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# Reanimating the Wound: Dermatillomanic Practice and the First World War

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Plymouth University

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# Reanimating the Wound: Dermatilliomaniac Practice and the First World War

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by **Camilla Nock**

A thesis submitted to Plymouth University in partial fulfilment for the degree  
of **Doctor of Philosophy**

Arts & Humanities Doctoral Training Centre

December 2015

Thesis advisors:

**Christopher Cook** and **Karen Roulstone**.

## **i) Acknowledgements**

To my husband Michael and my three sons who have been so supportive, understanding and patient all these years, in particular to Oliver who has supported and provided valuable input into the making of the document. To the memory of my Grandparents and other members of my family who did not survive the First World War. To my director of studies Christopher Cook and my second supervisor Karen Roulstone.

## **ii) Biographical Note**

Camilla Nock investigates the recovery of imagined memory in order to re-invigorate and re-cast mourning through different strategies within painting. Nock Studied painting at Cheltenham College of Art and was later awarded a scholarship at Goldsmiths, London to develop a language and practice that focussed on the visceral quality within art practice. Nock was the winner (Painting SW) of the Arts Council Year of The Artist, 2001, for her use of sequential code to figure Messiaen's quartet for the 'End of Time' (1941). Between 2003–2004 Nock was awarded a research grant by the Arts Council to investigate 'Silence' through a system of minimalist structures of painting, culminating in a collaboration with Gloucester Cathedral. Nock has acted as a host, through European collaboration schemes, for international Artists and Architects, from amongst others, Bosnia, Croatia, Russia, Germany and Poland. And has served as a committee member and exhibition organiser for the Royal West of England, Bristol. Her work is exhibited widely.

### **iii) Authors Declaration**

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Committee. This study was self-financed.

### **iv) Awards**

1. Winner (painting) Year of the Artist. Arts Council 2001–2002 (South West)
2. Arts Council award for Painting; 2002 commission.
3. Welsh Board Award for Research
4. Millfield Prize Winner.

### **v) Exhibitions**

1. The Rose & the Labyrinth, Gloucester Cathedral
2. Australianscape
3. Waterman Fine Art, London.
4. Mark Burkardt, London
5. 'Colour Scape Vibration', Royal West of England Academy, Bristol
6. 'Brilliant Corners', with Sandra Blow & Terry Frost, Newlyn
7. Contemporary Arts Council, Royal Festival Hall, London
8. Festival of Light, St Ives (organised by the Tate St Ives)
9. London Art Group, Barbican, London
10. Millfield

11. Royal Academy Summer Shows
12. Royal West of England Academy, Bristol
13. 'Critics Choice', Newlyn
14. Exhibition with Rose Hilton, Bristol
15. Royal Academy Touring Exhibition
16. Beaux Arts, Bath
17. 'Breakthrough'. With Elizabeth Frink, Victoria Art Gallery, Bath

## **vi) Art Fairs**

1. Geneva International Arts Fair
2. 20th Century Art Fair, Royal College of Art London
3. Contemporary Art Fair, Islington

## **vii) Professional Societies**

1. Newlyn Society of Artists, Cornwall
2. RWA, Bristol
3. Axis (Award Membership)

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# Reanimating the Wound: Dermatillomanic Practice and the First World War

by **Camilla Nock**

## Abstract

This research project uses an exploratory painting practice to examine a melancholic shadow cast by the First World War. The mode of inquiry is predicated upon the persistence of the past in the present, and upon a personal need to purge a persisting familial grief. To inform this stance there is systematic engagement with cathartic and redemptive artworks of the twentieth century, and with the poetry of the First World War. Developments of process and emotional register are specifically prompted by the writings of William Morris, Edmund Blunden, and Ivor Gurney, and reflections on practice are sub-divided accordingly. Wilfred Owen's 'internal reciprocity of tears', whereby an act of expression traces memory and mourning, remains a central theme throughout. An initial site-based interrogation into desecrated landscapes, using sketchbooks and notebooks, develops into painterly strategies of defacement, compulsive excoriation (the 'dermatillomania' of the title) and eventually the deliberate deformation of the picture plane itself. A deep emotional immersion in accounts of the war is sought in order to establish mindscapes of trauma, to which the radical actions of painting respond. Constant self-reflection is used to consider new areas of research and idiosyncrasies of process as they arise through the practice. The completed body of work explores a trans-generational connection to a legacy of embodied grief, in which the desire to counter the risk of forgetting is mediated through the obligation of the artist to express empathy. The methodology thereby confronts the paradox of catharsis through active mourning in the face of an unresolvable continuation of grief, and tests how narratives of loss may be repositioned and reconfigured in retrieval through the practice of painting.

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# Prelude

## The Yellow Suitcase

A small yellow leather suitcase was found amongst my mother's belongings following her death. It was to be many months before I was able to find the courage to open it. The suitcase was empty apart from a man's wallet, in which I found a small black and white photograph of a young woman, whom I recognised as my grandmother. The case was my grandfather's, its cruelly ironic mustard-gas yellow evoking the cause of his death.

The vacancy of the case articulated an irreducible loss: it seemed then as if the fetid air of decay emanating from World War One remained un-purged inside, expressive of a life utterly evacuated and effaced, a sepulchre for a lost soul. The wallet served as surrogate heart for the yellow case, itself emptied-out apart from the image of the young woman, upon whom the burden of living would fall.

Ann Michaels explores the history of damaged lives in her novel *Fugitive Pieces* (1996)<sup>1</sup>. Michaels recognises that at times there are unexpected moments (triggered by a disturbance) when attention is redirected to an awareness of the past. An example is given is when the spirit of another, who was present in that past, reaches out through an object that contains its presence. Hence our reverence for things that once belonged to the dead.<sup>2</sup>

In the studio, the vitality and colour of my current paintings presented themselves as a type of mockery of that suitcase and its implications. I began to consider these themes in the work, in particular the idea of no-thing. Whereupon the empty suitcase triggered the desire to extend my practice beyond its minimalist stance, and therefore may be said to have initiated this practice-led research project.

Initially I had the intention of registering, or recognizing, the symbolic trauma of the suitcase by uncovering, through practice, a history of suppressed pain, suffering and private grief that had lain concealed, and indeed become the family's defining (even sustaining) character.

I wondered if it were feasible to conceive painting as a release for this trauma that I found suddenly reconstituting itself inside me, and to transfer the palpable sensations of suffering onto, or into, the skin of a canvas. I conceived the paintings as testifying to an experience of loss and of sacrifice, and providing a space of immersion in which the dead might be listened to, and mourned. The

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1. MICHAELS, A. 1997. *Fugitive Pieces*, London: Bloomsbury Publications plc.

2. "The memories we elude catch up upon us, overtake us like a shadow. A truth appears suddenly in the middle of a thought, a hair on a lens". (Michaels, A, *Fugitive Pieces* p213).

contemplative tranquillity of my painting of that time would need to be set aside, to be supplanted by sustained physical encounters with surfaces, so that anger and fear might be reformed as an eloquent lament.<sup>3</sup>

I wished to make use of this empathetic approach by acknowledging a strong family link with the First World War, passed down through generations to me by a variety of means, overt and subliminal, and through innovative practice reclaim resonances made more sinister by secrecy. I wanted to pursue this as a cathartic act, but also one that could reveal a fuller understanding of what was implied by these memories.

In the last few months of her life, my mother, usually private, shared her sadness with me. She recounted her memories of a childhood as a grieving daughter, distraught, fearful, and increasingly aware of death. Each day she watched her father fighting for breath, racked with pain, slowly dying from the lung wound, grown gangrenous, inflicted during a gas attack in the trenches. My grandfather's trauma was made more acute by the recognition that he had brought the evil presence of the front back to the heart of his home.<sup>4</sup>

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3. The sculptor Doris Salcedo once described her research process in terms of absorbing or internalising the grief of others by allowing their pain and suffering to become her own. Later she became uncomfortable with the implications of moving into the place of the victim, and instead began to understand her encounter with the 'primary witness' in a different light. PRINCENTAL, N. Basualdo, C Huyssen, A. 2000. *Doris Salcedo*, New York: Phaidon Press Limited.

As an empathetic gesture, a means 'to feel into'. Salcedo. 2000, p143. The trauma of another. This has had repercussions for her work, as there is now an implied separation of the experience of 'another', and a void that cannot be breached. The acceptance of a physical distance now underpins the structuring feature of Salcedo's installations.

4. I can never look at John Singer Sergeant's huge painting (7.5' x 20') *Gassed* (1918) in the Imperial War Museum, without feelings of outrage. It depicts the aftermath of a mustard gas attack, where young blond wounded soldiers stumble towards a dressing station bathed in what appears to be the golden light of heroism.



During these precious months of intimacy with my mother, bitter secrets were gradually uncovered that spoke of suffering, sadness and betrayal. The insidious refusal of the Government to award my grandfather a war pension (because there had been no loss of limb or mental illness) resulted in the continual anxiety of finding means to buy medical supplies—dressings, ointment and bandages—coupled with the problem of their disposal, everything tainted by the all-pervading stench of gangrene.<sup>5</sup>

Braids of beautiful thick hair were cut and sold, her younger sister was lost to pneumonia, and the nerves of her brother were broken, rendering him unable to take up his painting scholarship at the Slade. Indifference, humiliation and shame added to the ordeal for what had been a private and genteel Gloucester family. Behind closed doors their sadness deepened into such melancholy that patterns of normal life were arrested.

Until I began tending her illness, my mother had been reluctant to talk about her childhood. My grandmother, however, was willing to share personal insights. Those memories she deemed suitable for children included the Angel of Mons, and visions of the 'White helper' and the 'Comrade in White'<sup>6</sup>, fantastical fragments that brought her reassurance and courage.

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5. It was only during the last night of my mother's life, as she curled into a foetal position, that it occurred to me that the MRSA bacteria that she contracted in hospital had become centred on her lungs, then and crept through tissue and blood into her bones. Somehow her wound had mirrored that her father.

6. Myths and Legends of the First World War.

During this time my mother spoke of the poet Ivor Bertie Gurney, and the composer Herbert Norman Howells, with whom she had a connection via my grandfather, who in his youth had been a sides-man at Gloucester Cathedral, and at the same school as Ivor Gurney<sup>7</sup>. She spoke of her concern and regret for the tragic state Gurney had fallen into, lamenting his mental illness marked by eccentric behaviour such as night walks, sleeping rough, and going for long periods without food. Eventually his mind gave way<sup>8</sup> and he was placed in the local asylum, Barnwood House (a name that haunts me still).

My Grandmother had always warned me, when recounting her memories, that sighing as an emotional response would result in a drop of blood being lost from the heart, yet so heavy was the weight of sadness I felt for my mother, that sometimes when I was nursing her, the blood vessels in my eyes would indeed rupture, and I would find myself blinded by the mixture of blood and tears.<sup>9</sup>

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7. She may well have met both poet and composer personally, but this is not proven.

8. According to my mother's account and KAVANAGH, P.J. 1984. *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

9. It was during this period that I read the and considered the words of John Berger in his introduction to Gabriel Chevallier's *Fear*, CHEVALLIER, G. 2008. *Fear* (Introduction by John Berger – The Imperative Need), London. Serpents Tail. (First Published as *La Peur* in 1930, Paris: Editions Stuck. A book that graphically describes the horrors of the First World War, in which Berger speaks of his father, who endured four years in the trenches—in his presence his father would at times touch his mementos, a trench map, a revolver, or a ring of a hand grenade, but he would never talk of his experience to anybody. Berger wrote "I was born eight years after the end of the War. But the war was part of the map with which I tried to find my way about, during my early childhood my adolescence and later too. The War marked an area on that map which covered one of the extreme limits of human experience, close to the tragic, unanswerable, but, unlike the tragic, silent and perhaps futile". CHEVALLIER, G. 2008. *Fear* (Introduction by John Berger – The Imperative Need), London. Serpents Tail. (First Published as *La Peur* in 1930, Paris: Editions Stuck. Berger was nearly fifty when he wrote a poem about the fighting around Ypres. (*Pages of the Wound: Poems, Drawings and Photographs 1956–1996*, Bloomsbury 1996).

In recollecting this, I felt that in the envisaged body of paintings, I wanted to work through the sensations of the body, using an embodied empathetic response to explore trauma as a means of locating myself within its extended experience.<sup>10</sup>

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10. In Marina Abramovic's performances in which she mutilates her body through wounding and cutting, she commented that being open to sensual experiences through the body allows for greater depth of knowledge. An example is provided by her 1975 performance; *The Lips of St Thomas* in which she cuts a five-point star onto her stomach with a razor blade. I attended her lecture; 'Evening with Marina Abramovic' at Plymouth University, October 2010.

# Introduction

My research is presented as a summative exhibition that incorporates four sequences of practices with accompanying theoretical reflections.

The sequences are titled:

- 1) The Forest and The Black Books;
- 2) No-Where;
- 3) No-Body; and
- 4) No-Thing.

The theoretical reflections contextualize those radical shifts in my creative practice that are triggered by the discovery of the yellow suitcase. These are organised into four chronological sequences, investigating the extended wound of the First World War as an agent for art practice. Each sequence is both accompaniment to, and a consequence of, a discrete group of drawings and paintings deploying specific transference of wounding methodologies to explore a heightened state of consciousness that reflects an amplified sensitivity to grief, mourning and loss. Throughout the project, practice and theory are developed in close

symbiotic response to this new state of awareness. I also indicate when theory proved a modifying force for practice, and conversely, where practice altered the theoretical attack.

Arising from what I initially perceived to be my neglect of another generation's suffering (i.e. inattention), my investigation reflects on the imperative need to return to the events of the First World War and, through intensive engagement with its histories, contexts and, above all, its creative individuals, develop an empathetic response. The reflections involve an empathetic sensitivity that is used both as a framing device for artistic research and a guiding tool for contextual analysis.

This methodology (subsequently developed through daily practice) is viewed as a practice grounded within acts of spoliation, excoriation and reduction, one which aims to embody a visual outcry against my own previous disinterest and silence. This awareness of led me to interpret the term Dermatillomania<sup>1</sup> for my practice.

As a clinical condition Dermatillomania arises from feelings of anxiety, and taken to extremes may cause disfigurement and scarring. In some conditions wound-picking and excoriation occur as a result of triggers, such as neglect or abandonment. Alternatively this may be accompanied by motivating factors such as stress, trauma or repressed rage towards an authority.<sup>2</sup> I now view the Dermatillomania of my practice as a condition of anger arising from events of the First World War received through the testimony and legacies of my family.

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1. Dermatillomania is an impulsive disorder in which the person is compelled to scratch at their skin which inevitably causes visible wounds.

