

Exploring 'The Bastard Word Studies' by Fiona Banner (aka The Vanity Press)

Information and Activity Pack

KS4/5 Art and History of Art

This pack contains information about Fiona Banner aka The Vanity Press and her artwork, including our newly acquired aeroplane alphabet, known as 'The Bastard Word Studies'.

Inside are also questions for discussion and a range of activities to try at the RAF Museum London, as well as in the classroom.

Fiona Banner aka The Vanity Press



Fiona Banner in front of stacked editions of 'Jane's All the World's Aircraft'.
Photo © Mischa Haller

Fiona Banner (born 1966) is a British artist born in the north of England, who lives and works in London. She studied Fine Art at university and had her first solo exhibition in 1994, just one year after she graduated. Her work includes sculpture, drawing, text and installation.

Banner has always been interested in aircraft and the role they play in modern warfare. She first saw fighter jets when she was a child, while walking with her family in the countryside. She has spoken about her family having their breath 'taken away' by the way the aircraft 'came out of nowhere' and cut through the quiet, peaceful environment. She sometimes went to airshows while on holiday too, where she saw aircraft performing displays. Banner was fascinated by the acrobatic movement of aircraft, yet felt conflicted due to the role they play in warfare.

Do you remember the first time you saw a plane flying? How did it make you feel?

Reflecting on our emotions and reactions about our subject can help create more interesting art.

Fiona Banner first started making art about aircraft when she was in her teens, and would create tiny pencil drawings of military aircraft. These delicate drawings stood in contrast to the enormous and powerful machines themselves. She also started drawing from films about war that show a lot of aeroplanes, like *Top Gun*.

Banner is also known as 'The Vanity Press', a name she began using when she published her first book 'The Nam' in 1997. The book is 1,000 pages long and contains written descriptions of well-known films about the Vietnam War (1955–75), written by Banner as if she was observing on set during filming. Each of the six films is described without beginning or end, so the book reads continuously without breaks. Each film description blends into the next, which makes the text seem chaotic and challenging to follow.

Why might Banner have chosen to write and edit the book in this way, given its subject matter?

'The Bastard Word Studies' (Aeroplane Alphabet)



You can find Fiona Banner's artwork on display in our Art Gallery upstairs in Hangar 3,4,5 at the Museum.

'The Bastard Word Studies' (2006-07) is a collection of 26 drawings of aircraft which have been dissected into fragments and re-formed as the letters of the alphabet.

For 'The Bastard Word Studies', as with most of her work in which aircraft are the subject, Fiona Banner chose aircraft that were currently in use by the military. This was to avoid the nostalgia associated with using historical aircraft that are linked to particular wars or events. For example, if she had included a recognisable aircraft like a Spitfire, the viewer would likely be reminded of the Second World War, and Britain's victory at events such as the Battle of Britain. Banner's aim is to question conflict, rather than recall past glories.

Banner has said that she wanted to create a more **'critical, confrontational relationship'** between artwork and viewer. By changing the context in which they are viewed, Banner removes the aircraft from their links to specific air forces or nations, which encourages the viewer to consider the nature of aircraft as deadly weapons of war, without ties to particular alliances. Another way she achieves this is by removing or altering a lot of the distinguishing features of the aircraft included in 'The Bastard Word Studies'. By doing this, the viewer is forced to go beyond recognition or naming of particular planes, and is instead made to question the purpose of these fighter aircraft as a whole.

Banner's artwork about aircraft calls into question the fact that fighter jets are often marvelled at and thought of as beautiful, sometimes even fetishised or sexualised due to their smooth curves, movement and power, despite their overwhelming purpose being to kill. This idea of fetishisation becomes apparent when you study nose art on military aircraft from the Second World War-Cold War. As you travel through the Museum, you will likely notice a number of sexualised representations of women that aircrew painted on their planes during long stints away from home.

Further Artist Research

Eduardo Paolozzi

Like Banner, Paolozzi examined the fetishisation of war and conflict in the period just after the Second World War, but did so in a more explicit way, by contrasting pin-up photographs of women with the deadly machinery of war. You can find a series of his work in the current 'To the Stars' exhibition.

Fragmentation

While some of the aircraft shown in 'The Bastard Word Studies' are more complete than others, all are fragmented in some way. Banner has always worked with aircraft in parts. When dissected, she sees aircraft parts as becoming figurative and taking on human associations. She has even described the parts as limbs. Aircraft become an extension of the human body. **Is there other artwork in the gallery that demonstrates this idea?**

Banner works very purposefully with aircraft parts. Historically, however, many artists documenting the work of the RAF had no choice in the matter. They visited air bases, where they saw the aftermath of aerial warfare – the damage to both aircrew and their planes. Many War Artists painted and sketched aircraft under construction or that had been separated into their various parts while they awaited repair, giving a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the impact of active conflict.

