

Grenville, Bruce, in *Barbara Todd: Security Blankets*, The Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 1993

## Death and Deterrence

*Sleep, oh! sleep, my pretty little fellow,  
rocked by the movement of thy mother's hand;  
rest and refreshment, tender and supporting  
comes from the cradle and its gentle rhythm.*

*Sleep, ah! sleep, in the grave's soft embraces,  
still neath the protection of thy mother's arm,  
all thou could'st hope for, all thou could'st ever have  
lies within the circle of that warm, loving clasp.*

Anonymous Cradle Song, Wiegenlied.  
Set to music by Franz Schubert, 1816, Op. 98, No. 2.

Today, children seldom die, they are bound to the world by technology, held firmly in its rationalizing embrace. When death comes, it is understood as a failure of technology, an inexplicable gap in the logic of its defence. In a seemingly impossible turn of events the language of medicine and the language of the military coincide around death.

For both, death is understood to come in a moment of weakness, the catastrophic collapse of a defensive position which can no longer be guaranteed by its technological apparatus. Here the failure of an artificial heart has the same immediate and totalizing effect as the failure of a radar defense system.

In her work of the past six years Barbara Todd has sought to bring about a different understanding of contemporary culture by proposing a seemingly improbable link between military security, domesticity, mortality and the body. Todd's *Security Blanket: A Child's Quilt*, 1988-89 stands at the centre of her recent work, for it is the child's vulnerability in the face of nuclear war, which brings a horrifying clarity to the language of warfare.

If contemporary warfare is based on logistics – the ability to deliver the maximum payload to a specific site with the greatest speed – then it is no longer a question of superior military intelligence, but of brute force and speed.

In Todd's quilt, the cumbersome and stout "Fat Man" nuclear bomb, which was dropped on Hiroshima, is surrounded by the sleek and speedy missiles of contemporary warfare. The emblematic images drawn from the pages of *Jane's Weapons Systems*, a pictorial reference book for state-of-the-art military hardware, are applied to the quilt's surface using traditional appliqué technique. The intent is to force a double reading of security and to create a conflict between traditional notions of military security and domestic security. Significantly, this conflict finds its locus in the body of the child which is the nominal subject of the quilt.

Todd's *Security Blanket*, 1986-88 is the earliest work in the exhibition and in many ways establishes the principal characters in her narrative. The fourteen miniature business suits represent big business and its role in the perpetuation of the Cold

War. These are interspersed with emblematic images of military aircraft and the "Fat Man" bomb laid out in a five by four grid. A decorative border of missiles surrounds this central grid. In her later quilts Todd has supplanted the literal image of the business suit by using woolen suiting cloth as the principal material for all elements of her quilts. In this way, the pervasive and insidious impact of bog business and patriarchy is economically acknowledged.

Todd's interest in combining traditional quilting techniques and patterns with unconventional subject matter culminates in two works which take the American B-2 Stealth Bomber as their subject. *Security Blanket: B-2 Stealth Bomber*, 1989-90 and *Wild Goose Chase: B-2 Stealth Bomber*, 1991, are dark and malevolent works. The barely perceptible shift between figure and ground echoes the covert character of her subject, for the B-2 was developed by the American military to avoid enemy radar by cloaking its form.

The B-2 offers an exemplary instance of the principal of deterrence. Proponents of deterrence advocate the development of increasingly sophisticated military hardware. In an extraordinary leap of logic they propose that the superiority of their hardware will deter the enemy and therefore ensure peace. Such a rationalization slows the military and the government to maintain a warlike status with regard to the acquisition of hardware, while avoiding the controversial death of civilian and military populations. War then, is everywhere and nowhere, at once. Within this scenario the B-2 is currently the ultimate deterrent – it is virtually invisible and therefore is potentially everywhere, all of the time.

Death too, takes on a very specific meaning within a culture of deterrence, for the principal of deterrence begins from the proposition that the potential for an instantaneous death is also everywhere, all of the time.

Death too, takes on a very specific meaning within a culture of deterrence, for the principal of deterrence begins from the proposition for an instantaneous death is also everywhere, all of the time. Within the postmodern world we have lost our understanding of death, seeing only its finality and closure. The continuity of life and death has been displaced by the binarism which pits the living against the dead and the powerful against the powerless. Death is no longer recognized as a condition of being. In claiming that "God is dead" Nietzsche invited us to consider whether "the question of God" has disappeared from contemporary consciousness. One might ask the same question of death itself – for it appears that "the question of death" has disappeared from our consciousness.

In her recent work Todd has shifted her attention away from an ironic commentary on Cold War paranoia toward a melancholic contemplation of life and death. *Funeral Blanket*, 1992 combines Todd's continuing interest in the representation of military hardware with an emergent interest in images and symbols which speak to human mortality. In this instance Todd has quilted a number of spiral shapes onto the open central panel. These spirals are traditional symbols of life. They speak of a passage through time and space. SO too, they acknowledge the circularity of life and rehearse the process of death. *Funeral Blanket* shifts the discourse away from questions of security and deterrence toward mortality and the complexity of relationships. If the earlier *Security Blankets* recognized the anxiety of a parent faced with the prospect of bringing a child into the postmodern world, then the current work mounts a compelling challenge to that fear. Death rightfully remains a

dominant presence in this work, but now it is an image of death inexorably intertwined with life.

Sleep and death are often confused, especially in the mind of a child. They listen too closely to our euphemisms, imagining that sleep somehow gently folds into death and death into sleep. Barbara Todd's *Coffin Quilt*, 1991-92 compounds this conceit, blurring the distinction between sleep and death, blanket and shroud, containment and continuity. The rigid geometry of the interlocking coffins is softened by the spiral overlays which blur their edges and disrupt their singularity. This dark and absorbing quilt returns us to the body of the child, freed from the paranoid grasp of deterrence and logistics, but nevertheless bound to its own mortality.

Barbara Todd seeks to blur those distinctions which have come to delimit our comprehension of life and death in the late twentieth century. Cold War politics and postmodern culture have constructed a representation of mortality in which death is nothing more than a sign of absence. The *desaparecidos* of Central and South America and the invisible casualties of the Gulf War are the logical consequence of a worldwide system of warfare which seeks to maintain the principals of deterrence. Against this monolithic presence Todd offers the body, and specifically, the body of the child – awkward, sentimental and frighteningly vulnerable – a mortal body.

Bruce Grenville

*For Jack, born July 28, 1992 –  
Died November 29, 1992*