

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

## Information and Activity Pack

### KS3 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  
Photo © Mischa Haller

Fiona Banner (born 1966) is a British artist who lives and works in London. She studied Fine Art at university and had her first solo exhibition in 1994. Her work includes sculpture, drawing, text and installation.

Banner has always been interested in aircraft and the role they play in war. 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 disrupted the quiet, peaceful environment.

She sometimes went to airshows while on holiday too, where she saw aircraft performing displays. Banner was interested in the acrobatic movement of aircraft, but felt uneasy because of the role they play in warfare.

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

Fiona Banner first started making art about aircraft when she was in her teens. She would create tiny pencil drawings of military aircraft. These delicate drawings contrasted with the aeroplanes they were based on because to the power and enormous size of the planes. She also started drawing from films about war that show a lot of aeroplanes, like Top Gun.

## **'The Bastard Word Studies' (Aeroplane Alphabet)**

'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' Fiona Banner chose aircraft that were currently in use by the military. This was to get away from the nostalgia that comes with using historical aircraft. For example, if she had included a famous aircraft like a Spitfire, the viewer would likely be reminded of the Second World War, and Britain's success at events such as the Battle of Britain. Banner's aim is to question war and conflict, rather than to celebrate past victories.

By changing the way they are seen, Banner takes the aircraft away from their links to specific air forces or countries, which encourages the viewer to think about fighter jets as deadly weapons of war, even without their connections to the actions of particular nations.

The artist also removes or changes a lot of the recognisable features of the aircraft. By doing this, the viewer is forced to go beyond naming the different planes. Instead, we are made to question the purpose of these fighter aircraft as a whole.



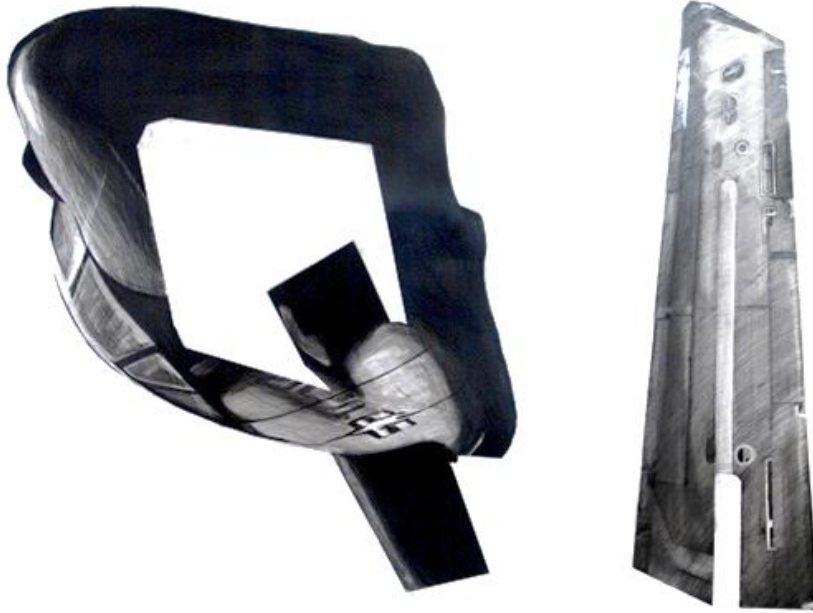
**You can find Fiona Banner's artwork on display in our Art Gallery upstairs in Hangar 3,4,5 at the Museum.**

'The Bastard Word Studies' show the artist's interest in both language and aircraft, and in the idea that when language or communication breaks down, it leads to conflict. Banner sees '**language as a deployable weapon**' (a weapon that can be put into action and used). This may be because she grew up during the Cold War, when a badly-worded sentence could possibly lead to nuclear weapons being released.

### Fragmentation

While some of the aircraft shown in 'The Bastard Word Studies' are more complete than others, all have been taken apart and split into fragments in some way. Banner has always worked with aircraft in parts. When dissected, she sees aircraft parts as becoming almost human-like due to their sizes, shapes and curves. She has even described the parts as limbs. Aircraft become an extension of the human body. **Is there other artwork in the gallery that links to this idea?**

Banner chooses to work with aircraft in 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 consequences 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.



'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.

### **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 gallery. How does Fiona Banner's work fit in?**

- What makes it similar to other works in the exhibition?
- What makes it different?
- Can you see a clear difference in how aircraft are shown 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?**

## Understanding Banner's Artistic Practice

There are key themes and subjects that run through Banner's work, but she works in lots of different media, and usually begins by making notes about her ideas. Banner has even described recording her thoughts and ideas as a form of drawing.

The activities below are based on the ways in which Banner has described how she works, to help you better understand how she develops a piece from 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, even when you aren't looking at it.

