

An Artists exploration of the mythic, subconscious and literary constructions of military interventions in the Indo-Pacific

Carl Gopalkrishnan

Contact: carlgopalkrishnan@gmail.com

Abstract

In this article I share my experience of using William Blake's 1793 poem *America a Prophecy* as a lens to explore the mythic, subconscious and literary constructions of military interventions in the Indo-Pacific for my painting *Australia a Prophecy*. For this painting I invited Blake's 18th century character *Orc* to travel forward in time to Australia to guide an alternative imaginary lens, rather than the conventional political, military or international intervention analysis that is currently shaping the region where I live. Along the way Blake's poem also inspired insights into the complex emotions and desires which seem to be driving the masculine messianic archetypal thinking of new global conflicts.

Using poetry and literature has been part of my visual art practice throughout my 36-year artistic practice. I have not followed a formal or academic artistic pathway. Instead, I have chosen an experimental and experiential journey of self-learning by collaborating with artists and researchers on topics as I strive to understand the human condition. In my search to identify the hidden narratives that underpin our political and military decisions I have used various metaphors including Broadway and Hollywood musicals, medieval French epic poetry and literary and religious texts. I hope the story behind my painting will help to stimulate conversations between experts from completely different backgrounds to explore the hidden narratives that drive our political and military decisions.



The historical poetics of our masculine messiahs

This painting began a long time ago in 2011 when I was reading the works of William Blake. His 1793 poem *America A Prophecy* gripped my imagination, and his character of *Orc* haunted me. On the surface, *America a Prophecy* is an illustrated poem about the American colonies' struggle for Independence from Britain in the 18th century. It delves into many

2

themes such as Empire, war, suffering and political oppression. Driving his ostensibly 'religious' narrative is the anger, sorrow and passion of the man/God character of Orc. Most agree that he well embodies the spirit of rebellion against tradition at the heart of the American Wars of 1775-83.

Using poetry and literature has been part of my visual art practice for many years. I have turned to Blake's poem twice in my life. In 2011 it helped me explore my concern about the political and military rhetoric around the so-called *war on terror* after 9/11; and last year I asked Orc to travel forward in time to Australia to help me understand my Indo-Pacific world of 2021.

Blake's poem is drenched with many complex emotional, mythical and theological interpretations that I won't go into here. His language is emotional, religious and passionate while still clothed in the traditional cultural narrative of 18th century Christianity. It is this religio-political aspect of Blake's work that seems to offer a different perspective to international intervention analysis, especially in the complex emotions and desires which drive masculine messianic archetypal thinking as global conflict continues to rise. We can see Putin's delusions so clearly, but when former Ukrainian comedians can effortlessly don the role of messiah too, and we instantly respond, something is at play.

Since 2019 the vocal narratives coming from China's President Xi Jinping through his 'wolf warrior' diplomats and from Australia by a former special forces soldier and recent Australian deputy Minister for Defence Andrew Hastie; have both contributed to painting a rhetorical political landscape in the region which evokes a misplaced nostalgia for World War 2 and Nazi/Soviet-era conflicts of the past. The world listened and followed to the point where many leaders now use WW2 metaphors far too frequently. There were other voices of course, but these two men embodied to me archetypes of masculinity in the public discourse of war and politics that seem to be deeply embedded in our subconscious.

Masculinity and male violence is as rarely discussed in international intervention as the hidden cultural, religious and gender narratives we absorb through our national cultures. What would William Blake write/paint if he was living today in Australia? I don't believe that he would be a passive observer of our current conflicts, or devoid of political agency in his spiritual and artistic search. So why should I?

So, for all these reasons I embarked on this painting and titled it *Australia a Prophecy*, cloaked in the pages of Blake's poem and the literary and popular cultures I have absorbed as a dual Australian and English citizen, from a childhood in Sweden, travels to multiple regions, my Chinese/Christian and Indian/Hindu heritage and as a gay man of colour living gratefully on the land of the Noongar Aboriginal People of Western Australia.

Sour dough rises in the Indo-Pacific

Australia a Prophecy is comprised of sixteen 7x5 inch canvases, six of which were painted several years after 9/11 and which I stored in a box unfinished. These six olive/gold canvases are screen-printed with pages from *Revelation* and iconic images from the 20th century such as the lovers from the Hollywood musical *South Pacific*. During a pandemic lockdown in 2021, I had run out of canvases. I pulled these canvases out of storage and instinctively arranged them into a crucifix.

These older canvases acted like a sourdough 'starter' for an exploration of messianic masculinity. I found 10 more canvases the same size and their shapes reminded me of mobile phone screens. I decided to explore the messianic story of the Indo-Pacific as I was seeing it unfold on my phone.

Art, song and poetry was the public relations and fake news of the Middle Ages. The logo of the NSA is merged with the seal of the Knights Templar to evoke the power of messianic narrative during The Crusades. Scrawled in 22k gold leaf are the cries of Orc claiming his name and his masculine identity through the repetitive stories of war.

At the same time, the existential yearnings created by the trauma of violence can shape the private thoughts of men. In the story of the Messiah are embedded the God of Redemption (and Revelation) for our violence. Political ideologies often display many of the same characteristics of religion, especially utopian promises of heaven on earth through social justice policies at the point of a gun.

