

LIST OF WORKS

MFO Photographs series

(all works are digital prints on aircraft grade aluminum, edition of 5, unless otherwise noted)

Amnesty Ammunition Collection Point, 2009
24 x 36 x 0.5 in.

August 2009 War Panorama (West Bank), 2009
40 x 60 x 0.5 in.

Force Protection Condition (MFO North Camp, Sinai), 2009
24 x 36 x 0.5 in.

Jerusalem Triptych – The Road to Damascus Gate, 2009
digital print on adhesive vinyl
40 x 156.6 in.

Liberty Ave (MFO North Camp Sinai), 2009
24 x 36 x 0.5 in.

Lookout (West Bank), 2009
24 x 36 x 0.5 in.

Observe Report Verify (MFO North Camp, Sinai), 2009
24 x 36 x 0.5 in.

Retired Observation Posts (MFO North Camp, Sinai), 2009
40 x 56.5 x 0.5 in.

Water Meter (MFO North Camp, Sinai), 2009
24 x 36 x 0.5 in.

Well (MFO North Camp, Sinai), 2009
40 x 56.5 x 0.5 in.

Ambivalence Blvd

Ambivalence Blvd, 1999–ongoing
single channel video
28 minutes, 36 seconds

Ambivalence Blvd, 1999–ongoing
aluminum sign blade and bracket
6 x 27in.

Liberty Ave, 1999–ongoing
aluminum sign blade and bracket
6 x 27in.



Top: *Observe Report Verify (MFO North Camp, Sinai)*, 2009.
Middle: *Liberty Ave (MFO North Camp Sinai)*, 2009.

Bottom: Installation view: *Ambivalence Blvd*, 1999–ongoing. Photo: SITE Photography.

AMBIVALENCE BLVD

SEPTEMBER 27– JANUARY 6, 2018

The Reach Gallery Museum Abbotsford
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Abbotsford, BC V2T 0B3, Canada
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Averns, Dick, 1964-
[Works. Selections]

Dick Averns : Ambivalence Blvd

Catalogue of an exhibition held at The Reach from September 27, 2018 to January 6, 2019.

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Front Cover: Dick Averns, *Retired Observation Posts (MFO North Camp, Sinai)*(detail), 2009.



DICK AVERNS
AMBIVALENCE BLVD

AMBIVALENCE BLVD

For more than 25 years, Dick Avern's has been creating cross-disciplinary work that investigates the politicization of public space, the increasing militarization of contemporary geo-politics, and the relationship between art, artists, and political engagement. Working in large-scale photography, crafted and readymade sculpture, performance art, and video, Avern's creates work that shares this set of conceptual concerns, as well as a pervasive sense of *ambivalence*. In the context of Avern's' practice, this persistent undercurrent denotes not indecision or hesitancy, but is more closely attuned to the Latin etymology of the word, describing the coexistence of two strongly opposing emotions or attitudes (*ambi* meaning 'both' and *valentia* meaning 'strength'). The works in the current exhibition span roughly the past 20 years of Avern's' career, but they are in many ways more relevant now than ever, at a time when the intensity of opposing opinions has come to dominate our social and political spheres. When considered through a present-day lens, Avern's' early work seems almost eerily prescient, particularly those works that draw attention to the absurdity of political performance, or shed light on the structures of power that increasingly infiltrate our everyday lives.

This exhibition consists of two distinct but related bodies of work that each achieve these ends in different ways. On display in the Grotto Gallery is video documentation of a performance that Avern's has been enacting in public spaces since 2000, and which shares its title with the exhibition as a whole. In *Ambivalence Blvd*, Avern's carries a custom-made street sign bearing the words "Ambivalence Blvd" while casually traversing sites associated with political and cultural power, including the US Embassy and National Gallery in Ottawa, Buckingham Palace in London, and the 2010 G8 Summit. Most recently, Avern's performed *Ambivalence Blvd* at rallies for Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump during the 2016 US primaries.

For most of the performance, Avern's cradles the sign in the crook of his elbow while he wanders the city. At times he uses it as an improvisational prop, for example grasping it at shoulder height while standing roadside as though thumbing a ride. In each performance, some kind of authority (official or self-appointed) eventually steps in to question Avern's or simply shoo him away. Aside from his unusual accessory, his presence as a middle-aged, well-groomed white man in everyday clothing is unremarkable; the embodiment of the "everyman." Indeed, one is struck by the lengths to which Avern's must go

to attract the suspicion of authorities. There is a clear point being made about who gets to occupy public space, and about what kinds of behaviours are and are not socially sanctioned. Beyond that however, there is also an unnerving sense of absurdity; a quality that is underscored by the *Just For Laughs*-like music that plays during portions of the video, as well as by the sped-up pace of the video that in other moments has Avern's zipping through the city.

