the works trace a line between the conflagration of the end of "world" war and the materiality of détente, the holding pattern of the Cold War. In the course of this, the enormity of the historical event or situation vanishes from view and we are left gazing at the remains, the trace of technology and the machinery of war.

Further, rubbing works to humanize, or even domesticate these edifices—their dimensions and tempo-


**Xing Junqin, Hero Train.** Photograph: Xing Junqin.

ralities come in a sense to mirror those of the viewer, bringing the vastness and impermeability of a border wall or the deadly fire power and size of a fighter plane down to our own scale and level, permitting us to see or imagine ourselves in them, in relation to them. In the process, we come to see and imagine ourselves as military beings, engulfed in a world of military technology. Howard has talked about the ways his works push us to cross that line dividing domestic or civilian lives from the military and state apparatuses that range about them: "Advanced [military] technologies … have at once been most separate from our daily and conscious lives while at the same time they have existed as a seminal determinant of our collective experience either as a precursor to political ideology, a measure of national ambition, or as the carrier of imaginable and unimaginable threat." Thus he argues that civilian populations have "a civilizing influence … upon constrained, often hostile, militarized and dangerous sites."

An awareness of the early rubbing works by Ian Howard is essential as we approach the works in *Borderline Art: Ian Howard and Xing Junqin*, at Watters Gallery, Sydney,[2] first for the ways the rubbing practice has developed over the intervening decades, but also because of the continuities that can be traced across this body of work. Further, for Australian viewers, Howard's focus on walls and borders resonates strongly within the context of current conversations around "border protection," raising persistent and vexing national anxieties around the porous boundaries of the (island) nation. Howard provokes and invites such readings quite explicitly, insisting that the domain of the military itself foregrounds "the relationships formed by Australians with their neighbors in a local, regional, and international sense," and that this interest is a crucial point for civilian engagement with the military: "My interest in military subjects is based on an understanding that within the relationship between the 'public' and the 'military' sectors lies the possibility of another day, another week, or another generation for people on this planet."

*Borderline Art* thus brings a global project—understood as both the military edifices and the artworks—into the ambit of the local and regional. More particularly, as well as directing attention to Australia's geographical location in the Asia-Pacific, *Borderline Art* builds on and makes explicit some of the collaborative links that have been established between Howard and Colonel Xing Junqin of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, focusing on what Howard calls "the muddied waters, the porous and sometime perilous nature of the border between China and North Korea." Over the past decade, Howard and Xing have worked separately and collaboratively on a number of projects around the visibility and materiality of national military and security deployments, scrutinizing the scope and the limits, the points where the bodies of citizens encounter the force and impact of the state. Their collaboration itself marks a crucial point of international connection, an instance of civilian/military encounters that take place in and around formal and official policy and protocols.

The exhibition comprised ten large rubbings by Howard, undertaken along the lengths of the Yalu River (north/south) and Tumen River (east/west) and a larger number of paintings by Xing Junqin, including small ink-and-watercolor works on paper. The collaboration brings a narrative with it, a story about civilian access to military and state apparatuses, and about tactics and shifting paths, individuals working around and toward collaboration.

In 1997, Howard traveled from Seoul to Panmunjon in the demilitarized zone on the border between North and South Korea at 38th parallel North, site of the 1953 Armistice. A decade later, in 2007, he traveled again to Panmunjon, this time from Pyongyang, having successfully arranged a visit to North Korea in a delegation of three, traveling with Australian politician Meredith Burgman and journalist Charles Firth.

**Ri Dong Kouk, Hero Train.** Photograph: Ian Howard.

This trip generated its own exhibition, entitled *War with Flowers* (2008) at Watters Gallery, Sydney, which included Howard's rubbing of the Chinese Hero Train at Dandong (the biggest city on the North Korean/Chinese border), along with Colonel Xing's *Hero*

*Train* painted for the People's Liberation Army headquarters in Beijing and a third *Hero Train* by North Korean artist Ri Dong Kouk. This earlier shared exhibition provided the impetus for the collaborative work seen in *Borderline Art*.

In particular, Howard initially proposed a project based on Changbai Mountain in response to the complexities that arose around the collaborative process in that earlier exhibition, that is, in order to provide a rubric, and an occasion for artists from Australia, North Korea, and the People's Republic of China to work together across a literal border. Changbai Mountain is an active volcano 2,744 meters high, which last erupted in 969 CE, after which the Heavenly Lake formed in the caldera of the volcano. This is a site of great natural beauty, revered by both Chinese and Koreans, thus marking a significant point of connection between the two nations since, as Howard explains, Mao Zedong (1893–1976) "declared that Heaven Lake should be half Chinese, half (North) Korean in respect of Kim Il Sung having fought the good fight against American aggression in the Korean War. Hence the oddly surveyed border."

He refers to this site and the work as "cross border difference on a higher plane," speaking to the spirituality of nature and landscape, at different times both crassly commercialized and sublime, and comments further: "at 2,700 meters it is also rare to see or experience the lake with clarity." The iconic scenic beauty of the lake is nowhere in evidence in *Changbai Mountain Topography* (*North Korea at 20 m distance*). What we get instead is something that dramatically shifts both scale and orientation—we might be in a spaceship gazing down at a lost earth, or indeed contemplating minute flora or other on a microscope slide. These literal impressions preserve an elemental binary of earth and sea, recalling the here and there of the border form itself, speaking to the difficulties of clear vision rather than simply to the site's sublimity.

Ian Howard site-working at Changbai Mountain. Photograph: Ian Lang.

By contrast, *Chinese Border Fence Lujiagou (North Koreans building their fence)* depicts the scene of the border site quite literally; it records something of the logistical and administrative measures that have been put into place to manage the border according to official policy on both sides. The rubbing part of the work has dramatically receded here; it is virtually just a trace of a trace, supplemented with digital photography of figures laboring alongside the border.