2. ODLAUG, B.L & GRANT, J.E. 2010. *Pathological Skin-Picking*, University of Minnesota

Throughout my research I reference historians, writers and composers who are related to the events of the First World War. Philosophers and art historians, have also provided important reference points in the development of a theoretical framework for my research. In particular the war poetry of two border poets, Ivor Gurney and Wilfred Owen, both are entwined with my family's history, and through my extended research—induced some of the most potent responses in my internal conversation. Further, the artists Doris Salcedo, Ann Hamilton, Sally Mann and Anselm Kiefer<sup>3</sup> have, at different stages, profoundly influenced my approach to the inquiry, and are therefore mentioned in many of the sections. In particular, it was an encounter early in the research process with the work of the German sculptor Joseph Beuys<sup>4</sup> that revealed to me the possibility of giving form to mourning through the creative process. Through his work, I was able to accept mourning, secondary grief, and inherited grief, as legitimate subjects for art-making. The experiential event of the dermatillomised wound is constructed physically on the canvas through a series of damaged transitions—not one, but many scars in all states of evolution and decay. Weeping scabs echo the disintegrating fat on Beuys's chair with fat (1963) where through time and chemical reaction, fat drips from the chair and eventually becomes dust.

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3. Artists whose thematic strategies—the legacy of violence and mourning—present a visual trace of memory in a contemporary setting.

4. The artwork of Joseph Beuys spans four decades from 1945 to 1985 and includes work such as the sculpture; *Crucifixion* 1962-1963 (Wood, nails, wire, thread, plastic bottles and newspaper). *Felt Suit* 1970 and *Eurasia Siberian Symphony* 1963 which included wedges of fat, dead hair and an action board with chalk drawings. BORER, A. 1996. *The Essential Joseph Beuys*, London: Thames and Hudson. I was first introduced to his work during the 1990's at a retrospective exhibition of his collected memorabilia at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol.

The paintings in the three sequences are presented through the different narratives of the journey and processes of alteration. Visibly present are scars, cuts, tears, burning and other symbolic gestures, layers of past actions and new wounds. However seductive the paintings become, the research moves beyond aesthetics in order to become subsumed in the irrefutable requirement to uncover memory in order to mourn.

My practice does not seek to mediate directly the experience of war or its history. Rather, the intention is to intimate a link between the terror and trauma of the First World War and my imaginatively received knowledge of that event—its alteration, brutality, absence and the ‘pity of war’ (Owen, 1917). I express through the body of the paint my response to this second generation experience. It is precisely this which I have sought to define in the painting as ‘trauerarbeit’ (Anselm Kiefer, 1960’s) or ‘mourning work’ (Anselm Kiefer, 1960’s), a concept I appropriated from Kiefer’s paintings that had been described as a ‘labour of memory’ (Lauterwein, 2007, p15); which is also a central theme explored by Joseph Beuys.

Beuys’s<sup>5</sup> system involved a more ambiguous methodology of confronting issues of memory in a historical context than the work of his fellow artists at the time. In a speech of 1985 he declared “I should like to start with the wound” (Borer, 1996, p11), presenting the wound as a vehicle for the healing process of his country’s past.

I aim to interpret the wound through my practice by using a system of Dermatillomenia and equivalences (both as signifiers and material agents) as vehicles for exploring the toxic memory of the First World War. In my practice, I risk alteration to myself and to the body of the painting. I submit to the physical and

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5. BORER, A. 1996. *The Essential Joseph Beuys*, London: Thames and Hudson.

psychic contamination of the trauma, which is projected through the hurt of the heart and through the nerve endings of the fingers as they disturb and mutilate the fabric of the painting. By the strategy of scab picking, metaphoric blood from the wound can flow, thus the extended memory of trauma and pain that arose from the war is reanimated as an act of mourning.

As well as interpreting my own reaction to the World War One, my practice is underscored by the darkness that shrouded the Western Front and the individual traumas of the bereft facing a bleak future of loss and emptiness. After the war, many memorials were created by and for those who mourned. On the 2nd of August 1932 the Architect Sir Edwin Lutyens attended the dedication of his war memorial at Thiepval (The Somme). A few days earlier, the Berlin artist Kathe Kollwitz erected a simple carved granite sculpture in the German War Cemetery in Rugevelde, Belgium (1932). It showed two figures bowed in their grief for their son Peter, killed during October 1914 in Flanders not far from Langemarck. He was eighteen. Kollwitz admitted to a friend “there is within our lives a wound that will never heal, nor should it”<sup>6</sup> (Winter, 1995, p109).

Questioning and probing these wounds became a ritualized component of my practice, exploring how the memory, history and extended outcomes of the First World War impose on me the awareness of another’s suffering: my history is constructed upon their past—and is part of the environment; my paintings are developed through this experience and I am wounded by that experience.

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6. WINTER, J. 1995. *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



The French Artist Christian Boltanski, proposes that no matter what an artist's working process entails, it is impossible "to escape from the artistic terrain of your own epic"<sup>7</sup> (Messenger, 1977, p8). Artists that emerge from different time periods represent narratives in very different modes, and this means whatever the subjects concerns are, an artist's work belongs formally to the art of one's time. Inventing a new form, according to Boltanski, is not of major importance, but what is an issue is that the chosen form should provide "the means of expression for that given experience" (Messenger, 1977, p9). The significance of this inquiry emerges from and is positioned in relation, to this concept. This proposition is coupled with Alessia Ricciardi's<sup>8</sup> request for a re-enchantment of "memory as an ethical call against detachment and disavowal of the past" (Ricciardi, 2003, p17). However, and to some extent as a counterpoint to Boltanski's proposition, Ricciardi argues "we must search for a new ground on which memory can be redefined and thus allowed to retain its imaginative urgency" (Ricciardi, 2003, p18).

In my research I am also indebted to Lisa Saltzman's study<sup>9</sup> (Saltzman, 2006, p10), of contemporary artistic strategies for visualizing mourning and remembrance. Her concept of 'bounden latency', the hidden or unexpressed obligation for the artist to speak graphically of a violent event, also proves influential throughout my research.

In order to feel secondary grief or to mourn, we need to first gather knowledge of the event and this process proved problematic to my inquiry, where individual memories have been to a large extent missing from family discourse. The methodology therefore, is underpinned by a need for the paintings to be

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7. MESSENGER, A. 1997. *Christian Boltanski*, Phaidon.

8. RICCIARDI, A. 2003. *The Ends of Mourning*, California: Stanford Press.

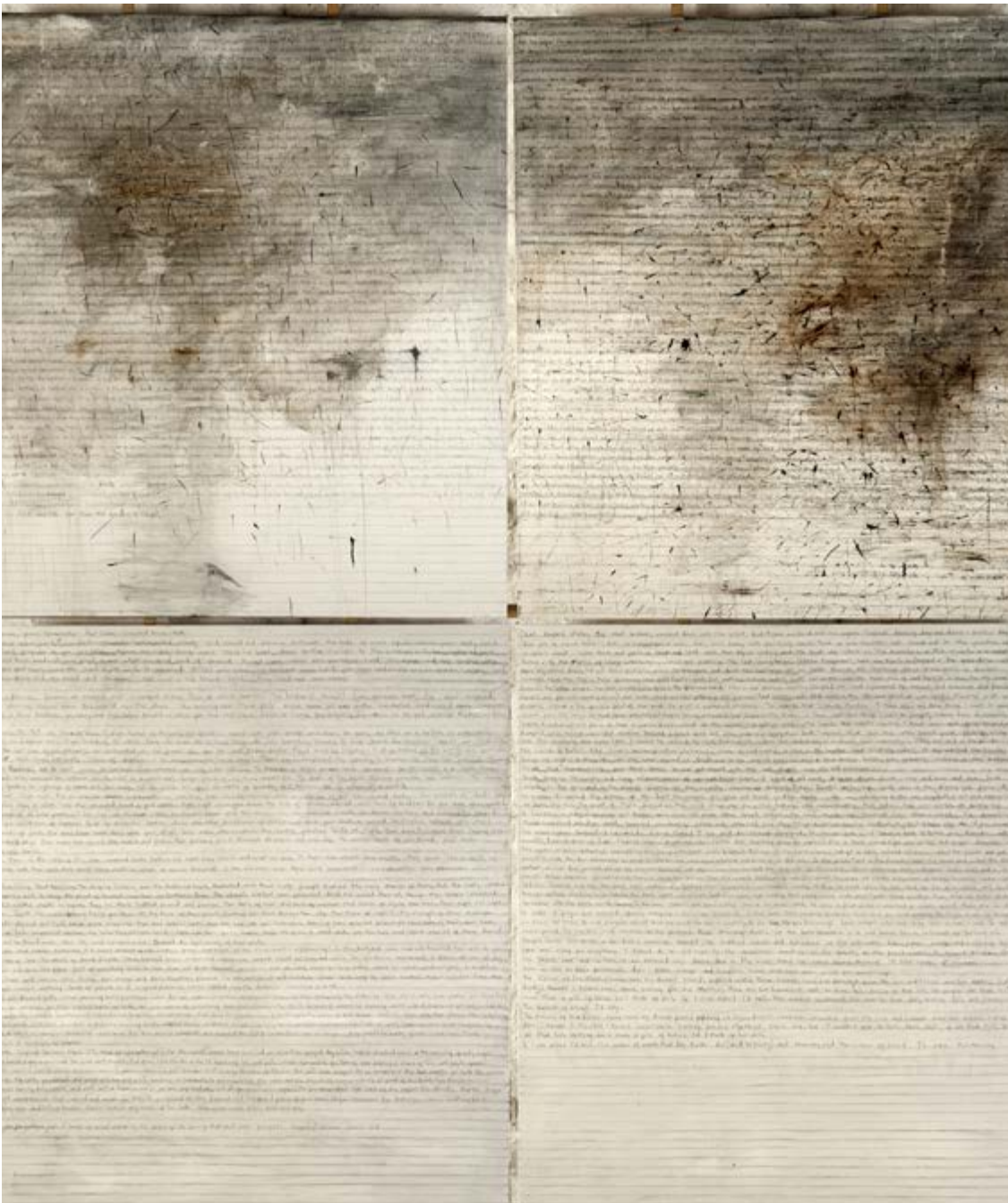
9. SALTZMAN, L. 2006. *Making Memory Matter*, University of Chicago.

occlusive, in that narrative and memory are rendered latent within layers of associations. Nancy Princenthal speaks similarly of how “a clouding of vision is necessitated by the inherent un-speakability of trauma and the impossibility of properly representing the experience of pain” (Princenthal, 2007, p59).<sup>10</sup>

Both the practice and theory of this project examines through what emphatic strategies states of grief and pain may be articulated without recourse to this ‘clouding of vision’, and whether the practice of painting can resuscitate past wounds by unpicking and fingering the unhealed scars of the past, and discover those fractures and shards still left in us.

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10. GIBBONS, J. 2007. *Contemporary Art and Memory*, JB Tauris & Co Ltd, p59.



# The Poetry of War



Ground



# **Sequence One**

## **(The Forest and the Black Books)**

### **Critical Overview**

#### **The Forest and the Black Books**

This sequence has two main strands:

- 1) The forest as a site from which men leave for War, and in which the indexical trace of the un-remembered and un-mourned is explored.
- 2) The record of my witnessing and grief as revealed in The Black Books through the interpretation of an abandoned and ruined landscape.

Within the subterranean, impenetrable depths of the Neroche Forest, I found I was able to sense the presence of two world wars; their imprint formed resonances that were powerful and inescapable. The forest became a touchstone for the research and I felt compelled to confront this reality daily. Its complex geographical iconography formed the ground of the research, both literally and

metaphysically. Concealed in its interior, I found sediments of past occupancy: traces of old farming communities<sup>1</sup>, abandoned when men and horses left for the war. Sadness and trauma had been assimilated into the soil.

The combination of these forces drew me in and I uncovered a history that connected me to the First World War. I did not paint or draw specific locations with work in mind; instead, I built relationships and constructed meaning as I moved through the forest, revisiting it at different times of the day, gradually understanding its nature as a repository for memory. Its laconic quality, its alteration, vacuum and silence, revealed a sad and bitter withdrawal of presence and a concept of a past now radically different from our own.

Inside the forest I initially discover a melancholic landscape of regret—a scared, localised wound from which I strive to retrieve an embodied history. Knowledge revealed is interpreted through visceral creative actions into sketchbooks. In my encounter with the forest, I recognise it as a site quite different from a place of remembrance, and am for the first time able to sense a physical inhabitation of trauma.

No matter how diverse the subject of memory is in contemporary art practice and through what form the past is addressed, I have learnt it is in the sensitivity in which the artist binds fragmented parts and re-assemble them back together that gives a renewed meaning to the original event.

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1. Their names are recorded on war memorials at the churches of Dunkeswell & Sheldon.

As a consequence of reading Joan Gibbon's *Contemporary Art and Memory*<sup>2</sup> (Gibbon, 2009, p147) in which she describes memory<sup>3</sup> as fundamentally unstable and a mutable phenomenon, with recollection and remembrance at its heart, I begin to interpret remembering as a gathering of fragments, which I deploy as a methodology within the Black Books, as a vehicle to carry a sense of encounter with a past.

The books begin to act as symbolic containers for the substances of mourning, and assume the role of reliquaries for ash and mud. Further, grime of the hand deposited through the working process adds to the patina of the pages. Through this freshly revealed dimension I consider a methodology of autographic elements in which the hand of the artist becomes an irreplaceable element in transposing materialised memory.

Anselm Kiefer is acknowledged as an essential reference, and whilst not employing Kiefer's cathexis, the books develop a register of private reflection through a "coming into language"<sup>4</sup>, a language explored as a record of experiential witnessing.

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2. GIBBONS, J. 2007. *Contemporary Art and Memory*, New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd.

3. The roots of memory and recollection lie, according to Gibbon, in the 'collecta' and the 'colliger', from the Latin 'together' and from the verb to 'colligate', meaning 'to combine together'.

4. BENNETT, J 2005. *Empathic Vision*, California: Stanford University Press, p2.



## Critical Reflection

The Neroche Forest, which covers a high plateau in the Blackdown Hills of East Devon, provided a crucial context in which I could imagine a landscape of specific events of history for which previously I had no memory or map. Dunkeswell, Sheldon and Smeatharpe, with their forested hills, deep valleys, numerous water courses, leaden skies and at times impenetrable mists, still retain a palpable and physical presence of a landscape damaged and made strange by absence. The environment around the plateau, transformed by a substratum of two world wars, still reflects today its military purpose<sup>5</sup> as a training ground for conflict. Patches of stagnant, oily water seeping red oxides leak into the surrounding soil, and, in places, the scab of history and its subterranean environment—all served to remind me of Edmund Blunden's *Troglodyte World*. By picking at its surface, war can still be traced, wounds un-earthed, scars and history re-animated. This is a passive and yet sinister landscape that emerges from the ground, betrayed, upturned and folded in on itself, possessing an emotional weight of dereliction that has corrupted its beauty. It is a world beyond the margins, hag-ridden, affected by nightmares and anxieties.

