

## Escaping Reality: Airfix and the art of Roy Cross

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This Paper will discuss the use of plastic model making in the Covid-19 era as a source of community. Further, the paper will locate the plastic model box top artwork of Roy Cross within a contemporary and creative environment. There will be a reflection on the original aeroplanes used by Cross as the artwork's origin. Finally, the paper will argue that Cross's artworks represent a positioning of the box top artworks as making a significant contribution to the understanding of the Covid-19 environment.

Keywords: Airfix, model making, creativity, artwork, COVID -19

### INTRODUCTION

COVID - 19 and the resulting society lockdowns have created significant increase in home-based activity. With the world seemingly turning a little slower it helps to have something to look forward to and occupy the mind. With people and family spending more time at home away from employment, school, and social activity such as sport, toy sales have rocketed. Toy purchases in 2020 increased globally by 16 percent. Rejuvenated by quarantines and the social isolation of lock down, the old school pastime of making plastic model kits, specifically aeroplanes have enjoyed what can be described as a Renaissance of interest amongst children and adults. Airfix, the oldest manufacturer of plastic injection moulding scale plastic model kits in the United Kingdom has seen sales dramatically increase as long-term fans and newcomers alike have found themselves confined to home. In October 2020, Airfix's owner, Hornby announced a 33 percent spike in sales compared to the same year in 2019.

### AIRFIX

Founded in 1939, the iconic Airfix brand is the jewel in the UK based Hornby toy empire, which includes Scalextric racing cars, Corgi model vehicles and the famous model trains. So great has been the demand for Airfix during the Covid-19 pandemic that the UK Hornby website repeatedly crashed at the start of January 2021 when customers rushed to view their favourite model kit product launches. As Hornby CEO, Davies (Grant, 2021) remarked: "We put the Airfix launch back to try to accommodate the orders we were taking" (Grant, 2021). Stock of the Airfix plastic Spitfire model kit, first introduced in 1955 and a timeless classic ran out completely during the UK 2020 summer. The first occasion that such a calamity had happened in Airfix's 75-year history.

## COVID-19

So, what is it driving this resurgence and fascination in the intersectional creative learning pleasure of gluing, cutting, and tinkering with small pieces of plastic model kit parts? Airfix has contributed to pandemic recovery by a borderless thinking, based in fostering risk taking, experimentation and innovation. Davies believes the pandemic has permitted an opportunity for modellers to switch off and step away from the endless 24-hour news cycle of how many Covid cases have occurred, when the next vaccine delivery will occur, or Vaccination hub will open. He remarked on the combination of model making and the Covid 19 social impact: “Mentally it is really good for people, it allows you to escape from the real world because you’re concentrating so much” (Grant, 2021). Grant also believes in today’s screen-based world, the making of a model kit delivers a solid physical outcome, vastly different to the screen-based games splayed on the X Box or Wii.

As Brower remarked

COVID -19 has changed life as we know it, and headlines have focused mainly on physical health and wellness as well as the way our daily habits must change—from physical distancing to wearing masks. Farther from the front pages has been the critical issue of mental health, and data suggests we’re facing serious challenges related to depression, anxiety and emotional exhaustion (Brower, 2020).

Airfix provides a resurgence of old-world technologies that engages the community. The plastic model Davies argued offers something that can be admired with a sense of physical personal achievement. Furthermore, Davies commented: “You completed something, you can look at it and say I made that!” More strongly Davies (Grant, 2021) remarked on the pandemic: “what you don’t want of your kids, your grandchildren, is them sitting watching the TV or staring at phones all the time. This pandemic has really brought families together”.

It seems with plenty of times on our hands, Airfix offers a readymade social antidote to pandemic blues. Model making speaks to the people involved, as an outcome driven problem. An amplified activity where one can listen to the news, music or television while being active. Airfix furnishes a type of mental deprogramming, engaging a creative led integration and consciousness, combined with a dexterity of hand build that adds deep psychological enrichment to the maker’s life. As Warein, 70-years of age and retired, commented in this rediscovery of model making: “You fill your time and forget what’s happening around you. Turning on the radio or the television is like being hit with a truncheon because they systematically talk about the virus and the misfortunes it brought. ... Having a hobby allows me to think of other things” (Leicester, 2021).

