Sophie Jodoin's War Series
Drawing on the Poetics of Deflection
by Robert Enright

Sophie Jodoin perceives the world in black and white and then re-envisions it within the same restricted tonal framework. On the evidence of the "War Series," an assembly of sub-themes on the hydra-headed subject of war which she has been drawing for the last two years, this is a limitation devoutly to be wished. Jodoin's body of work promises to be among the most ambitious drawing projects undertaken by a Canadian artist in the last half century. It already constitutes over 300 drawings on Mylar, the smallest 112 Conté and collage drawings measuring 24 x 19 cm, called *Small Dramas and Little Nothings*, and the largest being ten black gesso and Conté drawings called *Hoods*; at 132 x 91.5 cm, twice life-size. They show cloth-covered heads that take as their point of departure certain of the notorious images from Abu Ghraib. Just looking at them induces an intense degree of claustrophobic anxiety.

The *Small Dramas* are minor in scale but not in content; an animal on crutches, four pairs of shoes without benefit of occupation; and a collection of skulls arranged on top of a black cloth, a sort of gothic still life. (The French designation, *nature morte*, is a better fit). The drawings are the equivalent of reductive sculpture; more has been taken away than is evident on the drawing surface. "I'm interested in the poetic," Jodoin said during the two days I spent in her Montreal studio. "Reduction is really important to me and it's something I aspire to as I'm growing older."

Her work functions figuratively and conceptually; the figures occupy a solitary place on single sheets of Mylar, and then these isolated figures are installed in grids with as many as 80 images. The singularity of each drawing is altered by the plurality of the installation. Significantly, one body of 72 drawings is called *Regiment* (oil on Mylar, 2006-07); the artist thinks of it as a compact army of body types, cut off at the eyes and the navel, the torsos of which read as much like armour as flesh.

There is a kind of practical logic to the way Jodoin's work develops. The body armour of *Regiment* is extended in *Helmets and Gasmasks*, 80 Conté drawings Jodoin completed in 2008. The series is comprised of meticulous renderings of medieval battle helmets (she took photographs of the Medieval Art collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York), as well as 60 examples of gasmasks from the early 20th century through to the present, taken from an internet site. For the most part the helmets are uninhabited, whereas the masks are almost always worn by someone. The eyes that peer out from the murky interiors of the masks are variously confused, suffering, resigned and grateful, a range of emotions one would expect. What is less expected is the way that Jodoin avoids the obvious traps into which work that deals with war and torture often falls: the sensational, the morbid, the vulgar, the sentimental and the jingoistic. Death is everywhere around the work, but is never at its core. "We are at once broken and complete," she says in the following interview. Inside that frame, she is more interested in fragments and debris than she is in

wholeness. She characterizes her attitude as one that embraces "tender pain," a phrase whose restrained felicity shouldn't obscure its unblinking truth to experience. I think of another Montrealer when looking at Jodoin's compelling drawings. Leonard Cohen admonishes us in *Anthem* to leave behind any notion of a perfect offering and to concentrate instead on what can be done. "There is a crack in everything," the song lyric goes, "that's how the light gets in." Jodoin's drawn world may be crack-pated to lift an idea from W.B. Yeats, but it still has its dreams.

In *Headgames* (2008), a 7 minute-long video projection made in collaboration with David Jhave Johnston, she finds the kinetic equivalent of the tender pain embodied in her drawings. The video is a series of short scenes in which her seven and nine-year-old nephew and niece wear hoods and gasmasks while playing for the camera. The children's movements articulate a range of activity that is breathtakingly human and that moves from innocence to threat with the ineluctable logic of a dream. Everything that we cherish and need to be wary of is visible in this small, moving drama. The artist's own assessment is that there might be "a bit of redemption" in the video. It's the only occasion when I think Sophie Jodoin is wrong about something she has made. *Headgames* is one work that stands in for all her bodies of work. Her "might be" gets us nowhere near the mark of her achievement. What she understands to be her broken art is, at its centre, unapologetically redemptive.

The following interview was conducted in the artist's Montreal studio on November 19, 2008.

A. I've drawn since I was a child. I found that every time I tackled painting I would find it cumbersome. There were too many things to deal with: the tools, the drying time, having to manage too many colours. I felt I was creating a fake world. Also, the whole seduction of it never attracted me. Drawing is so immediate. Even though I don't keep a diary I was thinking that the "War Series" is just a vast visual compilation of drawings that becomes a diary. Maybe that's why I don't think that much when I do them. I just draw - they may come out very literal, or direct or restrained - and then the editing process comes in.

