

The Ruptured Portrait

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In winter 2006, on a blacked-out sound stage in Manhattan, the actor and producer James Gandolfini interviewed eight men and two women who had survived life-threatening injuries in Iraq. Timothy Greenfield-Sanders' portraits of two of Gandolfini's subjects – Dawn Halfaker and Michael Jernigan – can be seen in this exhibition. Ranging in age from 21 to 41, the ten interviewees recount in detail the events that resulted in blindness, amputation, brain injury, facial reconstruction and Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Their testimonies are interspersed with home movies and personal photographs as well as video footage



Timothy Greenfield-Sanders
Dawn Halfaker 2006

taken in Iraq: some of it filmed on vehicle-mounted cameras used in combat missions; some of it taken by embedded American journalists and some of it released by Iraqi insurgents following similar IED (Improvised Explosive Device) attacks. The resulting documentary, *Alive Day Memories*, was broadcast on HBO between September 9 and 16, 2007, coinciding with the six-year anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York. In his review of the programme, the historian Fred Turner noted that *Alive Day Memories* brought American viewers face to face with 'a kind of suffering that the George W. Bush administration has worked hard to make invisible.'¹

An 'alive day' is the day you escape death, but the real subject of the film is not the human cost of war. Instead, to quote Gandolfini, it is 'honor, duty, loyalty to your country.'² And the appropriate response to such profound acts of patriotism is not political, the film implies, it is emotional (and also medical, a point to which we will return).³ Dawn Halfaker, whose right arm and shoulder were amputated following a grenade attack, wonders if her child – if she ever has one – will love her as she is. Gandolfini waits in silence as her face clouds with emotion. 'What were you thinking just then?' he asks gently. 'I won't be able to pick up my son or daughter with two arms and hold them,' she replies.

Michael Jernigan refused, at first, to believe he had lost his sight in the IED explosion that

killed his friend. As he pulled the bandages from his face, it was his wife who broke the news that he was blind. In the interview he tells Gandolfini that he has eight prosthetic eyes to choose from for his right socket (his left is too scarred to hold an artificial eye), but his favourite is blue and set with the diamonds from his wedding band. His marriage was another casualty of the war in Iraq: when the relationship ended, he asked the oculist at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Washington DC, to set the diamonds in an eye. 'You know you put that eye in,' he says, 'you know that's the eye with the diamonds, and it kind of makes you think back to how it has truly affected your emotional life long-term.' Jernigan's prosthesis is more than an artificial part: it is a bitter embodiment of what he has lost, a testimonial object that connects the past with the present.

Jernigan grew up watching movies about Vietnam, such as *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). The real thing is different, though: there is no glory, he says, 'getting shot at is not fun.' His face, voice and gestures betray little emotion, but he speaks frankly about the psychological fall-out from his time in Iraq. 'It's not normal to sit there and kill somebody,' he explains, 'especially if you do it up close and personal, and see that person die. You know, that's going to change you, that's going to affect you mentally for the rest of your life. You're always going to know that you could do it, and it takes a huge toll on you.'⁴ It is impossible not to be moved by what Halfaker, Jernigan and the other interviewees describe: to marvel at their courage, honesty and conviction. But we also need to ask how their stories shape our personal and cultural understanding of war and patriotism. Whether tragic or celebratory, the rhetorical and visual 'frames of war' serve to 'organize visual experience' and mobilize affect.⁵ To a significant extent, modes of representation (from reportage to medical illustration, painting

to installation art) determine what we see and, perhaps more importantly, what we feel. They choreograph our senses, our horror and our pity. Was it not always so?

