Simo Bacar

Terry Atkinson
AESTHETICS AS ALIBI

October 2 – November 6, 2026

Simo Bacar is delighted to announce the opening of "AESTHETICS AS ALIBI", a solo exhibition by British artist Terry Atkinson. The show will open at the gallery on Friday, October 2nd, 6-9pm.

Terry Atkinson (b. 1939 in Yorkshire, UK) was born in the village of Thurnscoe. The artist studied at Slade School of Fine Art and in 1966 became a founding member of Art & Language, together with David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin and Harold Hurrell. The group was central to the critical development of conceptual art in the 1960s and exhibited at Documenta 5 in 1972, curated by Harald Szeemann.

In 1974 Atkinson left Art & Language. This individuation, the shift from "we" to "I," is the origin of the artist "Terry Atkinson," known also on occasion as Terry Actor, Terry Mirrors, Terry Dog, and Terry Enola Gay. Atkinson's longstanding commitment to group practice and the dispersion of authorship was ultimately broken by a shift within A&L that he perceived as one from the "social space of a group to that of a caucus."

The years that followed marked what he described as a break with conceptualism. He regarded conceptualism as having become "emptied out of its critical and philosophical parameters" and reduced to "little more than a gesture or style." From the mid-1970s onwards, his main focus became a critique of the artistic subject and a reflection on the conditions of production for avant-garde art.

By 1975, Atkinson was making drawings and paintings of soldiers and battlefields from the First World War. These works were based on audio and video interviews Atkinson conducted with veterans of the 1916 Battle of the Somme and materials archived in the Imperial War Museum in London. They were not, however, exercises in historical documentation. "What I was trying to comment upon was the general point about the transmission and construction of history and the specific point about the transmission and construction of the history-reporting artist. Included in the construction of the latter was the reflexive function of the history of the formal resources and means of representation of, for example, history painting: and going reflexively further and further in, a history painting of a modernist painting about the problems of painting and linked, the finding of some sort of formal resources to harangue the rapidly ossifying historical transmission and construction of Conceptualism." Becoming "The War Artist" was not an attempt by Atkinson to make himself feel more comfortable as an artist; it was an attempt to toe a comparison between a cultural front and a warring front. [1]

Over the following decades, figures and events from different wars and periods of political history - among them Iraq, the Falklands, Lebanon and Ireland - were brought into relation with the history of painting and with images and figures from popular culture. For Atkinson, these histories do not necessarily unfold in a linear sequence. Figures from different times appearing as "time travellers" - Goya's monsters, Picasso's bulls, ET and Bart Simpson - enter historical situations alongside soldiers, politicians and other figures. The resulting encounters connect distant events and periods and produce a form of historical narration in which different times coexist. An historical reportage and re-examination of major events that formed the Western world.

The relationship between image and language has remained central to Atkinson's work. His later practice continued to perform experiments on image and text relations, investigating different ways of looking, of reading, and more generally on the transmission of knowledge. The question of whether a painting can be read, and whether writing and painting operate differently when they address the same subject, became an ongoing concern.

Titles consequently became an important part of the work - "matter-of-fact descriptive to the point that their dryness becomes comical," turning language itself into something that can be inspected rather than simply read as an explanation. Atkinson's own formulation is concise: "The more text, the better."

This approach extends to his use of materials, a practice as involving multiple material, formal, and textual elements. These can appear independently as a didactic, painting, drawing or minimal sculpture, or be combined on a single surface or appended to one another. His use of grease, in particular, became an extended investigation into a material that remains unstable and whose movement makes the process of the work visible. Looking back on these works, Atkinson described this ongoing process as reflecting his "permanent uneasiness toward and permanent addiction to practice itself."

Atkinson's work has continued to address the position of the artist and the conditions in which art is produced. His critique of the "Avant-Garde Model of the Artistic Subject" has remained a recurring point of reference. Rather than presenting a fixed artistic identity, his use of different names, materials, images and forms of writing contributes to what can be called an elusive, dispersed artistic produce.

The artist exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1984 and was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1985. His work has been the subject of exhibitions at Raven Row, London; Stadtgalerie Bern, Bern; Fondazione Imago Mundi, Treviso; Yale Union, Portland; CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, CA; Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Cologne; Museum moderner Kunst (mumok), Vienna; KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; among others. His works are held in major public collections, including Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; Museum moderner Kunst (mumok), Vienna; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tate, London.

Terry Atkinson lives in Leamington Spa, England, with his wife, the artist Sue Atkinson, with whom he has frequently collaborated.

[1] Richard Birkett on the occasion of Terry Atkinson's exhibition at Yale Union in 2014, the artist's first institutional show in the United States