

Artists are responding to Sept 11 at last. But why has it taken them so long, asks Serena Davies

Where is the new Guernica?

War is much too serious a thing to be left to the military," Georges Clemenceau once quipped, presumably in misguided confidence that it was better off in the hands of statesmen. But he touched on a truth. We need more than soldiers' stories to comprehend war's magnitude and absorb the collective shock.

Artists have long helped provide such perspective, from Goya's fury-laden *Disasters of War* prints to perhaps the greatest painting of the 20th century, Picasso's *Guernica*, inspired by the bombing of a village during the Spanish Civil War.

Yet in the current context of the struggle in Iraq and the pervasive terror threat that is the fallout of September 11, where are the great works of contemporary art that respond to it? Theatre has risen to the challenge with prolific, even exhausting enthusiasm. David Hare's *The Vertical Hour* being the latest example. Filmmakers have brought us the sobering *United 93* and *World Trade Center*. A recent survey of 2007's upcoming novels noted one dominant theme: war. But the offerings of the art world have been underwhelming.

Most agree that the immediate artistic response to September 11 was creatively uninspired. Since then, the popular Colombian artist Fernando Botero has received some notice with his very ugly paintings of the goings-on at Abu Ghraib prison, which toured Europe and visited the US last year. But the new art hitting the headlines in the UK has been resolutely non-political: playground slides at Tate Modern and a pregnant giantess striding through the courtyard of the Royal Academy. The big prizes went to a subject-free painter (the Turner) and a man who made a film about a bunch of people popping in a church (Beck's *Furthest*).

Leading artists are starting to engage with the subject, but the shift has been slow. Today a new work by Yinka Shonibare (MBE, and previous Turner nominee) will be unfurled at Jubilee



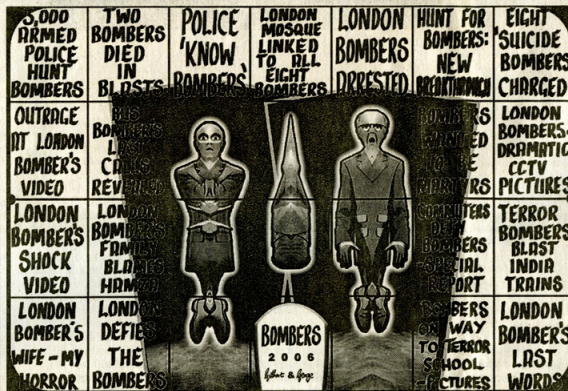
Garden: a flag commissioned by the Hayward Gallery.

It is a pure white banner at half mast. He chose white for its neutral connotations, the lack of any national colour: "The flag is a metaphor for the impossibility of peace. Fully flown, it might imply surrender, but at half mast it is a troubled white flag. Some kind of tragedy has happened; a mourning is taking place."

All of Shonibare's latest work – he also has an exhibition on at the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London – is engaged with conflict. "I think it is rather difficult to think about anything else at the moment," he says. But he is perplexed as to why more artists aren't doing the same, and suggests it reflects a contradiction currently at the heart of contemporary art.

"September 11, Afghanistan, the war in Iraq; they've all coincided with an economic boom in the art world," he says. "There's a big party going on at the art fairs, the biennales, but at the same time there is this very serious crisis happening, and it seems some people are finding it easier to ignore it."

Matthew Slotover, co-founder



Views of conflict: Yinka Shonibare, above; Picasso's *Guernica*, top, and works by Ben Turnbull, left, and Gilbert & George

of *Frieze* art magazine and the hugely successful art fair of the same name, suggests there's a historical link: "You can look at what art gets made in times of economic boom and bust, and there's a difference. The art does get more political when the art market is not as strong. After the art recession of 1991-92, for instance, the Whitney Biennial of 1993 was known as the PC Biennial because it was so political.

"I think, partly, if you are making beautiful paintings then when they're selling well that gives them their own kind of logic. But, when they're not selling well, artists and galleries look to bigger issues."

Slotover is also emphatic that many artists are engaging in the war, but concedes that the wider world may not be hearing enough about them, not least because such artists eschew the media-friendly cult of personality. The leading contender on the international scene is Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, who makes massive installations, including photographs of Iraqi bomb

victims, a theme he seems obsessed with.

And perhaps the tide is now turning in Britain. A new exhibition of political art from recent decades at Tate Modern, *Media Burn*, highlights the excellent work of Martha Rosler, an American artist deeply engaged with the Iraq War. It also includes pieces by English artist Peter Kennard, a vehement anti-war protestor who, along with collaborator Cat Picton-Phillips, provided the artwork on the front of this newspaper's Saturday magazine last month – a bleak image of Bush and Blair, and the world with a bloody sticking plaster over it – as well as the cover of last week's *Review* section, which showed a smiling Blair snapping himself in front of an explosion.

"I teach a lot," says Kennard. "And I think more and more young artists are trying to find ways to respond to the world, because they think what's going on is so urgent now, so horrific."

The gimmickry of graffiti artist Banksy also often deals, if rather didactically, with the war. His popularity is soaring, particularly among the young. And the hip

new Soho gallery that represents him, Lazarides, is fostering a whole stable of politically minded young artists. Among them is Ben Turnbull, a witty artist who makes sculptures out of toys and guns and specialises in political satire; his solo show opens at the gallery next week.

Better-known is the man appointed by the Imperial War Museum as official Iraq War Artist, Turner Prize-winner Steve McQueen, who will launch his own response at Manchester Central Library on Feb 28.

A prestigious precursor to the new Manchester International Festival, this will feature an edition of stamps displayed in a cabinet, each bearing the portrait of a serviceman or woman who has lost their life during the conflict. The museum's curator, Roger Tolson, describes it as "a memorial, very much in the tradition of the memorials that sprung up at the end of World War One. McQueen is making something for the whole nation to go to that can be a focus of respect, a commemoration."

And now our own living artworks, Gilbert and George, have turned to the topic. Their retrospective at Tate Modern next month will include six major new works on the July 7 bombs in London. Say the pair: "We believe that as artists we were able to bring something special in thoughts and feelings to this subject, something the media, religious leaders and politicians find difficult to do."

Sage, and surprisingly serious, words from the duo. McQueen has said something pretty similar. It is, of course, difficult to "bring something special" to such subjects, and commentators may be correct in predicting that it will take years to formulate a mature cultural response.

Perhaps we need the long view in our search for the new *Guernica*. As the situation in Iraq continues its miserable course, throwing up such unforgettable images as those of an erstwhile dictator with a noose around his neck, it may yet provide the inspiration.