

# The Boston Globe

Of War and Remembrance: Martha Rosler's montages conjure Vietnam and Iraq  
By Greg Cook  
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WORCESTER - Martha Rosler's exhibit "Bringing the War Home" at the Worcester Art Museum unites the New York artist's signature anti-Vietnam War montages with her recent anti-Iraq war work for a jolting, heartbreaking look at the echoes between the two conflicts.

Rosler was a pioneering feminist and political artist of the '60s and '70s. In her original "Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful" montages from 1967 to '72, she cut up magazines and pasted together war and home-decor photos to create nightmare scenes that recalled the World War I-era photomontage satires of German Dadaists Hannah Hoch and John Heartfield. Sticking the war into familiar American kitchens and living rooms made a strange, foreign, halfway-around-the-world fight seem more real, more shocking.

Curator Susan Stoops presents 20 of these old works. A Vietnamese woman carries a bloody baby up the stairs of a pristine modern home. Pretty housewives scrub and vacuum the tarmac of a military airfield. A patio awning and chairs frame American tanks and soldiers fighting their way down a blasted street (probably Hue during the 1968 Tet offensive). Two American soldiers patrol the hall outside an empty modern kitchen in which plates and food are laid out on the counter as if someone had just left: A typical home-design shoot is now an evacuated room. American soldiers question a crowd of Vietnamese, including a pasted-in naked Asian Playboy model; it suggests macho, sexual overtones to military invasion and occupation.

Rosler wasn't putting war photos next to documentary photos of American life, but next to sleek, sanitized dream homes that, she tells me, "showed a picture of who we thought we might be if we only strove hard enough, our best selves." The underlying consumer message, she believed, told Americans that the place for their voice was shopping and home decoration, but people had no voice in the war. She hoped to promote antiwar activism.

When the Iraq war rolled around, Rosler says she felt that the United States was overcome by a "rah-rah" attitude and the press lacked skepticism. It was déjà vu all over again. Our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan gave her old Vietnam works a new stomach-churning snap, but as she prepared to show them in 2004, she felt that the passing years had made the old scenes feel nostalgic, quaint - transformed from urgent, specific pieces into aesthetic objects. So she cut and pasted a new series that year, one that purposely

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evoked the old because it seemed to her that people were falling for the same sort of political manipulations as they had during Vietnam.

The Worcester Art Museum presents 15 of these new montages. A prim, smiling woman sprays Febreze inside a bombed palace. A bare-chested soldier with an artificial leg walks away from a photo of President George W. Bush and his brother Jeb clowning. A model (cut from a Motorola ad) stands in a mod living room snapping photos with her camera phone while bloody Iraqi girls slump in chairs in the background and fires outside silhouette American troops.

A woman in a burka sits on the floor of a palatial living room holding a photo of the anti-American Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. A wine bottle has tipped over on a table behind her, spilling what looks like blood onto the floor. In the background, an American soldier smokes in a chair (the source is a widely reproduced April 2003 photo of American troops lounging in a seized Baghdad palace).

The fresh news and advertising images - many of them familiar - don't feel like art, and so they leach into our bloodstreams before we can shield ourselves behind aesthetic responses. But it's Rosler's sharp, wicked eye that energizes them.

"Election (Lynndie)" shows a big, sleek kitchen. An American soldier stands at the back, holding a leash that disappears behind a counter. It's Army reservist Lynndie England clipped from the notorious photo of her standing in Abu Ghraib prison holding a leash tied to a prisoner lying naked on the floor. Here photos of abused prisoners appear on appliances and books throughout the room. The war has infected everything.