

On Ukraine

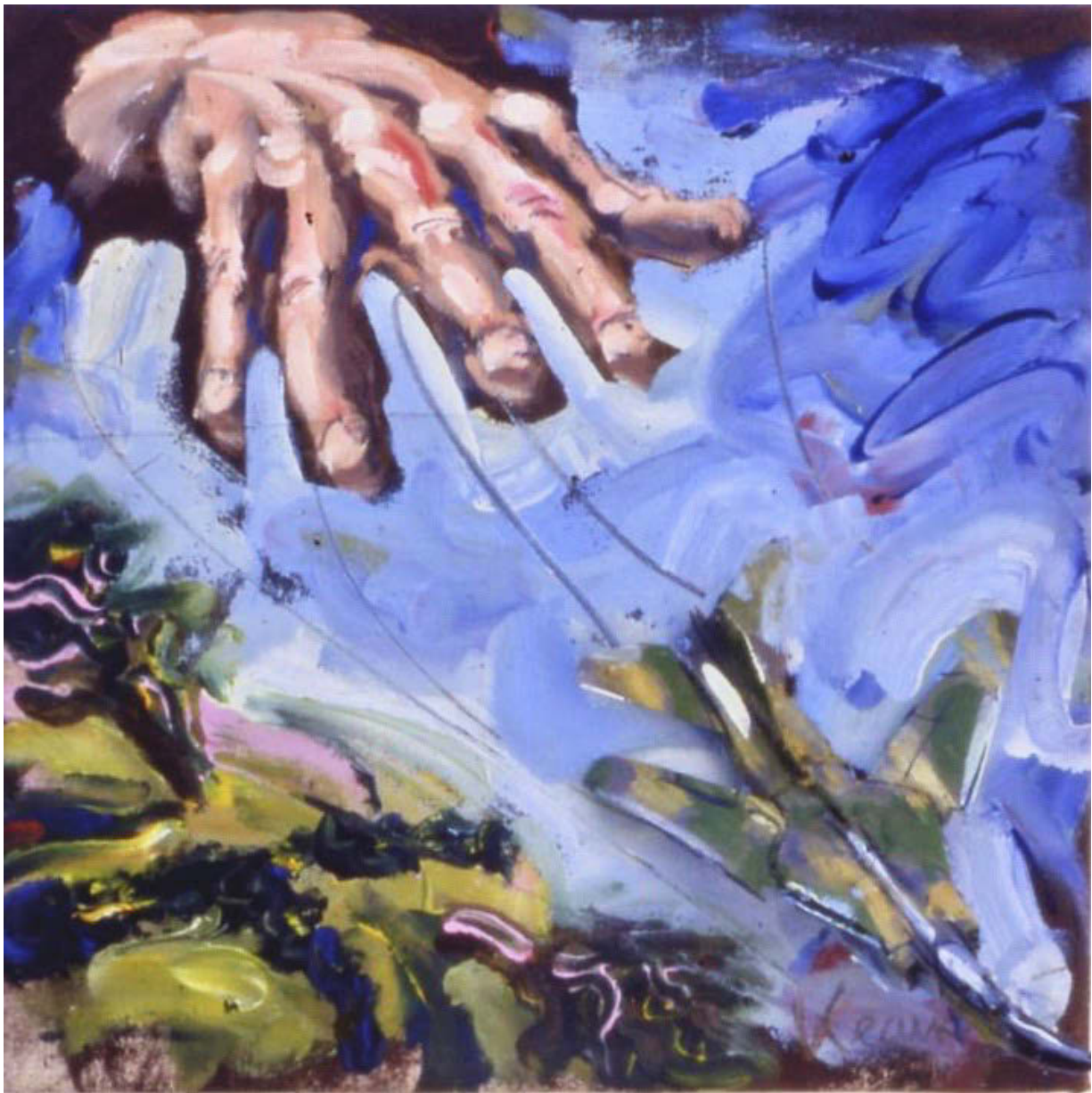


Who Shot the Plane Down/Flat Earth #6, 2019, Reactive metallic paint, metal, wood, gold & diamonds/ linen 65x96cm