Q. I think of the diary as a text which traces the reactions, emotions and attitudes of the diarist.
A. They are visual traces and since I don't write, that becomes my written language. Most artists say all their work is autobiographical which is ultimately true because I think we are very selfish, opportunistic beings and we appropriate a motif or subject and make it ours. We diffuse it into our own being.

Q. You say you see the world in black and white. Is there a process of visual translation that goes on inside your head?
A. It's hard to explain, but I don't really relate to colours. When I go to museums I don't feel I can judge the complexity of the colour in paintings, particularly the whole idea of composition. When I use visual

references, or take photographs, they'll be most likely in black and white. By doing that I arrive more quickly at the core of my subject. Formally it's very graphic and I can see it faster and more abstractly. Then I can busy myself with putting down the envelope of emotions, the whole array of what I'm trying to get at.

Q. What's your sense of the tonal range within which you have to work?
A. I think it's infinite. It goes from total negation and total infinity, like white on white, to a negation of space by filling it up to its full extent. In between you have all the subtleties. I think of it as music where you have silent passages. In that sense, I feel what I have to explore is huge and is still in front of me. Because my goal is to minimalize my work, I sill have a good deal to achieve. The means are minimal, but I happen to be a representational artist, so how can I put this into a more conceptual presentation? The disappearance of the image, particularly when it comes to mark-making, is difficult to do. It's not a recorded image like in a film. I find the mark-making so raw. So I haven't discovered a way to make nothingness convincing. But it's something I want to do because in some paradoxical way that's closer to death than a dark work would be.

Q. Did you know that Emily Dickinson called death "the white exploit"? Instead of seeing it as darkness she saw it as a blinding light.
A. I can totally relate to that. If I can add an anecdote, I feel truly Canadian in my relationship to winter and light. For me the ideal death would be in an open field in a snowstorm.

Q. So landscape is destiny?
A. I guess so. That infinite landscape is gorgeous. It's the desolate aspect that interests me, the loneliness of human beings. Yesterday you said even though my subject matter may be violent, the drawings don't read that way. Maybe it's because I'm more interested in silence, desolation, loneliness and how we survive being really alone in this world, no matter how surrounded we are. I think that comes back again and again in my work.

Q. There is a kind of melancholy in what you do.
A. Definitely. It's always been there. You're born, you die alone, you have to resolve things in yourself by yourself, no matter how much help you have.

Q. The project you did with your mother was in many ways a recognition of loneliness. Those drawings have a sense of apartness that seems almost private.
A. I would say the same thing about the series *Diary of K., a journal of drawings*. I never thought I would put those things out publicly. They were self-portraits of how I would live in this world if I had any type of handicap. With my mother it was more to confront my fear of death and aging. It was a very particular

experience because she modelled naked for me and I look strikingly like her. So I had vivid self-portraits in front of me of what I will look like.

Q. In drawing your mother unclothed and in drawing a little person, you chose unconventional subjects. Why?
A. Ultimately, I want to know how other people cope with their own fragility. Maybe that will teach me something. Working with someone over such a long period affords you an opening to that knowledge. You digest it and that helps you do the next series more intimately. I was always attracted to marginal people and loners. It's strange that when I have models in front of me I don't want them to talk to me and I don't talk to them. I'm not interested in establishing a personal relationship. They become a motif, so in that sense I come back to what I said about art being an act of selfishness in that you appropriate what you need. I don't necessarily want to know them. I'm like that in life, too. I turn pages really quickly. I like to keep my distance.

Q. What is it about war that you find so compelling?
A. It's a subject I've always been interested in and I haven't even touched the iceberg yet. I have a huge library of books on death, I've taken religious courses on the history of death and the history of cemeteries. I like historical drawings and I've always liked Goya's *Disasters of War*. But I don't draw like that. I prefer to look at contemporary drawings. In 2004 when I went back to black and white I knew I would eventually tackle the subject of war. The media helped in providing quick access to tons of images. So the subject interested me and so did the challenge of working with visual sources in a very different way than I had become used to. Obviously, I couldn't use subjects who were around me. A lot of people have asked if I ever felt the need to go to war as a witness but I've never felt it. I'm very self-contained and I believe I can funnel found images and create something personal with them. My first series on war was more realistic and more direct and I hope as I continue that they'll become more domestic or more surreal.

Q. There's a big difference between domesticating the war and making it surreal. How do you do the former?
A. Subdue it to something humble, that doesn't try to reach something universal, international or political. I've never considered my work political or feminist, or environmentalist. I respect those types of work but I'm not interested in doing them. I'm interested in the poetic. I'm interested in creating prayers, in a testament to something that someone has to witness very closely and in silence. That explains the size of my work. When they become bigger they're not like *ex-votos* any more. They hit you in the stomach and in a very different way can easily enter the realm of sensationalism, which is something I try to pull back from.