Airfix by its nature is a creative asset narrative of value practice, with not just one culture, but multiple subcultures with modellers often specialising in specific machinery, time periods and genre. When you take in to account the whole model making eco system, there is an opportunity to give individuals a place to be their authentic self. An agency that is many layered with a diffusion of lived experience, albeit it by sticky glue skin parched fingers and signage transfers that slide far too quickly across the plastic model surface. Airfix offers to those with a vivid imagination, a deep story of lived experience, that during the pandemic has

settled within the intermediary space of lockdown, the process of physical isolation returning an influence domain which involves knowledge transfer, physical outcome and cultural community connectivity. Devi (2020) remarked: “It is perhaps an irony that when the world is suffering together in this pandemic, with the same debates and trade-offs over restrictions being discussed in a multitude of languages, people feel more alone than ever”

## I BUILD BECAUSE

Airfix’s website has a section defined as *I Build Because* that showcases the emotive explanation behind the pandemic driven revival in all things plastic model kit. “Steve”, employed as a youth worker, enlisted Airfix to donate starter models kits which he distributed amongst some 80 UK teenagers, isolated in their homes. A starter model kit will normally include the iconic Supermarine Spitfire in 1/72 scale with model cement (glue), paints and paintbrush. Steve commented: “The feedback from the young people and their families highlighted the enjoyment, positive mental and physical impacts” (Hornby Hobbies Limited 2021). During the pandemic many youth clubs have had to close, the Airfix model kits have served as a point of contact with social worker Steve, leading with engagement, and it seems also dispensed for the youngsters a creative sense of personal achievement. Nostalgia has been reinterpreted as a tactile impact for greater discussion and in the process worked across many of the economic and social inequalities in our community. For Steve the Airfix model has been a connector to stimulate conversation with his teenage charges, a sharing of skills in the experience economy. Airfix has provided an emotionally helpful and critical role model for many of the youth Steve has worked with during the pandemic.

Others, on the Airfix website, remark of turning to a different type of activity; as a distraction or comfort. One significant positive pleasure or outcome, being to rekindle, reengage with family, partners and children. A gathering of exchange and ideas to focus on the uniqueness of the Airfix model to achieve an outcome. The Airfix model as a narrative brokerage to open discussion in a three-dimensional language. As model and out of work musician “Dave” remarked regarding the relationship with his son: “For me, it was the first time I’d sat down for a pro longed period of time with... to do something practical that involved us both and that was really special.” (Dave, 2020). Apparently, Dave’s son small fingers were useful with the tricky plastic model parts and Dad, Dave, tackled the more difficult painting. In real-world politic ex-soldier and Airfix aficionado Nicky discusses on the website how modelling helped recovery from the aftermath of PTSD and serving with the British army. Nicky has used the Airfix model as part of his contemporary healing process and a way of looking forward, not back. A tangible focal point for thought and discussion. Storytelling by the Airfix model at a scale of knowledge we can relate to and one what is rich in metaphor of childhood. (Nicky, (2020).

## THE PLASTIC MODEL

The first metric of learning is silence, with the second being feeling and making. A systematic journey that rewards by persistence a narrative that includes multiple sensory rewards, both emotional and physical. Airfix is providing a cultural pathway, where the maker rediscovers dialogue and the autopoiesis to express via imagination a subtle personal security, an invitation for others to engage, listen and feel.

The plastic model bridges the gap between shared experience of family and friend, a sagacity of community entanglement that provokes vitality and resilience within the creative process. In the process actioning as a visual literacy that engages, provokes and delivers connectivity. A curiosity of challenging intimacy, that provides collective identity and memory, that is landing in a real way. In a world of digital pandemic fatigue, Airfix is the vehicle that is providing for many a transformative and uplifting social ritual. One that is actioned on their terms and cultural context, whether it be constructed on the kitchen table, living room carpet or outside garden setting. Airfix is not a substitute for community, but it has during the pandemic provided for many an inhibitor that has by collaboration within specifically the family or home setting, lowered anxiety levels and been a resource for emotional accessibility. The model working logic of snipping tiny pieces of plastic and cementing them back together by carefully following a printed hard copy plan has provided a traditional sensory experience. In the world of lockdown, Airfix has delivered a siloed poignant look back at another age, an opportunity of choice and content, expectation and participation without a lead time that has provided a design experience built of manual interaction. Sharaf (2020, p.71) argues that channelling anger into a quiet and more industrious intensity is best. This is not to say there is no risk involved, but the private experience to scope out with a suite of emotional tools and techniques that Airfix plastic kits offers, functions as a lived experience at peoples own pace and speed; a granular familiarity that identifies and acceptance of the scope for things to fail. In the process Airfix facilitates a shifting away from the hierarchy of viewing art practice as solely for the academic trained.