In 2019 I did a small painting which I called 'Who Shot the Plane Down'. There was deliberately no question mark after the title, as it was intended ambiguously as both a question and a statement of agency. It raised the question of the identity of the perpetrator who shot down the plane, but also alluded to responsibility - the perpetrator of course would know their own identity. The painting used a small rust-coated model of a Boeing 777 airliner set against a rectangular map of the world, rendered in iron (for land) and copper (for sea) oxide, placed roughly over Ukraine. It alluded to the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight 17 from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur that was shot out of the sky on 17 July 2014 with the loss of 298 lives. It also had echoes of other downed planes with disputed perpetrators, like the incident in which Juvénal Habyarimana died in Kigali in 1994, sparking the Rwandan genocide, or that in which Secretary-General of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld died when on his way to cease-fire negotiations in the Congo in 1961.

The second part of the title was Flat Earth (#6,) a theme which raised the question of alternative beliefs, or as often described, usually dismissively, as conspiracy theories. There were a torrent of theories concerning the destruction of MH17, which largely depended on which side was putting them out, apportioning blame to either Russian supported separatist fighters in Donetsk, Eastern Ukraine, or to the Ukrainians themselves, either as a false flag operation to discredit the separatists or (according to RT) a bungled attempt to shoot down Vladimir Putin by Ukraine's western backers, even though Putin's plane was hundreds of kilometres to the north. Eventually it emerged, after painstaking open source research by investigative journalists at Bellingcat, that it was indeed blown up by a Buk missile supplied to the separatists by Russia. The extensive Dutch Safety Board investigation later confirmed this.

At the time I was outraged that a civilian airliner had been targeted, even mistakenly, in this way with the loss of so many innocent lives (the shooting down of an Iranian airliner by the US in 1988 also resulted in a work of mine). But I was struck by the efforts both to uncover but also to obfuscate the truth of who lay behind the atrocity, and instead to create smokescreens. What of course were actually real facts became instead a matter of personal belief, which often said more about the believer than it did about the reality. The concept of 'false flag' operations had recently risen up the agenda via the internet as a way of, depending which side of the fence you are on, either muddying the waters or explaining why the opposite of what you believe to be true is in fact the actual truth. This attitude put me in mind of a memory from primary school, when, given some crayons and blank sheets of paper we were left free to draw as we wished. All of us, to a boy started to do pictures of castles with crenellated walls, which, for small boys of that era was not unusual. When I turned to look at my neighbour Christopher's crenellated walls I made some remark about castles and he looked at me and said, with a superior air, 'This isn't a castle - I'm drawing *battlements*..' I'd never heard of 'battlements', but he clearly spoke with authority so I kept quiet. This word 'battlements' returns to me sometimes nowadays when those who consider themselves to be in possession of deeper and superior knowledge explain that what I think about a certain situation or event doesn't even approximate the real story.