Q. You're interested in death, but your work never seems morbid.

A. Even though I love grotesque works, where things become gothic, baroque or very morbid, I consciously avoid portrayals of screams. It does help to work in black and white because you kill off anything that relates to blood. It becomes a black ink stain. How do I deal with dismemberment and fragmentation? I had to question myself about the limit of holding back. Do I hold back because I fear putting something out there? Is it more about ethics and humility and the respect I have for the subject? I prefer things that reverberate from within rather than outside, something that has a silent voice. I couldn't do that with something gory.

Q. The fragment has been used historically as a way to render nostalgia for a lost past. Architectural ruins and broken statuary have become beautiful to us. How does the fragment function in your drawing?
A. In mentioning brokenness you've given me the answer. We are at once equally broken and complete. I'm interested in the unsaid, and it's more important to make the viewer aware of that missing piece, scene or feeling. I can do that with fragmented pieces. I'm not interested in the wholeness of human beings, in their completeness of spirit or health. I'm interested in their brokenness and in debris, whether human or physical or psychological. For me, fragmentation is just the formal rendering of that realm of things.

Q. So is the rendering of part of the body important because it implies the rest of what would be there? You're suggesting that, psychologically or imaginatively, the part stands in for the whole.
A. I hope the viewer can project beyond what is there. I'm at a point now where it's the subject that calls for precision; it's not me who decides upon the treatment. So with *Regiment* I had no choice because had I gone with something more interpretive or gestural, I wouldn't have had each individual's specific geography. It was important that it be clinical because the body became the documentation of their life experiences.

Q. The question of your agency comes up. Are you a kind of amanuensis, the transcriber of the thing you look at?
A. I'm definitely the translator of my own perceptions of the world. What makes any artist unique is that they have to believe in their potential to transcribe their perception of the world. If you don't believe in that, there's no point in doing it. I don't believe in my work; I believe in myself.

Q. Yet you have formidable technical skills. Is the aspiration to have the facility to call up whatever it is you want to get?
A. Skills have never been that interesting to me. I like children's drawings, Art Brut, and any work that is drawn beautifully and unselfconsciously. I'm certainly not like that though. I'm more interested in the subject and what I can do with it. I happen to have skills, which are often a crutch. But I've decided that since I have the skills, I might as well use them to their full extent, which I had never considered before.

Q. You work very quickly. What is your mental state when you're drawing?
A. I'm a very physical person, so whether I work slow or fast, my brain functions the same way. I prefer to learn through mistakes and repetitions. I find I need to do twenty works to arrive at two that hit the point. I've always worked in series and always quickly.

Q. Do you start out more cautiously? Is the trajectory to move away from that sense of control to something more flexible?
A. I would say the opposite happens. At the beginning you have this idea and it comes quickly and easily. It's like an outpouring and you don't really have control. The challenge in working on a series is to not repeat yourself, to make each image be strong on its own. That's why I need to stop and go back to the original spark, because over the course of a year and a half to two years, a series can easily go all over the place. But they do become more precise and concise as I go along because I have more time. I have this more engaged dialogue with the subject.

Q. You've said you always start big.
A. It's a bad habit but I keep doing it. I need to accept the validity of working small. Even though I know before I start that I'll go back to something smaller, I need to get it out of my system, to feel that I have absolutely no connection with it. Then I very quickly scale it down and make it much more intimate. I don't know how I'll work when I go very large, but I'll try to preserve that intimate contact with the large scale.

Q. Are the *Hoods* the largest images you've done?
A. Yes. In that series I started small and went big.

Q. What was it about the images from Abu Ghraib that provoked the series?
A. I've always wanted to deal with the war but these images forced things. They're very powerful. When I started to deal with the head in the *Helmets & Gasmasks*, I knew that I had to go more ghostly. Even though the *Hoods* seem pretty literal, for me they're very religious. Maybe it's because I've grew up facing a crucifix in my bed every day and night for 16 years that the body and its wounds have affected me so much. It's rooted in a lot of the work I do. If I want to read quietly I'll go to a church but unfortunately most of them are no longer open to the public. It's a type of silence that you don't get anywhere else (it can be any church, not just a Catholic one) and your relation to space there is tremendous. Even though I don't agree with religions and what they've done through time, they are wonderfully quiet and meditative spaces. It's a special silence, like an empty winter landscape where all you feel is the wind. It's so secluded that you feel you're protected in the womb. For me, it's very fertile.