It is a place that gathered up its dead whose imprint still lingers today. Within the forest are two carved stone memorials bearing the names of local men, reflecting their amputated lives, carrying stories of returning soldiers and horses profoundly damaged, their relationship to the land broken and altered. In the aftermath of war, the fate of buildings became uncertain, lay empty, stripped, slowly reclaimed

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5. Neroche Forest is adjacent to the decommissioned US Navy Fleet Anti Submarine USAAF airfield.

by the earth. Corrugated iron and barbed wire lay twisted, deeply bitten into rotting posts; field boundaries were neglected, streams re-routed, springs poisoned and clogged.

In the Second World War, these villages with their flat high plateau were requisitioned as a base for American Liberators and Catalina flying boats—that took off every two hours laden with torpedoes against the threat of U-boats in the Bay of Biscay. The noise of the engines thundered not only through the air but reverberated into the subsoil. Today fragments of trucks and jeeps, prefabricated concrete, ammunition, oil and chemical containers lie half-buried amongst the remains and skeletons of deer and sheep.

After the war, the sides of the valley no longer required for agriculture were replaced by plantations of Douglas Fir and Larch. Many of these trees became diseased. They have been ripped out by heavy machines and the ground burnt and sanitized.

The environment was formed not only by its geography, but also by the collective memory and detritus of history. An agrarian landscape transformed into something altogether darker and more sinister. A shadow lies across its edges and collective anxieties transgress thresholds. The accumulation of perpetual instability and shifting boundaries has given the area a sullen aspect. Through the altering activities of war, the forest has acquired an oppressive, passive and parasitical quality. Damaged, stagnant and fatigued; its former distinctiveness mutilated and emotionally exhausted; a dark, alien and impenetrable wilderness, which was once sweet.

Through immersion in the forest, I was in a position through my practice to uncover and re-animate history. Responding through the margins of peripheral vision, I could physically experience and touch the material substance of memory. I could, to a degree, seek to make a visual record not through historical references, but through sensing the souls and minds of men whose roots were deeply embedded in the land.

The remoteness of the forest replaced the studio. It provided the ground where I was not as compelled to present ideas in a realistic, aesthetic manner. Rather, I found a surrogate field in which to interpret a landscape of war. I could interweave new knowledge into the skin of the canvas giving it authentic depth. I considered not so much images which illustrate, but rather an image as an imprint that, to a greater extent, had been determined by other processes than those interpreted by the eye. The thread of new directions intimated differing passages of artistic process and, through these means of intimate scrutiny and the significance of proximity, elements of duration and silent meditation, I was able to form a bridge to the lost lives of the forest.

The Neroche Forest with the history of trauma embedded within its boundaries, its alteration and loss of communities, created a site of memorial and became a more reliable carrier or transmitter of the presence of memory than a mere sign. It gave shape to an overwhelming sensation of grief both subliminal and physical. In its still darkness, overbearing trees and cloying waterways, I sensed and understood in a visceral way the imprint of both men and war. That some-‘thing’ of memory and the long drawn-out experience of mourning was made tangible through its silence.

The inquiry was not a search for aesthetics. Rather, I sought to form a discourse, to engage in a dialogue that would follow a thread of a man's journey to war. I searched for the beginning of that thread: a map upon which to construct and develop a practice to facilitate a reciprocal bond between past events and the present with the aim of conceiving time as a porous element. My intention by dissolving boundaries was to find common ground upon which to excoriate and uncover the roots of a hidden wound of war—and make work regenerated from that wound.

Here I was able to sense terror, violence, brutality and the inevitability of death. Acts of excoriation provided a synthesis that operated between observation and inner contemplation, memory and imagination.

In the solitude of the forest, a landscape that had become neglected through the absence of men and those broken by war, I sensed—or, as it were, witnessed—a parenthesis of loss. The forest became spectral, a shifting between dimensions of time and space, and it is this encounter that I registered in the painting. It was this moment between unpicking, seeing and re-animating experience that I wanted to capture on the canvas. My intention was to manifest a passage between the artist working and a re-animated fragment of memory, not of narrative cohesion but of clouded vision and the dimness of time. Discarded memories and tainted earth, suggested a surrogacy for the damaged and absent body, an immersion into a troglodytic world where the missing were felt as a dark breath. Heavy and burdened by their weight of grief; unearthly cries were heard as though the forest itself were implicated in the deaths of soldiers.

Over the weeks the emphasis shifted from one of recording to one that engendered feelings and sensations of an extended past. Within the margins, I utilised the concept of descent: to dig beneath the humus and my own passivity, to find ground in which emotional trauma and physical terror had been sequestered and transposed into its roots.

The practice is predicated on the visceral experience of a felt memory or sensed history. To some extent this meant that I excluded the traditional imagery of war, its paintings and photographs. My intention was to experience the memory of war in a different light and not to allow other influences to construct my perception of feeling. Instead as a source, I turned to the soldier poets who wrote from the Western Front. Their words, spoken and written, developed new powerful images in my mind. Over time I was able to construct a separate lens from the dispassionate eye that was tired of the broken images of the newsreel.

Impressions that I had held previously of the forest were being eroded and substituted by a new and different decoding of the site. I realized that this experience, coupled with the text of war, resulted in a new interpretation of the landscape. My mind would determine the point of view according to the frame I put around it. Thus the assembly of themes, such as trauma and sorrow could evoke an altered perception.

Away from the studio and immersed in the sullen forest, I reflected how we carry memory within us. It was as if my existence as an artist was troubled by the fear of remembering, not something specific, but a shadow, a presence. Here in this landscape I was moved by the immediacy of the voices of war. The poetry of Ivor Gurney and Wilfred Owen accompanied me. Words spoken in my mind rose like filaments of missing knowledge and the taste of blood.

I went to a place on the plateau where huge beech trees grow—a vantage point from which I could look down into the depths of deep valleys and green pasture, but was absorbed not so much by the view I saw as the words I heard. Lodged in my mind was Wilfred Owen's poem *The Show* where the line "My soul looked down from a vague height with death"<sup>6</sup> transports me to another time and place. Owen, later described No mans land as an "octopus of sucking clay" which resonated with me as I struggled through the bog land of the forest.

Conversely, working in the depths of the forest and looking up to the horizon, I imagined the shadow of the parapet of the trenches at 'Stand to' before the 'rosy hint of dawn' (Blunden, 1928). In my imagination, it appeared at times as if its topography had become a projection screen and I was transgressing, perhaps unwelcome, into the lives of another generation.

I considered, through many drawings, the figural nature of the forest and its hidden inner metaphoric soul. I explored through a generative process the means to penetrate through to the surface of the wound that links the surrogacy of the old forest from which men strayed, with the horrors of the mud of the trenches, "the prevailing ghostliness of the line" (Blunden, 1928: 137) and the hideous woods of Marmetz (1916), Trônes (1916) and Highwood (1916)<sup>7</sup>. The substance of the forest,

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6. Owen, 1918, *The Show*.

7. The destruction of the trees of the verdant landscape of Flanders, Artois and Picardy was remembered by the soldiers who witnessed it.

Richard Talbot Kelly wrote:

"I never lost this tree sense: to me half the war is a memory of trees: fallen and tortured trees: trees untouched in summer moon light, torn and shattered winter trees, trees green and brown, grey and white, living and dead. They gave their names to the roads and trenches, strong points and areas. Beneath their branches I found the best and the worst of war" *A Subaltern's Odyssey: A Memoir of the Great War 1915-1917*. (London, William Kimber 1980, p5).

During the course of the war, woods became notorious as death traps and killing fields. Mansel Copse, Inverness Wood, Thiepval Forest and many others became areas of utter devastation.

its visceral sediments, are used to bind together and underpin the later sequences of paintings. There is a quality of stillness and otherness in the forest that eludes me elsewhere. In the broken silence of its heart I initially sought through an awareness of necromancy, to talk to the dead, to cross a threshold through which I can inherit another's history before the process of painting took over.

The Neroche Forest is a landscape through which a succession of human activity has taken place. It is an environment resonant with the passage of people through time, within its territory, communities have left traces of themselves. The continual transfer of generations have grafted together the physical and non-physical, so there ceases to be any defined edge.

I have few artifacts, photographs or memories, to connect me to the past, and therefore it is in the seductive body/earth metaphor of rich clay that I strive to find evidence of a man's life.

The soil of the forest is fertile with humus and in a perpetual state of fecundity, of decomposition and re-composition. By analogy, these associations explain why a corpse is inhumed and buried in earth.<sup>8</sup>

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Inexperienced soldiers gathered in this 'icon of nature' in search of sanctuary and refuge only to find death in the splintered copse and dismembered woods.

Nash recognized in the Ypres Salient the destruction of trees seeing in their shattered limbs an equivalent for the human carnage that lay all around and hung in shreds from the eviscerated tree tops.

In his writing and paintings he described the Western Front as a "wilderness, a pestilent waste of shattered trees, toxic soil and scattered bones". (A Terrible Beauty, Paul Gough, p128–130).

8. CARTER, P. 1996. *The Lie of The Land*, Faber & Faber.

Seepage, hemorrhage and fungi form a drip feed between the dead and the damp, abundant, alluvial soil (which I interpret as the soul of the forest). Within the impenetrable boundaries of a neglected and redundant landscape that has been forested over by a tangle of trees, undergrowth of Rowan and a straggle of Blackthorn, I sensed a world of irredeemable loss and of life severed. In the polluted mud that stank of decay, mists arose that gathered up grief and drained the sky of colour, invoking through association the horrors of the sticky mud of the Somme and the persistent shapes of the shell holes and mine craters of Warlen Court (1916 Battle of the Somme).

As I touched the bark of old Beech trees I traced residues of earlier presence. Names and dates carved into the trunks of trees are repeated on a village's war memorial.<sup>9</sup> The arc of black, moist air carries the cries of buzzards and other carrion that conjoin in a keening litany, reminding me of other graves and dark skies of translucent matter and floating filaments of ash.

Filaments of lines as fragile as a scratch on the skin from a bramble bush and as thin as black veneer revealed the veins of trenches. Shadows appeared in the drawings that shifted as if constructing new nightmares. Half linguistic, half fantasy and at times incoherent, these spectres forced me into a new and uncertain territory. It was as though, by touching their pain, I sensed they would spin me out of myself into a new and deeper darkness.

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9. S.J. ALFORD, H.J. COLLIER, F.B. Foxwell—and their horses.



Over time as I drew, layers of the forest unfolded, revealing the palpable but insubstantial territories of a phantasmagoric threshold. Jagged, arthritic, skeletal branches and stringy, slimy, protruded roots acted as membranes through which passed the numinous presence of shapes of the anguished, corrosive stain of death and decomposing, jutting bones. The once clear water, now sullied with tears and iron, threw up hideous reflections.

In the forest, pernicious, odorous shades of weeping women and “souls of unborn children”<sup>10</sup> surrounded me; soldiers buried in strange graves haunted and filled the cracks and holes of the forest. I became an expert on lost lives and abandoned places. In darkness I came to share the fragile secrets of the forest and through second sight I knew the colour of discarnate spirits.

Etched into the sentient environment of the site, I witnessed the shadow of the passage of a man on his journey to war, the physical and emotional weight of a soldier leaving home, the sign of the metal studs of his boots inscribed into the skin of the forest. The boot, analogous to his body, left an imprint of itself in the accumulated remains of animal, vegetable and human detritus.

In this broken stillness, I felt the unbearable pain and anger of those left behind when a young soldier is severed from his source. Yet it was here in the intense, black, dense thickness of the woods that I followed him. In a moment of stark clarity I saw the terror and bitterness that would later subsume.

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10. *The Road Also*, Wilfred Owen.

I have walked the edges of the forest countless times but to enter its heart was to 'see' its hidden nature for the first time. It was no longer passive but a force, cloying, changing terrain of overlapping narratives that asserted themselves and emerged independently at different times. Ghosts, memories, suddenly broke through the ground, not as an ingested background but as a demanding, strident unfolding, which developed into countless, splintered images.

The boundaries of my practice altered and expanded in the daily ritual of working in the forest. I became attentive to new ways of accessing knowledge that included staring into the mirror of dank pools of water to read events that I could not discover in any other form. Sleep became eroded. Nightmares left me ragged and drained but provided a rich source of material.

Over time the emphasis shifted from one of recording to one in which I utilised increasingly the concept of regression. The drawings became a conduit through which complex ideas were filtered. From this methodology I was able to determine a new system of painting in which I pushed ideas of a visceral abstraction in order to juxtapose two differing timescales of experience into the same frame.

During this period the solitude of the environment echoed the solitude of my own darkness. I became profoundly influenced by the interaction between light and dark, and the play of light on dark. I imagined that the screams, which I heard on the ridges, aroused cadavers who became sensible to the slightest touch or caress. I felt that the forest was heavy and bounded by their weight, as if the trees themselves were indivisibly linked to suffering and the missing were blamed for

the manifestation of its disturbance. For all its beauty, the forest had become a surrogate memorial to a soldier, even though his body was buried in a far deeper embrace in another soil.<sup>11</sup>

## **The Black Books (Drawing)**

Notes made alongside the drawings

“The earth smelt of musk and fox, above the forest circled and cawed  
the dark menace of Cerwidens and Bran’s charcoaled jet-black birds.

I have become a familiar or agent of the forest and know  
well the shadows of trees, the stunted rowan, the old  
coppice hazel that dropped fruit into streams, the green  
hawthorn and elder and the broken chipped flint.

I saw charms bound with saliva, blood and horse hair  
lowered into streams for strength and safe return, old  
patterns of war hidden in the fog of history.

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11. For Beuys (BORER, A. 1996. *The Essential Joseph Beuys*, London: Thames and Hudson.) as for many German artists, the German ‘soil’ is a metaphor for a world in a state of trauma. Language can be equated with the impalpable soil. Language and soil relate to one another in terms of physical matter and space. Consumed in its raw material, soil brings about change—actualizes a humus grown from nightmares, through developing and regenerating potential matter. Beuys considered language and soil as being inseparable from the people. The notion of the land as fundamentally linked to the body—a body that speaks beyond death and is transubstantiated by it.