Further Artist Research



Barbara Jones

'Aircraft Fuselage and Wind Tunnel'

This 1941 watercolour painting shows the interior of the Royal Aircraft Establishment. An out-of-date Fairey Battle Mk 1 and Napier Sabre engine await testing in the wind tunnel.

'Language is our chief agency, yet it fails us.'

These drawings show the artist's ongoing interest in both language and aircraft, and in the premise that the failure of language ultimately leads to conflict. Banner sees '**language as a deployable weapon**'. This may have been influenced by the fact that she grew up in the shadow of the Vietnam War and during the Cold War, when one ill-spoken phrase by a world leader could result in nuclear weapons being unleashed. It is, however, true for all conflict, whether it leads to military involvement or not.

This critical stance towards war is reflected in the work of many artists during times of both war and peace, and became more common and accepted in the late 20th century with conflicts such as a Vietnam War (1955–75). Even during the Second World War, however, artists used their platform and skill to 'speak out' against war.

Further Artist Research

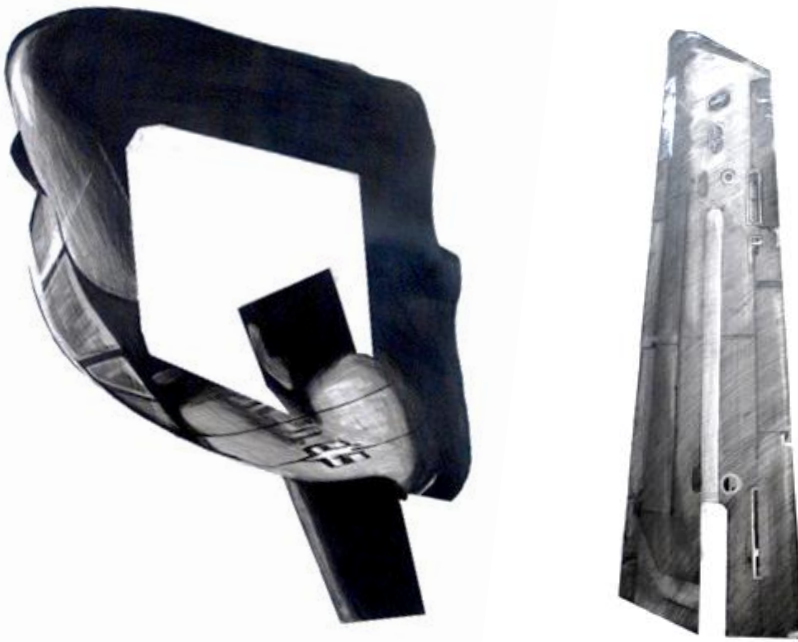


Gladys Hynes

'Crucifixion'

Gladys Hynes painted 'Crucifixion' in 1939 as one of several artistic statements against Britain's declaration of war on Germany.

While this work is both more surreal and figurative than Banner's, they share a similar concept and ambition to call into question the nature or necessity of warfare. **Do any other artworks in 'To The Stars' also seem to share this ambition?**



'Q' and 'A' detail from 'The Bastard Word Studies'
Fiona Banner (2006-07)

Questions for Discussion

Think about the artwork in greater depth and analyse using some of these questions. They could be explored through discussion (as a class, in small groups or pairs) or as a short, reflective piece of written work for completion individually.

Look at the artwork carefully, how has the artist created it?

- What techniques have been used?
- What materials have been used, and how have they been used?

Have a look at the other artwork in the exhibition. How does Fiona Banner's work fit in?

- What makes it similar to other works in the exhibition? (These could be conceptual, rather than visual similarities)
- What makes it different?
- Can you see a marked difference in how aircraft are represented from the First World War to the present day? Why might this be?

Challenge: What message do you think Fiona Banner is trying to present with this artwork? Why do you think this?

OR: If you already know about the concept behind the artwork, do you think the artwork conveys this message effectively?

Understanding Banner's Artistic Practice

Despite there being key themes and subjects that run through Banner's work, her output is diverse. She works in a range of different media, but usually begins by making notes about her ideas. **Banner has even described recording her thoughts and ideas as a form of drawing.**

These activities are based around the ways in which Banner has described her artistic practice, to help you better understand how her work develops from initial inspiration to finished artwork.