#### THE GREATER DEBATE

Airfix has in an age of political division delivered a community, one based arguably on nostalgia of making, combining personal history and anxiety with a need for physical touch and emotional connectivity. The Airfix model makers, Steve, Dave and Nicky, and the Airfix website elaborates others, (though all do seem male), convey a use for the Airfix model beyond the cliched nostalgia experienced by white middle class males of a certain 1970s generic age. Unfortunately, in our changing and present-day world this narrative doesn't include the Me-Too Female generation or cater for the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, can anyone who made Airfix models in the company heydays of the 1970s remember painting a toy pilot with a First Nations face, or inserting a female figure to fly the Russian Yak fighter? Highly unlikely? It should be noted that Airfix have begun to engage a more female focussed ethos in the design of their model kits. They are certainly open to the discussion of greater inequality in our community and the broader shared experience model making as an inclusive family experience. How far this newfound gender diversity and any implication that Black Lives Matter movement is considered, remains to be seen. Here too we must consider the argument that toys, such as Airfix, promote and legitimize militarism and prepare our children for the understanding of conflict, military expenditure and the growth of what is the largest sector of manufacturing: the global arms industry. Such rhetoric is part of the significant debate concerning political determinants dominating our contemporary world, whether they be the removal of Confederate statuary, Churchill's legacy or the removal of the Swastika from Airfix models. The challenging and arguable question being the modellers faithfulness to accuracy, sacrificed to the altar of historical authenticity.

## THE ART OF ROY CROSS

The famous Airfix artist Roy Cross carried no such philosophical baggage pertaining to the Airfix predominately military theme. For Cross the visual backdrop of excitement delivered by his stirring full colour action scene box top artworks resonated with the buying public and was designed to trigger the imagination of the mostly youthful customers. He remarked to television journalist James May on the reduction of violent activity on the cardboard box cover art of Airfix “I’ve been told many times it was the action, the bomb bursts and the excitement that made the kids buy these kits” (May, 2016). Further Cross (2014, p.24) elaborated “Action and excitement were the watchwords for the box art to entice purchasers away from offerings by other kit manufacturers”. As Cross commented on the Airfix alteration of one of his paintings depicting a Junker Ju88 attacking a British naval destroyer: “they have airbrushed out all the bombs in the water and the bombs falling and completely sanitised it, taken all the excitement away, as well as spoiling my original artwork. (May, J, 2016).

During the Second World War Roy Cross joined the Royal Air Corps, wearing glasses he found that his eyesight barred him from flying. One can surmise that at this youth full age given his interest in the years to come that the disqualification from flight duty came as a great personal annoyance. Cross did, however, have several of his drawings published in the Air Training Corps Gazette and significantly started writing and illustrating articles for magazines such as Aeroplane, Flight and Aviation Week. He gained employment at Fairey Aviation Limited as a technical illustrator, tasked with creating easy to read perspective illustrations to assist second world war service personnel that were not used to deciphering two-dimensional engineering drawings in the operation, maintenance, and repair of aircraft. It is interesting in our university art schooling dominated academia to appreciate that it was at Fairy Aviation that Cross learned to draw without formal training. The detail that has become synonymous with his creativity (and the ability to life draw from engineering blueprints) seems to have come intuitively through an inner understanding of form shape and spatial preoccupation. Cross did study briefly at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts and in the 1950s at School of Fine Arts in London. As he remarked:

Because of the war, my education had been cut short and I had no formal art training, and day attendance at two prestigious art colleges in the early 1950s soon confirmed that, apart from useful tips about the techniques of the various media, they could not teach me what I wanted to know in the technical manufacturing fields that were my main interest (Cross, 2014 p. 11).

