

Epoch and The Coviad: Two Contemporary Panoramas

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Abstract

Is the genre of the panorama still relevant to contemporary painters and graphic artists? It is easy to accept that contemporary photographic or cinematic panoramas attract current artists but painting or drawing in this genre may be seen as a thing of the past--or is it? As a painter, sculptor, and draftsman, I demonstrate how I have been inspired to make two highly ambitious panoramas, one a vast painting, the other a pencil and gold leaf drawing some 35 metres long, the latter inspired by the Bayeux Tapestry and of identical surface area and currently on virtual exhibition in a UK museum. The panoramic format can allow contemporary painters to express profound thoughts about time, philosophy, memory, personal challenges, experiences, survival, and cultural change. In the past, large panoramas tended to deal with historical moments, battles, or realistic scenes of places, but new artists can use the format to express a broader range of subjects, for example, the new panorama *The Coviad* that tells of the experiences of the pandemic during the last year, 2020-2021.

Keywords

Epoch, Coviad, Panorama, Mesdag, Museum, Painting, Drawing, Picasso, Gauguin.

Encountering *Panorama Mesdag*

It started with a chance encounter in March 2016. Every year Maastricht hosts The European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF). [1] I normally visit the fair as it shows an exceptional cross section of art from every period of history, from ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, medieval times, the Renaissance, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and Impressionist, modern, and contemporary art. I am one of those artists who like to dig deep into the past as well as projecting into the future. I normally go for a walk in the beautiful medieval part of Maastricht when I am staying there, dodging students on bikes and crowds leaving bars in an inebriated state. But this walk was different, because I stumbled upon a modern circular structure at the centre of a square that dates to Roman times. I walked inside and there was a recreation of the *Panorama Mesdag* [2], advertising to all visitors of TEFAF the wonder of 19th century panoramic art. Some may have seen Mesdag's small oils of boats and coasts but had never had the chance to travel to the Hague to see this painted view of the coastal town of Scheveningen, one of the best loved panoramic paintings to survive from the

19th century, and an unexpected inspiration to a contemporary artist.

Almost immediately upon entering this space and slowly turning my head to see the panorama, an idea struck me: I wanted to make a contemporary panorama. But why?

In my paintings and sculptures, I had been exploring specific themes: the passing of time, the passing of generations, our attitudes to personal and collective history. [3] In general, I made images on single panels, canvases, or sculptures of a certain size. But it occurred to me that the genre of panorama might be remarkably relevant as a way of expressing longer periods, unfolding narratives, progressive thoughts, and not just events or spaces, as in many 19th century panoramas. In other words, I wanted to extend the genre to include philosophy and thought. Although it is of course much more demanding to bring off a panorama than a painting on a single canvas, it seemed to me a fantastic challenge for a contemporary artist. Furthermore, my aim was to express something very relevant to now but using the age-old medium of paint on canvas. The assumption that the contemporary panorama needs to be photographic or cinematic, whilst of course perfectly valid, seemed to me to tell only part of its relevance to current practitioners.

Creating *Epoch* - a contemporary Panoramic painting

My first act was to paste together many small sheets of paper so that I had a very long strip that I could carry around with me as a kind of elongated sketchbook. I carried this with me for many weeks, sketching ideas for the panorama in sequence in pencil and in miniature. I started the studies for what would become one of my most ambitious works to date: *Epoch*.

What was the idea behind *Epoch*?

The TEFAF art fair is attractive because it covers all artistic periods right back to the dawn of civilization. In 1985, as an art student at Central Saint Martin's School of Art I used to visit the British Museum several times a week. I was studying under Shelley Fausset (1920-1994), one of Henry Moore's (1898-1986) sculptural assistants. [4] Fausset gave me a piece of Hornton stone, one of

Moore's favourite mediums, and encouraged me to carve it. I never did because I saw it as a talisman handed down from one artist to another. Like Moore himself, Fausset exuded a strong feeling for the length of art. In the current art world, it is easy to get caught up in new fashions, movements and the commercial aspects of a world often driven nowadays by money or politics. [5] But the story is much longer. At the British Museum, simply by walking from one room to another, you could see that one empire or system of thought soon replaced the other, but art continues; it is eternal language. I like to think of art history itself as one endless panorama.