Q. Tell me how the *Hoods* came about.

A. *Hoods* is the only series in the war work that actually involves living models. I rarely hire someone without trying it out on myself first. I have to see if there's potential and I don't want someone to go through the ordeal if it's not worth it. As I mentioned before, I don't like to stage things or waste time, so I take pictures as quickly as I draw. In this case, I put different thicknesses of cloth on my face and then took the pictures. If they were to be staged I feel they would be too beautiful as photographs, and even though a lot of my work looks photographic, I need to go beyond that. So I print them quite small and I don't print them well; the shadows from the lights are sometimes extreme. When I'm drawing I work half of the time on the floor and half of the time on the wall. I like to work with liquids. Someone told me recently that the liquids in my black and white pieces are about the dissolution of the body and about the body's blood. I guess it's true. I like to work with wet and dry. The reason I use black gesso is because it has a beautiful, velvety matte quality that is closer to flesh than something like ink or acrylic.

Q. So are you under the various hoods?
A. No. After doing a few I asked some friends. I trap them. I like to take people by surprise because they can't really prepare for it, so the rapport is very natural. But it wasn't a very pleasant experience for most of them because they felt claustrophobic.

Q. In some instances the facial expressions underneath the hoods are more pronounced. Did you give instructions about what you wanted?
A. I usually don't give directions. I say you can remain still or you can move. Some people took over and almost ate the cloth.

Q. I know there are smaller studies and since scale is such a significant issue for you, why did you move to images that are twice life-size.
A. I need to have a reason to work big and that's usually when the intimate rapport isn't fulfilling enough, where I feel the need for something more visceral that will take over the viewer. When you have a small scale it's really the viewer taking over the work, but if the work is strong enough, the reverse happens. I create a lot of works thinking of the Stations of the Cross. In this case I was just thinking of rows of hooded figures where you would feel the suffocation more.

Q. You say you're not a political artist, but someone could read them in a political context.
A. People can see it as political, but I'm operating on a more human level. It has nothing to do with politics.

Q. So your images could be from Central America, Vietnam, or Abu Ghraib? The specific conflict is not the point.
A. And it could be the Italian Renaissance. They come from my sheer love of the human face. When I do drawings of the head I always have to renew how I'll work with the subject. Maybe it was a poor attempt at

trying to make them disappear. What really interested me was the layering between the viewer and the head and how much can you convey through that layering.

Q. In *Regiment* you cut the image just below the eyes. Was your interest in doing a portrait through the confirmation of the body rather than through a look into the soul?
A. Yes, and in this case I was also interested in the idea of portraits as something else, the body, the hands and the torso. The torsos are obviously like armour. We face the world a lot with our chest - that's where the heart and the guts reside- and so for me it's a wall that we put up or not. *Regiment* led me into the "War Series", particularly with the title. I think of them as my own little army because we are all at war in some way or another; we all fight different things in our lives.

Q. Are you as close an observer of the world as you are of the thing that you're drawing?
A. I would say making art makes me a more acute observer and not the opposite. If I go for a walk, what makes me look at objects on the sidewalk in a different way, or listen to sounds, is what I've seen in books, or torn from pages, or collaged together.

Q. So art mediates the world for you? It is the thing that translates you back into the world.
A. Yes, it keeps me alive.

Q. I want to talk about your decision to use Mylar.
A. It came about by accident in 2005. With Mylar I found the perfect partner because it is a very forgiving surface. I can come in and out. For me drawing is not moving from A to Z; it's a back-and-forth process. I can layer lots of drawing and if I'm not happy with it I can erase the whole thing and go back to the initial surface. I happen to work with Conté, which has the same rich quality as black gesso. That really gorgeous variety of blacks and greys stays on the surface. It's almost like working in the mines. I don't use charcoal because it's too powdery and too volatile and it doesn't give me the blacks I want. I just seem totally hypnotized by Mylar and I haven't even explored the possibilities of transparencies or layering with it yet.

Q. The question of layering is interesting. In Eric Fischl's early drawings he was working on glassine. His methodology was to draw different figures and objects and, in the manner of a theatre director, then layer the glassine sheets. He could take out a boy on a bicycle and put in a woman in a bathtub. It was a narrative method that allowed him to tell different stories. It seems to me that the combination of Mylar and layering in your work inevitably introduces the idea of narrative?
A. That's exactly what I'm thinking about on a large scale. I have no choice other than to go that way and I find it exciting. The construction was exactly how I was thinking of doing it, trying these things out together and some way or another a narrative that I have control over would be built.