Showing Suffering

In early twentieth-century Britain, depictions of the war-damaged body tended to conform to familiar Christian motifs of heroic sacrifice that denied the ugly reality of mutilation and death on the battlefield. Photographs of the dead and wounded did find their way into circulation – despite the best efforts of the censors – but it was mass-produced prints like *The Great Sacrifice* that most people would have seen. Sold for a shilling with the Christmas 1914 issue of *The Graphic*, the picture, recalled the chaplain Geoffrey Gordon, was at one time 'to be seen in every shop window.' For him, the image triggered memories of the carnage he witnessed:

Like the young lad in the picture, the man whom I saw die had a bullet wound in the temple, but there the likeness ceased. Here was no calm death, but



The Great Sacrifice
reproduced in *The Graphic* Christmas 1914

a ghastly mess of blood and brains and mud, on his face and in the surrounding trench; and in the stark horror of the moment I could not see the Crucified at all.⁶

Henry Tonks' *Saline Infusion* 1915 (p.90) shows how subtly this traditional vocabulary of suffering and salvation could be deployed. Drawn in 1915 at the Red Cross hospital in Arc-en-Barrois in northern France, the composition is arranged like a Descent from the Cross: the cross now a metal bed; the instruments of the Passion replaced by surgical instruments, the needle and line of the saline drip highlighted in the same red chalk that outlines the wounded soldier's torso and neck. A nurse stands in the shadows like a ministering angel. One doctor attends to an abdominal wound – a scalpel or perhaps a suturing needle in his hand – while another restrains and reassures the patient whose muscles are taught with pain. In the foreground a large, white enamelled bowl – a modern-day baptismal font – completes the arrangement. Exhibited later the same year, the central figure was described by Sir Claude Phillips as a 'magnificent young Hercules,' a 'splendid nude torso.' Like many depictions of the Passion, however, the Christ figure is both heroic and vulnerable. The tension between his classical



John Hodgson Lobley
The Toy-Makers' Shop c.1918

Herculean appeal and his palpable suffering has everything to do with Tonks' handling of his materials, the sinuous chalk and blush of blended pastel that invite our vicarious touch.

Tonks is better known today for his portraits of First World War servicemen with facial wounds, now in the collections of the Royal College of Surgeons and University College, London. The setting for much of Pat Barker's novel *Toby's Room*, The Queen's Hospital in Sidcup employed a number of artists and plaster-casting specialists to record the advances being made in the fledgling medical discipline of plastic surgery. The hospital's workshops – where the patients could learn new skills like carpentry and toy-making in preparation for their return to civilian life – can be seen in John Lobley's paintings for the Royal Army Medical Corps. In the foreground of *The Toy-Makers' Shop* c.1918 is a winsome woolly-plush monkey astride a pile of stuffing. Scenes like this contrast sharply with the more conventionally heroic representation of amputees in the British press and propaganda.

A volunteer in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), Private Kearsley was operated on six times between November 1917 and April 1919 for wounds caused by fragments from an exploding shell. The difficulty of producing 'live' surgical diagrams in these circumstances is summed up by another artist who was posted to Sidcup and mentored by Tonks, the Australian artist Daryl Lindsay. Of his first operation, Lindsay recalled: 'how was I going to translate what looked like a mess of flesh and blood into a diagram that a student could understand?'⁷ These are, quite literally, ruptured portraits: shocking not only because of the injuries they record, but because the wounds look so incongruous, rendered delicately in watercolour or pastel, and seen in the context of an otherwise perfectly ordinary face. For Tonks, drawing was essentially tactile: it should, he told his students at the Slade School of Art, convey an 'idea of touch.'⁸

He makes it possible to imagine touching these torn and shattered faces without horror or revulsion.

The Sensory War also includes six of the 77 portraits of patients in the New Zealand section by the illustrator Herbert R Cole. Born on the Isle of Wight, Cole emigrated with his family to New Zealand, returning to Britain to study art at the Slade. Although his watercolour portraits look somewhat cartoon-like alongside Tonks' more spontaneous drawings, their sensory effects and poetic ambiguities are just as interesting. Unlike pastel – which adheres to the surface of the paper and can be blended, smudged and re-worked with the fingers – watercolours seep, stain and bleed: effects that Cole has carefully controlled. His documentary intention is clear: like Lindsay, he wants us to be able to 'read' (rather than have to feel) the injuries depicted. Even the most horrific wounds, such as Private Greive's, have a flat, almost topographical quality. Having crossed the red expanse of raw flesh in the centre of the image, I find my eye drawn upwards to the soft curls of brown hair that Cole has described with the painterly economy of a practiced illustrator. Beneath the boundary line of the wound lie the gentle contours and plateaus of the patient's uninjured lower face. Cole demarcates and domesticates trauma.

