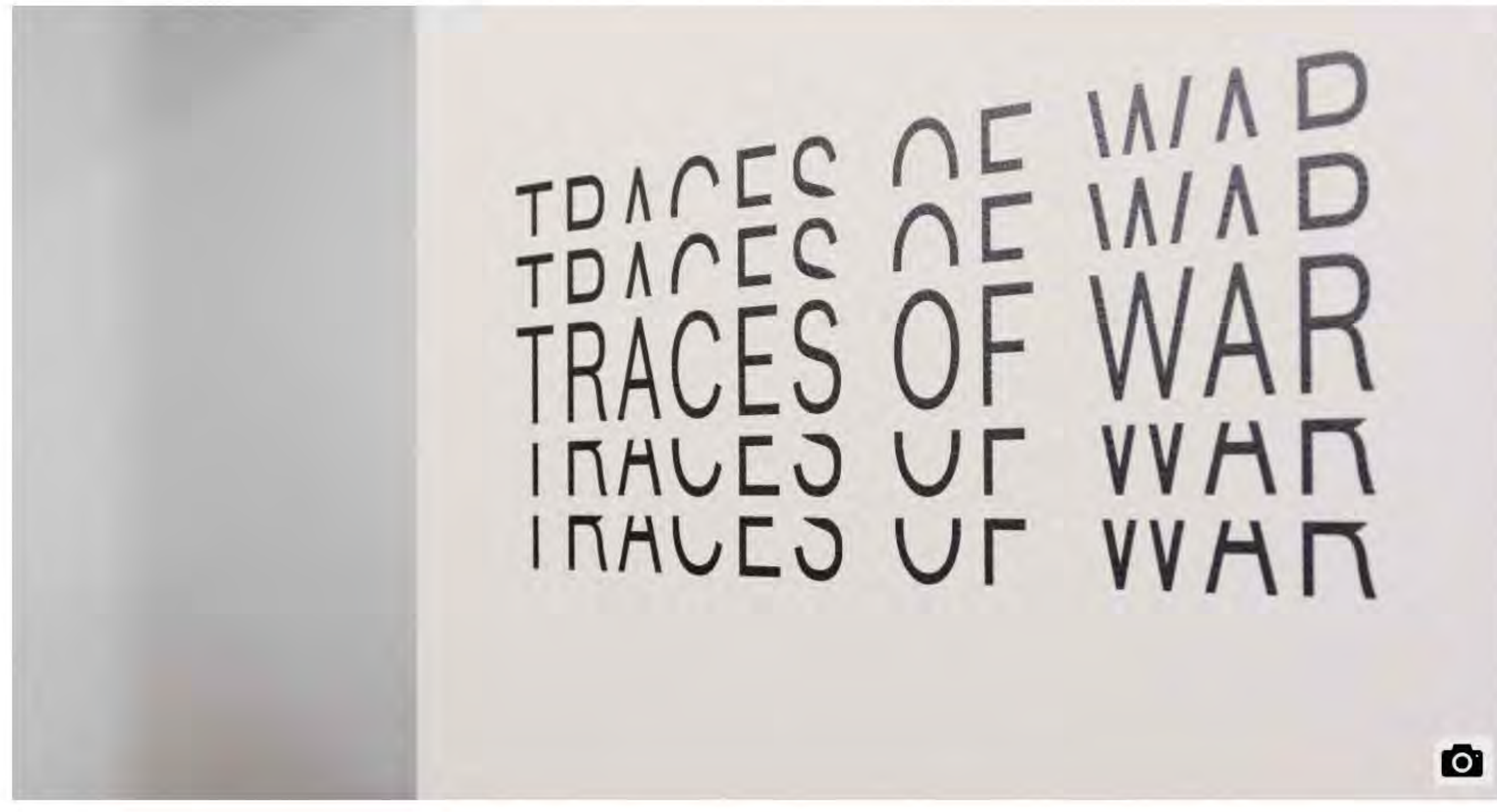


Traces of War

 Art on display  See 11 more




A new collaboration between the Department of War Studies at King's College London and three internationally renowned artists explores the 'everydayness' of war. What is left of war if you strip it of the actual fighting?

Every day, our newspapers and television screens are awash with images of war. Even for those thousands of miles from the front lines, war is present in our everyday lives. The motif of the battle scene is one of the oldest throughout art history, from Roman mosaics displaying the defeat of Darius III of Persia, to Diego Velazquez's 'The Surrender of Breda' in the 17th century and Pablo Picasso's 'Guernica'.

