

## David Cotterrell: Art Monthly : War and Medicine

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War and Medicine surveys the relationship between warfare and medical practice since the Crimean War. It is a history of the visual culture of war as much as a chronicle of specialised medical and scientific equipment, advances in hospital design, and new paradigms for the evacuation and treatment of the wounded. Florence Nightingale's celebrated and effective 'coxcomb' graph demonstrated how her intervention in the care and treatment of sick and wounded soldiers dramatically reduced the mortality rate. So skilful was Nightingale's use of visual aids that she has been mistakenly credited as the originator of the bar graph. Gilbert Rogers' painting, *Stretcher Bearers of the Royal Army Medical Corps, 1919*, pictures in the style of a deposition of Christ the transport of the wounded in the trenches of the Great War. (The art historian Stephen Eisenman made the same point recently in a study of the notorious Abu Ghraib photographs.) There is poster art produced during the Second World War by that master of graphic design, Abram Games. Remarkable colour photographs by Percy Hennell, taken between 1939 and 1945, document the outcome of maxillofacial reconstructive surgery on British soldiers and civilians. These are astonishingly poignant and dreadful portraits; no surprise, then, that Francis Bacon turned to similar images to find inspiration for his voyeuristic confections of modern angst.

Medicine is just beginning to take seriously the privileged relation between doctor and patient on battlefield, in field hospital or prison camp. The ethical dilemma faced by doctors and nurses in the military is part of the focus of this exhibition. Yet artists, too, have played a role in the documentation and visualisation of war and are prone to consider the same question: what am I doing here? The exhibition punctuates the narrative of relentless death, maiming and general brutality with specially commissioned works by contemporary artists, such as David Cotterrell and Shona Illingworth. Commissioned by the Wellcome Trust and supported by the Ministry of Defence, Cotterrell was flown to Helmand Province in a military transport plane along with other service personnel. Everything about the experience, according to Cotterrell, was foreign and awesome; from the advance training in survival to the blackout flight to the medical unit. As we learn from published extracts of Cotterrell's diary, nothing can prepare you for the actuality of war. The privileged position of the non-combatant witness to war is part of our culture; the subject of art born of war, however, seems more difficult to pin down.

Cotterrell's first-hand knowledge of the situation in frontline medical units will remain alien to most of us. But his conclusion is not difficult to grasp: 'the incongruity between what I had seen and what was presented as the public face of conflict was, and continues to be, profound and irreconcilable.' In many ways, Cotterrell's narrative is far more vivid than the artwork that emerges from the situation. The images produced by Cotterrell do not seem to embrace the same sentiments voiced by the man. At first glance, it is not clear how such commissioned work could incorporate doubt without risking failure. Quite deliberately, Cotterrell refused to force the issue and remains content to frame his photography - reproduced in the catalogue and on view at the Danielle Arnaud Gallery - in the language of 'aesthetic distance'. Cotterrell's panoramic video installation on view at War and Medicine is, in fact, a film of a training exercise; a simulated environment constructed by the military.

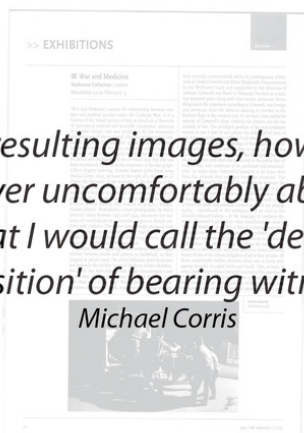
It is rare for artists to be given the opportunity to get so close to the action. The artist working away from the frontline may luxuriate in the sublime and pose questions about the awful beauty of war or the ethical obligation of art to bear witness. All these comfortable buffers dissolve when one is faced with gaping wounds, mangled limbs and death. This, at least, is what I have learned from Cotterrell's account of his experience. The resulting images, however, hover uncomfortably

about what I would call the 'default position' of bearing witness. Like the subjects of Cotterrell's video and photography, the artist does what he or she is trained to do because there is no time to do anything else. Documentary photographers and military doctors have this in common: in the heat of battle or when the chopper delivers the wounded, you immerse yourself in your job. The time for reflection is later, when one is faced with the problem of making this material public.

We cannot help but applaud the efforts of doctors and nurses who save life and limb; yet it is worth remembering just how contradictory the roles of doctors, nurses (and chaplains) in the military are. In her splendid catalogue essay, 'Suffering and the Healing Profession: The Experience of Military Medicine in the First and Second World Wars', Joanne Bourke argues that military medicine was more 'military' than 'medicine': 'medicine did not simply serve the military, but was crucial in actually defining and expanding military power so that the armed forces could control and direct the emotional as well as the material lives of its recruits with greater effectiveness.' In the face of total war, there is little room for introspection and doubt. The military initiative in Afghanistan is something different, even if some are of the opinion that it is justified. Cotterrell's diaristic remarks find common ground with some of the accounts written by medical professionals involved in the aftermath of armed conflicts of the past. The overwhelming expression shared by all is one of disorientation, shock and confusion.

War is tragedy without nuance, whereas the representation of war is a sophisticated and complex fixture of most cultures. Warfare is considered to be one of the great crucibles of human values and is presented as such in works as diverse as *The Iliad* and *The Deer Hunter*. We have had our imperialist wars and our 'just' wars; our wars against aggression and terrorism. In the context of the just war, attributes of the victorious in battle become the touchstone for conduct in civil society. But with a recent historical legacy of so many ill-considered military campaigns, one wonders what values emerge. Can the trauma of questionable military misadventure also be a resource for art? Where it has been, in some cases the results are as disturbing and conflicting as the counter-intuitive process of battlefield triage. What 'War and Medicine' does reveal spectacularly well is the dilemma that awaits the artist when the focus of attention is the saving of human life framed by the unremitting savaging of human life.

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