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I think therefore I # : An exhibition of paintings interpreting some of the most shocking world news stories

she was moved to interpret the colourful narratives of world events that would become her forthcoming exhibition, I think therefore I #. While the paintings themselves are graphic, primary coloured and seemingly optimistic compositions decorated with popular iconography and emblems – the messaging is anything but sunny. Weeks after the Charlie Hebdo shooting, a video of Jordanian pilot, Moaz Al Kasasbeh being burned alive was beamed to a global audience. The harrowing daily news feeds of decapitated children, old men being pushed off buildings and beheadings of journalists, civilians and aid workers continued; Teague began her riff on hashtag activism, feeling like a new low had been reached.

A new dawn, a new day – and a new crisis

She says, “I had never seen anything like this. I don’t think I’ll ever forget some of the faces of those individuals in their final moments. I was dreaming about them at night and couldn’t shake them off during the day. Of course, horrors like these aren’t new. But they feel different because they are literally coming into bed with us at night and they wake us up in the morning.” Social newsgathering has given the world a new dimension of some of the major stories of our time. We’ve watched the Arab Spring, the Burmese uprising and closer to home, the London riots, yet the proliferation of social media means that it’s nearly impossible to turn on the TV or surf the internet without a notification of a new world disaster. Teague states as a result of a 24-hour news cycle accessed via a mobile phone or iPad, we’re culturally partaking in “24/7 tortuous voyeurism.”

Hashtag activism or slacktivism

Teague’s interpretations of the news stories that have had the biggest impact on social media in the last 12 months bear titles such as ‘I am no one, just a little vagina’, about the 276 girls who were kidnapped from Chibok. More than one million people including Michelle Obama tweeted #Bring Back Our Girls. The questions begged – were the tweeters helping or jumping on a digital bandwagon? The title painting ‘I think therefore I Hashtag’, is a semi-transparent creature made of emojis and stereotypical hashtags posing with spread legs while taking a ‘selfie’ and ‘belfie’. The underlying subtext of hashtag activism emerges, are those protesting on social media taking a stance against injustice and social change? Or are they not doing that much – but by tweeting, feel like they are?



Me, my selfie and I

Teague says that what interested her was the space in between the seduction of other people's heavily filtered lives on social media. She reasons, "everyone wants to tell a story – you, me, journalists, Isis – we all want to play with this new system of editing and uploading our story to an instant audience." Yet what would have been considered vain prior to social media, narcissism is now the norm and with Instagram allows us to present an edited glossy magazine version of our own existence.

Shiny happy people

She explains that essentially, painting the news has enabled her to digest the flip side of social media. She describes painting as the perfect medium to scrutinise the context, she says, "purely by virtue of it being slow to burn." The self-serving social networks are divisive, she reckons because of the faux world that we present is essentially a brag, a disingenuous version of perfection. She exclaims, "The most followed person on Instagram is Kim Kardashian – and her siblings make up most of the rest of the top

ten. Given the awful news that always pokes its head at us, is it any wonder that we seek the other extreme of picture perfect, easy breezy living, some light relief? The Daily Mail – the world’s most read online page – ingeniously places two columns side by side. When the depressing images from the left hand news column get us down, switch the right for some lighthearted showbiz frivolity.”

Ice bucket philanthropy or naval gazing?

What Teague has explored in this body of work is the space in-between the frippery and the catastrophes that are accessed on our phones and tablets. While twitter and other media social platforms do not have the magical powers that can overturn a crisis or right injustice, they can work-up enough attention to put events on the front pages and on the top of a news agenda. Teague understands that social and political problems continue long after we stop hashtagging them. Can tweeters really change anything by posting a comment before tuning back to their favorite television programme? Teague explains that although the collection of work pokes fun and questions armchair activists, she does so with the knowledge that she herself is one of them. She says, “I actually do believe that social media can be an effective force for good. Take ALS, I hadn’t even heard of it before the ice bucket challenge. Likewise the Yulin dog meat festival is something I’ve known about for years but suddenly it’s hit the social media storm.” Of the causes that we flaunt on social media, she says, “I think education and knowledge will save the world...in time. Social media will be instrumental. It can pull us together more than it divides.”