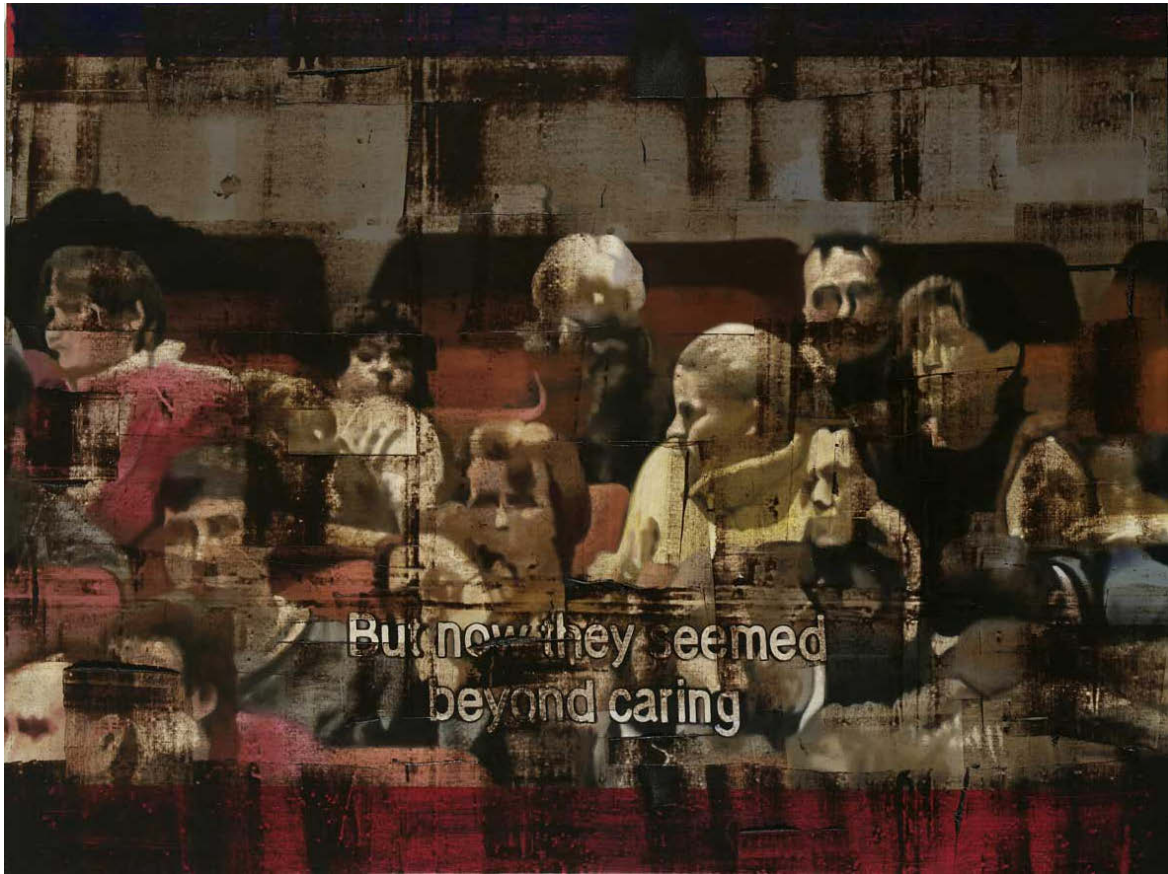


Mig Thrust 1985, PVA/model aircraft/canvas



Romantic Encounter 1984 PVA/canvas

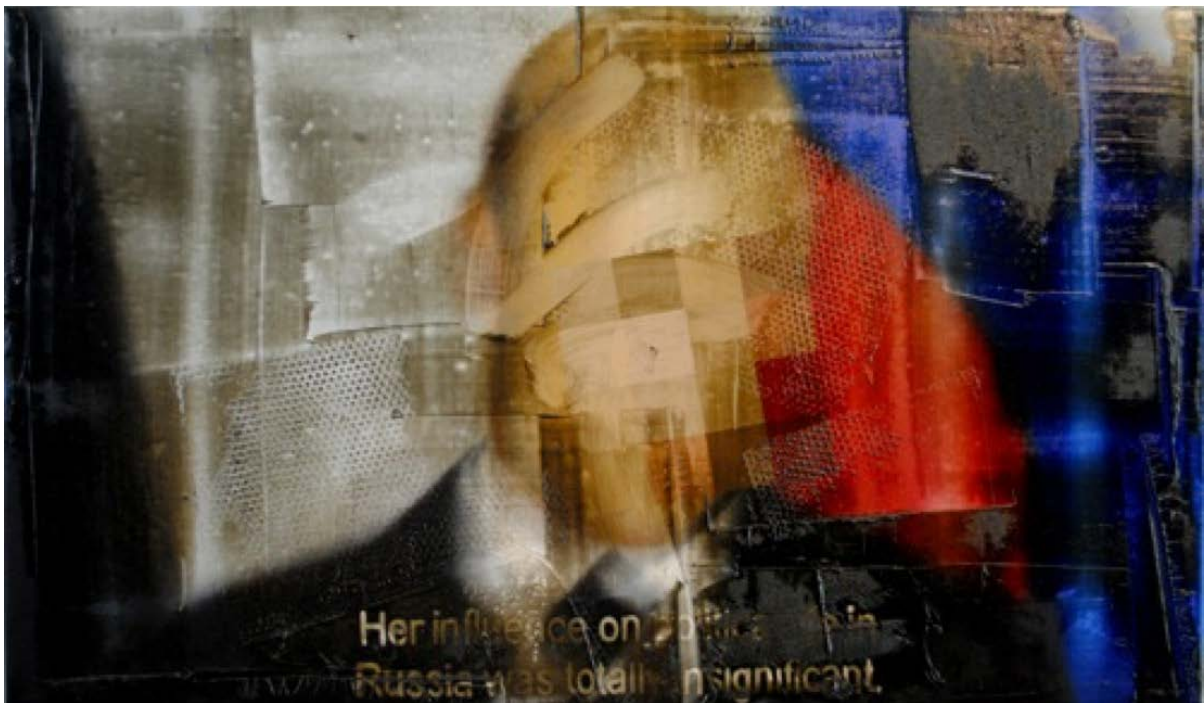
Over the years subject matter of my paintings has on numerous occasions made reference to Russia, and previously the Soviet Union during cold war times, and for some reason, perhaps not unrelated to fact that for a year when I was twelve I studied Russian, it has always held a fascination for me. From Dostoevsky and Tolstoy through Malevich and Tarkovsky to Pussy Riot, I have always found fascination in its history and culture. I have followed it's politics since the collapse of the Soviet Union, through hope, dismay and despair at various times. I have only once been there, to Moscow, when I held an exhibition there in 2006. The exhibition was called *57 Hours in the House of Culture* and dealt with the notorious Moscow theatre siege of 2002 which resulted in the deaths of around 130 theatregoers taken hostage during the second Chechen war.