I imagined the air crowded with lost souls during the eves of  
waning moon, when clouds pressed down squandering the  
dawn. Black on black left a cast in my eye when the days seemed  
stretched like night and damp mists, bleeding, seeping grey.

At dusk I watched as numinous clouds caught fire above the  
parapet, colour spilt through them, spreading gamboge—leaking  
into orange, dark burnt scarlet into a bruised vermillion, eventually  
turning from a deep cobalt mauve into the nothingness of dirty white.

The vestiges of sunset smeared bright gun bursts  
and old blood across inaccessible skies.

If the dead are not subject to our laws, can we approach  
them? In the forest, where the bleakness of dark hurt looked  
into my eyes, I knew the shattering of men's hearts.

Stagnant pools of filthy water, covered with greasy film and  
fallen leaves, negate not only tears, the rituals of blessings and  
cleansing but suggest that all memory will be extinguished.

And in this sullied liquidity it is possible not only to imagine  
the drowning, choked lungs of suffocating gas released from  
canisters, but Wilfred Owen killed days before the cease-fire, as  
he placed duckboards across the swollen Sambre-Oise canal.”

(Nock)

The Black Books are a collection of artworks presented in a bound format.

In the Black Books the drawings describe a border zone in which the distinctiveness and edges of time dissolve, an unfolding in which images surge, struggle and subside on the paper.

Joseph Beuys considered drawing as a process of extending thought beyond speech: to see drawing as giving form to what was impossible to say and to convey a sense of the passage of thought. As an artist, Beuys understood his role as a medium on a psychic level, through which the energy of ideas passed<sup>12</sup>. Beuys taught the concept of language and drawing as being part of the same mental examination, not as a process of illumination but in the sense of a pre-logical, revelatory means of recording the workings of the mind.<sup>13</sup>

Over the course of the inquiry it occurred to me that Beuys's notion of mark making could be extended to describe and configure an edge in which experiences are felt and to delineate the visible from the unknown. Just as our skins form a physical boundary for our bodies and minds, so the drawing describes the rim of the ungraspable and gives it life. Drawing thus has the ability to search out the subtle and the furthest edge of experience, giving it an expression of form. Through the merest shift, a line can describe a flash of light as it pierces through a shadow.

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12. TEMKIN, A, ROSE, B. 1993. *Thinking Is Form: The Drawings of Joseph Beuys*, New York: Philadelphia Museum of Art & The Museum of Modern Art, New York, p83.

13. IBID, p47.

The drawings are personally significant and evolved into a journal in which I stored knowledge of the journey. The forest provided significant visual metaphors for the paintings. It prompted a paring-away of consciousness, knowledge, learnt history and decision-making to get to something more direct and authentic. The time and energy spent in the forest related directly to the many stages in the construction of later bodies of work.

The drawing practice became a major preoccupation at the start of the research. Styles markedly shifted over the course of the inquiry to become a vital component in the process of making new work. The early drawings contained the seeds of later work and, as a vehicle of knowledge, became deeply packed and layered with ideas, text and experimentation. They provided a catalyst and a fundamental source of inspiration. These self-sufficient black books became my most intimate connection to my experience of constructing memories and of visually imagining the First World War. Due to their size, they accompanied me everywhere.

In interpreting books as an art form, I consider the work of Anselm Kiefer<sup>14</sup>. The format of his books are not simply an accompaniment to his paintings, but occupy a pivotal position in his activities. They remain art works in the traditional sense and their themes are defined by the title he gives them (for example: *Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen*, 1974). In their early structures the sequence of pages form a progressive figural narrative, image by image a latent meaning is hinted at, however, and what bears relevance in this inquiry, is in the close attention he pays to the symbolic material he employs. For example, *In the face of The German*

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14. Born 1945 in Donaueschingen, Germany.

*People: Coal for 200 years* (1974) the pages are constructed from charcoal drawings over printed with the texture of wood planks—alluding to the connection between the German people and their identity with the landscape of Germany.

In a further series photographs of landscapes gradually gave way to fire and thick smoke. In the last pages the landscape had entirely disappeared under layers of black matter, signifying the policy of 'scorched earth' by the Nazi regime. In later works, canvas was cut, burnt and made into a number of editions. In other books, the images are gradually incased in sand.

Daniel Arasse<sup>15</sup> suggests that books are inseparable from Kiefer's overall process, and the critical role played by the books in the artistic development of his work, is underlined by the fact that they constitute a sub-narrative as complex as his paintings.<sup>16</sup>

But perhaps the ultimate purpose is not only their function as arts of memory, but as objects of mourning. Furthermore as recognising them as containers or repositories for revelatory knowledge I came to understand the trajectory of my own black books as conveying a sense of passage.

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15. ARASSE,D. 2001. *Anselm Kiefer*, London: Thames & Hudson Ltd).

16. During a later period discoloured and heavily eroded lead changed the appearance of the books into monumental proportions. These were significantly connected to the use of straw and other materials in works such as *The High Priestess* and *The Breaking of the Vessels*. 1990. ARASSE,D. 2001. *Anselm Kiefer*, London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.

During the early stage I focused on collecting three forms of data:

- a) The external topography.
- b) The internal dialogue and the felt experience of the environment.
- c) Associated artistic practices.

In order to draw quickly, I used graphite pencils, oil pigment and wax sticks to record and prompt. Here I integrated traditional techniques with a freedom of expression. Sharp, brittle lines and erasures of marks indicated the sprawl of trees, barbed wire and deep watercourses. Smudges and soft indistinct lines suggested the interminable distant horizons and spectral cloud formations. Crude brushstrokes acted as a counterpoint to the thin incantatory ink scratchings, covering and overlaying earlier work. The layering of archeological depth was to become a factor not only in the books, but, later in all three sequences throwing up questions as to how this could be achieved through three different visual approaches. This prompted ideas of conceiving painting as an evolving event over time and became a subject I would further explore within the context of the research.

Although the motivation was not to make preliminary drawings for the paintings, ideas did develop which contributed to the practice. During this period, I introduced the idea of an imagined thread or the 'Red Yarn' (Gurney, 1915) of the *First Time In*, which describes Ivor Gurney's entrance and trajectory through the war. The thread appears and disappears as a conceptual device that connects the sequences.



The drawings evolved through accumulating information such as time, mood and atmosphere. The colours I used emphasised selected areas of information and were a combination of solid and translucent glazes. I altered my methodology many times in order to apply meaning and drawing into a field that expanded through experimentation and chance. The ability to make marks rapidly enabled me to think graphically within the event of the drawing and to take risks that would be unthinkable in later paintings. Erasure of lines would act as a withdrawing of former decisions and allowed for changes in ideas. This led to the layering of other manipulated images on top of each other, distorting the final picture; this added an uncomfortable frisson to an already unstable and unpredictable outcome.

Joseph Beuys described drawing as a visible entity that gives a form to thought—the changing point from the invisible powers to a materialisation of that thought. Beuys taught that drawing is the first step in making a psychological space coexist within a pictorial space.<sup>17</sup>

With this in mind, I understood why at the start, the forest drawings were tentative, tense, hesitant, almost withheld marks of rubbed lines, harsh edges and spit. However, the turning point in the work was best suggested by the fluidity in the watery substances of materials I later turned to. I exchanged the charcoal and lead for opaque reddish-brown paint, mud, Indian ink, household paint, oil and water. These combinations caused a considerable variety in tonality and texture and presented a distinct change in the drawing techniques. Through seepage the pages of the books inherited memory of former drawings and, through these, unexpected outcomes, new narratives transcribed the drawings further into an imprint of grief and longing. The red oxide that oozed and gained egress onto the

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17. TEMKIN, A, ROSE, B. 1993. *Thinking Is Form The Drawings of Joseph Beuys*, New York: Philadelphia Museum of Art & The Museum of Modern Art, New York, p73.

surface of the forest floor was loaded with powerful references presenting all the weight and stickiness of a soldier's death, burial and his inescapable attachment to the ground. An archetypal landscape of war began to dominate the imagery of the second series of the Black Books.

The earth was darker in tonality and lit by a melancholic light that emphasized a sense of the claustrophobic. The horizons were high or non-existent. Rising from polluted springs and streams, the smudged lines of fumes suggested the fires of Hieronymus Bosch, the Great War or the pitted landscape and figures of the frottage drawings of Max Ernst. Also influential at this point were the photographs of the American artist Sally Mann. Mann based her project *What Remains* (2001) in the forested landscapes of the American Civil War battlefields of Antietam and again at an isolated site of a forensic forest of decomposing bodies. Using glass plates of the nineteenth century collodion process she evoked death, its passing and the experience of where the land subsumes the dead. Later Mann extended the theme of the forested environment to record the scars left by a young suicide on the wooded environment surrounding her own property in Virginia.<sup>18</sup>

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18. The nature of the forest as an iconographic theme associated with the history, trauma and fear, is elucidated in the works of Anselm Kiefer, Sally Mann and Ann Hamilton. All three practices conceptualize the forest as a site for transformative process, in order to embodying a presence.

The relationship between the forest and art is also exemplified in Ann Hamilton's *The Picture is Still* in which Hamilton chose to hang a forest of charcoal in a 'dense cloud of charred' branches at head level in a former military warehouse Yokosuka Trocura, south of Tokyo. In the contemporary memorial installation that recalls the dropping of the Hiroshima bomb, Hamilton stresses the physical element of the forest and its metaphoric ability to link sensuously with the human situation.

Kiefer's focus is predicated on a latent kinship, or illusion to a past in which is accentuated Germany's history and culture. The watercolour self-portraits of 1971 play on the factor his surname means Fir or Pine tree. Daniel Arasse (*Labyrinth*, p36) suggest Kiefer saw himself as an allegorical incantation/incarnation of 'the Green Man' or 'Man of the Forest' 1971 and the 'Wald' as fundamental to Germany's natural identity and mythology. Examples of the central positioning of the forestry in Kiefer's paintings are *The Destructive Fires in the Battle of Teutobury Forest* 1977 and *The World Ash Tree*.

These words accompanied Sally Mann's project: *What Remains*.

"Lose not an atom  
...and the woods where my dear children's blood  
Trickling redden'd ..  
...Exhale me them centuries hence, breathe me their breath,

## Black Books

The Black Books are in four formats: 4×4in, 6×6in, 8×10in, 8×14in.

“The sensation of death can attach itself to a  
landscape as well as a body”<sup>19</sup>

(Bennett, 2005, p93-95)

Materials: Black grey monotones, charcoal oil sticks, graphite pencils, mud, spit  
and turps.

I requisitioned uninhabited farm buildings in conjunction with the forest as  
my studio.

Still visible were remnants of the forest’s role for military use: barbed wire, Nissen  
huts, chemical spillage and half-buried ammunition and equipment.

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Let not an atom be lost  
Oh years and graves! Oh air and soul! Oh my dead,  
An aroma sweet.  
Exhale them perennial sweet death, years, centuries hence”  
(Walt Whitman—*Leaves of Grass*)

19. BENNETT, J 2005. *Empathic Vision*, California: Stanford University Press, p93–95.

The Black Books recorded:

“Water which bites into broken banks

Storm-broken, split branches

Rock and flint

Circling crows

The wind (howling of battle fields)

The barrier of fallen tree trunks and old field posts”

(Nock)

All these served to warn me of the difficulties I faced in finding the means to penetrate the interior gloom of the forest and what it strives to protect.

The admission of my difficulties is shown by the scale of the drawings. The first books are small, acknowledging that I was not yet prepared for what the forest had to reveal. Though the thick marks are overwhelmingly disproportionate to the page, the double-spread sequences form a figurative narrative of my journey through overgrown track-ways.

### **Book 1: 4x4in**

The drawings are not reinforced by a single perspective but multiple perspectives which exploit a quality of immersive verticality enforced by the absence of a horizon. I have represented different fragments of physical locations within a single spatial plane.

## **Book 2: 4x4in**

The second of these books reverses land and sky, repositioning the horizon to the base of the page to demonstrate unfathomable skies that point to a network of associations: the view from the trenches of shell and bomb bursts, smoke, mist, sunset and sunrise, strange auguries and the Angel of Mons.

## **Books 3: 6x6in**

“Images rise like bruises, blackness fills me” (and) “filter through me and spread into my fingers”.<sup>20</sup>

(Michaels, 1997, p5)

These books occupy a central role in the research. They are not viewed as simply an accompaniment to the painting or as a commentary on it. They are a major part of the project. Though autonomous and small in size, they remain artworks in a traditional sense. Each deals with a specific theme and all are used to support a discursive argument.

To gain insight and information, the drawings included structured observation in the form of probing for, and producing, a direct response to the forest. In the drawings I sought to describe settings that would evoke imaginative ideas which could be transmitted into future works. The ideas produced in the drawings implied not only the vertical lines of an English forest and the forest of the Western Front, but also of Germany's identity through her forests.<sup>21</sup>

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20. MICHAELS, A. 1997. *Fugitive Pieces*, London: Bloomsbury Publications plc, p5.

21. During this period I visited the forests in Germany around Wuppertal taking photographs and drawings.

The drawings yielded specific information that enabled me to make a connection to the past. In this context, the border or edge of the sheet of paper echoed the repetitive nature of the work, which implied an act of daily ritual. The border was not regarded as an edge or a frame but as a boundary between the creative idea and its memory, capturing the moment of observation.

The process of collecting knowledge/memory went beyond the normal interaction with the forest into something that was more intense and intimate. Knowledge occurred on many different levels: in the forest's geo-topography and archeological elements, in its atmosphere and, fleetingly glimpsed in the trees and sub-soils, the verticality of history.

I used more than one perspective in locating the drawings in order to demonstrate the sense of immersion within the body of the land, dislocation and unease. The drawings demonstrated both the history and the physicality of the environment. The sense of burial, mud, high horizons, darkness, shadows, damp moisture and feelings of morbidity were enhanced by a sky that closed in upon the scene. The locations were heavy, unyielding and materially dense. The remoteness of the site related to the fading memory of the ghosts of long dead soldiers.

#### **Books 4: 8x12in and 8x14in**

In the surrounding forest, I am reminded of:

“The white mists (with the wafting perfume of cankering funeral wreaths) was moving with slow, cold currents above the pale grass, the frogs in their fens were uttering their long drawn co-aash co-aash; and from the line the popping of rifles grew and more threatening”.

(Blunden, 1928: 19)

“Hung an atmosphere of anticipated terror thick as mist”

(Blunden, 1928, p161)

Materials: Indian and Chinese inks, white emulsion, oil, water and turpentine.