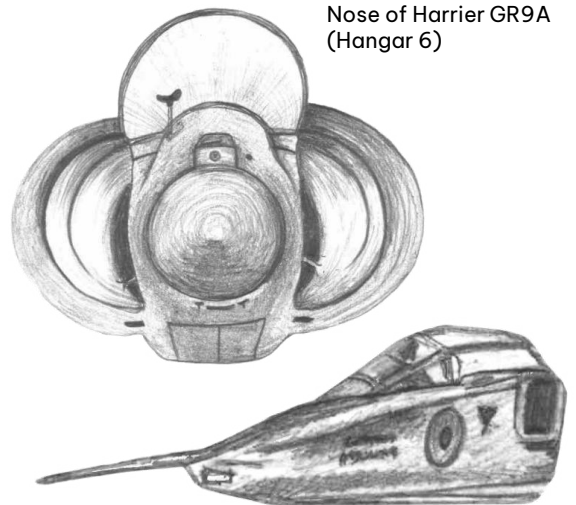
#### Aircraft Parts Detail Drawing

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

### Experiment with Scale

Banner has described how she would create tiny drawings of huge fighter jets when she first became interested in aircraft. Play around and experiment with size and scale to see if it changes how powerful and intimidating the aeroplanes seem in your art.

1. Pick two–three fighter jets to focus on (see below for where to find them)
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:

McDonnell Douglas Phantom FGR2

British Aircraft Corporation Lightning F6

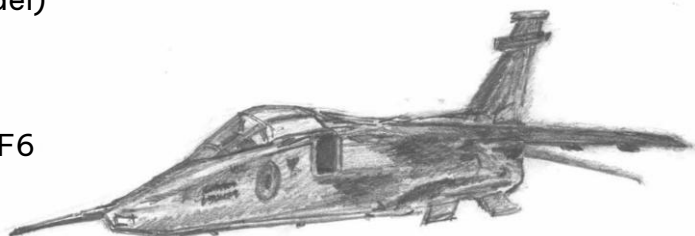
Gloster Meteor F8

#### 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

For more guidance on sketching at the Museum, download this free pack: [Sketching at the Museum KS3](#)

### 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 photographed a range of aircraft parts.

**Tip:** Try picking aircraft parts that could become abstracted and become something new

**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 artwork?

# 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 interested in 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 movement of the aircraft in the demonstration using lines

**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 often works 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 light  
signalling Altitude  
heroic "weapons envelope"  
Missiles + guns sea control flashing  
modern fighter dogfight Fear  
jets - arrow formation Guns blaze -  
Explosions EJECT aircraft mol  
EJECT down EJECT Thrustle  
Munitions Smoke  
lost control of aircraft computer systems engaged Rak-at-ak at-at speed hidden enemy  
wings expand  
Hurting towards the ground  
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 don't manage to fill the whole page on your first watch, repeat or watch a different clip and continue to add to your page

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

## Understanding Banner's Artistic Practice

### Activities to try at home or in the classroom



Abstract flower/star collage made by using 10 repeated cut-outs of the nose of Panavia Tornado aircraft, which is on display in Hangar 6 at the RAF Museum London

### Abstract Aircraft Collage

1. Take photographs of aircraft at the Museum or find online
2. Print photographs of a range of different aircraft in different sizes
3. Cut up the photographs into interesting shapes or 'take the aircraft apart' by cutting up its parts e.g. the engine, wings etc.
4. Try re-assembling the different aircraft parts in new ways. Think about what the shapes could become and move the pieces around. Experiment and don't rush to stick them down
5. Once you're happy with the layout, stick down the different pieces on to paper. Is there anything else you could add to improve it?

**Tip:** You could also do the same activity using your aircraft drawings instead of photographs!

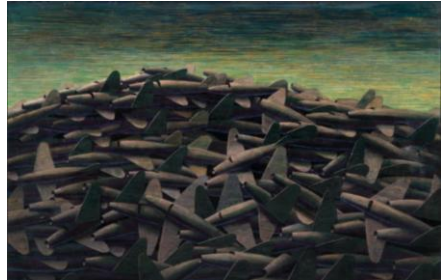
**We would love to see your responses to the artwork on display in our Museum. Share with us on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook @RAFMuseum**

## Other Artists to Explore

If you have been inspired by Banner's work and the activities you've tried out, why not explore the work of other artists? Below are suggestions of artists who have created artwork with themes of aircraft, war and flight.

### John Armstrong

During the Second World War, Surrealist painter John Armstrong was asked by the British government to make artwork showing scenes of 'debris and demolition'. In this painting, Armstrong has shown a mountain of damaged German (Luftwaffe) aircraft.



### Rudolf Sauter

Sauter is known for his landscapes and portraits, but during the Second World War he created a collection of work focussing on the Battle of Britain. This collection included watercolours of RAF Fighter Command aircraft and these contrail studies which show the dynamic movement of aircraft.

### Paul Nash

Paul Nash is one of the most famous War Artists of both the First and Second World Wars. During the Second World War he was chosen by the War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC) to make art showing Britain's successes in war. This painting shows an RAF attack on a German factory.



### Enrico Castello

Castello was part of the Italian Futurist movement, which aimed to capture the speed, movement and rapid change of the modern world. This meant that there was some fragmentation of reality in his work, and scenes would be broken down into blocks of colour, similar to Cubism. Castello was a Fighter Pilot in the First World War, so often focussed on subjects like aircraft and flight.

### Raymond McGrath

During the Second World War, McGrath was asked by the Ministry of Information to create a series of watercolours drawings. He focussed on aircraft under construction, and visited several factories to complete his work. Several of these drawings show aircraft fragmented into their various parts.



# Viewfinder

