

Afghanistan and Ukraine – Experiencing War zones - from the inside. June 2026

George Gittoes AM & Hellen Rose

Introduced by Geoff McWilliam, George Gittoes, supported by his wife Hellen Rose proceeded to recount stories and show pictures from his life as an artist, documentary filmmaker, photographer and writer, working in areas of conflict, war and war crimes, particularly in Rwanda, Somalia, Ukraine and Afghanistan.

In his early remarks George spoke of his admiration for people who have made a lasting contribution to Australia, e.g. in infrastructure, and of his pride as a 15 year old high school student at winning the Roselands Inaugural Student Art Prize where the whole prize went to his School.

While studying Fine Arts at the University of Sydney, under Professor Bernard Smith, he was invited to New York by the visiting art critic, Clement Greenberg who was impressed by his experiential abstract paintings. He benefitted from time spent with Andy Warhol at his Factory, and subsequently establishing the “Yellow House” Artists Collective in Sydney with fellow artist Martin Sharp. It included a well regarded puppet theatre.

In 1993 George was asked by the Australian Army's General Grey to go to Somalia to support, as a photographer, artist and unofficial mentor, Australia's contingent of young soldiers. There followed stories of encountering massacres in a number of countries including the horrific scene of Somali women camel herders who had been raped and mutilated by rebel “monsters”, and at Kibeho Refugee camp in Rwanda where he and his colleagues, Paul Jordan and Jonathan Church, rescued 154 babies whose mothers had been slaughtered during a night of terror.

George was gratified to learn decades later of how successful many of these children had become, in their later life, working in various parts of the world including back in Rwanda.

George described his admiration for a very brave African preacher who preserved the dignity of his congregation by joining them in prayer and song in the hours they waited while expecting to be massacred. The preacher requested George assist the children to find a safer area to hide. While George was off doing this, the preacher and his flock were killed. George's portrait of the Preacher won the Blake Prize and is presently on display in Canberra's National Gallery receiving wide acclaim.

In more recent times George and Hellen have been in Ukraine. He showed pictures of the devastation and referred to the documentary film they have made “Humanity in Danger” which is currently available on SBS On Demand. One of his photographs showed an Australia Flag flying in a memorial among hundreds of Ukraine flags. It was in memory of a young Australian soldier Sage O'Donnel who had volunteered and been killed in battle with Russian forces. George spoke of the amazing bravery of the Ukrainian people, of their appreciation of Australia's support and of the importance of Australia continuing to provide support.

He also spoke of his collaboration with Ukrainian artists including painting murals on bullet-damaged walls. Hellen sang very movingly the song she had performed in the ruins of what had been a Ukrainian theatre for opera and orchestras which had been destroyed by Russian bombs and artillery. George and Hellen arrived in Kyiv in the first weeks of the Russian invasion, when the city was surrounded by tanks and have returned twice more making three films and their art exhibition titled 'Ukraine Guernica'. They plan to return to Ukraine later this year to continue their artistic support.

George went on to speak of their teaching work in Afghanistan at the creative centre and school they established in Jalalabad, 16 years ago. It is named the Yellow House. Their aim is to show how communication and art can succeed where 20 years of war failed.

They advocate for change through peaceful means and not at the point of a gun. The Yellow House is flourishing and has gained the trust and protection of the Taliban. They have established a Yellow House Australia Foundation (Yellow House Australia Ltd with DGR charity status). Four films about their projects in Afghanistan are available through On Demand on SBS - Miscreants of Taliwood, Love City, Snow Monkey and Yellow House Afghanistan. They are highly recommended viewing and have won many International Awards.

In concluding the presentation Hellen spoke of the importance for all people of hope and freedom then sang an ancient Pashtun song The Gambler in both Pashto and English.

After a short period of questions, John Doherty told of his forty year relationship with George when his employer, Clutha Coal financially backed the making of his 1986 documentary in Nicaragua, about brave Sandinista women revolutionaries, titled Bullets of the Poets. John then thanked George and Hellen on behalf of the members.

Alan Locke