These series are markedly different in character from the previous Books. In the double-spreads I largely dispersed with mid-tones, the tones that would normally denote the transition from light to dark. Instead I used blacks and white, pools of deep shadows without half tones, to suggest the extremes of nature and ruination, life and death: the corrosive daylight which illuminated the terrors of war, the bleached flesh and bones of the landscape, and the toxic blackness which highlighted decay, wasted men and nature, putrefaction, pungent, strange odours and vermin.

An extra dimension was provided by the addition of montaged text and scraps of earlier drawings, over which I washed a mixture of fluids that included ink, house hold paint and turpentine. This caused the paint to soak through many of the levels of the book causing damage and disintegration. Many images were despoiled, stuck together and had later to be torn apart. Through tears in the paper it was possible to see the memory of other work on the preceding pages. Though I attempted to repair the mutilated drawings, many images became inevitably absent.

This progression of processes, I would return to in the last series *No-Thing*.

## Findings

The drawings within the Black Books are informed by the transgression of history and transmission of affect. The Black Books demonstrate an internalised lament, dark with colour. Memory is lost in the deep depth of an immense void. Through descent into a charnel of dark, oily, water-spills and through gases emerging from the mud where scarred trees fester in swampy water demonic in its corruption, I became aware of sharing somebody else's memories. I realised the need for sensitivity and watchfulness in order that I might become aware of what else lay beyond the margins. The location was never specific; instead it was drawn from the experience of moving through the vacuum of the forest in which its forbidding qualities pointed to absence. Its darkness and oppressive quality seemed to me to be appropriate to the memory of the dead. The books became a laboratory for memory, a reservoir of experience and a receptive structure in which knowledge could accumulate through the layers of its pages.<sup>22</sup>

The books are inseparable from the artistic process and in this context extend the notion of Dermatillomania exposing a lost history and making this a central concept to develop in later works.

They provided a site in which knowledge lead to the development of ideas and new methodologies. Early drawings were often revisited and further developed into a new direction. The main function of the books was to prompt and facilitate a move away from the pictorial into a more conceptualized, process-driven mode.

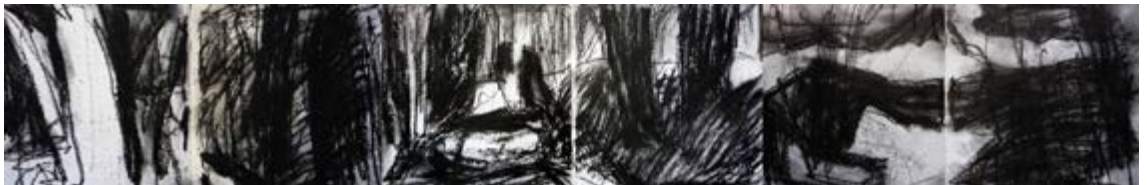
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22. Kiefer's earlier books contained a double page mixture of photographic images that were overlaid with paint and sand. These pages were then mounted on cardboard and bound. The photographs were based on a set-up in the studio. He later incorporated these qualities into his paintings. ROSENTHAL, M 1987. *Anselm Kiefer*, Chicago & Philadelphia: The Art Institute of Chicago.





Abandoned farmstead



## Black Book Drawings 1

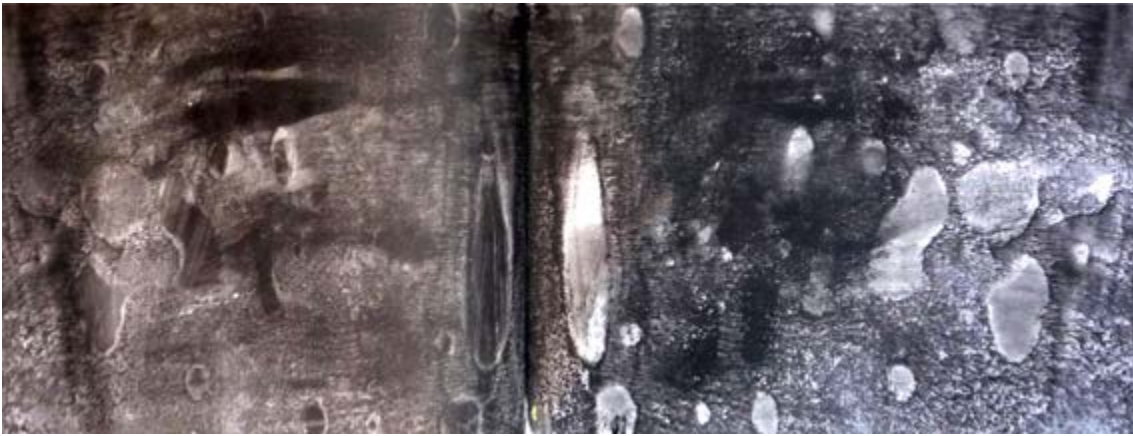


## Black Book Drawings 2





### Black Book Drawings 3

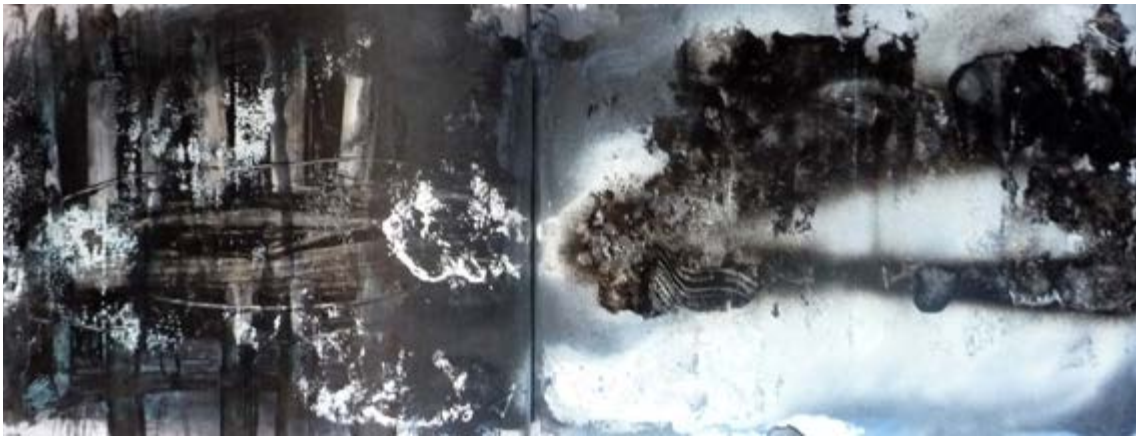


Black Book Drawings 4



## Black Book Drawings 5





Black Book Drawings 6



## Black Book Drawings 7







Black Book Drawings 9



# Sequence Two

## (No-Where)

### Critical Overview

Sequence Two comprises of two series of work: 1) The Demonic, and 2) The Boundless Sea.

In *No-Where* I re-establish the forgotten link between the romantic quest and perilous encounters of William Morris's *The Well at the Worlds End* (1896) with the soldier poet Edmund Blunden's *The Undertones of War* a pastoral elegy written in 1928.

By studying this forgotten connection between Morris and Blunden my research revealed the problem of finding a visual language to express the inexpressible misery of the First World War.

Through the potential destructive act of transforming the paintings into a gothic confluence of paint and nightmares, I aimed to draw on both the imagery expressed in their iconic literature, whilst being indebted to Joseph Beuys's<sup>1</sup> approach to the symbolism of materials.

In *The Demonic*—a group of wax-works on paper, I interpret the menace that lies beneath/draws close to the memory of a vulnerable and poignant beauty of a landscape on the edge of disaster.

The *Boundless Sea*, the work comprises of two triptychs. By initially using traditional methods of painting which I later destroy and overlay with a tough calligraphy of industrial car aerosol, I re-appropriate Morris and Blunden's imagery of: a once serene landscape now ravaged by war; the diffused character of the trenches; the grotesque violence which pointed to the impossibility of a single static view, suggesting an omni-directional perspective. I felt this insight would support a shift from my previous approaches to painting. I now filled the canvas surface, not with emptiness, but with agitated oil spills and highly worked areas of paint, to infer numerous actions occurring simultaneously. Artillery barrages and shell bursts juxtaposed against atmospheres thick with the haze of smoke and gas, driven against dawn at Sanctuary Wood (1914) and sunsets at Ypres.

These works also explore emotive colour as an expressive medium: pitiless virulent reds, savage sprawls of orange and purples together with pink tinged tenebrous greys.

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1. BORER, A. 1996. *The Essential Joseph Beuys*, London: Thames and Hudson.

## Critical Reflection

In this sequence of paintings I interpret the metaphysical and poetic dimension of war: reality and imagination. For this approach, I draw on the imagery and language of William Morris's *The Well at the World's End*, which was commonly quoted from and freely used at the time to describe the indescribable. Images such as:

"They came to the dry tree" (chp18, p72)

and

"But most (were) men folk of whom the most part were weaponed  
and some with drawn swords in their hands. Whatever  
semblance of moving was in them was when the eddying  
wind of the valley stirred the rags of their raiment..."

"But at very midmost of this dreary theatre rose up a huge and  
monstrous tree, whose topmost branches were ever the horns which  
they had seen from below the hill's brow... all around about the roots of  
it was a pool of clear water that cast back the image of the valley side  
and the bright sky of the desert... and as they passed by the dead folk,  
for whom they had after to turn aside, they noted that each of the dead  
leathery faces was drawn up in a grin as though they had died in pain..."  
(Morris, 1892, p72)

*The Well at the World's End*, published in 1896, was a 228,000-word work of fiction written in the style of a Victorian pseudo-romance. It is an account of a young knight's journey through a demonic landscape<sup>2</sup>, filled with dread, dangers and strange beings. The knight's aim was to find a magical well, whose waters held the power to heal the wounds of battle.

The historian Paul Fussell suggests in his book *The Great War and Modern Memory*<sup>3</sup> that, for the war generation, a young soldier going up the line to his destiny must have felt as if he were the hero of a medieval romance. Morris's story conveyed not only heroic adventure, but also provided a powerful and significant source of images in which to communicate the indescribable. The importance of its literary position at the time is reflected in the general familiarity with which soldiers quoted from it, and by the use of its poetic verses by journalists in their reports from the front, in particular in such papers as the *Illustrated Weekly*.<sup>4</sup>

Clive Staples Lewis, and more commonly known as C.S. Lewis, was nineteen when he joined the war. Like many young, literate men of the time, he took Morris's romance with him, together with a copy of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. For frontline soldiers familiar with 'Wood Debatable' and 'Wood Perilous', the horror, dread and sinister aspect of the woods' dark interiors held parallels with the woods of Mametz, Trônes and High Wood of the Western Front.

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2. Such as 'Ralph cometh to the wood Perilous' (chp 8 p40) and "For the road went straight through a rough waste, no pasture—and beyond this the land rose into a long ridge, and on the ridge was a wood thick with trees and no break in them..."

3. FUSSELL, P. 1975. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York: Oxford University Press, p135–136.

4. FUSSELL, P. 1975. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York: Oxford University Press, p136. Letters from the Front edition, John Laffin. 1973, p12.

The term 'Demonic' is pivotal to this sequence of paintings. It establishes a counter-definition to the traditional, perceived understanding of the pastoral landscape of the period before the War. As previously explored in Sequence 1, I welcomed the notion that a landscape is never simply the backdrop to history or merely its witness but through events becomes an active participant. This recognition allowed me to conceive new ways of invoking the war through paint, this included the juxtaposition of wax and car spray, and the fragility of paint handling with the coarseness and barbarism of graffiti.

The *Demonic* defines the Western Front in terms of Northrop Frye's<sup>5</sup> literary demonic imagery: a world that is closely linked to images of an 'existential hell' a nightmare world of "bondage and pain and confusion...the world of...perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and monuments of folly" (Fussell, 1975, p343); In the Demonic world, we find inaccessible skies, lice, rats and wild dogs abound. The vegetable world is reflected in the trenches, in its terrible forests, in Trônes and Mametz woods and the wasteland of No-man's land. Morris's 'Dry Tree' resembles the tree of suffering and death. It is to be found not only in the woods of the Western Front, but in the form of Calvaries and hastily constructed crosses, in the mineral world of the machinery and detritus of an industrial war, and in the spilled blood that filled the fetid shell craters.

In 1928, Edmund Blunden published his war autobiography in which he graphically relates his experiences of the Somme, Ypres and Passchendaele:

**"The chaos and slaughter of men, their hopes and fears".**

(Blunden, 1928, p3)

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5. FRYE, N. 1957. *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, New Jersey. (FUSSELL, P. 1975, p343).



Blunden acknowledges that the pattern of war's experience is shaped by a soldier's individual interpretation and what he fears most. It is through the destruction of nature that Blunden is able to see things clearly. Arcadian and primordial references provided a resource that allowed not only for an imaginative language in which to describe the destructive nature of war, but also allowed for moments of release and escape in the midst of violence and fear.<sup>6</sup>

Blunden, by reflecting on the long-held tradition of the Arcadian landscape, makes clear his feelings when he describes the brutal trajectory of the war. Through broken and fragmentary vignettes of events, his writing has the power to establish a visual connection to its horrors. It has been suggested by many commentators (including Fussell and Winter), that the activity of war is backward-looking, where the soldier seemingly dwells in the period before the present. Blunden uses imagery that is retrogressive, traditional and reflects the pastoral, pre-industrial England in order to withstand for a while the horrors and grief of the Western Front, its "scene of bondage, frustration or absurdity"<sup>7</sup> (Blunden, 1928, p83).

Blunden (as a front-line soldier) desires to find meaning for the inescapable horror that he is witnessing. His mental state of mind turns to an elegiac pastoralism. He mourns for an Arcadia lost in the battlefields by illuminating the insane and barbaric destruction of nature in a conflict conducted against a landscape of the bitter beauty of 'summer ripeness'. (Blunden, 1928, p34).

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6. FUSSELL, P. 1975. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York: Oxford University Press.

7. BLUNDEN, E. 1928. *Undertones Of War*, London: Penguin Books, p83.

His approach is to fear the demise of a universe alive with nature's spirits and mourns its passing. This is an incantatory ideology whose sacred myths are pre-Christian. It is a landscape untainted by the world of men. Although it provided Blunden with a distraction from the reality of his war environment for a short period, Fussell advises that this was not a form of poetic escapism, but a means to bear witness to a greater loss. He mourns the contamination of a once sacred, unpolluted land: the beauty of Picardy before it was destroyed; the 'innocent green wood' and the 'silver lake' on the borders of Thiepval Wood, all co-existing alongside the deep, polluted dug-outs and duckboards.

Blunden was eighteen, a young subaltern, when he joined the Royal Sussex Regiment in 1915. As a young soldier he considered the countryside as magical and as precious as English Literature and felt that both were alive, had feelings and were equally menaced by war.