However, regardless of where he obtained his skills it is at Airfix and the subsequent model kit box top paintings that Cross is most recognised. The endless supply of journalist articles written by 1970s middle-aged men pandering to memories of boyhood spent playing at war, flying Mosquitoes, Mustangs, Zeros, Gloster Gladiators and Meteor jets in bedrooms, or blowing them apart with air rifles on the family front or backyard lawn and smouldering pyres of acrid burnt plastic, gives solid evidence to Cross’s continuing popularity. As Peter Caddick-Adams Military Historian at the BBC stated on the middle-class male fascination with Airfix ‘If they were to admit it, there is a whole generation that owes much to Airfix and their fellow manufacturers of plastic model kits’ (Caddick-Adams, 2006). And the Second

World War still dominates, perhaps as an easily described war of good versus evil. Francesc Gatwin, then Head of retail at the RAF Museum Hendon, which sells thousands of aeroplane model kits every year, remarked the legendary Airfix Spitfires outsells all other aircraft in the museum shop by “ten to one” (Caddick-Adams, 2006).

The legendary and now well transcribed story is that Cross after seeing Airfix kits at Woolworths in the 1960s was so dismayed by the clear plastic packaging with awful cardboard header, that he approached the company claiming he could do better. He remarked: “One day I saw Airfix kits in the bags they were sold in then with the header card with a line drawing. I thought I could do better, so I wrote to Airfix.” And so Cross in 1964 began a decade freelancing at Airfix, ultimately becoming the Chief Illustrator, mainly working on aviation themes. He created over 200 plus finished artworks, many of which are still in use. As Cross stated on his favourite medium of the time:

The common commercial art medium in the 1960s and 1970s, and the one I used, was gouache: water-based tube colour with a gum arabic binding and opaque filler, giving good hiding power, great lasting qualities and brilliant colours. As a fine art medium it dates back at least to the fifteenth century, and its light-fastness and longevity can be assured. I liked the speed of application, drying time and cleanliness of the water-based colours. (Cross, 2014 p. 20).

Cross provided many of the most celebrated Airfix box top paintings, including a Lancaster coming into land with engine aflame, the famous yellow Tiger Moth RAF trainer, and various Spitfires, setting new standards for realism, detail and drama. As Cross commented on the artistic restrictions of working within the limitations of the plastic kit cardboard box top, and specifically the requirement to include the Airfix logo and related marketing copy:

The Airfix basic packaging was oblong in shape but with a segment intruding into the lower right-hand side, making a somewhat restricted area for the artwork. Certainly with aircraft it made it difficult to give a variety of ‘poses’ without cutting off a wing or other portion of the subject. (Cross, 2014 p. 24)

Most of Cross’s Airfix original artworks, associated sketches and finished drawings are believed to have been lost after colour transparencies were created or discarded in the various office moves and company upheavals. Cross held an auction in 2014 to clear his studio space of unwanted drawings, water colours and original box top illustrations. Among the highlights which went under the hammer were charcoal sketches of a Lancaster bomber. Some of these sketches were rejected by Airfix and had a resounding no written on them, which has made them all the rarer and more valuable to the discerning collector.

In 2013 the RAF Museum, London partnered with Airfix to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the company. *Airfix: Making History*, included several of Roy Cross original artworks. The exhibition charted the history of the Airfix company from the 1950s, 60s and the heyday of the 70s. The show consisted of two displays, one of original box-art, primarily by Cross, and two large cabinets with examples of models, boxes, paints, and other artifacts. The models shown were not professionally built or painted but constructed by amateurs. The youngest modeller being Harriet McIlwaine, four years old, who insisted that her father had

not helped assemble the PBY Catalina, and apparently “got very cross when he tried to interfere with her paint scheme.” (Jefferis, 2014). The RAF Museum has continued to partner with Airfix, hosting a regular and very popular family friendly Airfix Make and Take model making weekend. Children and those young at heart can choose from a selection of Airfix kits and build their models nestled amongst the Museum’s collection of aircraft on display in Hangar 1.

The three legendary and perhaps a best-known aircraft that Cross and his Airfix box top paintings depict are the yellow RAF trainer Tiger Moth, the heavy bomber Lancaster and the legendary Second World War fighter aircraft, the British Spitfire. These classics of aeronautical and military history have been continual favourite sellers for Airfix, and Cross box top lid artworks are still being manufactured and enjoyed.

