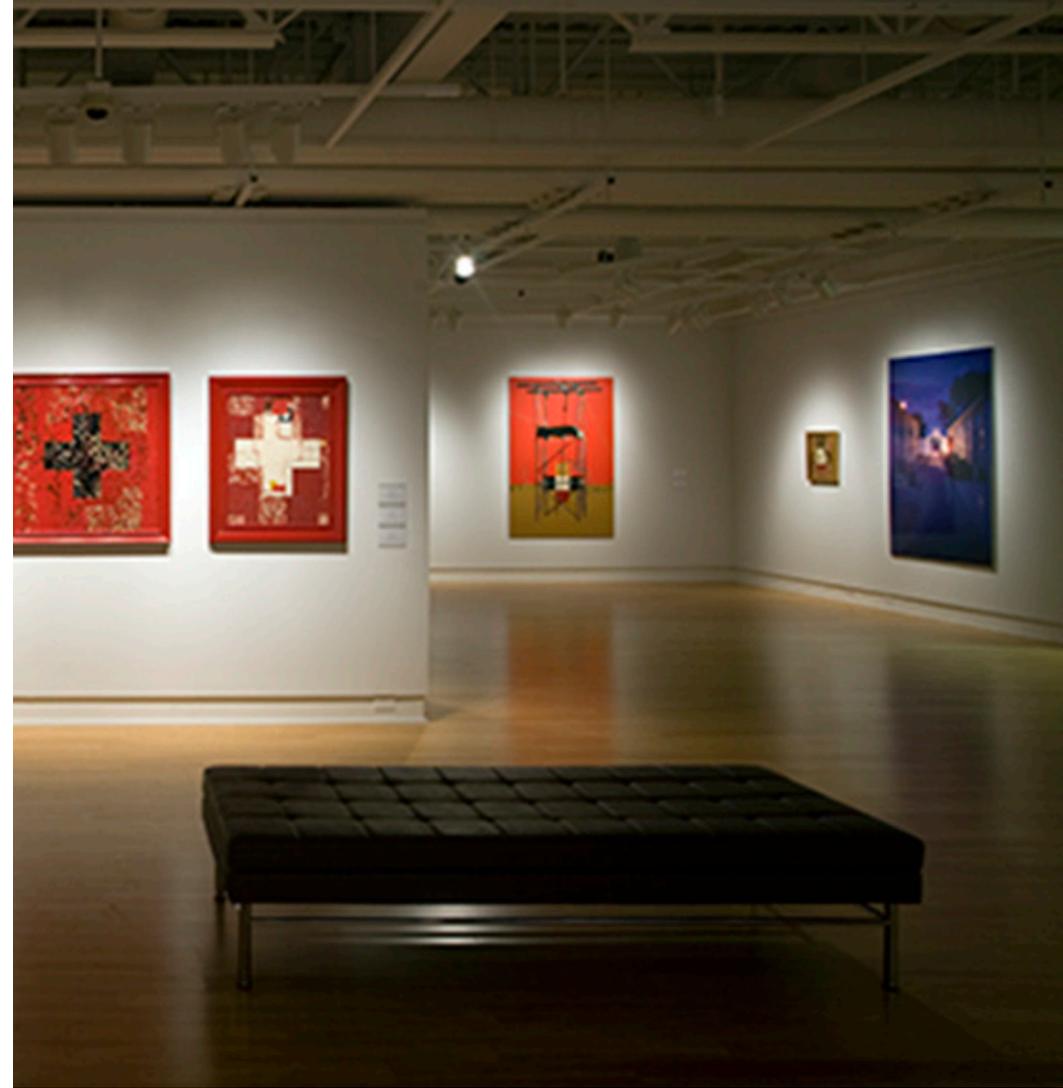


How do the intentions, actions, and consequences of evangelism and peacekeeping intertwine in our post-colonial world? Perhaps, they intertwine much like the various materials that co-exist in Ball's paintings: the admixture of paint over 'gold leaf' on wood invokes the religiosity of Christian icon paintings, though here underpinned and complicated in meaning by an eight-pointed star pattern on the linoleum substrate that could be the Star of Redemption representing Christian baptism or the Rub el Hizb design used as an emblem throughout the Muslim world. But then, what of the optimistic Western linoleum pattern that looks very much like the post-WWII American Dream kitchen floor? Perhaps the mercurial meaning-potential of the signs referenced in Ball's paintings are there specifically to cause us to puzzle out meaning and like the pages of the original wordless book the very blankness of a solid coloured page allows the imagination and our cultural needs to fill in