Activities to try at the Museum



Warm-Up: Blind and Continuous Line Drawing

1. Choose an aircraft part to draw
2. Focus your eyes on your subject and **draw it without looking down at your paper at all**. Draw the same subject twice more. Your drawing should improve with each try
3. For continuous line drawing, choose an aircraft part and draw without taking your pen/pencil off the paper at all.

Tip: You may find it helpful to combine the two techniques, as continuous line can help you to keep your place on the page.

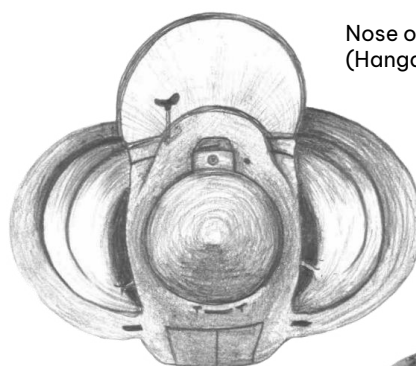
Aircraft Parts Detail Drawing

1. Pick an aircraft that you find interesting
2. Carefully look around the aircraft and choose one part of it (e.g. engine, wing, nose, etc.) to draw in detail
3. Find the best angle to draw your chosen part from
4. Draw your chosen part in detail
5. Repeat this until you have a few different drawings of aircraft parts.

Tip: Try doing some quick rough sketches (e.g. blind drawing) before you get started on your detailed drawing.

Tip: Use a viewfinder to help you focus on a specific aircraft part. There's a viewfinder at the back of this pack.

Take it further: Back at home or at school, why not try collaging your drawings together to create new, abstract forms?



Nose of Harrier GR9A
(Hangar 6)



Nose of Sepecat Jaguar GR.1 (Hangar 6)
This drawing was created by a visitor at RAF
Museum London

Understanding Banner's Artistic Practice

Activities to try at the Museum

Experiment with Scale

Banner has described how she would draw tiny drawings of fighter jets when she first became interested in aircraft. Working on a small scale creates a contradiction between the large, powerful subject and its representation in drawing. This may change the way it is perceived by the viewer.

1. Pick two-three Fighter Jets to focus on
2. Carefully look around the aircraft and chose an angle to draw from
3. Draw the **whole** aircraft (if possible). Play around and experiment with scale. For example, you could draw the same aircraft the size of a postage stamp and A3.

Fighter Jets at RAF Museum London

Hangar 1:

Lockheed Martin F35 Lightning II (model)

Hangar 3/4:

Panavia Tornado F3

McDonnell Douglas Phantom FGR2

British Aircraft Corporation Lightning F6

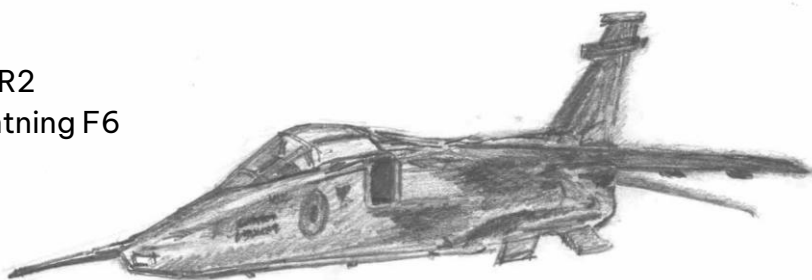
Gloster Meteor F8

Hangar 6:

Eurofighter Typhoon

SEPECAT Jaguar GR.1

Panavia Tornado GR1B



Sepecat Jaguar GR.1 (Hangar 6)

This sketch was created by a visitor at RAF Museum London

Aircraft Parts Photography

1. Pick an aircraft or parts of an aircraft that you find interesting
2. Find the best angle to photograph your chosen part from (the 'best' angle will depend on what you plan on using the photograph for)
3. Repeat this until you have a range of aircraft parts documented.

Tip: Try picking parts of the aircraft that could be abstracted or taken out of context

Tip: If you are using a camera, rather than a phone, try looking through the viewfinder, rather than at the screen. This will act as a 'viewfinder'

Take it further: Back at home or at school, why not try collaging your photographs together to create new, abstract forms?