The 'pathos and shock' of the 'murdered' countryside prompted in Blunden, more bitterness than the prospect of his own demise, for, as a gassed asthmatic he longed for death that would reunite him with his friends. Throughout the war Blunden remained distraught at the site "of a whole sweet countryside amok with murder" (Blunden, 1928, p259) a land laid waste.<sup>8</sup>

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8. The events in Blunden's war, though occurring in a linear chronological order, are broken and fragmented. Fussell believes that his descriptions are validated by the authority of actual incidents, making them not imaginative narratives but testimonies. Fussell, 1975, p259.

The romantic schoolboy-soldier perceived the countryside as being alive. For him, the Naiads and Hamadryads still lurked in the countryside west of the Somme. Just prior to the German attack in March 1916, he wrote:

“The willows and waters in the hollow made up a picture so silvery and unsubstantial that one would spend a lifetime to paint it. Could any countryside be more sweetly at rest, more alluring to Naiads and Hamadryads, more incapable of dreaming a field gun? Fortunately it was that moment I was filled with simple joy. I might have known the war by this time, but I was still young to know its depth of ironic cruelty. No conjecture that in a few weeks Buire-Sur Ancre would appear much the same as the cataclysmal railway cutting by hill 69, came from that innocent green wood.”

(Blunden, 1928, p191)

During his first few months he enters a perverse pastoral landscape in which “at some points in the trench skulls appear like mushrooms”. Later he invoked all the beloved details of an pastoral landscape as a “model and measure” in which to judge the war; “not roses but shell holes around the door at Cuinchy”. He begins to understand its drift, in which nobody is in charge, “towards insensitive destruction conducted against a background of unbearable beauty” (Blunden 1928, p261).

Blunden re-established old themes and latent kinships to create new juxtapositions between war and nature, and provided a mnemonic logic in depicting a spoiled landscape as a fundamental part of the act of memorization and mourning. The radically de-familiarized and defiled landscape presented new allegories in which to express the evil, horror and ugliness of its destruction.

Increasingly his writing draws parallels with Frye's demonic imagery, as in these lines from *A House in Festubert*:

“What blind eyes meet in the mist and moon  
And yet with blossoming trees robber round  
With gashes black, itself one wound  
Surprisingly still it stands its ground  
Sad soul, how stay you,”  
(Blunden, 1928, p195)

At Bois du Biez Blunden described the ‘black’ and ‘scowling tree’ amid the greening of June’s summer grasses and the legend of the nearby “gaunt omnipresence” (Blunden, 1928, p40) of Neuve Chapelle where, during an offensive in the previous year, a battalion entered the wood never to be seen again.

## **The Psuedo-Romance and the Western Front**

Though the ‘boundless sea’ was not on the front line overlooking No man's land, Fussell suggests that Siegfried Sassoon, in writing his *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man*, had Morris’s sinister setting in mind when he described the battlefield:

“On wet days the trees a mile away were like ash grey  
smoke rising from the naked ridges and it felt very much as  
if we were at the ‘end of the world’...and so we were: for that  
enemy world...had no relation to the landscape of life.”  
(Sassoon, 1928, p572)

Blunden also used the resources of Morris's imagery in describing the winter in Thiepval in 1916 'as sheer hell...a filthy limb—strewn and most lonely world's end...'. (Blunden, 1928, p162)

Hugh Quigley<sup>9</sup> quoted Morris's text on two occasions. The first time it served to enable him to see the horrors of the war, when confronting the "ghostly canal at Ypres, clotted with corpses...like the poison pool under the dry tree...around which lay bodies of men with dead leathery faces...drawn up in a grin as though died in pain"<sup>10</sup>. The second occasion enabled Quigley to remember events of the war, by associating aspects of the fighting with literary text. The decimated cloth hall at Ypres in the Autumn of 1917 is an example: "it was (so) battered that not a single sculptural figure, or shadow of a figure remained except one gargoye which leaned down as jauntily as ever" (this description derives from one of Morris's leering figures). Quigley<sup>11</sup> added: "when I came back this incident will remain one of the treasured memories, something to recount time and time again, as happening in a land of horrors and dread whence few return like the country described in the *Well at the World's End*".

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9. Royal Scots.

10. MORRIS. W. 1971. Introduction by Carter, L. *The Well at the Worlds End*, London: Pan Books Ltd. Book 2 chp 18.

11. Passchendaele and the Somme 159.

Charles Carrington (*A Subalterns War*, p117) was also intimate with Morris's romance. He described the infamous machine guns, which dominated the Somme from the top of the white chalk burial tumulus known as the Butte of Warlencourt, as:

“terrible enormous living things .... That ghostly hill became fabulous,  
it shone white in the night and seemed to leer at you like an ogre  
in a fairy tale. It loomed up unexpectedly peering into trenches  
where you thought yourself as safe: it haunted your dreams.”  
(Carrington, 1929, p117)

Another soldier Guy Chapman<sup>12</sup> wrote in *A Passionate Prodigality* (1918, p43) that he could not throw off the notion that he was being watched “There is a secret magic about these wastelands (i.e. the environs of the derelict villages on the edge of the battle fields) while you wander through the corrupted overgrown orchard there is always someone at your back, you turn, it is nothing but a creak of a branch...”. These accounts articulate the universal significance of Morris's text in the First World War.

I drew on these resources in Sequence 2 to find a visual vocabulary to interpret the uncanny and surreal landscape of the trenches, a war which Otto Dix called the ‘work of the Devil’<sup>13</sup>. The war caused such a deep rift with the ordinary world that it became difficult, if not impossible, for an exhausted soldier's narrowed imagination to find the resources to render the war's enormity, cruelty and ghoulish defilement of both humanity and nature; a landscape altered from a rural haven into a war's infernal industrial setting.

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12. Royal Fusiliers.

13. WINTER, J. 1995. *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

New analogies were needed to express the terrible consequences of conflict: the radically de-familiarized environment in which the insane barbarity of battle was conducted against a landscape seen by Blunden as one containing Devas as well as those of an eidolon nature.

In order to find a literal rendering for the phantasmagoric and the demonic, I looked to the dualism, responsiveness and sensuality of the wax of the mortician's craft<sup>14</sup>: the ability of wax to summon a memory of something that is absent; the frisson of wax to imply a record of something that has been lost (a death mask). I wished to determine forms that evoked vivid images that arose both from fantasy and recollection.

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14. Wax has an ancient history. It was used in votive statues, religious reliquaries, living likeness, effigies, mummification, death masks and the detritus of Victorian paraphernalia. Wax anatomizes the corpse to create an illusion of memory suspended in historical time, and through its malleable capacity insinuates life. The wax model was coloured and vulgarly enhanced to provide the means in which memory and mourning could be sustained.

Its capacity for precise detail as a means of commemoration was a precursor to photography, its capacity for precise detail and surface semblance to flesh and the ability to hide the corruption of the body, wax communicates memory and an illusion of life. (WARNER, M. 2002. *Phantasmagoria*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p23).

In its antithetical connection with reality and embodiment, wax gives rise to questions of mortality. By stimulating life, wax cheats death. Encaustic coloured wax was used to mimic and cover the corruption of the body and through this semblance the dead were resurrected. Taken at death, the mask is inert and blank, but it is the nearest remnant that can be preserved before the body's final disintegration. (WARNER, M. 2002. *Phantasmagoria*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p24).

In the *Boundless Sea*<sup>15</sup>, The Tableau Vivant (of the trenches), I interpreted a landscape on the edge of nihilism in the face of advancing sinister spectres, shells, billowing gas and malignant horrors on the edge of an abyss, by replacing wax with a contemporary catalyst of aerosol paint and modern chemicals. These paintings were initiated by Blunden's description of a terrible battle near Ypres in 1917. I juxtaposed this with the "ugly waste" of *The Well at the World's End*.<sup>16</sup>

### Series 1. 'The Demonic', Wax on Paper

"My soul, dread not the pestilence that hags  
The valley; flinch not you, my body young,  
At these great shouting smokes and snorting jags  
Of fiery iron; as yet may not be flung  
The dice that claims you..."<sup>17</sup>  
(Blunden, 1928, p199)

After an exhausting attack at Hamel and a 'bad time fighting at Thievpal', Blunden is reunited, during a march to Ypres, with the horrors of the verdant valley, which had once been the "haunt of every leafy spirit and the blue eyed ephydriads..." but '...now wore slimy blackened bone" (Blunden, 1928, p93). On entering the darkness of 'Stuff Trench'—three feet deep in corpses—Blunden heard the dragging feet of soldiers crossing a nearby footbridge to reach

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15. This title is taken from *The Well at the Worlds End* "Where the land ended there was but a cliff or less than a hundred feet above the eddying of the sea." p79 and "At the uttermost end of the world"—"and strange land, this was an end of earth, with its grass, trees and streams and the beginning of the ocean which stretched away changed-less and it might be for ever". p80 coupled with another quote from the 'The Well at the Worlds End' The water is heavy with venom. Accursed valley. p74.

16. MORRIS. W. 1971. Introduction by Carter, L. *The Well at World's End*, London: Pan Books Ltd, chapter 17, p67.

17. 'Preparation for Victory', BLUNDEN, E. 1928. *Undertones Of War*, London: Penguin Books, p199.



Ancre. The sound reminded him of the Avebury site “where a sad guard of trees dripping with the darkness of Autumn...the shadows on the water were so profound and unimaginable that one felt them as the environment of a grief of Gods.” (Blunden 1928, p68–176).

Of the ancient waterways surrounding the battlefields, Blunden wrote “the streams were now foul yellow and brown in colour, the hideous site of suffering Eels, Breams and Jacks bloated in death and the sides of the ditches oozed gases that fowled the air” (Blunden 1928, p151).

These descriptions contextualise my practice within a malevolent landscape, where the preservation of a memory of horror extends into a present. Corrupted images of horror triggered a loathsome scene, which I interpreted through the use of wax to describe a gothic and phantasmagoric domain. The use of wax in its funereal ability to resemble a surrogate life that enfolded the remains of the dead (or a likeness to the dead) are transformed into a medium for envisioning the terrors of the *Demonic*. Wax’s literal and figurative ability to mimic nature and give an assemblance to skin coupled with wax’s unique role as a guarantor of a formal existence<sup>18</sup> were qualities I wished to express. I wanted to find ways to present difficult ideas, such as Blunden’s primordial ‘naiads’ and ‘hameliyads’ on the edge of extinction, juxtaposed with a description of a sight at Cassel. This was an area that ran from Bethune to La Basse where enchanted gardens filled with flowering shrubs and gooseberry bushes hid the brutality of a field battery.

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18. WARNER, M. 2002. *Phantasmagoria*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p16.

## Embalmer's Wax

Throughout history, wax has anatomized the corpse to create an illusion of memory suspended in time and, through its malleable capacity, has mimicked nature. The wax model, when coloured and vulgarly enhanced, provided the means in which memory and mourning could be sustained.

During the late 17th Century the Abbott and Sicilian artist Gaetano Giulio Zumbo, made delicately morbid, miniature tableaux of death and hell, depicting tormented souls burning in red painted wax. Later Pope Benedict XIV authorised pioneering medical investigation though replicating the body in wax. He evinced that there should be no superstition in using cadavers as the soul had already left the body. In the 1760's the French portrait sculpture Jean Antoine Houdon disfigured the idealised classical bust by carving into, disfiguring and causing other injuries to the surface of the skin.<sup>19</sup>

Wax was also used during the terrors of the French Revolution, where wax effigies were regarded as reliquaries. The original contact with the subject had been severed; instead, the hallucinating effect of the absence of the former presence was stressed through the replica of the artifacts.<sup>20</sup>

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19. WARNER, M. 2002. *Phantasmagoria*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p16.

20. Later Madame Tussauds was to follow the artist David's lead in placing the wax corpse into a pictorial setting. David had redefined the metaphysical religious ritual of the wax effigy for purposes of narrative. Contemporary artists who have worked in wax include Helen Chadwick, Gavin Turk and Marc Quinn. (Warner 2002).

As a major component in the painting I have used the mutability of wax, its bifarious nature, its translucent character and its ability to replicate nature. My approach has owed something to Joseph Beuys in as much as recognising that certain materials contain intrinsic references that carry multiple meanings<sup>21</sup>. These references establish case studies for me to contextualise my material references, whilst building up a palette of processes to communicate the demonic domain.

In more contemporary practice fat and felt are deployed within Beuys's sculpture to intimate a specific cultural meaning in his work.<sup>22</sup> Likewise wax assumes an alchemical presence when transformed into the assemblance of nature, but is flawed in its ability to become incarnate. Over time I found that the wax paintings became transposed into something grotesquely faded, distorted and by definition a reflection of the demonic, noxious and pungent war landscape.

I transcribed the uncanny, surreal and at times haunted landscapes of the forest and the Western Front into a visual interpretation of a corrupted and poisoned site that was once innocent. As a metaphor for a lost and mourned paradise I substituted water colours for the clamminess of wax pigment, not as an image, but as an equivalent for the preservation of an old sorrow: an embalmed, delicate, faded petal that reflected a dirge or a passing bell.

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21. Beuys relates the story of his misadventure during the Second World War. Drafted into the Luftwaffe in 1940 he is shot down over the Crimea in 1943. Normadic Tartars save his life by wrapping him in felt and fat. These materials came to acquire significance in his work and teachings, however, later his artworks tended to become relics and mementos of his performances. LUCIE-SMITH, E. 1995, London: Phaidon Press Ltd, p141-143.

22. Beuys in a discussion with Bernard Lamarche-Vadel 'Is it about a Bicycle' op.ct. BORER, A. 1996, p10. The Essential Joseph Beuys, London: Thames and Hudson, p15. Beuys explains "fat was a great discovery for me, as it was a material that could appear very chaotic and indeterminate. I could influence it with heat or cold and I could transfer it".

The works on paper are small, perhaps establishing a sense of their lack of importance in the scheme of things—a reminder of an insignificant postcard from the front.

These images are only a projection of my thoughts and many other images would have been possible. But I endeavored to see through the wounds of a lost generation to conflate on a single sheet the flooding of images, not filled with the healing qualities of wax, but the wax of a reliquary in which a vigil is kept, or the emptiness of a yellow suitcase.

The cracking and creasing of the wax encaustic is a consequence of time and points to wax's inherent material properties.<sup>23</sup> The wax takes on its own translucent qualities through its surfaces, but through excoriation I sought to find what lay inside, hidden and inaccessible in a motionless, indefinable fluid: a silent, still substance, blurred and empty of presence, which neither sight, touch nor words could comprehend.