But now they seemed beyond caring, 2004, oil and acrylic on canvas, 212x282cm



They Shouted 'Got the Bitch' 2004 oil/linen 212x282cm



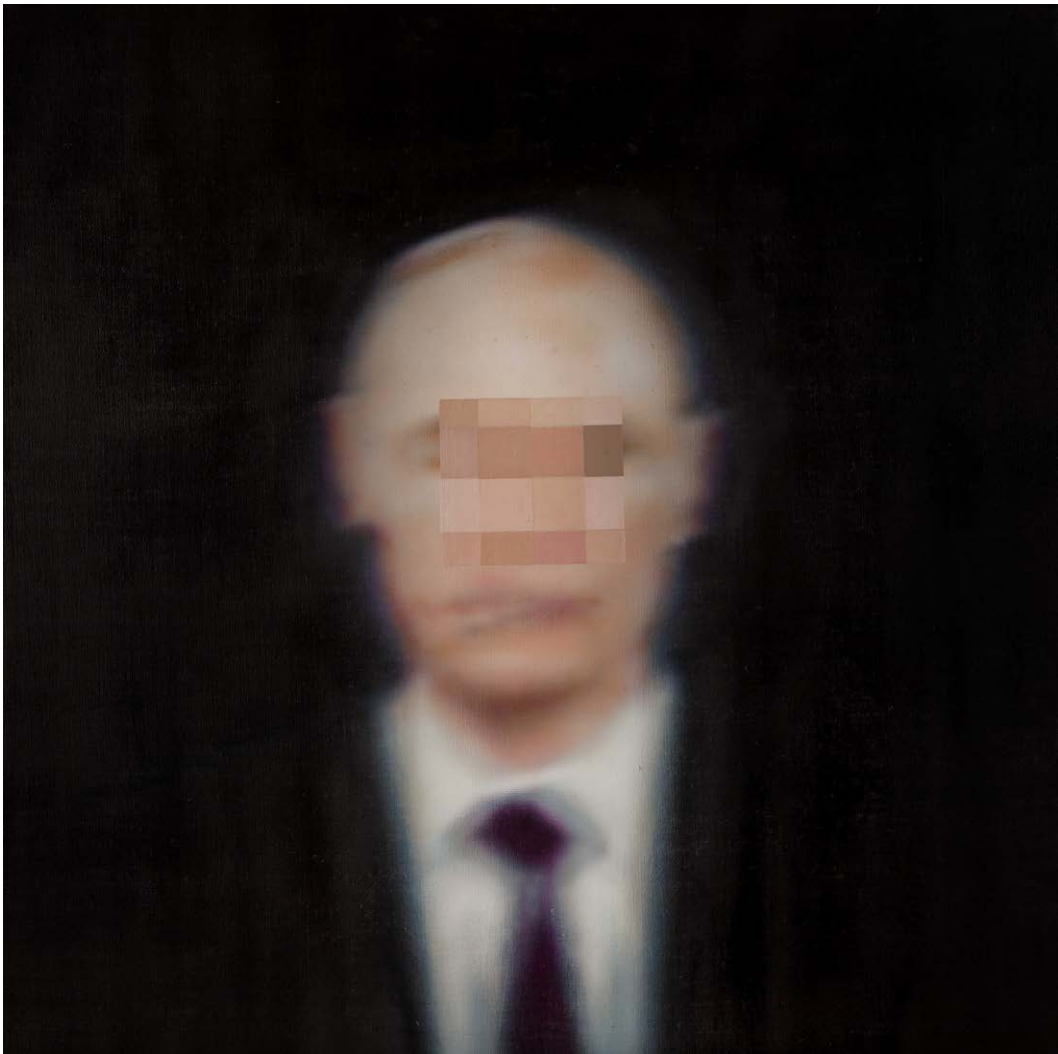
Her Influence on Political Life in Russia was Totally Insignificant, 2007 Oil/linen