### THE TIGER MOTH



Figure 1: Tiger Moth, Australian War Memorial P01817043

The ubiquitous open tandem cockpit dual control biplane de Havilland Tiger Moth started life with the RAF as its main military aeroplane trainer in 1934. The Moth was specifically used for training purposes as it was an incredibly forgiving vehicle for the novice flyer, and robust and easy enough for the ground maintenance crews to quickly mend. Essential for wartime when need for trained pilots was essential. The fuselage, wings and tailplane were constructed of steel tube and thin plywood, covered with doped fabric.

Cross's Tiger Moth liveried in bright yellow is shown above the airfield, we can see other parked yellow trainers at the nearby airfield hangar entrance. Positioned on the box top lid if coming into land, the pilots wearing classic aero leather helmets with goggles, are focussed, concentrating on the training program underway. The Tiger Moth open cockpit enabled the novice the opportunity to move their head, good for when making the runway approach during landing. The shadow of the biplane is obvious on the ground and a nearby wind directional sock emphasizes the new pilot is coming into land. Around the biplane the open field offers a sensibility of the vast spatial environs surrounding the biplane and airfield. We can easily see the fragility of the Moth construction, the canvas of the wings, obvious taunt rigid framework underneath, wire controlling ailerons, propeller blurred and the machine straining against the wind. The biplane is depicted as a detailed, studied flying machine, all classic Roy Cross dramatic metaphors. The excitement of flight, mixed with the knowledge that we are watching a pilot in training creates a visual exuberance. We want and will the pilot to land successfully and get his "wings" to fly another day.

Like the Airfix plastic kit, the Moth trainer is a nostalgic symbol of another distant time. The two are united by an emotional response, one that Cross conveyed so artfully, a belief in a righteous battle. In the Second World War this was a campaign against the forces of evil, within our contemporary environment a challenge for emotional human connectivity. The emotive power of the Airfix model kit Tiger Moth painted by Cross rests within the solidarity of recognition by the romantic connectivity of building a modelled interpretation of a past, more honourable struggle. A righteous crusade constructed on the magnitude of good versus evil, all established upon the melancholic belief that there still exists a human morality of rectitude and decency.

Compare Cross Tiger Moth trainer coming into land with Arthur Streeton World War one renditions of various aircraft, for example *S13 struck off strength after 10 months service* depiction of a British Re8. As Gray remarked the painting "captures the essential fragility of the aircraft and, by implication, the risks taken by the pilots who flew during the war" (Gray, 2017 p. 33). This superb and accurate pencil and water colour rendering showcases Streeton's attention to detail. We see the curvature of the biplane four spoked propellor and the tactile construction method of struts and taunt fabric stretched over a timber framework. The significant attention to detail is reminiscent of Cross box top paintings. However, Streeton's poetic painting lacks the intense theatre of Cross Airfix box top rendering. *S13 struck off strength after 10 months service* as the title suggests has finished its work time, where, as Cross Tiger Moth gives evidence via the bright yellow painted exterior to a future experience of war and the dangers inherent.

More fittingly, perhaps, a painting such as Septimus Powers 1924 rendition of *Lieutenant F. H. McNamara RE8* and the exploit for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross give credence to the real-life action that Cross wanted to depict with his Tiger Moth coming into land. It is the spectacle of what has happened before with the thrill and excitement of future exploits that Cross depicts so eloquently. Lieutenant McNamara and Captain Rutherford were returning from a bombing flight to Gaza on 20 March 1917 when Rutherford's plane was forced down. A wounded McNamara sighted Turkish cavalry racing in the direction of Rutherford's plane. Under intense rifle fire from the Turkish horseman, he decided to rescue

Rutherford and made the heroic decision to land. An attempt to get airborne failed as McNamara's leg wounds prevented him from controlling the aircraft and he crashed, rolling the machine. The two officers set fire to the McNamara's biplane and on foot made for Rutherford's machine, which they succeeded in getting aloft. McNamara, weak from blood loss, took off just as the enemy cavalry charged upon the clearing with guns blazing. For his incredible bravery in rescuing Rutherford, the young McNamara was awarded the Victoria Cross. Something of this exceptional courage is visually embedded, creatively hidden in Cross's yellow Tiger Moth trainer. We sense the posited fear of the learner pilot, the danger of combat and the nervous anticipation of war.