For more guidance on photography at the Museum, download this free pack:

[Photography at the Museum KS4/5](#)

For more guidance on sketching at the Museum, download one of these free packs:

KS4: [Sketching at the Museum KS4](#)

KS5: [Sketching at the Museum KS5](#)

Understanding Banner's Artistic Practice

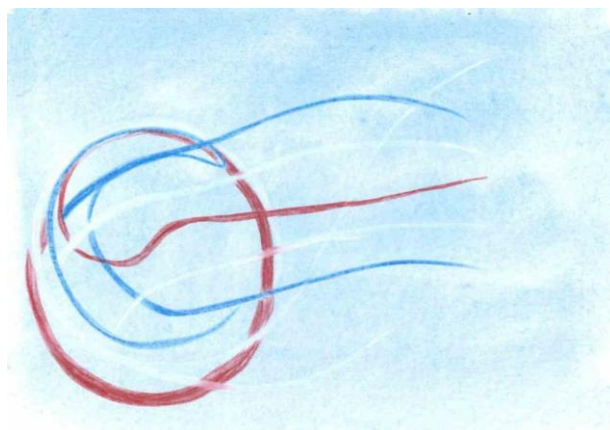
Activities to try at home or in the classroom

Aircraft Acrobatics

Fiona Banner has described going to airshows as a child, and being fascinated by the acrobatic movement of aircraft.

1. Watch a short video of an airshow (there are plenty to be found online). A Red Arrows demonstration would work well
2. Record the flight path of the aircraft in the demonstration.

Tip: You could use simple pen/pencil and paper, or prepare a watercolour wash background and use colouring pencils, paint or pens, as shown in the example.



Describing Film

Fiona Banner works extensively with text as a form of art. Her 1997 book 'The Nam' was a written description of six films about the Vietnam War. She has also described recording her thoughts and ideas as a form of drawing.

From Top Gun: maverick
serious + concerned pilot faces
Two aircraft approach over mountains
signalling Altitude
heroic "weapons envelope"
Muscles + guns sea Control flashing
modern fighter dogfight Fear
jets - arrows Guns blaze -
formation EJECT aircraft shot
Explosions EJECT down Throttle
Muzzle Smoke
look control computer systems
of aircraft engaged Rat-at-at
wings expand speed hidden
hurtling towards the ground Eject enemy
Rebel

1. Watch a clip or trailer of a feature film that includes aircraft. A film like 'Top Gun' would work well. There are plenty of free clips online
2. Keep a pencil and paper in your hand and describe the action taking place on-screen. You may want to just record key words, rather than full sentences
3. Once the clip has finished, look over what you've recorded. Does the way you write (e.g. the size of certain words) change depending on the action taking place?

Tip: If you find the activity useful, you could watch the whole film. Alongside the written description, you could also make quick sketches of the action or movement of aircraft in the film (see above)

Take it further: Could any of the words or descriptions be developed into a piece of art?

We would love to see your responses to the artwork on display in our Museum. Share with us on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook @RAFMuseum

Artist Research

If you have been inspired by Banner's work and the activities you've tried out, why not take your artist research further? Below is a summary of the work of several artists who work with similar themes or in similar styles to Fiona Banner.

Aircraft, flight and war

Bryan Organ

Organ is most well-known for his celebrity portraits, but has also created imposing, atmospheric 'portraits' of aircraft, as shown here.



John Armstrong

During the Second World War, Surrealist painter Armstrong was commissioned to represent scenes of 'debris and demolition'. In this painting, fallen Luftwaffe aircraft appear as toys.



Rudolf Sauter

Sauter is known for his landscapes and portraits, but during the Second World War he created drawings focusing on the Battle of Britain. The contrail studies above were part of this collection.



David Bomberg

In 1942 David Bomberg spent two weeks in an underground bomb store. The fear instilled by these deadly weapons is clear to see in his artwork.



Fragmentation

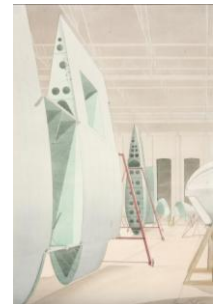
Enrico Castello

Castello was part of the Italian Futurist movement, which aimed to capture the dynamism of the modern age. This resulted in a fragmentation of reality in his work, which was often focussed on aircraft.



Raymond McGrath

During the Second World War, McGrath created a series of drawings focused on aircraft under construction. Several of these drawings show aircraft fragmented into their various parts.



Cubism

Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque co-invented Cubism in 1907-08. It was a new way of representing reality that broke solid objects into fragments, known as 'planes'.

Jenny Holzer

Holzer's work comments on the modern world with an underlying feminism. She uses text throughout her work and often places her work in public places, using advertising methods such as billboards.

Language and text

Bruce Nauman

Nauman has worked extensively with text in his work, and often explores themes of war, ethics and politics. The majority of his text-based artwork is presented in neon, which gives an urgency to the message.

Cut out this section