all the rest. War is complex and nations invade each other for many reasons. Our need to help explain the sacrifices of the people of our countries, our neighbours and children is a fathomless maw. Can comparisons be drawn between Christian sacrifice and those on the battlefield, or the concept of evil as an absolute or simply a rhetorical political tool? Righteousness aside, when people confront Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial in all of its modernist simplicity, the names of tens of thousands streaming down your own reflection on the polished black granite surface, perhaps, like these paintings, phenomenological material presence in solid colours and simplified shapes arranged on a flat surface is the most effective entry point to emotional connection and understanding.

by Clement Yeh and Terry Atkins



# Allen Ball

*The Wordless Book*



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**October 16th - December 12th**

# Allen Ball

## *The Wordless Book*

The paintings of *The Wordless Book* by Allen Ball, rendered in wax, enamel, linoleum, and metal foil on plywood, initially evoke modernist traditions of abstract expressionism, and variations on centrally placed symmetrical crosses add a touch of post-painterly abstraction. They have been constructed in a vertically oriented rectangular style and size that speaks of a Western painting tradition, and possess visual characteristics in patterns and shapes of black, red, white, and gold which unify them as a series. Their wooden frames reference the simplicity of modernism, the florid ornamentation of the baroque and the affordability of the second hand store.

The legacy of modernism is complex, continually unfolding, and its effects are heroically celebrated in polished stone, metal and glass of contemporary metropolitan centres (for example). Artists and writers in the early part of the 20th century felt that the spiritual beliefs and optimism of Victorian times were out of step with a thoroughly industrialized world, especially following the horrors of World War I. Rejecting previously held convictions of the inherent goodness of humanity and the lofty functions of art, modernists espoused self-reflexivity in their various mediums of expression. Writers such as William S. Burrows developed unreliable narrators and used stream-of-consciousness techniques. Pushed out of the realm of recording reality by the emerging technologies of photography and its objective realism, visual artists concentrated on non-representational

arrangements of colour, shape and line, all meant to activate the surface of the flat canvas. Although this modernist tradition of formal exploration is part of what informs Allen Ball's work, closer investigation shows there is much more going on. The clues are to be found in the symbol of a cross much like the one on the Swiss flag or used by International Red Cross, stocky and symmetrical, intermixed with layers of patterning of vintage linoleum, textures reminiscent of photographic blow-ups and colours with the richness and glow of Russian Icon paintings. Clues are also held within the exhibition's title, *The Wordless Book*.

*The Wordless Book* is the name of a Christian evangelistic book, developed by the Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon, in 1866. Devoid of text, it featured two-page spreads of pure colour which would allow a minister or missionary to describe to a non-literate audience the



*The Wordless Book +Blood*, 2009  
Enamel, metal-foil, linoleum and wax  
on plywood 27 1/4" x 32 1/4"

blackness of humanity's sins, the redness of Christ's blood (in which the converted are to figuratively wash themselves), the whiteness of their redemption and righteousness, and the gold of heaven's offerings. Astounding in its simplicity, the *Wordless Book* was widely used in many countries to spread the message of Christianity, to indoctrinate new populations into its fold and is still available today, but advertised more for use with children. Ironically, when the abstract nature of a page, or a painting, is simplified to this degree what it can mean is so open to interpretation that it can mean anything, or everything, or nothing.

Reflecting on the meaning of Ball's paintings in the context of this evangelical history is loaded enough until we also consider that in 2007, under the Canadian Forces Artist Program, he was assigned to observe independent peacekeeping operations in Northern Egypt. The volunteer program, through various incarnations, mandates

that, "[t]his new artistic endeavor would allow Canadian artists the opportunity to record Canada's soldiers in Canada and around the world... [and] will help usher in a new era of Canadian military art".<sup>i</sup> Many artists within the program's history chose to record scenes in front of them literally as a documentarian (or camera) would. Though this series of paintings by Ball comes several years after his posting with the military, how his work is informed by that experience does not echo the others because he has taken a decidedly less representational approach. His use of the cross simultaneously brings to mind Christianity (the crusades?) as well as Swiss armed forces flags or the humanitarian, apolitical and neutral sign of help and healing in the Red Cross.

Continued...

<sup>i</sup>National Defense and Canadian Armed Forces website, URL <<http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/gal/ap-pa/index-eng.asp>> retrieved Friday October 9, 2015