A more contemporary example of this foreclosure of death being Shaun Gladwell's pensive video portrait of Victoria Cross winner Mark Donaldson with machine gun braced, peering from the open side door of a BlackHawk helicopter, as it choppers over the backblocks of a military training base in South Australia. Donaldson is helmeted, ready for combat, and conveys an awareness of reflective danger that is communicated by his body language, a type of taughtened physical exhaustion is evident. There is a brooding awareness of war within the imagery, we sense he understands the fear of Cross Tiger Moth novice pilot. Mark Donaldson was awarded the Victoria Cross when as a member of the Australian Special Air Service he saved the life of an Afghan interpreter under heavy enemy fire in the Battle of Khaz Oruzgan as part of the Australian military contribution to the Afghanistan War on Terror. As Gladwell remarked on the portrayal of Donaldson in the video portrait and his highly trained knowledge of warfare: "he is just there, inactive, contemplating this landscape as it scrolls by him – but for me he is a vessel of all this experience." (Gladwell, 2011).

## THE LANCASTER BOMBER

Lancaster G for Georgie is on permanent display in the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, and a popular public exhibit. The World War Two heavy bomber flew ninety operational missions over Germany and occupied Europe during the height of the European bomber offensive. From the time it was built in 1942, until its retirement from active service in 1944, the Lancaster was flown by No. 460 Squadron RAAF (when in Britain). On retirement from active war service, G for George had completed more operations than almost any other aircraft in RAF Bomber Command. In 1944 after an extensive overhaul the Lancaster was flown to Australia. In 1945 G for George toured the eastern states of Australia as a promotional push for the Third Victory Loan, at the end being declared operational surplus and loaned to the Australian War Memorial. Sadly, the plane languished in the open air at a Canberra RAAF Base and then was positioned on public display at the Australian War Memorial in 1955. The Australian War Memorial undertook a major restoration in 1991 and G for George now forms part of the Striking by Night display. As the offensive over Europe gathered momentum, the Lancaster was Air Vice Marshall "Bomber" Harris work horse aircraft for the campaign. The versatility of the Lancaster was such that it was chosen to equip 617 Squadron and modified to carry the Barnes Wallis designed Upkeep "Bouncing bomb" for Operation Chastise, often celebrated attack on the industrial German Ruhr Valley dams. The Lancaster was also adapted to carry the Wallis 12,000 lb (5,400 kg) Tallboy and the 22,000 lb (10,000 kg) Grand Slam earthquake bombs, used against the V1 and V2 rocket launch site and Tirpitz Battleship. This was the largest payload of any bomber in the war. Operational Bomber Command flying was incredibly dangerous. Of the 125,000 crew

members who joined Bomber Command, 57,205 were killed. Meaning Bomber Command had a 46% death rate, making it the most perilous of the services during World War Two. Some 27,500 Australians joined the RAF via the Empire Training Scheme. The Lancaster carried seven crew members, with the great majority between the ages of 18 to 25.



Figure 2: G George Bomber, Australian War Memorial 148874

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Television identity James May when interviewing Cross comments that this box top of G for George coming into land with one engine aflame is ‘the best picture from his childhood’. One senses when watching May interview Cross that this meeting is for him a personal watershed moment. Cross’s Lancaster box top reeks of the vast dangers of the war time skies over Europe, a type of remembrance of the epic loneliness of the singular flak damaged bomber, struggling to make it home. The remaining three Rolls Royce Merlin engines would have been howling in rage as the pilot fought to land the bomber safely. We can hear in Cross painting the cascading clatter of emergency vehicles sounding across the airfield. Out of sight the ambulances are ready, and the fire trucks are racing alongside the incoming plane. For May this image (and for older baby boomer generation modellers) is “full of drama.” In the sky above we see another Lancaster pensively waiting to land, and an airman or ground crew officer is striding towards the runway, braced for disaster as the heavy bomber hurtles toward the tarmac. However, as Cross remarks to May on his harrowing imagery of the Lancaster