Watercolour might seem too pretty or insubstantial a medium for depicting war, but prior to photography it had been used to capture both battlefield scenes and casualties (the surgeon Charles Bell's own record of injuries inflicted during the Battle of Waterloo demonstrates the versatility of the medium beautifully). Cole's Sidcup portraits give us no visual clues as to the patients' personalities or circumstances – although each is named and dated – but he records more than just the men's injuries. Private Green's carrot-red hair is painted with evident delight (and paired with an orange tie), while Private Harper's facial features and darker skin suggest Maori ancestry.



Henry Tonks
Private Kearsley 1918

That the Sidcup drawings and watercolours depict individuals – not types like the faceless figures in *Saline Infusion* – is obvious, and yet they are not conventional portraits. Portraits are expected to capture the sitter's character; these expose the essential fragility of the self. Facial mutilation was particularly dreaded because it deprived a man of the 'visible proof' of his humanity and identity. This was the theme of an article in the *Manchester Evening Chronicle* in the summer of 1918: 'The torturing knowledge of that loss, while it lasts, infects the man mentally,' the author ventures. 'He knows that he can turn on to grieving relatives or to wondering, inquisitive strangers only a more or less repulsive mask where there was once a handsome or welcome face.'⁹ It is possible that the men drawn and painted by medical artists such as Cole, Tonks and Lindsay never saw the drawings they produced. Mirrors were banned on facial wards and most of the drawings were never publicly exhibited. Sentiments of suffering and sacrifice could not accommodate disfigured veterans, who were erased from the public visual record of the war.

Today, images like these could not be made or shown without the patient's consent. As an audience, we should ponder what it means to look at them as 'war art'.

Prosthetic Bodies

The ideal of rehabilitating wounded and disabled soldiers has transformed the image of sacrifice over the past century. Timothy Greenfield-Sanders' portrait of Dawn Halfaker complicates this now-familiar rhetoric of repair and overcoming. A celebrity photographer best known for his contributions to *Vanity Fair*, Greenfield-Sanders was commissioned by HBO to produce the 13 portraits that appeared in the publicity for *Alive Day Memories*, on billboards and, through September 2007, as blowups displayed in the street-level windows of the Donnell Library across from MOMA in New York (where a free screening of the film was held). Marcia Vetrocq notes the photographer's trademark monochrome background and format. Close-up or full figure, the subjects fill their frames and face us directly. 'We know that his portraits are posed,' Vetrocq points out, 'We know that his particular, direct mode of address democratically imparts a quotient of glamour to all his subjects.'¹⁰

Halfaker's luminous portrait is the photographer's favourite, although he initially felt uncomfortable suggesting the pose we see in the final image.¹¹ Dressed casually in jeans and a light sweater and seen from the thighs up, she holds her artificial right arm so that it curves across her torso from breast to hip. Unlike the mechanical prostheses worn by the other veterans in the series (or Michael Jernigan's diamond-studded eye), it is the naturalism of Halfaker's arm that is shocking in this image. The evident weight of the limb, its realistically freckled complexion, and the addition of a ladies' wristwatch create the illusion of an actual arm and shoulder detached and rotated. Of the soldiers and marines interviewed

for *Alive Day Memories*, Dawn Halfaker is the only one who expresses any real concern about her changed appearance. At the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC she refused to wear the prosthetics they gave her. 'I don't want to look like a robot,' she told them, 'and I don't want to wear a frikin' hook.'¹² Her determination comes across in the portrait, but as Dora Apel suggests, 'the sense of heroic agency' is unsettled by the poignancy of the watch, by the almost perfect arm (that cannot hold a child), and ultimately by the moments of doubt and disillusionment Halfaker betrays in the telling of her story.¹³

We might conclude that images of the war-damaged body are inherently unpredictable: you can press them into the service of one story (patriotism or human resilience, for example), but they always threaten to reveal another.