I found wax's mutability hard to control. It was easily fractured when I applied it onto a two dimensional surface. At times I lost not only the image but the memory of the image. When overworked, the surface quickly lost its coherence, becoming dark, muddy and spoilt. However, through learning to handle it carefully when applying each separate layer of colour, I was able to extend images that had been previously determined by the limits of my imagination. When dry, the medium formed a translucent and delicate skin that captured a sense of decay within its surface: an assemblage of a tinted encaustic portraiture of a demonic and sinister landscape cast within a war zone.

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23. In its mortuary qualities, wax anatomizes the corpse to create an allusion of suspended historical time; its peculiar translucent, slightly clammy sweatiness forestalls the corruption of flesh. (Warner 2002).

## Series 2: The Boundless Sea (Tableau Vivant)

**2 x triptychs: canvas—3 x 4ftx6ft**

After a terrible battle near Ypres in 1917 Blunden described the dichotomy between the quiet terror of the ritual of dawn and dusk and moments of waxing and waning. He wrote of the "Light lovely sunsets of the Eastern skies" and the violence of "baying flashes" and "half moons of avenging fires" accompanied by the "torrent of shells" which contrasted with "The blue and lulling mists of evening"... "The Eastern sky that evening was all too brilliant with British rockets appealing for artillery assistance. Westward over blue hills, the sunset was all seraphim and cherubim". (Blunden 1928, p30-31).

At Cuinchy he wrote:

"Over Cold Stream Lane, the chief communications trench, deep red poppies, blue and white cornflowers, and dandel thronged the way to destruction; the yellow cabbage flowers thickened here and there in sickening brilliance...then the ground became torn and vile, the poisonous breath of fresh explosions sculpt all about and the mud which choked the narrow passages stank as one pulled through it...much lime was wanted at Cuinchy. (Blunden 1928, p30).

Combined into a double triptych pictorial frame, *The Boundless Sea* was originally painted as an Arcadian landscape. I used traditional materials, skills and techniques which incorporated gesso, the laying down of under-painting, a colour-stained ground, oil paint, stand oil and turpentine.

Initiated by Blunden's observations of the war at Ypres and Cuinchy, I repositioned my approach and began to conceive the project from a different angle. This enabled me to articulate the alteration and barbaric destruction of war. By using a more aggravated method of working, coupled with the obliteration of the figurative context, the painting acquired deeper significance. The surface of the canvas was re-worked numerous times, until it acquired a character of mutilated injury.

In order to achieve this change, I returned to the previous idea of the embalmer's wax, but this time I replaced the wax with coloured, industrial aerosol car-sprays and the techniques of graffiti. Characteristics of the medium were similar: the coupling of mortification and mummifying, cracked and broken bodies, paint and wax covering physical decay, corporal and material corruption. The aerosol spray shrouded the lingering forms left by the previous palimpsest landscape, enhancing and developing the 'queering' of reality.

The industrial aerosol spray provided both substance and a metaphor for a range of processes and ideas. Its very presence conveys (and actualises) the atomization of matter and the destruction and annihilation of memory. This methodology articulates Blunden's pulverization:

**"And around the great holes of the dugouts and bomb blasts, the edges were slurred into pulverized blood stained wilderness".**

(Blunden 1928, p126)

The aerosol performs this all the more effectively because of its industrial context and provides a mechanism that lends its chemical application to an act of spoilation. This mode of communication cannot help but suggest man and nature being overwhelmed by greater forces, whilst the significance and literal translation represents mourning for the previous classical form of painting. The

final stages marked the disappearance and loss of the earlier work and the ruination of the craft of my traditional painting, replacing these skills with the destructive and covering force of modern chemical paint material.

Flawed, dominant but seductive, the chemical materials were manipulated to form a newly vandalized image. This approach, coupled with the industrial character of the paint, provided a metaphor for barbarism, mutilation and contamination, leaving little memory or trace of the former landscape. The significance of using industrial paint was not only to suggest mourning for a past, but also the impossibility after the First World War of seeing or painting an 'innocent' landscape, in which bright light no longer represented poetic beauty but the bright flames of the inferno.

This series of triptychs evolved through new and previously unexplored juxtapositions and ill-matched couplings, which generated uncomfortable images through a field of crude and insensitive fragments. The balance changed dramatically from the traditional idea of painting to one of confrontation and destruction. Fractures appeared that had not been obvious before, making the site ambiguous and uneasy. The graffiti—rough and applied with little technique, working without direction, on the edge—introduce a sense of fear, dread and shock as I destroyed the former classical form of my literal representation of the landscape, echoing Blunden's text of a monstrous act befalling nature.

This destructive, wasting practice developed into a crucial innovation I would later develop in the next series of work. It was not only an act of violation directed towards the romanticism of the 19th Century and First World War sentimentality, but a means of severing a passive landscape from the 'known' into an actively hostile environment of extremes and oppositions. It would also direct future work into a more ruinous course in the methodology and physicality of the making. I would

follow a path that would come to reflect a young soldier's journey from his roots in a rural landscape (or small city), through his music and poetry into his experiences of suffering in the trenches and towards his gradual descent into madness.

When I interpreted the garish and brilliant landscape of *The Boundless Sea*, the freshly nourished soil re-invigorated by the ingestion of the detritus of war, its buried pits and dead groves, through the medium of the aerosol spray. I was aware of the following analogies:

- a. The paint is stored in sealed pressurised containers and releases a fine air-born spray. This references the gas used in the First World War.
- b. The paint leaves an industrialised, hard, non-organic, smooth surface that is permanent and has the capacity to obliterate all preceding surfaces.
- c. Aerosol is linked to acts of vandalism.

Rather than using stencils I concentrated on other 'street art' techniques. The speed and freedom of this methodology and the brilliance of colour enabled me to build up layers of drawing until there was little left to see of the former work. Not wishing to achieve an immaculate finish, I purposefully allowed paint to run and mix, and I used the discharged blobs from the canister to my advantage. By working with several fluid colours at the same time, by placing them in juxtaposition, and by allowing for different drying times according to the make-up of a variety of chemicals, I achieved results that were visually compatible with the appearance of peeling sores and re-animated, unhealed and septic wounds.



The Boundless Sea was constructed as an imagined image of a memory for a past of which I had no experience. In this context the fusion of beauty and war are taken to extremes by the ruination and material transformation of the earlier paintings. The canvas exhibits one subject whilst covering over the memory of an earlier subject; it is only by scratching at the paints surface I was able to uncover the former images. The term 'graffiti' comes from the Italian to scratch, write or draw on a surface. Illicit graffiti is considered a crime when it defaces. By using this form of graffiti I was able to suggest nature ravaged in human terms.

The Boundless Sea forms a crucible for the combination of ideas and images that surfaced and evolved from the preceding research and as a consequence reflects ambivalence, unease and barbarism. It is a site in which the nature of the work changes. The assimilation and juxtapositioning of themes, from the 'Black Book One' and 'Two' and the wax paintings, focused and extended my initial ideas, not only reinforcing the melancholic atmosphere and a sense of claustrophobia but also establishing the central themes of lament and mourning.

## Findings

In late December during a brief respite, while enduring the ordeal and misery of a thick fog so dense that it hid the sun and when the chalky grey mud seeped into every crevice, Blunden became aware of the horror and degradation of Thievpal Wood. He drew on his memory of William Morris's "ugly waters of the dry tree" in *The Well at the World's End* and described the environment in these terms:

"A filthy, limb—strewn and most lonely world's end...and in their den of misery, sluggish, soaking mists or cold stinging wind, loaded the air and the spirit of man, the ruins of the world looked black and unutterable; Thievpal Wood's ghostly gallow trees made no sound or movement."  
(Blunden, 1928, p83)

By transposing Blunden's description of war, colour and imagery, the paintings attempt to both resurrect the trauma of War and reanimate the memory of a young soldier's experience. When this experience is set in a new context and contained within the materiality of wax or aerosol spray, it is once more given a presence. A connection is remade that spans time and history providing a model for memory and mourning with the intended outcome of reaching a more profound experience, and a deeper knowledge and understanding of my reason to mourn. This provided me with a visual context for the regressive thinking that occurs in wartime. The archaic quality of the language provided a link to the past that for a while drew soldiers' minds from the nightmare of an apocalyptic war. The rendering of phantasmagoric, ancient themes within the wider context of a ruined landscape of conflict created a profound visual language from which new images of war could be imagined.



The Demonic 1 & 2





The Demonic 3 & 4

Sequence Two (No-Where)





The Demonic 5 & 6





The Demonic 7 & 8



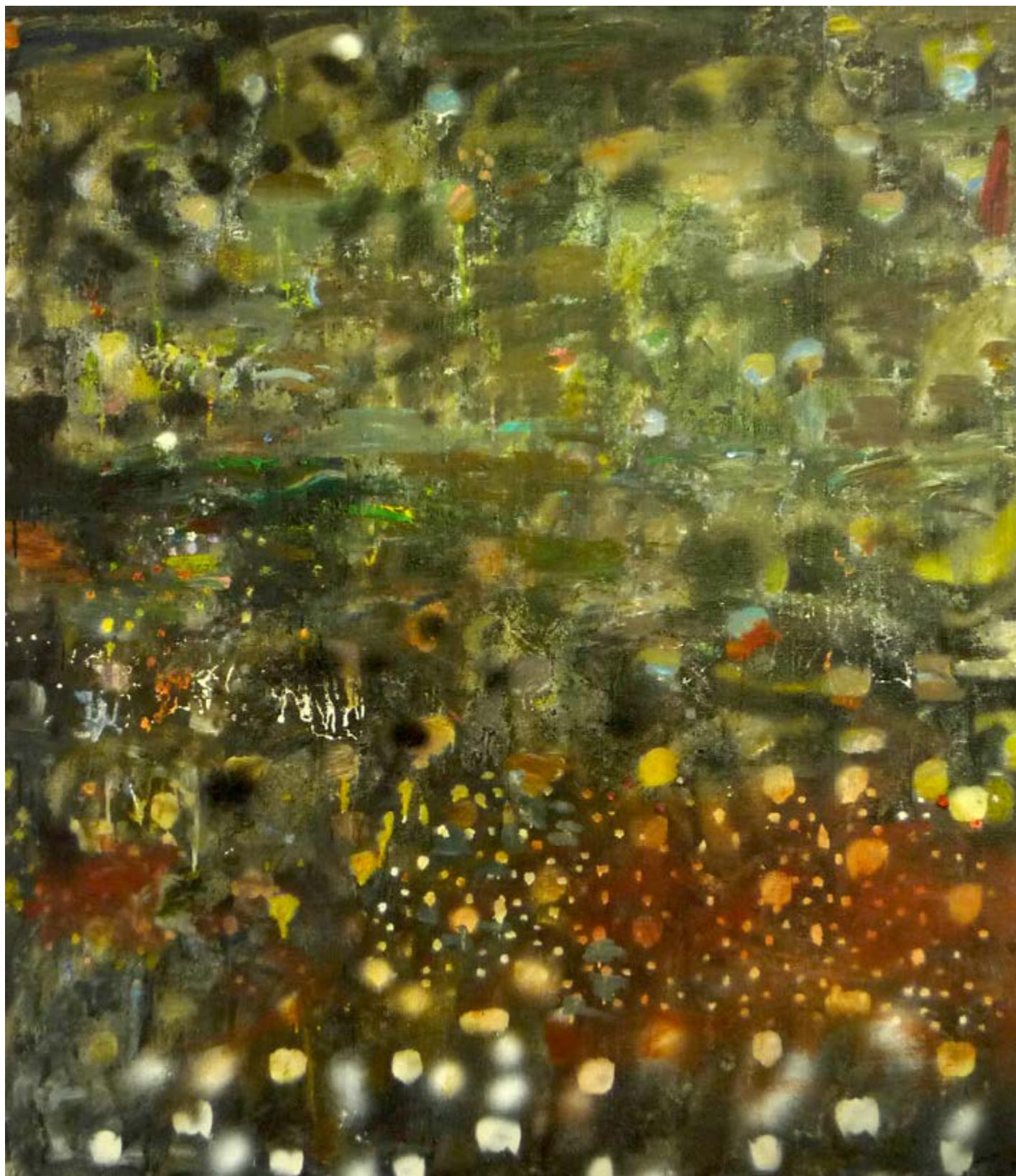




The Demonic 10

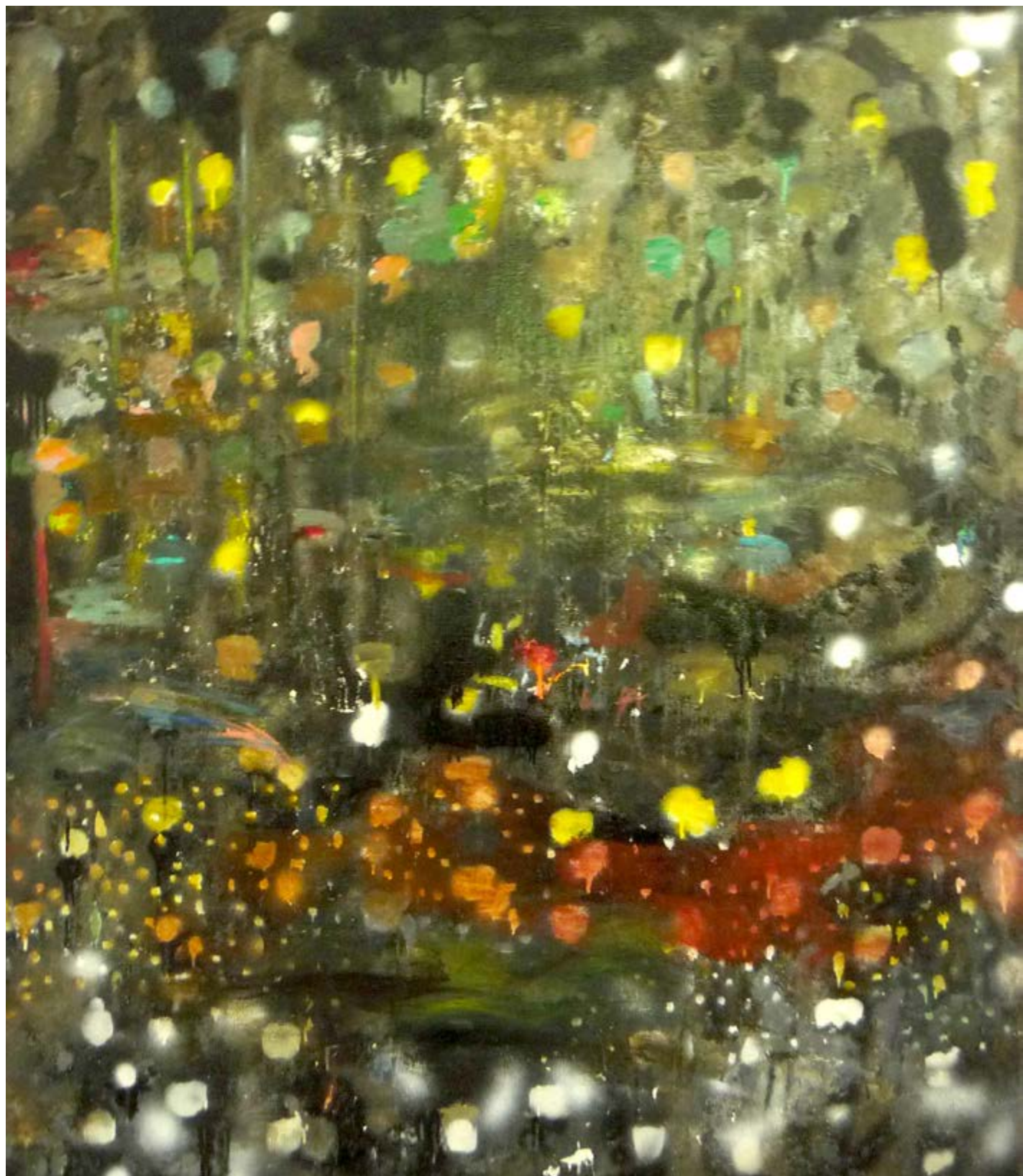
Sequence Two (No-Where)





The Boundless Sea 1









The Boundless Sea 2







# Sequence Three

## (No-Body)

### Critical Overview

The paintings in this sequence were made in two groups: a) The Eidetic Photograph and b) Reduction.