In the British Museum there are what might be considered early examples of panoramic art for example the Elgin Marbles [6], the Siege of Lachish (700BC-692BC) [7], and the Neo-Assyrian Lion Hunt Wall Relief of Ashurbanipal (645BC-635BC) [8]. All these legendary antiquities reveal a narrative over a lengthy, continuous surface. Through these frequent visits, these works became deeply imbedded in my visual imagination and I refer to them knowingly or unknowingly in various works, including *Epoch*. But having come across the *Panorama Mesdag* in its circular format, I was given a visual punch. And my idea? To create a panorama that was all about the passage of time. I called it *Epoch* because it was to be a tragi-comic image of history, starting with the moment when life evolved from the primordial swamp. This first image of a lake or swamp that was the incubator of life was, in part, suggested to me during a trip to Los Angeles. The La Brea Tar Pits, so close to the LA County Museum of Art, suggested a start point, and I did several small paintings inspired by this prehistoric site where many bones of prehistoric animals and one prehistoric human have been found. [9] However, images of lakes also had a deeply personal meaning, as will be seen below.

The idea of *Epoch* was to create a panorama recording the epoch since the beginning of life on earth and ending with mankind taking off for other planets. Perhaps it is just one chapter in a larger story? In common with much contemporary art, this is at one time a deadly serious idea but also tinged with irony and humour as well. Because there is a certain absurdity at work here, a painting of a vast period can obviously only be symbolic and extremely partial. But I have always felt that there is something potentially moving about mixing the serious with the comic, something essentially Shakespearian. [10]

After drawing the study (Fig. 1), I ordered several 10 metre rolls of canvas. The *Epoch* panorama was to be composed in sections, each measuring 1.9 m x 3 m. In the end, there were twenty of these inter-related canvases; the overall size of *Epoch* is 3.8 m x 30 m, two panels high and ten panels long.

I had planned out the whole composition on paper after weeks of carrying the strip with me wherever I went and as ideas spilled into the concept of *Epoch*. I was so taken with the panoramic concept that I went ahead and started this massive work without any idea where or when it would be seen.

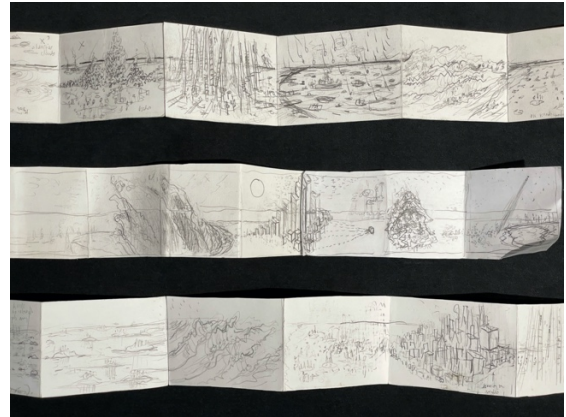


Fig 1. Study for *Epoch*, David Breuer-Weil, pencil on paper. Copyright: David Breuer-Weil (author), 2021.

Whilst I was embarking on this secret project, I was simultaneously exhibiting monumental sculptures in very prominent public places, and in planning and making them, I was very aware of their placement and end use. My eighteen-foot-tall sculpture *Brothers* was installed at Marble Arch, *Alien* in Grosvenor Gardens, and *Emergence* in Hanover Square in the heart of London. [11] *Emergence* (Fig 2) was a condensed version of *Epoch* in some ways; it is an evolutionary image, showing mankind born from the earth. But *Epoch* would remain hidden until now, as it is not easy to display epic panoramic paintings these days, largely due to an absence of available spaces, the cost of rental, and museums that still tend to favour digital, object or light-based large-scale installations over painted installations. But that does not mean they are not being made, and a search should be made for other contemporary examples that may have been undiscovered (<https://youtu.be/Zd0t2QgfEuA>).