Faces of War

The damaged face is also a symbol of the psychological trauma of modern combat. Photographic portraiture has become a primary means of framing war in contemporary western culture. It is through the portrait (and its textual equivalent, the biography) that we have come to experience – to *feel* – the human dimension of violent conflict. This is particularly true of professional photojournalism, which relies above all on the emotional legibility and expressiveness of the face. Not every image of a face is a portrait, however, and portraiture does not always require facial likeness: Picasso's Cubist portraits don't look much like their subjects – not in a naturalistic or mimetic sense – and contemporary portraiture often disrupts the conventional association between facial appearance and identity. What, then, does it mean to 'put a face' to suffering and violence? And what are the effects (and limits) of traditional portraiture when the face itself has been transformed by war?

Photojournalism exploits the human face's capacity to convey a sense of the individual while at the same time signifying a generic type, attribute or emotion: the face of suffering or innocence, the face of evil. Not surprisingly, many artists and photographers have sought to distance themselves from such clichés. If the human face of war is ubiquitous in the news media and on television, it is often entirely absent from museums and art galleries. Some of the most compelling contemporary photographs of war are devoid of human subject matter, dwelling instead on the post-apocalyptic aftermath of conflict: urban wastelands, architectural ruins, depopulated villages and the surreal topography of battle-scarred landscapes or mass graves. One of the most successful proponents of this sub-genre of the 'military sublime,' Simon Norfolk has said that he prefers taking pictures of landscapes because 'people gobble up the photograph. They become what the photograph is.'¹⁴ A photograph taken at Farm Hada military base near Jalalabad shows the twisted track of a destroyed Taliban tank. Half-buried in the sand, it looks more like the bleached skeleton of some prehistoric animal than the detritus of the recent conflict in Afghanistan. When people do appear in Norfolk's photographs, they look like they have strayed onto a film set. A lone balloon seller displays his rainbow-coloured wares next to the ruins of a teahouse. The image is unusual in its admission of hope: once banned by the Taliban, balloon sellers have reappeared on the streets of Kabul. But there are no customers visible here. What was once a popular park overlooking the Afghan Exhibition of Economic and Social Achievements is now an expanse of rubble; the ruined teahouse a Stonehenge for modern times.

If people have a tenuous relationship with the landscapes Norfolk photographs, they occupy centre-stage in Nina Berman's work. Writing about *Marine Wedding* (p.102) in the *New York*



Simon Norfolk
Balloon Seller outside a former Teahouse 2001

Times, Holland Cotter describes Tyler Ziegel's expression, as he looks at his bride, as 'hard to read: his dead-white face is all but featureless, with no nose and no chin, as blank as a pullover mask.' Despite winning the World Press Photo Contest for portraiture in 2006, the photograph challenges the premise of the traditional portrait: that the face can be relied upon as an index of identity and emotion. Like Berman's earlier project *Purple Hearts* (2004), *Marine Wedding* focuses on the homecoming: the protracted and difficult – perhaps ultimately impossible – transition from the military to civilian life, from able-bodied soldier or marine to disabled veteran. Berman thinks it unlikely that *People* magazine had seen a picture of Ziegel when they approached her with the commission. It was supposed to be a happy story: wounded war hero, high school sweethearts, fairy tale wedding. When she first met Ziegel she was shocked at the extent of his injuries. 'I've seen lots of wounded people before,' she comments in an interview with Richard Bradley, 'but he was probably the worst-looking, and also the least expressive.'¹⁵

Asked why she was initially drawn to war photography during a talk at the 2010 Whitney Biennial, Berman described a trip to Vietnam in