The deaths were mostly the result of incompetent handling by the security forces. The show was held at the Andrei Sakharov Museum, a memorial to the victims of Russian totalitarianism and a beacon of free expression and human rights in contemporary Russia. The opening was attended by many who had been involved in or affected by the event, and turned into a kind of political forum, most of which, of course, I didn't understand, but I was humbled and gratified by the warm reception I received from those whom it had affected. No proper inquiry into the tragedy had been held, leaving the bereaved feeling that they had been held in contempt. (The Andrei Sakharov Museum was finally shut down by the authorities in spring 2022.

<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/europe/57549/moscow-diary>

The funeral of the murdered journalist Anna Politkovskaya had just taken place, and not long after Alexander Litvinenko was poisoned in London by agents who left a radioactive trail which had left traces in the Arsenal stadium close to where I live, so these felt like sinister and threatening times. It took years for Litvinenko's brave widow to finally get the British government to accede to an inquiry into his murder, only after the invasion of Crimea. It took place at the Royal Courts of Justice, and I sat in on one of the days just to observe proceedings - on that day police officers on assignment to Moscow described how every effort was made to frustrate their interviews with the suspects. After years of procrastination the UK government finally had to concede that the trail of Polonium 210 led all the way back to the door of the Kremlin. A highly inconvenient fact, given that Londongrad, as the City of London was becoming known, had for years been welcoming the wealth of Russians enriched by the milking of Russian state assets sold off after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russian citizens with questionable and unexplained wealth were embraced by British financial institutions, the legal system, the property market, private schools and the Conservative party. Many were welcomed in on the golden visa scheme, whereby for a mere £2m immigrants could be awarded British citizenship. Amongst these were many with close links to the Kremlin which were conveniently overlooked so long as the money poured in. Some of this money has been documented as providing resources for the Brexit campaign.

Even without the state sanctioned or implemented programme of assassinations, the complexion of Putin's regime, however diplomatically awkward for the UK, became brutally apparent. Both Chechen wars for independence (for which the Dubrovka theatre siege and the Beslan massacre were examples of bloody retribution) and the brutal Russian intervention to defend the Assad dictatorship in Syria were clear indicators of the measures that Putin was prepared to take to further his idea of a glorious Russia. After the humiliation and sanctioned pillaging of the 1990s under Boris Yeltsin, Russia had much ground to make up on the international stage to regain credibility and respect as a major power on the world stage, and Vladimir Putin declared himself the man to do it.



Putin Variations II, 2014, Oil/linen 70x70cm

The manner in which he chose to do this, however, rather than promoting the idea of a progressive and fraternal ally of the liberal democracies of the international community, was instead to waste no opportunity to undermine the very concept of progressive and liberal democracy, portraying it as a decadent western concept, both overtly and by stealth. This process combined with allying himself with the dictators and thugs of the world, and using Russian money and influence to promote extreme right wing tendencies in the democracies he sought to undermine. Putin's world view appears to be a zero sum game in which the only way to make Russia stronger is by making others weaker. That this approach has now actually had the opposite effect will no doubt not be a deterrent. Crimes against the planet and humanity are as nothing, it appears. So far, so awkward, if you are a beneficiary of the proceeds filtering out of Russia. But before the invasion, still not a reason not to do business. Yet.