coming into land with engine aflame: “I think they’re going to make it, don’t you? The box top painting speaks of the great wartime books such as D.E. Charlwood *No Moon Tonight*, and Paul Brickhill’s 1951 *The Dam Busters* of 617 Squadron, Operation Chastise and bombing the Ruhr dams. The original Airfix plastic Lancaster model appeared in 1958, a time of the Cold War and the memory of the destructive London blitz and related tragedy would have been within horrifying memory. The Lancaster kit was beautifully crafted, most impressively the full-length bomb bay, conveyed a detailed mechanical production history. A similar story can be seen in the wheel doors and wells, which were a major step forward in terms of casting plastic model kit realism. Airfix produced a 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary version of the famous Dambuster Lancasters’ as part of its company celebrations.

For a modern audience more used to filmic imagery of formidable American transport planes flying out of Kabul packed with terrified Afghani civilians, suddenly now escaping refugees, the Cross Lancaster painting speaks of the tragedy of war. The dominant use of the Humbrol black paint scheme reflects the death and destruction caused by the carpet bombing that laid waste to Europe. It is a credit to Cross and his passionate belief in detail as perfection, that even after so long a time, these thoughts occur when viewing the box top artwork for Lancaster B1 at 1/72 scale. Cross’s box top artworks are not the romantic daring do visual of the W. E. Johns *Biggles* First World War themed book covers. They do convey the extreme detail of Howard Leigh prints of First world war planes. For Cross the reality of the drama is built, established and foundational within his highly detailed reproduction of the Lancaster physical stature. The Lancaster engine is on fire, the three other Roll Royce Merlins would be at full power with the pilot straining at the control joystick to keep the bomber stable. The subtle blurring of the runway lights with the sheen of incandescent yellow, an ambiguous luminescent beauty, reflecting up to the Lancaster undercarriage. The Lancaster single engine spewing red flame, alongside two torchlight holes of intense white, perhaps flak hits. The airfield control tower beckoning to the pilot the safety and security of coming home to England. All surrounded by a yellowing sky imbued with the romance of a distant frightening history. We are left with a forbidding sense of May’s exuberant drama, but also the cost of war. Cross’s use of the palette of darkening pastels, gives a spectacle of the power, domination, and destruction of the allied air campaign. Cross’s box top Lancaster painting goes beyond mere illustration to evoke the true human tragedy of war. G for George contributes to the understanding of the creative canonical history of warfare and of the modern and contemporary genre art periods that reflect upon the dark times of World War Two.

## SPITFIRE

The Supermarine Spitfire will be forever synonymous with the Battle of Britain, England and the White Cliffs of Dover. The Spitfire has come to define an era of courage, back against the wall unwillingness to accept defeat, Douglas Bader and the other heroes fighting the tyrannical push of Nazism against the stand-alone democracy of England. A supreme killing machine, with destruction it's only aim, the Spitfire was the only fighter to remain in production during the entirety of the Second world war. Airfix introduced the Spitfire model in 1955, a time when the Spit’s high pitched engine reverberation and dog fight vapour trails twisting and diving above London, the River Thames, the East End and English countryside would still have been vivid recollection. Cross painted several Spitfire’s Box top lids during

his decade at Airfix, with the 1/32 scale model being his favourite. He also illustrated in collaboration with Gerald Scarborough the first book for Airfix on the Spitfire titled *Spitfire Classic aircraft No. 1 Their history and how to model them*.



Figure 3: Spitfire, Australian War Memorial 003926

Airfix still makes the Spitfire with Cross imagery on the box top cover. A particular Airfix customer favourite is the classic modeller start kit at 1/72 scale that includes glue, or in modellers language, cement, paints and brush. You can also buy the Airfix Spitfire kit in 1/48 scale, a boxed dogfight double with legendary foe the Messerschmitt Bf109e, painted in civilian post war colours and the quick build kit for children 5 plus.