Epoch was a continuous panorama of mankind moving through its crucial stages. Or rather what I imagined to be its crucial stages in a personal, poetic way, partly inspired by T. S. Eliot's (1888-1965) *The Wasteland* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943): it is an image of a great passage of time, but it is also quintessentially modern in that, like Eliot's *The Wasteland* and *Four Quartets*, it is filled with vignettes and potent details, particularly many from my own life and family history. [12] For example, my paternal grandfather, Ernst Breuer-Weil (1902-1978), is portrayed playing the piano, a scene I often witnessed as a child, and discussions of all his relatives who had died in the

Holocaust were also frequent. He escaped to London after the Anschluss in 1938.



Fig 2. *Emergence*, 2012, David Breuer-Weil, bronze sculpture in four parts. Copyright: David Breuer-Weil (author), 2021.

My mother's father, Kai Didereksen (died 1944), was murdered by the Nazis by the lake of Holte, near Copenhagen, in 1944. Images of lakes and water in my art are often infused by a sense of loss as a result; he was killed by one of the most beautiful lakes in Denmark, and that element is clear in *Epoch* as well, a sense that natural scenes somehow absorb human experiences and traumas.

In *Epoch*, I try to recreate the psychological storms such subjects evoked in the mind of a person growing up in the shadow of genocide and there are details such as thousands of people deported from a city to a small building where they all disappear (Panel 8 of *Epoch*). Here there are other literary influences as well. When I was in my early twenties, I met Primo Levi (1919-1987), a survivor and one of the greatest writers on the Holocaust. [13] In *Epoch* there are images of people stripped of all possessions and left as vulnerable human presences, a leitmotif from Levi's *If This is a Man*, a book that I heard him talk about in person just before he died. Panel nine has an image of a huge mountain of clothing, suitcases, and belongings that dwarf people nearby. I am often stuck by the thought that I was born only 20 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, but in my mind, it is ancient history because we are tempted to push horrors as far away as possible. The panoramic format however demonstrates in a very eloquent way that all events are connected and joined by time. But mixed in with these thoughts are also beautiful memories like the building of sandcastles on a beach, something that I take as emblematic of childhood, creativity, and hope. But I also make dramatic aesthetic use of the classical elements that appear in many variant ancient cultures: water, air, fire, earth. But towards the end

of the panorama, modern science debunks this idea and embraces the atomic theory. [14]

Although there are powerful themes at play here, there is also a purely aesthetic and artistic element: using this vast flowing canvas to play with a great variety of intense colors, forms, and tones. It is quite literally a broad canvas to let loose.

The idea of creating a large-scale painting that is a symbolic statement about life and destiny is not new, nor are paintings that commemorate historical moments in a veiled symbolic manner. In my twenties, I was very struck by Roman paintings in Pompeii, particularly at the Villa of Mysteries. Medieval and Renaissance art is, of course, exceptionally rich in interconnecting cycles of paintings, often of biblical, classical, or military subjects. There seems to be something eternal about the human need to make wall-sized paintings, perhaps a legacy that goes back as far as the Lascaux Cave paintings and runs right until the Mexican Muralists and beyond. Two of the greatest Post-Impressionist and Modern artists achieved haunting and magnificent visions in large scale mural sized paintings, Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) in his *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897-1998) [15] and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) in *Guernica* (1937). [16] Whilst these are painted along a strong horizontal axis, they are not panoramas but do represent events unfolding in sequence. It can be argued that Claude Monet's (1840-1926) *Waterlilies* (1914-1926) at the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris is a panoramic installation, but without narrative, more of an immersive contemplation of nature. [17] This way of working on large scaled horizontal canvases that are linked in some manner had some influence on American Abstract Expressionist painting as well. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the panorama was more of an illusionistic spectacle, and developed into a distinctive panoramic genre, different from earlier fresco cycles but still with connections to these historical precedents. Such dramatic and all-encompassing examples as *The Raclawice Panorama* (1893-1894), Franz Roubaud's (1856-1928) *Siege of Sevastopol* (1905) and *Battle of Borodino* (1911) as well as Pyotr Tarasovich Maltsev's (1907-1993) *The Battle of Stalingrad* (1981) are memorable examples of the genre. These works were highlighted by Ralph Hyde (1939-2015) in the exhibition *Panoromania!* (1988) he curated at the Barbican in London. [18] Although strictly speaking it is these works that are what we understand to be "panoramas," the idea of an elongated sequential painting that uses symbol rather than spectacle can have wide ranging influence on current artists and be more of a mainstream part of artistic practice.

