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Once were witnesses

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Faced with the tedium and waste of war, two artists found a tragedy far more terrible than they could have imagined, writes Andrew Stephens.

LYNDELL Brown went up in a Chinook helicopter in Afghanistan last year. It was not a place this artist ever imagined being. She was hurtling low and fast through Helmand province, in Taliban country. From the jump seat, behind the pilots, she saw poppy fields, Afghans and even the fear in the eyes of the goats. She was that close.

They call this the "theatre of war". Brown — in body armour, cameras around her neck — had a front seat.

Behind her, a documentary photographer was strapped to the open-air ramp. The strategy for the Australian military, says Brown, is to fly about 15 metres off the ground, which helps to avoid rocket-propelled grenades. "That was quite intense," she says. "A two-hour mission to this outpost."

Brown and her husband and artistic collaborator, Charles Green, might at first seem unlikely candidates as official war artists, "embedded" with the Australian Defence Force. In an essay about the experience, they write these were astounding circumstances for "two latte-loving, inner-city vegetarian elitist artists" who are "profoundly anti-war".

Along with many, many thousands of other Melburnians, I was at the mammoth anti-Iraq invasion rally at Federation Square in February 2003, when the absurd phrase "war on terror" was still fresh to the ear. Imagining that art might one day come out of the looming, frightening conflict seemed impossible, much less that such art might be enriching.

For many of us, the words "war" and "art" seem mutually exclusive. To think of war artists and war art perhaps conjures restrictive images: hard-bitten colonial types out for a piece of the action, sketching in the field and returning with paintings and drawings that glorify battle and military hardware; or dull portraiture of grey generals plastered with medals.

But as any of the million visitors each year to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra will testify, the art of war is neither so simple, propagandist nor hardline. It can be moving, full of pathos and horror. It can even be gentle. At the memorial, for example, visitors can see Arthur Streeton's lovely *The Somme valley near Corbie*, painted in 1919. It looks at first to be a pleasant rural landscape. Yet there in the background is an artillery barrage. Streeton, who lobbied for the establishment of an Australian war art scheme before his appointment in 1918, wrote to Tom Roberts at the time that true pictures of battlefields are "very quiet looking things" with "nothing much to be seen". Our expected scenes of explosive battle only occur in the mind of those who have never been there, he said.

CNN, YouTube and the World War II, Korea and Vietnam films that have flooded out of Hollywood have brought war images much closer for civilians, vigorously shaping perceptions. Even so, such imagery emphasises constant action. In the art of Brown and Green, the results are wholly different: stillness and the "quiet looking things" of Streeton strongly characterise their work, yet there is much to be seen.

Their paintings and photographs, made after a six-week tour of Afghanistan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf are, like their other work, complex and layered but much more firmly grounded in direct representation of what they saw amid a "symphony of gravel, sand, dust and bomb-blast barricades". In some ways, they resemble grand 18th-century landscapes, carefully composed and steeped in one of war's overwhelming yet little-documented qualities: the state of interminable waiting.

For that is what happens in war — soldiers, planes, choppers and aircraft-carriers wait in camps, bases and seas for the next burst of activity, the next stage in an illusion of one side or the other gaining control.

The more you look at the Brown and Green works — and they are paintings that invite lengthy gazing — the more you see. An ancient ziggurat that looks remarkably like a chunk of a defence installation; a car in the far distance that might be an explosive booby-trap; a military surgeon whose face speaks of compassion tempered by great, deep weariness.

What on earth is war *about*?

Like many others approached by the Australian War Memorial asking them to become official war artists, Brown and Green were reluctant to take it on. "We thought 'we don't want to die; art is not worth dying for'," says Green. They thought, too, that it would be about "gung-ho and adventurism", with "explosions, bodies, whatever". Really, who *would* want to be in central Baghdad these days, on a battleship in the Gulf or on a military base in bin Laden territory, wearing khakis and a brassard on the upper arm saying "Official Artist"?

Melbourne artist Jon Cattapan, asked to be an official war artist in East Timor under peacekeeping troops, was also not keen to go, thinking he "wasn't the right sort of artist". He took more than two years to come around to the idea. "Once I'd committed to the idea of doing it, I was pretty delighted with the way it was handled," he says, having visited for two weeks in March.