Nina Berman
Marine Wedding 2006

1987 with a group of Vietnam vets. She realized that for them the war was still present in their lives. The news media's fetishistic obsession with the violence of combat obscures both the ongoing effects of war and its cultural preconditions (the subject of a recent project by Berman documents military training exercises and large-scale simulations).¹⁶ Elaborating further on her decision to focus on the veterans returning from Iraq, she says:

I think that part of our lack of understanding of war is that there is so much imagery of that combat moment and very little imagery of the years and years, and the ripple effects after.... And as there were no images of wounded Americans or dead Americans I thought that was something that I could do.¹⁷

Berman does not give us intimacy: there is little sense of psychological connection with the people she photographs, and little emotional or physical contact between them. Her theme is isolation and it is not empathy she requires of us but responsibility. When her photographs

were included in the 2010 Whitney Biennial in New York, one blogger described them as 'dehumanizing,' adding: 'it totally aestheticizes the work so that you think about [it] in terms of art and compositions rather than the human content.'¹⁸ But this accusation only holds if we can agree on what art is. What is 'art' in the context of the Whitney Museum of American Art; what was the value of art for Herbert R Cole, Henry Tonks or John Hodgson Lobley? What is it that painting or drawing – as distinct, perhaps, from photojournalism or the images of wounded bodies in medical archives – can bring to the subject of war? What do we gain (or lose) by seeing a photograph framed and displayed in a gallery?

Based on the works in this exhibition, part of the answer is surely that art has the capacity to engage us or elicit our attention – our senses and bodies and imaginations – in a way that other kinds of objects do not. To be sure, art can reassure and comfort: it can transmute suffering into a kind of beauty; give form to grief and commemorate loss. Over the last hundred years, however, the role of art has often been less comfortable and it is telling that so many of the artworks in this exhibition appear shocking rather than consoling. Even portraiture – the most tradition-bound genre of western art – has been transformed in the process. Ruptured by violence, the portraits shown here have the potential to humanize suffering, but they also bring us face to face with the inhumanity of war.

Notes

- 1 Fred Turner, Review of *Alive Day Memories: Home from Iraq*, *The Journal of American History* (June 2008), 289.
- 2 James Gandolfini, quoted in Bill Carter, 'The Price of War, Front and Center,' *The New York Times*, September 6, 2007.
- 3 Turner, *Alive Day Memories*, 289.
- 4 Michael Jernigan, HBO *Alive Day Memories* interview.
- 5 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 3.
- 6 TW Pym and Geoffrey Gordon, *Papers from Picardy by Two Chaplains* (London, 1917), 175–76.
- 7 Daryl Lindsay, 'The Sir Richard Stawell Oration,' *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 45th year, 1.3 (January 18, 1958), 62.
- 8 John Fothergill (ed), *The Slade* (London: Slade School, University College, 1907), 34.
- 9 'Worst Loss of All,' *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, May–June 1918.
- 10 Marcia Vetrocq, 'Rules of Engagement,' *Art in America* (June/July 2008), 175.
- 11 Peter Applebome, 'Soldiers' Portraits Make the Costs of War More Visible,' *The New York Times*, September 27, 2007.
- 12 Dawn Halfaker, HBO *Alive Day Memories* interview, YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCZ4Xjx-lJs>, accessed May 12, 2014.
- 13 Dora Apel, *War Culture and the Contest of Images* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), Kindle edition, loc. 1964.
- 14 'War/Photography: An Interview with Simon Norfolk,' on BLDG BLOG, November 2006.
- 15 From Berman's interview with Richard Bradley, June 10, 2010, *Shots in the Dark*.
- 16 Nina Berman, *Homeland* (London: Trolley Books, 2008).
- 17 'My Turn: Nina Berman.'
- 18 mad@er, June 9, 2010, (5:31 pm), comment on Berman's interview with Richard Bradley, *Shots in the Dark*.