Epoch completed

The ten connected panels (each consisting of two 1.9 m x 3 m canvases, one above the other) of *Epoch* are as follows (these are the brief notes that I made about them whilst I was at work):

One: *Swamp*. This is the primordial swamp showing different life forms evolving. Mankind is only one of other possible forms of life that never evolved further. I am inventing strange life forms that never made it. Experimenting with different figures that I may also create as sculptures. (Fig 3)

Two: *Fire*. The discovery of fire as a key moment in human achievement and one that is ambiguous because both destructive and creative. I am thinking of J. M. W. Turner's (1775-1851) painting of fire as I work on this. How do you paint light like this? (Fig 4)



Fig 3. *Epoch*, Section One: *Swamp*, 2016, David Breuer-Weil, acrylic on canvas. Copyright: David Breuer-Weil (author), 2021.

Three: *Height*. Seeking transcendence in the form of faith and beliefs. This is also the element of air. Ladders represent aspiration for me, the instinct that we must pursue something higher, the idea that there must be more to life than survival or material success. At its best art is about the seeking of transcendence.

Four: *The Pit*. The constant threat of death and the reality of mortality is represented by the element of earth. As a sculptor, digging the earth for clay and plaster is particularly vital. There is the Biblical idea that the first man, Adam, was made of earth, born of clay. The species is remarkably resilient and continues its march through time and space.

Five: *Ant hills*. Human beings are compared to ants, building ant hills and cities as soon as the hunter gatherer stays still and embraces agricultural life. The discovery of writing and record keeping seems to come hand in hand with the creation of cities.

Six: *The Great Wave*. The supremacy of nature over human wishes and ambitions. A seismic destruction like the Flood. Water as an element, both essential and destructive. I am thinking of Hokusai's (1760-1849) famous image of a wave. Its great height gives a point of compositional focus to *Epoch*. I think about Japanese and Chinese art. I also look at some scroll paintings, these are early panoramas often of great beauty and often hidden.



Fig 4. *Epoch*, Section Two: *Fire*, 2016, David Breuer-Weil, acrylic on canvas. Copyright: David Breuer-Weil (author), 2021.

Seven: *The Shore*. The instinct to create and build cannot be destroyed even by overwhelming force. Sandcastles on the beach built by survivors evolve into great cities.

Eight: *Civilization*. What we regard as civilization is relatively new in historical terms as a proportion of the time that there has been life on earth. Great cities, painting, music, cinema, communication, architectural and scientific progress do not prevent genocide and self-destruction. In this panel are references to my grandfather, a refugee from Nazi Vienna and a pianist: he plays his piano having fled to England whilst many of his contemporaries who were unable to leave Europe are deported to camps in the East never to be heard of again. In the sky are traces of the nuclear threat. Science discovers atomic theory and makes great strides but at the same time facilitates the potential destruction of the species. (Fig 5)



Fig 5. *Epoch*, Section Eight: *Civilisation*, 2016, David Breuer-Weil, acrylic on canvas. Copyright: David Breuer-Weil (author), 2021.

Nine: *Possessions*. The heaps of looted belongings are mountains that overshadow both past and future, but mankind redefines itself through technological and medical innovation but against a backdrop of extremist ideas. (Fig 6)

Ten: *Blast-off*. The human ant leaves the world behind in search of new worlds. The swamp where it all started is empty. But as humanity departs, a new drop falls into the pond suggesting that another history might begin.



Fig 6. *Epoch*, Section Nine: *Possessions*, 2016, David Breuer-Weil, acrylic on canvas. Copyright: David Breuer-Weil (author), 2021.



Fig 7 *Epoch*, 2016, David Breuer-Weil, acrylic on canvas. Copyright: David Breuer-Weil (author), 2021.