The artists displaying their work at a new exhibition at King's College London, entitled 'Traces of War', have found another approach to engage with the darkest expressions of man's heart. Jananne Al-Ani, Baptist Coelho and Shaun Gladwell explore the paradoxical dynamic of war and 'the everyday', locating conflict in spaces where it is least expected, capturing its agony. Working primarily with photography, film and multimedia installations all three find their very own vantage point, reimagining the mundanities of war, exposing that there is no such thing as leaving battle behind.

Among the first casualties of war is the relationship between soldiers and their loved ones. Baptist Coelho, a Mumbai-based artist and current Leverhulme Artist in Residence at the Department of War Studies, King's College London, explores conflict through the gateways of communication between soldiers and their families.



 'Beneath it all... I am human...'. King's College London

The installation 'Blueys', a term referring to letters from the frontline written on blue paper, displays the handwritten correspondence of a British soldier with his family during the 2003 Iraq War. The artist juxtaposes the personal and emotional language of the letters with the hard, basic Arabic vocabulary handed to soldiers to communicate with locals whilst at the front, illustrating the inner cleft the fighter faces.

Reading the letters in the exhibition, audiences are exposed to sounds playing out the sharpness of the desert wind, a keyboard clicking and the breaking news tone of the BBC app, creating an ambience of despair. "For a span of two to three months, the family of the soldiers were prohibited from any communication with their families. The BBC therefore became the only line to see what was happening to their husband and father, they were stuck to the TV, it was their way of communicating with the soldier," Mr. Coelho tells *The World Weekly*. To the artist the letters represent an aspect of truth, "but to create an artwork, does not mean to believe in it, it is about challenging the narratives. How much truth lies in the exchange of proof? How much truth lies in the experience of war?"

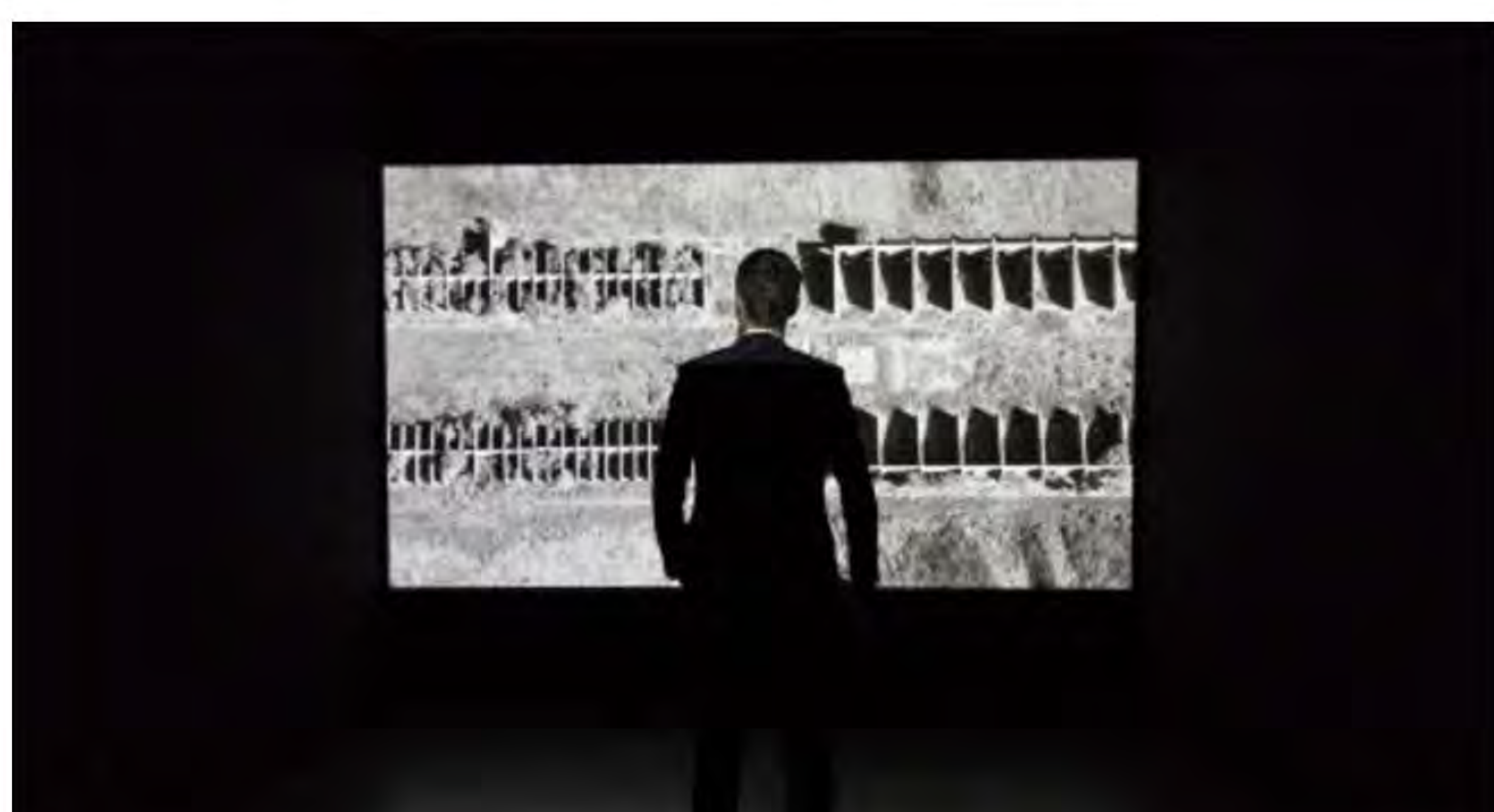
A further contribution by Mr. Coelho is 'Beneath it all... I am human...' a film showing a body at wrapped in high altitude military gear - used in the conflicts between India and Pakistan at altitudes as high as 18,000ft at the top of the disputed Siachen Glacier - then slowly repeatedly, piece-by-piece taking off jackets and boots and gloves. "Zipping and unzipping almost turned into a ceremony. I believe that we are all born as pacifists; the structure makes us become warriors. Beneath all these layers is a human," reflects Baptist Coelho.