As years went by he secured his status at home as virtual president for life, whilst political challengers like Alexei Navalny and dissidents such as Pussy Riot were subjected to violence and imprisonment, and the recurring deaths of possible opponents seemed to be frequently shrouded in mysterious circumstance.

In 2013/14 the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine divided the country between those who looked west toward the European Union and NATO, and those who looked east to the Russian Federation. Fighting broke out between the separatists in the Donbass, who wanted to become part of Russia, and the forces of the state. There are accusations of atrocity on both sides, and it



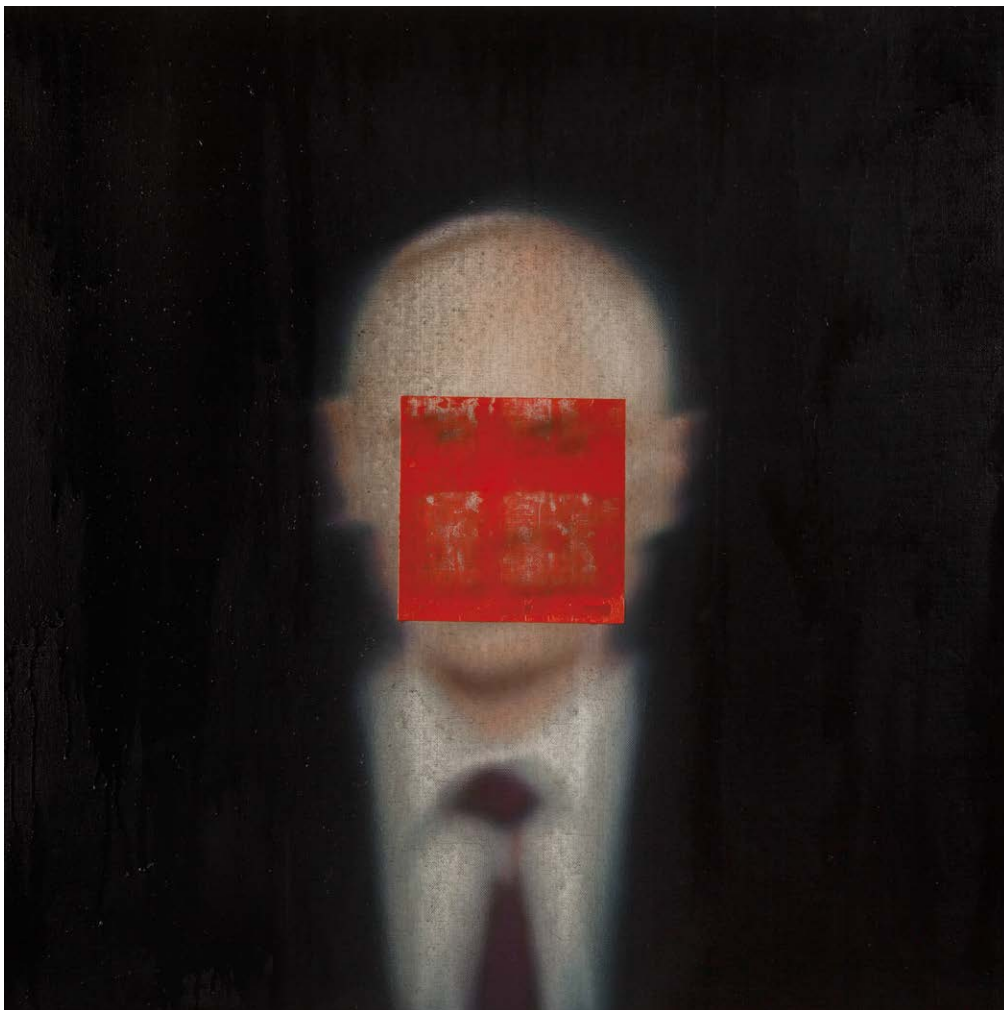
Fear Not 2013, oil/gold leaf/inkjet transfer/jute

was in this unfortunate scenario that the passengers aboard MH17 who, rather than finding themselves lounging on the beaches of Bali were instead found lifeless in a Ukrainian field. In February 2014 Russia also, having decided that Crimea belonged in the Russian Federation, took over the peninsula by force, without any legitimacy under international law and an act which was condemned by UN resolution. This event was staged conveniently just after the end of the Sochi winter Olympics, but still didn't prohibit Russia from their role as world cup hosts for 2018. So far, so good - Russia was far too valuable an asset to the Western financial elite to dwell on awkward questions and Putin was smart enough to recognise this.