To some degree, the whole of *Epoch* is an attempt to come to terms with my family history during World War II. Sections 8 and 9 show the massive impact of genocide and its redefinition of the human condition as well as the destructive elements of humanity that threaten the whole enterprise of life. *Epoch* Fig 7 was completed in 2016 and rolled up whilst other works of mine have been publicly displayed around the world.

***The Coviad*, a contemporary drawn panorama**

The Coviad is a panoramic drawing in seventy sections, executed in pencil and gold leaf on paper during the beginning of 2021. It is of identical size to the *Bayeux*

Tapestry that inspired it, 350,000 cm². A massive challenge, it tells the story in detail of Covid-19 from its beginnings in 2019 till the advent of vaccination in 2021 and happens to be one of the largest drawings in history.

It has its origins in more modestly scaled drawings. I had just published a book of *Golden Drawings* that I had made during the UK's first lockdown from March till summer 2020 with the Italian art publisher Gli Ori. [19] These drawings were my reflection on the apocalyptic times we were living through with the Covid-19 Pandemic. Images I had first drawn when first ill with Covid in March 2020, they became a series of works all about these extraordinary times: drawings of the threat to life, isolation, lockdowns, support bubbles, the importance of family, a reconnection with nature, a sense of the fragility and beauty of life, peons to the heroism of health workers and the National Health Service.

In January 2021, I happened upon a book about the *Bayeux Tapestry* [20] and, remembering my earlier panorama, *Epoch*, I thought I would embark on a second panorama based on what may arguably be the most famous "panoramic" artwork of all, the *Bayeux Tapestry* that records the Norman Conquest of England. I started by making rough sketches of interconnected works, exploring the different images that seemed relevant to the era of Covid. Over three months, I spent hours every day drawing each of the sheets that make up the total in great detail, and applying gold leaf to the backgrounds -- a very meditative process due to the time and concentration required.

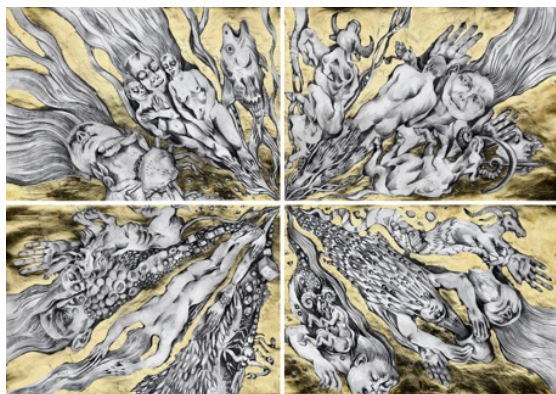


Fig 8. *The Coviad* – 'Zodiac', panels 025 - 028, 2020, David Breuer-Weil, pencil and gold-leaf on paper. Copyright: David Breuer-Weil (author), 2021.

One thing that making contemporary panoramas achieves is a deep engagement with panoramic works of the past. The *Bayeux Tapestry*, made to commemorate a period of trauma and change, seemed to me a strong template upon which to base a new work of art about the extraordinary and tragic year the whole world had lived through. The

tapestry is filled with images of travel, horses, boats, a comet, trees of life, and many mythical beings in the margins. I have interpreted many of these motifs in ways relevant to the period March 2020 -- February 2021. Here there were also poetic references: I called the work *The Coviad* based on the heroic poem *The Iliad* (Fig 8, 9, 10, 11).

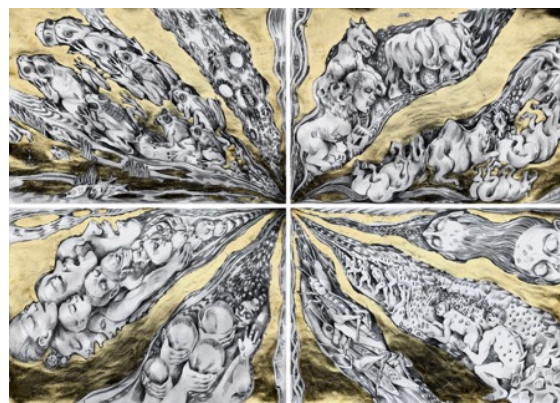


Fig 9. *The Coviad* – 'Ten Plagues', panels 033 - 036, 2020, David Breuer-Weil, pencil and gold-leaf on paper. Copyright: David Breuer-Weil (author), 2021.

