

Picasso's fury screams out still

VISUAL ARTS

THE GUERNICA TAPESTRY
Whitechapel Gallery, London
★★★★★

Welcome back! Picasso's *Guernica*, that supremely sombre evocation of the destructive powers of war, first went on show at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1939, after it had been exhibited in Paris. The painting, a commemoration of the destruction of the village of Guernica by Franco's forces, had been made by Picasso in his Paris studio in 1937, in a furious outpouring of pity and anger.

Now, a version of *Guernica* is back at the Whitechapel, as part of an installation by Goshka Macuga, to mark the gallery's reopening after refurbishment. This is not the painting you'd have seen in 1939; that one is permanently installed at Madrid's Reina Sofia Museum, too fragile to travel.

In some respects, the installation at the Whitechapel is more impressive than what can be seen in Madrid. In London you approach it face-on, and you can get up really close. In Madrid, you come at it side-on, like a listing ship. There is no way you can walk directly back a pace or two to take in the enormity of the terrible message.

The other advantage is that this version is not so colourful. It is woven in tones of brown, cream and black, which adds a strange intensity. Look at the original, and you experience a near-riot of movement and agitation. Nothing stops. Everything seems to be decomposing before our eyes. Arms reach out. Hands claw at nothing. A disembodied head floats. Mouths yawn in inaudible screams. The heads of mythic beasts skew violently.

And we – the merest we – approach this monumental distillation of human suffering like petty-minded voyeurs. We are suddenly plunged into the midst of it, all this jaggedness, all this laceration, all this falling apart. And the colour seems to add a horrible decorative gaiety to the scene. Strip it of

most of that colour, as here, and you have scarified it to the bone.

At the Whitechapel, you approach it along a blue carpet. It's close to the

blue of the UN, where the tapestry usually hangs. It is here to remind us of that moment in 2003 when some goon ordered that it be covered up because Colin Powell was about to deliver a speech in support of the invasion of Iraq. Did Picasso's minotaur rage back in the muffled dark? Or did Powell just dream that later?

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Tapestry of terror: the 'Guernica' on show at the Whitechapel TOM DULAT/UPPA/PHOTOSHOT