The memorial's scheme has been operating in various forms since 1917. War artists are quite distinct from official documenters and archivists. Even George Lambert's famous painting *ANZAC, the landing 1915* was not a mere transcription. It was a vibrant imagining, coloured by the passage of time: Lambert, I am surprised to discover, was not even at the landing and first visited the Gallipoli site four years later. He made the painting in 1922. It is his own perception of events, as described to him by others.

The war memorial's curator, Warwick Heywood, says that from the outset, the scheme's curators have had an emphasis on war artists having freedom to express their own artistic points of view. "They were aware that art would bring something else, a different perspective from a written document; that it could capture sensations, men's fatigue, or whatever," he says.

Brown and Green were commissioned to produce paintings. Their established method involves intensive photography followed by detailed, time-consuming painting, which they do together (they consider themselves a single artist).

For their stint as war artists, they took thousands of photos that they intended to use only as references for the paintings (soldiers kept asking where their paints were). But in the end, the photographs were so compelling they have formed a separate but closely linked body of work to the paintings — three large canvases and sets of smaller paintings. Both groups of works are displayed in a travelling exhibition, now at Melbourne University's Ian Potter Museum of Art.

"Everyone assumed we'd be totally opposed to the Iraq war, given our demographic profile," says Green. "But the military never had any problems with that. They just assumed that we would behave responsibly and not start waving anti-war placards."

While Brown and Green weren't neutral about the Iraq and Afghan wars, they felt strongly that being bombastic doesn't convince anyone. They wanted to make art that would be paradoxical and situated in the history of art "as an irritant", says Brown. "We know that we are risking being misread as apolitical formalists — but we think the subtlety, for the sensitive viewer, will pay off in terms of the richness of layering.

"We felt we had to work with such a light touch with this subject matter. It's so heavy and so intense and fraught, that we didn't want people to be told what to think. We're not interested in didactic propaganda."

Take a look, for example, at the large canvas called *History painting: market, Tarin Kowt, Uruzgan province, Afghanistan*.

Green says: "We really wanted this sense that if you take off the uniforms, put on some classical sandals and togas, you could be in some classical narrative from Poussin. We were so aware of the painters who came before us, being part of the trajectory of history."

Brown describes the elaborate, staged feel to the arrangement of figures in this painting, at the centre of which is a Dutch film crew interviewing a soldier.

"There's also this meta-narrative of contemporary warfare and how it is so much about packaging and representation."

The recurring characteristic they noticed — and have infused into their paintings — is the "lack of agency", where the might of the military machine rolls on, with soldiers, civilians, militants and the narrative of history caught in its cogs. Within this, says Green, there is an illusion of "we can do good, we can make a difference", which prevents a recognition of the profound tragic ramifications of the wars in progress.

Even so, while inside the "green zone" in Baghdad, on naval vessels in the Gulf and in military bases in Afghanistan, they were impressed by the ADF staff they dealt with. "We had never met soldiers before and we were amazed by how low-key and professional they were, disciplined and unpretentious, but how skilled and committed to doing the best they could do," they say.

Nevertheless, having seen the military in operation in the Iraq and Afghan wars, they use phrases such as "the limitations of power", "the confronting vastness", the "catastrophic mismanagement" by the US and a "holding game where nothing matters". They quote from *The Iliad*, in which there are no heroes, for they are all turned to dust.

"If anything, it was more tragic than we'd ever have thought, vast in the waste," writes Green in his essay. There was "overwhelming entropy, which we all like to call history". There was the imagery of *Mad Max* but *Mad Max* after September 11, 2001. And there was the military's "vast, unbelievable processes" — the tragic processes of "controlled violence".

This terrible might, and its profound sadness, is seen in one of their photographs of a dusty, monster-sized ADF vehicle in southern Iraq. Across its chassis, soldiers have scrawled the words "Road to nowhere".

***Framing conflict: Iraq and Afghanistan* is at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, Swanston Street, until February 1.**

www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au

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