Unlike *Epoch*, which has still not met the light of day, *The Coviad* was exhibited at a UK museum almost as soon as it was completed as the institution had already taken an interest in the *Golden Drawings*. The Ben Uri Gallery and Museum was very timely in having started virtual exhibitions even before the onset of Covid. Virtual exhibitions will be of significance to the genre of panoramic art. In this case *The Coviad* was exhibited online as a video which slowly reveals the whole panoramic sweep of the 70-part drawing executed in pencil and gold leaf in detail (<https://youtu.be/9yzHtRYC9cQ>). The video displays the whole work in sequence with a voiceover describing the unfolding motifs. In addition, stills of all parts of *The Coviad* are hosted on the museum website. *The Coviad* will be hosted online in this way for the life of the museum -- an interesting innovation that will doubtless be mimicked in other cases of panoramas where the sheer practicality of displaying the large physical works is unrealistic.

I would hope that one day there could be a panorama museum entirely online bringing together many of the panoramas spread throughout the world that can be viewed as sweeping videos or as virtual reality experiences. Although nothing can beat standing in front of an actual work of art, the virtual experience can be a valuable educational method recording works to diverse audiences and a record for the future. To some degree, it also matches the cinematic scope of the panoramic genre.

The Coviad is a panoramic work of close relevance to the times we have just lived through. I hope it demonstrates how this genre can maintain its urgency for new generations and express something profound about our times.

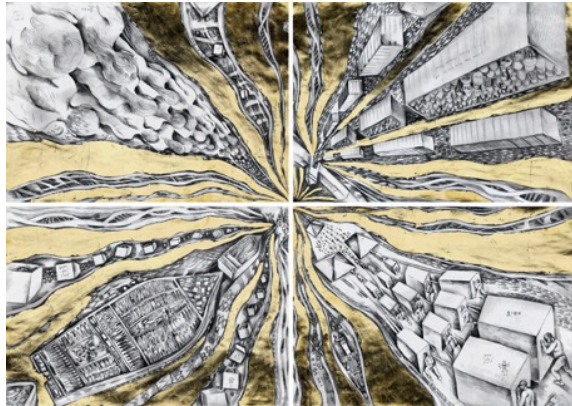


Fig 10. *The Coviad* – ‘Slavery’, panels 043 - 046, 2020, David Breuer-Weil, pencil and gold-leaf on paper. Copyright: David Breuer-Weil (author), 2021.

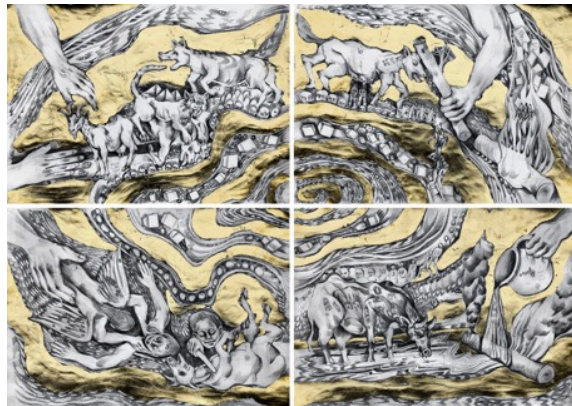


Fig 11. *The Coviad* – ‘The Song of the Goat’, panels 047 - 050, 2020, David Breuer-Weil, pencil and gold-leaf on paper. Copyright: David Breuer-Weil (author), 2021.