Violence begets violence and most military violence is overwhelmingly still planned and practiced by men. Men also create rules and spaces for their kindness, remorse and they search for forgiveness for their acts of violence. In my painting, messianic masculine

identities are shaped by the collective historical trauma of our national identity. Like the Chinese fighter jet incursions into Taiwanese airspace at the time of painting, the symbols of war descend from the top of my canvas in glistening gold leaf – angelic perhaps if war is your theatre of redemption.

The myths of Australian culture: Egalitarianism, The Larrikin, The Quiet Achiever all drown in the shapes of Australian artist Sydney Nolan’s iconic Ned Kelly. To the right of the canvas, nuclear submarines render visible the AUKUS agreement between Australia, the US and the UK which has increased fears in the Indo-Pacific region. They move stealthily towards our Christian Messiah as he stares at the dogs of war beneath his feet. Submarines will save us. I will save us. I am Orc. I am God.

The messianic urge prevents us from practising a form of empathy which leads to clarity. It limits the sophistication of diplomatic thought required to move with the subtlety of a Dior gown which, like France, is cast aside. As our tunnel vision narrows, we lose more friends until we are isolated and alone.

Beside the Dior model is the symbol for Facebook’s “Like” button. Do masculine messiahs just want to be liked? We play a role in creating messiahs from our social media. In isolation we spend too much time online ceding our intellectual and emotional sovereignty to whoever Facebook, Twitter or Instagram tell us to.

Curating the metaphors of culture, history and religion embedded in our languages of war

In donning the camouflage of traditional Christianity, Blake’s poem reflects much of the patriarchal religious allegory that appears in military culture. Stories of oppression which justify violent retribution filter less emotionally into military rules of engagement and international law. Heroes, like Orc, are allowed to practice violence in the name of bigger causes, or a *higher calling*, such as the protection of the motherland or human rights violations.

These concepts made me look at the Indo-Pacific region today differently. Instead of a political analysis, Blake’s poem became a lens. His artwork accompanying his poem is a guide to the visual language which shapes our internal voice. Perhaps China’s narrative arc

of “100 years of humiliation” and Australia’s historical ‘fear of The North’ have merged into the personal traumas of Mr Jinping and Mr Hastie. Through their political roles they now influence the national and international lens, bringing others into their vision. As others begin to follow their vision, is it so small a jump for them to imagine that they have a Divine Purpose? This sense of purpose shapes their world view, language and message and – ultimately – our shared geopolitical and military realities.

As the mythologist Joseph Campbell has observed, the mythic hero/adventurer leaves home, faces unknown challenges, and is transformed, most notably through surviving an “Abyss” - a turning point in their journey. Many of our archetypal hero narratives are cross-cultural but gender specific. Only time will tell if female messianic/saviour stories become as dominant across our global cultures as they have been for men over the next 200 years.

Like Blake’s poem, I think traditional religious narrative arcs contain within them multiple meanings. My painting *Australia a Prophecy* contains multiple metaphors to mirror the insights Blake found in his re-telling of the American Revolution applied to our contemporary situation. Do our hidden narratives shape our response to an existential threat or create them?

The intense ideological narratives of Jinping and the patriotically WWII-inspired rhetoric of Mr Hastie recalls the redemptive power of the messiah fantasy. Like masculine violence, mythological archetypes are not normally integrated into military planning or strategic analysis. Indeed, it would seem foolish and laughably irrational. Yet faith in something (if not religion) seem always to underpin our decision-making.

In my artist statement for this painting, I observe that, “*Prophecy is both a warning and a navigation system. How do we know who is the enemy? We look for heroes. Their flaws make it easier to graft our hopes and fears onto them*”.

Men of war and politics seem to instinctively run towards conflict, or towards their “Abyss”, in search of their inner Hero. Since the time of Blake that archetypal journey has become embedded in many of our institutional cultures including our military. It has become a celebrated pathway for both religious and secular men to express their masculinity. One does not need to finish the journey, but men expect other men to be on the Hero’s journey.

What they do not plan or expect to confront is Carl Jung’s concept of the ‘Shadow’. When men finally become the Hero, they discover that they are still *too* human. It is at this juncture

that the messiah archetype is at its most seductive for our national leaders. It is at this critical time for the Indo-Pacific that we cautiously curate the personal, cultural and mythological stories that we choose to inspire us.

In my painting, words from Blake's *America A Prophecy* are painted together with words from two poems by the American poet A Van Jordan¹ around the outside of The Crucifixion.

It reads:

Sound! Sound! My loud war trumpets...

The Empire is no more, and now the Lion and Wolf shall cease...

I escaped from Westworld, the amusement park for adults, or maybe it never existed: though I do remember a vivid weekend there and shooting a man...

Perhaps his non-belief makes him a hero, perhaps without insecurity he seems less believable as a man...

* A Van Jordan "American Gigolo" and "Westworld" from *The Cineaste: Poems*, 2013

* William Blake, *America A Prophecy*, 1793

¹ Editors notified to correct surname to "Jordan".