



Emily Prince, *American Servicemen and Women Who Have Died in Iraq and Afghanistan (But Not Including the Wounded Nor the Iraqis Nor the Afghanis)*. 2004 to present. Credit: Saatchi Gallery

## Seeing, Counting, Taking Time: Memory and the Iraq War

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In the context of today's digital, postmodern, remix image culture, the power of visibility can seem to have lost its currency. Within the dominant modes of irony, parody, and remix culture, and in the context of an immense oversaturation of images on the Web, cell phones, and social media, more value has been awarded to linkages, aggregation, and navigability, than to sheer visibility. In this image context, the simple assertion of visibility *as a political mode* has come to seem old-fashioned. Yet rendering visible remains an enormously important political task, one crucial to the politics of memory. The political aim of many memorials has been to assert the presence of individuals whose deaths have been negated, denied, disappeared, or rendered invisible.

The memorialization of the ongoing, unresolved, and now largely ignored war in Iraq reveals this tension of visibility and erasure. On the one hand, the Iraq War has been the source of vast numbers of images, including nonprofessional images circulated through digital networks (such as the image of abuse in the Abu Ghraib prison) that have impacted the war's progress. This has produced the sense that the war is taking place in a context of uncontrolled image proliferation and distribution. On the other hand, the war has been subject to traditional forms of

# EMISFÉRICA

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ensorship, including restrictions on photojournalists and the banning of images of flag-draped coffins at Dover Air Force Base until 2009. The war drags on, barely registering with many Americans today as they struggle with economic crises, and is likely to continue to fester long after something resembling a U.S. withdrawal of personnel takes place.

Memorialization of the Iraq War has thus largely been an attempt by artists and activists to render the costs of the ongoing conflict visible, often in very direct and simple ways. The visual economy of the remembrance of those who have died in this war has been one of counting, tallying, and rendering visible. In the early years of the war, this was made clear in many of the ongoing memorials created by concerned citizens that used traditional symbols to tally the U.S. war dead: a weekly display of crosses for the U.S. dead in Santa Monica, California; a hillside of crosses in Lafayette, California (subject to a lawsuit); and the travelling exhibition *Eyes Wide Open*, in which empty combat boots fill exhibition spaces. The online memorial site [Iraqimemorial.org](http://Iraqimemorial.org) has a large number of proposals for memorials for Iraqi civilians that simply aim to tally their numbers and render their absence visible.



Emily Prince, pencil drawings from *American Servicemen and Women Who Have Died in Iraq and Afghanistan*.

Credit: Saatchi Gallery

Counting and tallying the dead is often one of a kind of memorial labor, taking time to count the dead. One work that engages with this labor of memorialization is Emily Prince's *American Servicemen and Women Who Have Died in Iraq and Afghanistan (But Not Including the Wounded, Nor the Iraqis nor the Afghanis)* (2004 until the present). Prince's [work](#) engages through its very self-conscious title with the problems of cataloguing, counting, and attempting to make visible the dead from this war. In the titling of her work, Prince makes clear that the list of people to be named and noted as the victims of the war is potentially expandable to many hundreds of thousands, and that to note the American dead is of course to

# EMISFÉRICA

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indicate the absence of a cataloguing of the Iraqi and Afghan war casualties. The idea of an endlessly expandable parenthetical list is crucial to Prince's project, which presents individual hand-drawn portraits of each of the American soldiers who have died. She starts with the individual portraits of the American war dead that are posted on a military website by their families. She then redraws each one of those photographs, which she posts on a wall in different forms, sometimes as a chronological listing or at some sites (such as at the Venice Biennale) with the images set out in a map of the United States with the portraits clustered at the hometowns of the dead. Prince's work attempts to render visible the racial and ethnic demographics of those who have died as she uses different colored paper to demarcate race and ethnicity.

This is a work about spending time reflecting on the dead. It is reminiscent of one of the most effective and affecting aspects of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which is the way in which the labor of making a panel constitutes a time and a reflecting on the meaning of someone's life and its loss (even for those who are making panels for people they don't know). Prince deliberately takes time to draw a replica of a photograph for each person killed and is always behind in trying to keep up with the numbers. Her ongoing labor is integral to the work, and its ever-unfinished nature is key to its memorial effect. This is the *labor* of remembering. The potential ongoing ever-unfinished quality of the project thus reflects the festering state of the war itself. (This aspect of it has not negated its value—it was purchased by art collector Charles Saatchi). This work is about the politics of visibility. Counting the loss. Counting the sacrificed lives. Counting the human costs. And noting those tens of thousands who are not being counted.

The labor of drawing these portraits is a kind of *tarrying* with grief, to borrow Judith Butler's term (Butler 2003, 30). In methodically redrawing the faces of the men and women who have died, Prince tarries with loss, she sits with it, and that is, of course, why her project could remain unfinished for years. Not only does the mode of drawing in her work create labor and demand time, it also pushes back on the culture of the digital that we have come to associate with today's visual economy.

Drawing as an act of remembrance thus creates a kind of deliberate temporal mode of remembrance. This tactic can also be seen in the work of Michael Reagan, a Vietnam veteran who has been creating portraits of soldiers (American, Canadian, and British) who have died in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Reagan, who has been making portrait drawings for years, began to draw images of Iraq War soldiers at the request of families, who now regularly send him photographs to draw from. He calls his project "[The Fallen Heroes.](#)"

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Michael A. Reagan. Portrait of deceased U.S. Marine Michael M. Carvey with his daughter Mia.

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Reagan's project says something about the power of the drawn portrait to convey compassion and attention. Families send Reagan photographs, yet they report that it is the drawn portrait that really conveys a sense of the presence of their lost ones. In addition, and perhaps most intriguingly, Reagan has produced a number of images that create virtual portraits, so to speak, in which soldiers are drawn with the children who they never knew. In one image, for instance, Michael Carey is paired with his daughter Mia, who was born two weeks before he died. In another portrait, two brothers who died separately are paired together in their combat gear, creating a time when both brothers are imagined at war yet together. It is worth noting that the portraits that bring together children and parents who never met in real life could be created in Photoshop, yet perhaps such a collage might appear too artificial. The time-space created by the drawn portrait evokes, however, something different. It is not a fake, it is, rather, an imagined encounter, the drawing of the powerful desire to see the new life (the life of this child, for instance) conquer death, the desire for redemptive narrative out of the war. Reagan states that he is told by families that his drawings, which he does for free, help them to heal their loss. His work, like Prince's, reveals the affective quality of drawing in remembrance. And both remind us that it remains a radical act to mourn a stranger.

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## Works Cited

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