After Nyne spoke to Teague further about her up coming exhibition.

At what point after witnessing tragic events via social media and the news did you decide that you needed to create artwork in response to everything you’d seen/learnt?

Immediately – almost as a knee jerk response. But my response to the subject matter tends to become more measured and thoughtful as I go along, helped by the fact that act of painting is slow and layered. Painting about the news gives me time and space to think, scrutinise and draw my own conclusions about the vast amount of information that comes my way each day.

something of a symbol of solidarity for those declaring an allegiance to freedom of speech. The pencil is one of the first tools we are given as children to express ourselves. It's a humble symbol of expression and education – two things all of humanity should have a right to but many don't. Also the pencil is being in danger of becoming something of a relic as we move increasingly along in our electronic age, so I felt it deserving of some special attention!

There's a lot of chaos in your pieces. Does this reflect the chaos of current global affairs?

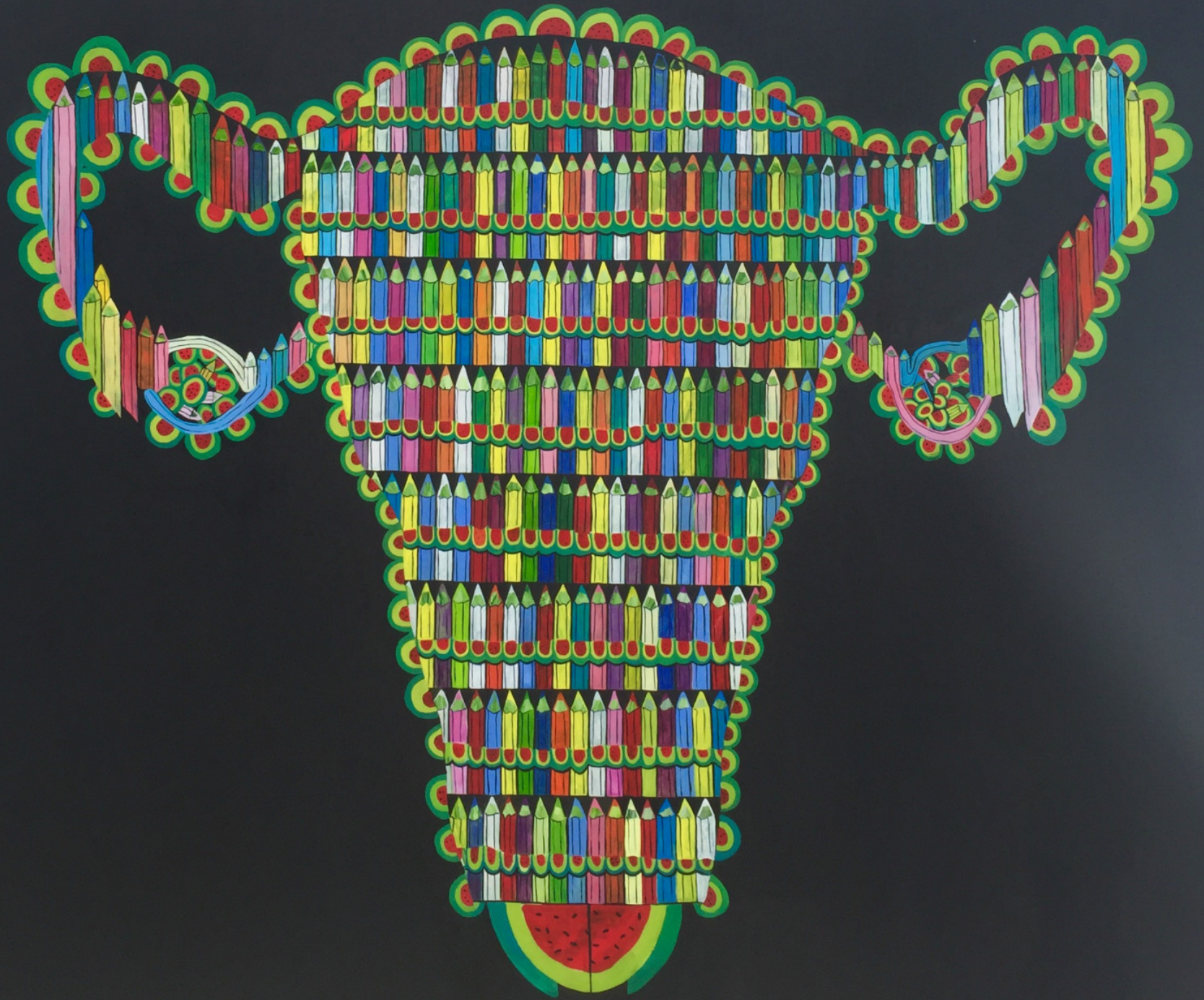
I think my paintings aren't about the actual chaos of global events but more to do with my personal understanding of the news. It's hard to digest stories at a rate of hundreds an hour. Especially when everything is spun. The nature of storytelling – to select, distill and amplify – certainly doesn't help us with the slippery subject of 'the truth'.