In 2016 The United Kingdom held a referendum on leaving the European Union. A fraction over half of the votes were in favour of leaving, and a fraction under were against. Leave voters were unembarrassed by and were unlikely to question the support for their cause by the likes of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. Undermining European cohesion was an avowed aspiration of the Russian leader, but the implications for European security were of no importance to the Leave campaign. The report on Russian interference in UK government failed to prompt an investigation of interference in the democratic processes. Under Boris Johnson the inquiry did not seek to assess the impact of Russia's alleged attempts to influence the 2016 EU referendum, as it might invalidate the success of his whole careerist Brexit gamble, and in addition to this, credible open-source commentary suggested Russia sought to influence the Scottish independence referendum as well. Clearly there is a pattern here - egregious breaches of international law and detected clandestine interference in the internal procedures and politics of liberal democracies, plus the murder of declared opponents on foreign soil somehow all failed to ring the alarm bells on which the people of the UK rely through their government and security services to protect them. The betrayal of spies like Kim Philby and Guy Burgess during the cold war are as nothing compared to the betrayal of the British State by their entrusted leaders. The alarm bells only rang when the first Russian boots stepped over the border with Ukraine on the 24th February 2022. And then it was too late. It seems obvious that Putin's imperial ambitions were emboldened by the complacency of the UK and other western countries and willingness to turn a blind eye to what was a clearly

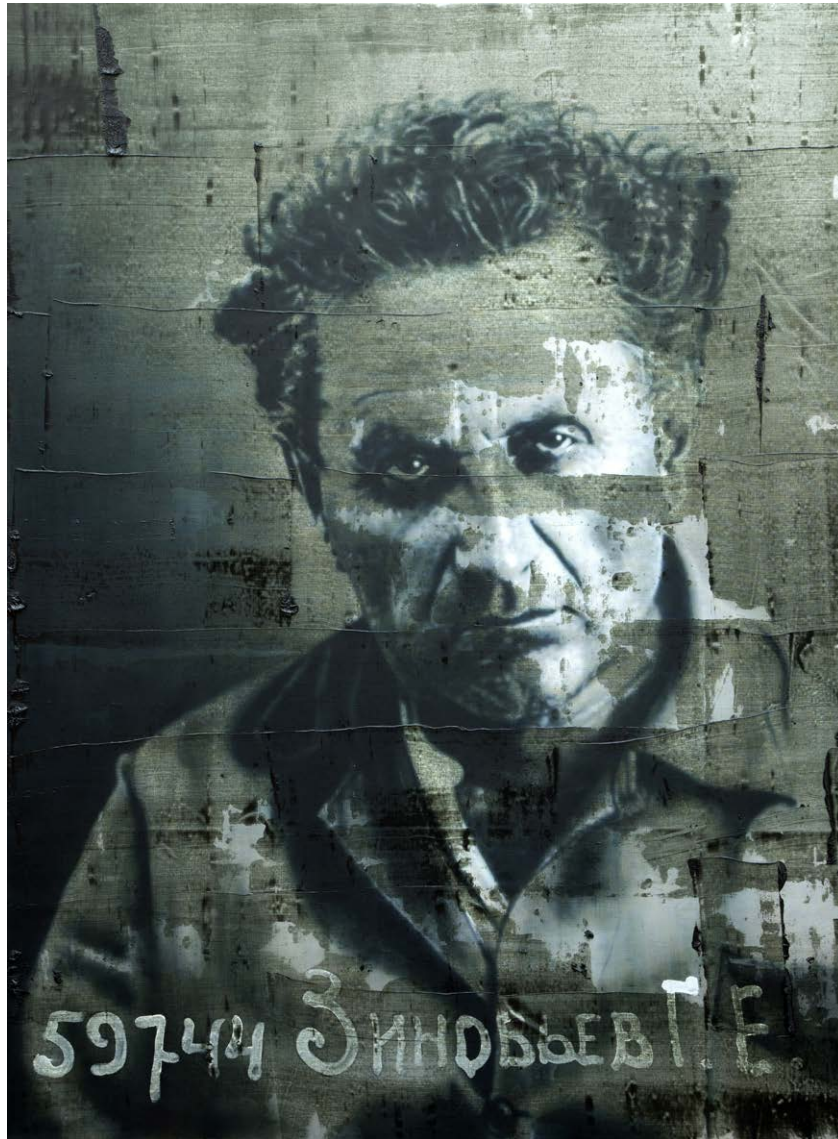
sympathise with their view. Their opinions on a strongman nationalist leader who will gladly invoke divinely endorsed traditional family values are easily understood. The Left, on the other hand, is more problematic, and this is something I have wrestled with since the start of this conflict, since I see myself as of the left. There are a few, (perhaps the likes of George Galloway and his Hat) who would go on TV as shameless Putin apologists and declare that Russia has no intention of invading Ukraine, but for some of that tendency there is one thing much, much worse than Putin. And that thing is NATO. Nato is the embodiment of evil, so any who dare to challenge this dastardly force is deserving of support.