Howard explains: "The natural topography along the lengths of the rivers lends itself to many individual initiatives." The border sites thus speak to the diversity and minuteness of human activity in the face of the massive facts of the state and or international relations. Human resourcefulness works in concert with but also in the face of official deliberations, policies, and sanctions, while officious sovereign rights of the state are deployed at the local level, against both citizens and non-citizens. Against this larger scale we also acknowledge the ways that borders, and border projects, facilitate the exchange and consumption of goods and services. Thus at the border, minute,

**Ian Howard** and **Xing Junqin, Chinese Border Fence Lujiagou (North Koreans building their fence).** Photograph: Ian Howard.

Reconnaissance at Chinese border fence, Lujiagou. Photograph: Ian Howard.

Site work at Chinese border fence, Lujiagou. Photograph: Ian Lang.

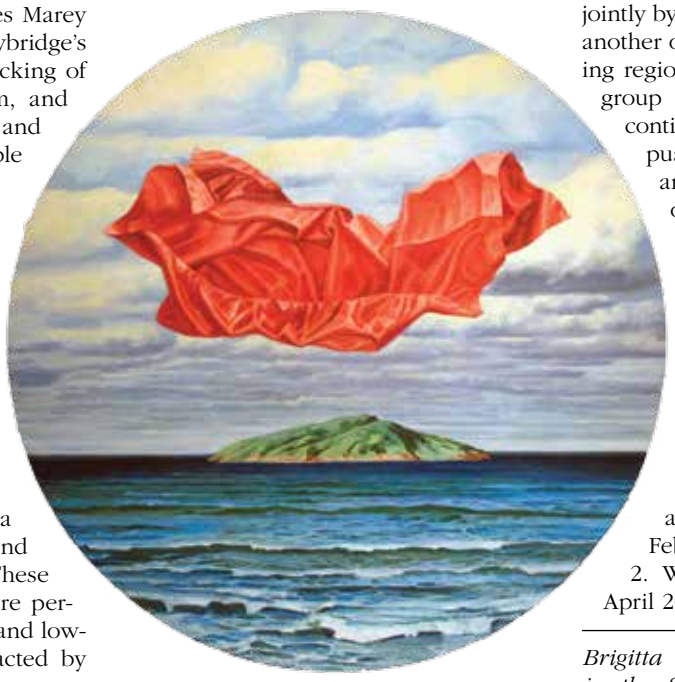
quotidian, strategic practicalities sit alongside large-scale points of connection and shared experience.

*Four Trees at Fanchuan (northernmost crossing, Tumen River, into North Korea)* maps the three-way border between China, North Korea, and Russia. Howard notes that this border is economically vital and strategically critical. He observes that it is "unthinkable that this area of North Korea could become unified with South Korea, which is allied to the West. Such a unification would set the US on the doorstep of both China and Russia." So it is important in relation to this work to see China's role as the "forceful guardian of the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea in world affairs" invoking the trope of strategic fraternity, of two nations working together against a common foe. The focus of the work is the rail bridge that extends between North Korea and Russia, and the work itself is suggestive of moving images viewed from a train window, with the rubbing contracting even further, to the vertical bands of the narrow-trunked trees of the title. Into the monumentality and stasis of the border slip traces of the history of the representation of movement, which prise the border loose from its hold on the earth, rendering it somehow fleeting. This is a feature that aligns this work with the *Chinese Border Fence Lujiaogou*, which likewise invokes technology's past in the way its multiple small frames evokes Étienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904) and Eadweard Muybridge's (1830–1904) late-19th-century tracking of moving figures, anticipating film, and binding the promise of mobility and change into even such intractable locations.

The bridges recorded in *Bombed Bridge Dandong (Korean War-damaged crossing, China to North Korea)* and in *Japanese Bridge at Hekoucun (Japanese occupation – China and North Korea – bridge, bombed during Korean War)* raise and depose the question of fraternity, the idea of China and North Korea aligning as brothers/partners against a greater evil in the form of Japan and Japan's ally, the United States. These strategic international relations are perhaps belied by the more mobile and low-key collaborative endeavors enacted by the artists. The first is a grey/blue overpainting of a rubbing taken off the vertical structures, indicating the twisted steel and rivets from bombing; the second, over-painted in grays, blacks, and creams of worn concrete, is a rubbing of the horizontal concrete paving surface of the bridge, which originally stretched from an accessible island in the Yalu River on the Chinese side to North Korea. Both are heavily worked over, with little of the material origin still readable in the abstraction of their final painterly form, with the titles striving to anchor the works back in their location through the details of latitude and longitude.

**Ian Howard** and **Xing Junqin, Four Trees at Fanchuan (northernmost crossing, Tumen River, into North Korea)**. Photograph: Ian Howard.

**Ian Howard** and **Xing Junqin, Four Trees at Fanchuan (northernmost crossing, Tumen River, into North Korea)** (detail). Photograph: Ian Howard.



**Xing Junqin, Diaoyu Island, China Presence,** 2012, diameter 150 cm. Photograph: Ian Howard.

Also featured in the exhibition were works undertaken jointly by Ian Howard and Xing Junqin on another of China's troublesome neighboring regions—the Diaoyu/Senkaku island group in the East China Sea, which continued through 2012 and 2013 to push the region, and the problems around borders, to the forefront of world attention. In the wake of *Borderline Art,* the two artists propose next, in 2014, to respond to each of China's 14 border regions in turn with plans in place to conduct field work in Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar. Δ

*Notes:*

1. James Gleeson. "Realism with a Difference," *The Sun-Herald*, February 6, 1972, p.102.
2. Watters Gallery, Sydney, March/April 2013.

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