Conclusion

From my perspective, the panoramic format, in its broadest sense, can be a relevant genre for contemporary painters wishing to complete more ambitious, installation-like works. This is especially the case if these works seek to deal with subjects such as the passing of time and history, whether personal or otherwise. Both of my panoramas, *Epoch* and *The Coviad*, deal with or incorporate significant historical events. *Epoch*, a reflection on history, focuses on my family experience of the Holocaust as a defining moment of world history, and the psychological

ramifications upon “the second generation”. [21] *The Coviad* is a detailed reflection on the unprecedented year 2020-2021. That panoramas on recent and current themes are still being made in this way demonstrates, I hope, the longevity of panoramic art and the way in which panoramas, like some contemporary art, can reflect psychological states as well as events and topographies.

Notes

1. Catalogue European Fine Art Fair, European Fine Art Foundation, 2016.
2. John Sillevius, *Panorama Mesdag Album*, Scriptorum, 2015.
3. Ben Hanly, et al, David Breuer-Weil, *Radical Visionary*, Skira Editore, 2011.
4. Anne Wagner, ‘Scale in Sculpture: The Sixties and Henry Moore: Rothenstein Lecture’, in *Tate Papers*, no.15, Spring 2011.
5. Sohrab Ahmari, *The New Philistines-Provocations*, 2016.
6. The Elgin Marbles are the carved relief sculptures that once formed part of the Parthenon and are currently on view in the British Museum where they comprise a continuous frieze. See: B. F Cook, *The Elgin Marbles*, 1997. Their current location remains controversial.
7. In 701 BCE the Neo-Assyrian Empire's besieged Lachish in 701 BCE., as documented in the Old Testament and the Lachish relief, formerly adorning King Sennacherib's Palace at Nineveh and now in the British Museum.
8. Julian Reade considers that these reliefs are *the supreme masterpieces of Assyrian art* (Julian Reade, *Assyrian Sculpture*, 1998 (2nd edn.), The British Museum Press, p. 73). These were an early influence on my work.
9. Charles Rivers (ed), *The Le Brea Tar Pits: The History and Legacy of One of the World's Most Famous Fossil sites*, Charles River Editors, 2019.
10. As a student at Cambridge, I was stuck by Shakespeare's mingling of comedy, tragedy and pathos, perhaps seen most poignantly in the figure of the Poor Tom in *King Lear*. Gillian Woods writes extensively about King Lear and Poor Tom. She contends overall that as a play King Lear represents a breakdown in civilization (Gillian Woods, *King Lear, Madness, the Fool and Poor Tom*, 2016). It is this aspect that impacted my work that reflected the breakdown of civilization during World War II.
11. These public sculptures were all exhibited under the aegis of the City of Westminster sculpture programme in key locations in London.
12. T. S. Eliot's poetic ruminations about the passage of time and history were a strong influence on my early work. *Epoch* and *The Coviad* are both intended to be epic poems

in visual form. Kenneth Paul Kramer, *Redeeming Time, T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets*, 2007.

13. Primo Levi, *If This Is A Man and the Truce*, 2003.

14. Kikuchi, Mitsuru, *Frontiers in Fusion Research: Physics and Fusion*, London: Springer Science and Business Media, 2011, p. 12 “Empedocles (495–435 BC) proposed that the world was made of earth, water, air, and fire, which may correspond to solid, liquid, gas, and weakly ionized plasma. Surprisingly, this idea may catch the essence.”

15. Paul Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From, What Are We, Where Are We Going?* 1897-1898, oil on canvas, 137 by 375 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

16. Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil on canvas, 349 by 777cm., Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid.

17. Claude Monet, *Nymphs*, in several panels, Musee de l'Orangerie, Paris.

18. Ralph Hyde, *Panoromania! : the art and entertainment of the 'all-embracing' view*, an exhibition at Barbican Art Gallery, London from 3rd November 1988 to 15th January 1989

19. David Breuer-Weil, *Golden Drawings*, Gli Ori, 2020. This book also includes a written diary in which 66 drawings are each accompanied with notes.

20. Norman Denny and Josephine Filmer-Sankey, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, The Norman Conquest, 1066, London, 1966.

21. Children of survivors of the Holocaust and other traumas have reported dramatic influences on their mental health and sense of identity see: Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (ed), *History, Trauma and Shame: Engaging the Past through Second Generation Dialogue (Cultural Dynamics of Social Representation)*, 2020.

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