 'Double Field / Viewfinder' was commissioned by the Australian War Memorial. King's College London

The 'everydayness' of war has different implications for Australia's former official war artist in Afghanistan from 2009-2010. Shaun Gladwell's approach to war is shaped by his upbringing; his grandfather served in World War II, his father in Vietnam. "So my decision to become a war artist meant quite a turn," Mr. Gladwell says. As an artist he uses his camera to destabilise time and space, shifting perspectives. In a dual-video installation he juxtaposes two soldiers filming, as if shooting each other in a stand-off, turning around each other in the heat of the Afghan desert with the camera. 'Double Field / Viewfinder' was commissioned by the Australian War Memorial. Military gear worn by the soldiers and a tank rolling past disturbs the calmness and almost playfulness of the setting, never letting the viewer forget a war zone.

'AR 15 Field Strip', a 360 degree video brought to the viewer through a virtual reality headset and earphones immerses audiences in what looks like a cluttered urban basement, accompanied only by a blindfolded soldier kneeling on the floor repeatedly disassembling and assembling a military rifle. Again the everydayness of the setting is disturbed by the presence of conflict, the kneeling man's face is covered with a long beard, embodying the encounter between 'the other' and 'the self' within oneself.



 'Black Powder Peninsular', video footage imitating modern warfare. King's College London

Another series, by Iraqi-born artist Jananne Al-Ani, grapples with the experience of war through the medium of aerial shots. The stills displayed are taken from her film 'Shadow Sites II'. The video footage taken by a drone takes the viewer on an aerial journey, revealing evidence of human occupation in a landscape historically represented as void of civilisation throughout 19th century Orientalist painting as well as during 1991's Desert Storm campaign and the 2003 Iraq War.

The landscape, which is presented as void of bodies, is continued in the video installation produced for 'Traces of War' called 'Black Powder Peninsular', a drone flyover of northern Kent's Curtis and Harvey explosives factory at Cliffe, a World War I munitions factory, and the ruins of Palmerston Forts, built in the second half of the 19th century to defend against invaders, in the Medway estuary. Taking the point of view of a drone allows for a new perspective on Western and Middle Eastern landscapes, showing the imprint of conflict and the ghost of Britain's imperial past.

The theme running through the entire exhibition is captivating but constricting; war permeates 'the everyday', leaving traces through time and space, repeating itself.

Traces of War is on show at Kings College London, Inigo Rooms, Somerset House East Wing, until 18 December 2016.

Daisy Schoenaich-Carolath

 INSIGHT  27 October 2016 - last edited 27 October 2016



AMERICAN EXPRESS

about our sponsor