Q. When you're a figurative artist so much is invested in the recognition of the subject that it's difficult to move in the direction of minimalism or abstraction. How do you negotiate the terrain between the abstract and the mimetic?
A. I am more engaged with minimalism and I hope to be even more. But I'm not willing to let go of the representational. I don't think I could also convey what I want with pure abstraction. The decision to go to black and white; the austere presentation in choosing what frames to use; and how I install things is all I can do for now. There will be other choices. Do I make it so that it's ephemeral; do I work on surfaces that will disintegrate; do I make the dialogue of the drawing within an architectural space more important? I'm more interested in these things now, but abstraction will always be a part of my work. Sometimes it's just more obvious. I could give less emphasis to rendering, but it would be dishonest to make my mark-making look like I didn't know what I'm doing.

Q. The notion of authenticity and honesty seems an integral one for you.
A. My decisions within the art world come from that, my decision to try to remain as independent as I can comes from that, as does my battle with being a representational artist. The idea of integrity is at the base of how I do my art.

Q. You use the fine phrase "tender pain" in talking about *Small Dramas and Little Nothings*. I wonder if that is integral to what you want to get across in your work? It suggests a dialectic with a lyrical side.
A. I think it is even if I don't want it to be all the time. I love the idea of pathos. I like extremes, so there is something exquisite about falling in and out of love. Extreme pain is really pathetic as well. I have so much empathy for the subjects I work with and I hope the viewer has that too. But I'm not trying to put out a message. I really don't care about that. Tender pain is the way I relate to the world.

Q. What made you decide to move into video? I guess the obvious question is its relationship to drawing?
A. The rendering of the drawings is classical and traditional, so I felt the need to bridge somewhere else. I didn't see what I could do with photography. It would just have been a static drawing and my concern was to integrate movement. Basically, I wanted to be able to give the mood of the drawings in a different medium. From the beginning, I didn't want to do big things with my videos. My aim was to keep it very simple, very quiet, very minimal. From the start, I knew I'd work with children. I think that came from *The Ward* series and then with *Helmets and Gasmasks* I was increasingly putting children behind the masks. Children suffer the most collateral damage during a war. Also, violence is inherent in all of us and so I had to start at the source. I knew I wouldn't have to be involved in the acting process because kids are very natural.

Q. And you didn't want to be a director telling them what you wanted?

A. Most of the time I don't know what I want. When I approach models I tell them I don't know what I'll be doing. With my niece and nephew I did it over three sessions. I knew the chemistry they had together and I wanted to exploit that, but I didn't know what the outcome would be. I wanted headgear because that was the whole point, and I wanted them to relate physically to one another with these masks and hoods. I figured that if they were standing together, they would start playing, but I didn't tell them to play at war.

Q. What is the meaning of *Headgames* for you?
A. It's definitely not about hope, nor is it about death or oblivion. Maybe there's a bit of redemption in there. I know you're not supposed to use the word, but there is also the beauty of two children playing and loving each other. Then any minute they can turn against each other.

Q. Things do suddenly shift when she holds her finger gun up to his head. All of a sudden child's play becomes an enactment of something dangerous.
A. And it's very natural. She smiles while she does it. I was surprised at how lyrical the video turned out to be at the same time that it has these harsh moments. Maybe my work is like that, whether I want it to be or not. It is beautiful but it has a certain harshness that won't press you against a wall.

Q. What was it about the gasmasks that so interested you as objects?
A. The gasmask is another version of the skull, which I held back from doing because it's such a loaded image. But I think gasmasks are beautiful objects. I had wanted to work with the head again and I wanted to avoid drawing the figure directly. I was also personally interested in the development of gasmasks through history, how the shapes have changed formally. The helmets remain as objects. I see them as respite for the eyes. They're like parentheses. They are extremely pleasurable to draw. You're using chalk to fake metal, so it's a really nice contrast.

Q. Do you feel that you're negotiating a psychological space in drawing the gasmasks? By putting a figure inside those masks a different range of psychological associations comes up.
A. You add the pathos, the whole human side. It's not leaving empty, foggy sockets. I need to have questioning or suffering eyes, or the eyes of anyone who can't escape this ridiculous situation. They are trapped physically and mentally. I needed to have that dialogue, otherwise there would have been no point to the series.

Q. Why not use photography?
A. As much as I love photography, I find I spend less time with a photograph than with a drawing or painting. Maybe it's this dialogue over time which interests me - how it breathes, because it has a different type of breathing.

Q. What keeps you doing it?

A. It's always an effort. There are artists who are happy to get up in the morning but I'm totally the opposite. It takes a lot out of me, but once I'm in it, I'm fine. Of course, coming out of a Catholic background, I feel guilty if I'm not working all the time.

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