

REVIEWS

KINGSTON

AGNES ETHERINGTON ART
CENTRE AND MUSEUM OF
HEALTH CARE AT KINGSTON

HOWIE TSUI

by Christine Conley

Howie Tsui's unsparing display of bodily trauma in "Friendly Fire" at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre and "Friendly Fire Cabinet" at the Museum of Health Care at Kingston was an ingenious interpretation of artifacts from the Museum of Health Care that slyly subverted narratives of heroism from the War of 1812. Those familiar with his equally irreverent "Horror Fables" (2009) could recognize the delight in gory spectacle and the satirical use of diverse image sources.

In *Musketball!* (2012), a revamped pinball machine sends metal balls ricocheting through the diagrammatic guts of a redcoat to replay the deadly trajectory of musket balls through human flesh (a musket ball from the collection was displayed nearby). Tsui's lurid rendering of anatomical detail mimics pre-digital medical illustration, complete with inscriptions. But shooting to score in this outmoded arcade game has a contemporary feel: the emotional disconnect of computerized war games.

Countering the seductiveness of *Musketball!*, the field-surgery kit and other items on display in the gallery brought home the ghastly reality of soldiers' healthcare circa 1812: surgical procedures without anaesthesia, and archaic practices of humoral medicine. Little wonder so many would feign illness or injury to avoid service! *Of Malingers, Skulkers and Dupes* (2012) illustrates various grisly means of self-maiming, inspired by Dr. Hector Gavin's 1843 textbook *On Feigned and Factitious Diseases*.... Using acrylic ink, Tsui's caricature-like rendering of desperate conscripts in scenes of wartime mayhem evokes more laughter than empathy, yet the artist's use of suspended sheets of deer parchment as ground introduces a visceral tactility that leaves the viewer cringing. Tsui's choice of medium connects his own use of Chinese storytelling techniques to Aboriginal culture, and Aboriginal peoples are registered here as the repressed "others" in dominant accounts of the war and Canadian nation-building.

Siamese Destiny (2012) fuses two simulated skeletons into a haunting emblem of this fraught history. Atop a mound of earth and fabricated skulls, these looming figures—representing General Isaac Brock and the Shawnee chief Tecumseh—call to mind an alliance that gained everything for Britain



and nothing for Aboriginal peoples. It was impossible to decipher these dense historical signifiers without viewing the artist's sketches and visual sources at the nearby Museum of Health Care. Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon's *Types of Mankind* (1854), charting the unequal origins of the races, and Pascal Blanchard's *Human Zoos* (2009), documenting the outrageous use of non-Europeans as freaks or zoo residents, reveal that in the 19th century pseudoscience and racism were as intertwined as the conjoined twin brothers Chang and Eng Bunker, documented here as the first Siamese twins.

"Friendly Fire" complicated all claims to military glory while bringing the corporeal reality of armed conflict vividly to life. ■

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HOWIE TSUI *Siamese Destiny*
2011 Mixed media 2.03 x
1.72 x 1.72 m COURTESY THE ARTIST
PHOTO PAUL LUTHERLAND