Never having been much of a joiner, I did nevertheless rejoin the Labour party when Jeremy Corbyn stood as leader. Not just because he is my local MP, but because whenever he opened his mouth, despite a slightly irritatingly sanctimonious tone to his voice, there was precious little I could find that I actually disagreed with. On the subject of Russia I could even justify his questioning of the rush to judgement over the Salisbury poisonings whilst facts were still to be established. He had also spoken out in parliament of his concerns over the flood of dodgy Russian money into the British establishment. However the massed barrages of media vilification, lies and ridicule eventually succeeded in consigning Corbyn to the dustbin of history, and once his successor Keir Starmer began to make his true colours apparent I had to recuse myself again from membership on grounds of apparently being too anti-semitic. Nevertheless, I could not but feel disappointed when, upon returning from protests outside both the Russian embassy in Kensington and in Whitehall two days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, trudging across Highbury Fields, who should I see addressing a small gathering but Jeremy Corbyn. I think it was the NHS he was discussing, but why wasn't he outside the Russian embassy, or in Whitehall? Ok he was talking about the NHS, but if this had been another US invasion, I sort of think I knew where his priorities would lie.



Red Square 2014, oil/linen 70x70cm

Sometimes on occasion I have been asked if I am a pacifist. I think my answer in the past has generally been, I don't know. In a newspaper interview I once said I'm not a pacifist but more likely a coward. I have never been tested in the way that my parents generation were. As a child I loved guns and toy soldiers, but since my teenage years anything to do with the military I found anathema, even whilst I became preoccupied with the morality of warfare and political violence in my own work. Through my work as an artist I have spent many years attempting to address the moralities of politically motivated violence. It has taken me from Northern Ireland to the Middle east to central America and Africa. The use of violence to address political problems is inexcusable. Why should many have to die before accommodation can be reached, as in the end it will be. But what if someone acts violently without justification or provocation? Where are your principles of non violence then? If this violence is not directed at you, but toward your friend, do you stand by idly by for them to sort it out amongst themselves and just tell them to stop fighting for goodness sake? This seems to be the view of a certain faction of the left, sometimes referred to as the 'Tankies', after those apologists for the Soviet repressions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the fifties and sixties. I suppose these are the ones who claim better understanding, who were not drawing castles, but *battlements*. They know better than the brainwashed masses. But whatever confected ideological justification there might have been to accommodate the Imperialism of the Soviet Union evaporated with the descent of the Russian Federation under Vladimir Putin into progressively fascistic rule. But for me, what I chiefly, bitterly, resent, is that as a lifelong dissenter and opponent of the merchants of war, I have been forced to throw in my lot with the evil arms trade.



Fear No. 59744, 2012, Oil/Linen, 200 x 150cm

John Keane

July 2023