What made you want to combine bright playful colours and imagery with such dark undertones of tragedy and death?

It may not seem this way, given that I seem to be drawn to dark stories, but I am a pretty optimistic person and have faith in the good of humanity and the wonder that is planet earth so something of that is bound to spill out in my work. I do try to encourage people to linger on and step closer towards my paintings. The colour, the detail and the humour that masks the darker content, I suppose, are some of the tools I employ to try and seduce and engage with viewers

'I Am No One' is a very bold and iconic piece with such a terrible story behind it. Would you say that the event of the kidnapping of 276 girls in Chibok emotionally effected you the most out of all the new events you researched?

Bring Back our Girls was one of the most tweeted and instagrated social media 'events' but the world has moved onto new stories. There can be few sadder stories than this one. Nearly 300 young children targeted because they were Christian, female and being educated. No doubt these girls have been raped, impregnated and forced to convert to a new religion. They have been torn from their families, stripped of any rights to an education or over their own bodies. There is some evidence to suggest they have been brainwashed and sent out to be suicide bombers. I painted a pencil for each girl abducted and arranged them in the shape of a uterus. I do like that the uterus is a strong shape – like a bull's head. This painting gives me hope that their spirit is not broken. It's important not to lose hope and that the pressure remains on the Nigerian government to find these children and track down their abductors.



Social media inspired your artworks but in many of your paintings, the concept is only hinted at by objects such as a USB cord for an iPhone. How important was it for your artwork to subtly suggest the idea of social media as opposed to using an obvious hash tag in every piece?

I hadn't thought about that. Indeed one of my paintings, 'I Think Therefore I Hashtag' is an overt rip-off of everything I see on Instagram – a concoction of many all the hashtags that stormed social media in the last 18 months pinned on the ultimate social media stereotype, a girl stuck in a room taking selfies and belfies, donned in emojis with her head cut off from her body... Perhaps tellingly though, I felt the show only needed one such piece. From that launching pad, I wanted to drive under, right into the subtext of what we see. And that was the place where the other works began

You're clearly 'pro' social media as an instrument for raising awareness of news events. Would you say that this collection of work is, in a sense, an echo of social media, in the way that you're continuing to spread awareness of global events?

I see the pros and the cons. Armchair activism is better than nothing. We now have so much more information on hand to make educated decisions. And that can help to galvanise change. But the way we are experiencing social media – as though attached to a drip – is concerning. 24/7 we are checking our phones. Social scientists are warning of a decline in empathy owing to us seeing so much misery on the web. More than living in an age of information overload, it seems we are experiencing something more like pictorial overload where the story lacks any real substance. Our attention spans are getting shorter. We are getting snap shots and making snap judgments based on little real evidence. It's all too easy to absorb all this information passively and without question. I think we should be questioning and debating everything and not shying away from uncomfortable subjects. That, if there is one message from this show, is it.

Do you think you will continue making artworks about events in the news or are you beginning to feel inspired by something else?

At the moment I am still putting the finishing touches on three paintings so I am head down and thinking of nothing else. But since my inwards-looking-out interpretation of the news has always been so alluring to me, and because the way we gather information is changing all the time, I suspect that come September all the news apps I intend to delete from my phone for the month of August, will be back on it again and I'll be online waiting, like a sitting duck, for whatever comes next.

5 August— 5 September 2015

Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, 533 Old York Road. London, SW18 1T