In more provocative moments, Avern's holds the sign like a gun and points it at the sky or at passing cars, and it is in these moments that *Ambivalence Blvd* becomes increasingly complicated in the light of recent shifts in the public sphere. In the context of seismic cultural changes that have occurred since the 2016 US Elections, Avern's' whiteness, maleness, and general "everydayness" have taken on a heightened layer of meaning that now cannot be divorced from the seemingly unending wave of stories of abuses of power and acts of violence perpetrated by white, middle-aged men. The shifting context within which we view an ongoing work (which is now nearly two decades in the making) is integral to its meaning and lends the work renewed relevance and versatility. Avern's' performance must, by necessity, be read against ever-shifting external conditions, and as such has the powerful ability to draw our awareness to the contemporary contestations of our current moment.

Avern's' preoccupation with ambivalence plays out in another consistent line of inquiry in his practice: the investigation of the relationship between political and military power. In 2009 this interest led Avern's to a unique opportunity to participate in the Canadian Forces Art Program (CFAP), through which he spent several weeks in Israel, Palestine, and Egypt. Avern's used his time with the CFAP to produce projects in both large-scale photography and sculpture, and also to research the relationship between war art programs and the health of liberal democracies in six countries. The scholarly article that came out of this research describes the current war art programs of Canada, Australia, Egypt, Israel, the UK, and the US, calibrating them according to a range of artistic, practical and administrative concerns which, in Avern's' words, collectively constitute a "barometer for how different nations either enable or disable conflict-related cultural canons."¹

On display in the Great Hall of The Reach are a series of large-scale photographs taken by Avern's during his time in the Middle East, while he was embedded with Canadian troops serving with the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), a peace-keeping agency tasked with overseeing the terms of the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. Although the MFO's work is rarely in the news, they are one of the longest serving and most successful peace-keeping missions in the world. In the post-9/11 world, when peacekeeping

forces and resources are increasingly redirected to military intervention and conflict, Avern's is interested in the work of the MFO as a "counter-monument in relation to war... an abstract memorial that looks forward to the possibility of change ... also seek[ing] to activate an audience to participate in such change."²

Avern's' photographs capture the militarized daily realities of that region, and the mundane, everyday signs and gestures by which authority asserts itself. In *Jerusalem Triptych – The Road to Damascus Gate*, we see two of the ubiquitous military checkpoints that restrict and control people's access to different areas of the city. In *August 2009 War Panorama (West Bank)*, the security wall clearly separates Palestinian, Bedoin, and Israeli people, resources, and opportunities. These images resist any straightforward criticism or endorsement, instead approaching their subjects in a manner akin to documentary photography. The approach is particularly ironic because the MFO heavily restricts access to its bases and personnel for news media; if Avern's were in fact a documentary or journalistic photographer he could not have accessed many of the sites pictured in his photographs.

Expanding on the artist's interest in the regulation of public space, the MFO photographs prominently feature the signs and signage that regulate these zones of conflict. For Avern's, these markers and messages reveal the ways that our bodies and behaviours are policed and managed by signage, but also the possibilities for slippage within these systems of communication and control. In *Observe Report Verify (MFO North Camp, Sinai)*, for example, Avern's presents an image of a marquee-style sign that appears commanding and imperative. At first glance, the words "Observe and Report," "Earth," and "Incendiary" alert us to be on guard, and to engage with our surroundings with suspicion and vigilance. In actuality, the text is a listing of films on offer for personnel on the MFO



Installation view of *Ambivalence Blvd* at The Reach Gallery Museum, September 27-January 6, 2018. Photo: SITE Photography.

base. Clearly, in the everyday ways that power and authority assert themselves, the message sent is not always the message received.

In contrast to the sensationalistic coverage of global conflict that bombards mainstream media, Dick Avern's focuses on the quotidian symbols and structures that regulate our lives, reminding us that although the pressures exerted on our bodies, movements, and understandings of space may be naturalized or commonplace, they are deliberate. Consciously avoiding the fervent or alarmist aspects of politics and war, Avern's resists decisive or one-sided statements about the complex issues he raises, instead encouraging us to contend with the subtler symbols that signal, and reinforce, larger structures of power that come to bear in our lives. In this way, he is able to draw our attention to the assumptions that we, as viewers, bring to this work, bringing focus to our own ambivalence, or lack thereof.

¹ Dick Avern's, "Calibrating Official War Art and the War on Terror," *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 26, Issue 1 (2017): 1.

² Ibid, 19.