The Spitfire box top artwork by Cross showcases what made it such a potent and lethal killing instrument. We clearly see the refined elliptical wing that reduces wind drag, increased speed and gave the fighter an iconic visual design. Add to this eight wing mounted machine guns with a capacity for 16 seconds of continuous firepower, a Rolls-Royce Merlin V12 liquid-cooled piston engine and bubble-style cockpit enabling excellent pilot all-round vision and we have the qualities that epitomize the destructive capability of this legendary Second World War fighter plane. The modern multipurpose jet fighter bomber is more a missile launch platform, and vastly different to the Spitfire. Today's contemporary jet fighter weapon does not need to sight the adversary, rockets and missiles can be launched using over the horizon radar and a multitude of other technology receivers and electronic digital countermeasure systems.

## THE HORNET

Peter Churcher's *Hornet on Flightline at Night, Diego Garcia, 2002*, gives testimony to the sleek firepower these high-tech machines can deliver as a potent weapon. Much like Cross Spitfire fighter renditions, Churcher's Hornet speaks of a new war, one based within the latest technology that utilises exceptional design as weaponry. Churcher was commissioned as an Australian War Artist in 2002 and was assigned to document the role of Australian forces in the International Coalition against Terrorism. He worked at the US Military base of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. The RAAF had four F/A 18 Hornet fighters, two PC Long range maritime aircraft, as well as associated ground staff at Diego Garcia to offer support to the US forces. Churcher was able to sight Australian piloted FA/18s as they flew into and returned from battle in the First Gulf War. He preferred to work in the early morning, away from the intense heat of the day. *Hornet on the Frontline* depicts a new, but just as brutal Cross interpretation of war at its maximum potential. The F/A-18 Hornets are multi-role fighter aircraft, capable of air-to-air combat and air-to-ground bombing missions. The F/A-18 includes in its arsenal the AIM-120 AMRAAM missile, giving it deadly Beyond-Visual Range (BVR) sight capability.

Churcher's *Hornet* depicts the plane being serviced by a ground crew member, ready to launch another airstrike. The inclusion of a ground crew member gives evidence to the physical size of the plane, in the process humanising the vehicle as being flown by a person. Here remember Cross use of the striding peak capped officer as Lancaster G for George came hurtling in to land. The ground crew member gives human scale to both paintings, whilst also alluding to the emotive cost of war. The inclusion of a ground crew member also gives acknowledgment of the often behind the scenes overlooked work required for these killing platforms to deliver payloads of destruction. In the process Churcher's *Hornet* specifically contributes towards the public understanding of the reality of contemporary warfare, as being purely more than the Top Gun cinematic scenario. In the background, reminiscent of Cross's Lancaster box top, we see American B52 bombers waiting to land.

Australian artist Lewis Miller also painted the FA/18 when deployed to the second Iraq War in 2003. Miller spent three weeks in Iraq, the Persian Gulf and Qatar. Interestingly his father an art teacher, enlisted in the air force during World War Two, serving in Darwin and Borneo. Miller was present when the last FA/18 Hornet returned to base, ending the Australian air operation in Baghdad. *Return of the Last FA/18, 2003* is a poignant reminder that the air war is conducted by these beautifully sleek, incredibly fast, well-designed human directed weapons platforms. Miller's watercolor and pencil on paper harps back to Streeton's earlier World War One Re8 biplane artwork. The connectivity between the artists and the ease, with which the drawing mediums can be used, resonates across time. Miller, like Churcher found working in the Middle East high temperatures demanding, with his gouache paints dried before he could use them and the gum in his solid blocks of watercolour melted. Miller, unlike Cross, utilises minimal brush strokes in his watercolours. He does in a very similar manner to Cross Spitfire box tops, produce a superb sense of the weight and power of the contemporary multipurpose Hornet fighter.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion the Airfix box top artworks by Roy Cross deliver in a Covid-19 era a significant commentary on community social interaction and nostalgic memory. In an era characterised by mass production the Airfix model harks back to a time of handcrafted artisanship, a materially grounded reality that is becoming more and more distant. The artworks of Roy Cross deliver in the Covid -19 era a natural place within all scholarship that makes claims of critical rigour and contemporary relevance. Cross box top paintings remind us of nostalgia, intertwined with the physical of making. The outcome being for lovers of artistic creativity and model makers an historical materialism, representative of objects of value, construed in the mythology of the modern and an extraordinary detail that engages with a critical redemptive practice. A creative conduit that captures realistic canonised histories. The Airfix box tops of Roy Cross represent modernity at a standstill, within a mechanised model making stimuli.

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