The sequence was provoked by the discovery of the photograph in the yellow suitcase that features in the Prologue. Through a contemplation of this object I unexpectedly came to touch an emotional layer long buried in the silt of family and collective history. The major challenge of the sequence was then to find a way of working with what I came to term 'double vision', a state of oscillating between being emotionally inside the painting whilst being physically on the outside.

In the first group of paintings I contemplate the implications of the photograph in its relationship to the absent body. As the last semblance of the soldier before death (and anonymity) the photograph powerfully evoked in me the departed individual, and his connection to those who mourn.

Through the paintings I came to examine the question of how to express, within a ritualized language of painting, signs of grief. Although primarily intending to register the 'felt' or sensual memory of grief, I also wanted to make work that could confront, and bear witness to, absence. I did this in full knowledge that I could never fully inhabit or negotiate the memory of another generation.

I decided to move my work from the forest back to the studio, aiming to employ a minimalist strategy in which marks are driven to their smallest element before extinction: judging that these may be the signs of grief I was looking for.

To gain a particular insight of war in my general research, I had been following Gurney's Red Yarn from the poem *First Time In*, and a strong empathetic response to his poetry at this point profoundly altered the dynamic of the practical inquiry. The language of the poem reflects the culture of a miserable, bitter war, in which men become de-humanized and anonymous in a desecrated landscape.

## Critical Reflection

Notes made alongside the drawings in the Black Books

"Initially I thought to pull a slither of the past out of a distant place, where grief had seeped from cold bones into the soul/ soil; where the skin was a mass of putrid infected scabs, which erupted as I painted. A cold place where death came seeking through the acid bitter taste of tears. Where grief was weighed and bounded by melancholic, grey, gradually materializing shadows. I knew only the deadness that blanketed my thoughts.

I filtered material through my own experience and emotions, choosing what I needed to look at and what I wished to remain concealed and perhaps untouched. Old wounds sometimes need to be uncovered to let them heal, but I had not thought to throw up such crippling nightmares, to tear a jagged hole in my heart. I found battlefields layered with ghosts of the dead, the damaged minds and the decimated lives of those who had survived, weeping, with the wringing of hands<sup>1</sup> and the stuttering crossfire of machine guns”.

(Nock)

I understood that I would struggle with something darker and more difficult in this sequence of paintings. In *No-body* my intention was to provide visual tools to describe the many-layered experiences of tracing the Red Yarn. The only source of energy was the war itself, where men suffered passively, died, inflicted wounds on others or themselves; a twisted landscape of constant killing on a hideous scale, where no green survived amidst the mutilated stubs of stricken trees; an endured war which poets had rendered in images of radical emptiness that depicted a chasm or a fracture in time that cut the past from the present.<sup>2</sup>

(Haynes, 1990, p.xi).

It is my intent in considering the thematic concerns of recording erasure of a soldier, to think through my practice a visual language that is developed within a serialist and reductive armature; one that would strip away all figurative associations. The nature of this I interpreted through a dark graphic approach that included a narrow and uniform range of colours of blacks, browns and greys.

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1. An unconscious nervous reaction that I first noticed in my Grandmother. Hand-wringing is a family trait that has been carried through into later generations.

2. HAYNES, SAMUEL. 1990. *A War Imagined*, London: Pimlico.



In re-evaluating the possibilities offered by conventional painting, my intention was to adopt a paired down rudimentary methodology. One in which a simplified calligraphy would consist of repetitious graphic lines. I understood that figuration in painting has the power to be specific about a subject, whereas in an abstract interpretation, that pointed to an emptying out of context, it would leave little room for manoeuvre.

However, I considered, by reducing the work to an unitarian form of sequences, it would endorse the anonymity of the paintings and their subject matter. To some extent I departed from the strict regulated iconography of minimalism in order to define a greater freedom in the work, in which other considerations could be taken into account. This would include making the work emblematic in nature, rather than purely aesthetic.

I considered various methods of extending the dimension of minimalism. One element was to divide the paintings into panels and another by using a variety of closely connected colour ranges. However, I discovered by scouring marks into the surface of the canvas, this added visceral quality, enhanced the objectivity of the paintings.

In framing the impersonal and anonymous nature of *No-Body*, I considered how a sense of exile and a repetitive hardship that trapped men between a non-existent sky and a seeping pit of mud could be expressed. To suggest the common measure in which everything that was engaged in war, whether machine, landscape or man, is shown as equally present.

I approached this through developing a systematic process in which an organising repetitious grouping of lines of the same size, thickness and spacing were drawn on top of a matrix of small lines. However, a disjunction arose out of my practice—which indicated the results were not strictly minimalist. The sharp lines made by the use of the stencil were imperfectly painted. Rather than painting to the edges I only painted within their limits. This led to a discrepancy in depth of colour, gesture of broken brush marks and a fluctuating interior edge. From this position arose a question; could something in the access of this reductive strategy produce something less perfect in order to point to how a memory of a personalised grief might signify?

In 1982 Maya Lin conceived a Vietnam Veterans' Memorial that snaked through the landscape as a shrine on which the names of thousands of soldiers were inscribed<sup>3</sup> on its reflective, black, polished marble surface. My method of approach to the challenge of presenting mourning in a material form was to pursue an alternative way of representing what is irredeemably absent. In contrast to the hard, implacable stone of memorials, the paintings operate through the pale, soft, pliable skin of the canvas, the blurring of text and memory, to describe something that cannot be figuratively represented or put into language. As a site of commemoration and bereavement, many layers of lines and marks are scored into the paint to acknowledge the premature, extinguished lives of young soldiers of the First World War.

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3. Maya Lin—Lisa Saltzman suggest that Lin's project was both indebted and departed from Frank Stella's abstract black paintings in which he expresses the difficulty of figuration in history paintings after Auschwitz. SALTZMAN, L. 2006. *Making Memory Matter*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p6.

In order to follow a thread of war, I visually imagined its trace through 'Red Yarn', from the poem 'First Time In'<sup>4</sup> by Ivor Gurney, the Gloucestershire soldier/composer/poet, and through the nuclei of his collection of war poems, 'Severn and Somme' and 'War Embers' (1917–1919). The trajectory of a soldier's passage through the First World War: from his entry into the war, through his experiences at Ypres and Passchendaele, and finally his later disintegration into madness and mental breakdown. In *First Time In*, describes "the strangely beautiful entry of war's rout", which was only too quickly to change and push his writing from "hurt into poetry"<sup>5</sup>. The red thread/yarn has a secondary function one that corresponded to an existential dimension in its role in connecting the creative development of the paintings. At times it disappears only to be reconstructed and resurfaced in a different thematic context, where it clearly articulates a new direction in the practice.

Gurney<sup>6</sup> served as a private in the 2nd/5th Gloucestershire Regiment. He believed this role to be a 'cleaner business' humanly speaking than that of someone with more responsibility... in other words (unlike the officer cadets in the Bohemians) remaining 'triumphantly a civilian'.

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4. *First Time In* is not included in *Severn and Somme* and *Wars Embers* but I located it in *Stars in a Dark Night*. The letters of Ivor Gurney to the Chapman family. Anthony Boden, Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 30 Brunswick Road, Gloucester, 1986. ISBN 0-86299-225-7

5. GURNEY, I. Edited RKR Thornton. 1987. *Severn and Somme* and *War's Embers*, Northumberland: Carcanet Press, p12–14.

6. Ivor Gurney was born at 3 Queen Street, Gloucester, 28th August 1890. The Rev'd Alfred Cheeseman became his God parent and took him under his protection, the first of several surrogate parents. In fact his sister was later to say they knew little of him. As a chorister at Kings School, he won an open scholarship to the Royal College of Music. Here he was known for his 'erratic brilliance' (Kavanagh 1984)).

In 1912, Gurney began to set poems to music and during this time began to write his own verse. His boyhood friend was the composer Herbert Howells. He was to study under Sir Charles Stanford and Vaughan Williams. At this time the first signs of his mental disturbances began to show themselves. He joined the war in 1915 and survived. But mental illness dogged him. First committed to Barnwood House, then later to the mental hospital at Dartford, Kent. He was never again to see his beloved Gloucester. He died on the 26th December 1937 of Tuberculosis. The burial service at Twigworth was taken by Canon Cheeseman. KAVANAGH, P.J. 1984. *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

During May 25th 1916, his regiment boarded a troop ship for Le Havre. Following a long march towards Flanders, they moved to a reserved position at Laventie. On the 27th October 1916, the regiment marched south to join the Carnage of the Somme offensive. Gurney was gassed, probably at Passchendaele early in September 1917<sup>7</sup> (Kavanagh 1984).

In the preface to the two volumes of poetry—spring 1917 he wrote:

“All these verses were written in France and in the sound of the guns,  
save only two or three earlier pieces. This should be reason enough to  
excuse any roughness in the technique...”<sup>8</sup>

However, the distinction of his poetry, P.J Kavanagh suggest lies in a particular awareness of detail—pictures that inform of “flesh and nerves rather than those of the intellect”<sup>9</sup>. An example of this is expressed in *The Silent One* (1917):

“Who died on the wires and hung there, one of two—  
Who for his hours of life had chatted through  
Infinite lovely chatter of Bucks accent...”  
(Gurney)

In which we are shown not the shock of the demise of beauty and youth but the loss of the inconsequence of an accent.<sup>10</sup>

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7. BODEN, A. 1986. *Stars In A Dark Night*, Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, p53.

8. GURNEY, I. Edited RKR Thornton. 1987. *Severn and Somme and War's Embers*, Northumberland: Carcanet Press, p20.

9. KAVANAGH, P.J. 1984. *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p2.

10. IBID.

In a similar vein he later writes in agonising desperation the words; "...like last years bryony are gone".<sup>11</sup>

This body of work marks the transition from Edmund Blunden and William Morris's agrarian landscape to something altogether bleaker. To transcribe onto the canvas the state of exhaustion and despair that Vera Britton recalls in *Testament of Youth* (1933, p10), a harrowing situation in which a generation is "forced to take part in, the fear and fatigue that it brought me, and to witness its impotent anguish the deaths of...".<sup>12</sup>

To achieve this, I returned to and re-interpreted the forest drawings of the Black Books, placing their symbolic and graphic associations into a new context within the paintings.

In remembering and re-ordering their visual echoes, interpreted through a reductive practice, I found a new dialogue, a vocabulary in which the transference of fractured marks could evoke the raw lacerated images I found in Gurney's poetry of the trenches.

At times, on muddy pages, I could see where I had incorporated other corroded systems which over time had become broken and buried within barren depths. What remained, the repetitive drawn lines of the forest, was sufficient to provide the visual language I was searching for.

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11. GURNEY, I. *The High Hills*.

12. WILLIAMS, MERRY. 1993. *Wilfred Owen*, Mid Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press Ltd: 10. (Vera Britton).

The transposition of these drawings marked a transition that was progressive in that they followed a soldier's war by associating with the emotion of a "new spirit learnt of pain"<sup>13</sup> (Gurney).

In a letter dated the 22nd December 1916, Gurney wrote: (located East of Laventie)

"I have seen Death and the faces of men in fear  
Of Death, and shattered, terribly ruined flesh...  
...Are now but thoughts of blind pain and best hid  
Away...  
(Over the top this morning at dawn's first grey)...  
...To think—earth's best and dearest turned to red  
broken clay..."<sup>14</sup>

Earlier on the 8th November 1916 in a poem 'Maisemore' he wrote:

"When the darkness downward hovers  
Making trees like German shadows"  
(Gurney, 1916)

The invocation of these two poems became a mantra. I became haunted by the terrible beauty of his words. I summoned selected lines of the poetry, until meaning emerged and a kind of transference of a visual interpretation of the

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13. The Day of Victory. GURNEY, I. Edited RKR Thornton. 1987. *Severn and Somme* and *War's Embers*, Northumberland: Carcanet Press.

14. Scots dated the 4th January 1917. *Severn and Somme* (Ivor Gurney, Private of the Gloucesters).

text of war became not only an emotional response—but also a material record of the numbing routine of a dispiriting violence which had broken men's bodies and their minds.

Within my paintings the embodiment of the etched marks was not accidental or random, but a material record of an act that left behind on the face of the canvas traces of the memory of Gurney's poetry: signs scoured so deeply that they outlasted the life of the activity of painting and reflected the memory of carved names on the war memorials that had many years previously outlived the families of the war generation.

### **Series 1: The Eidetic Photograph; 5ft×4ft oil on canvas**

The first body of work uses the idea of the photograph as a bind to those left behind and as a prompt to memory in that it cheats death and simulates life.

In this series I adopted the idea of the Eidetic photograph from Marina Warner's explanation of the eidetic image. It is said that the devil conjures up images in the mind's eye and that one of the forms referred to is the eidetic<sup>15</sup>. In certain situations, photographs can belong to an eidetic recollection and in this form can take on the aspect of a haunting, a return of the dead, or as an aid to remembering.<sup>16</sup>

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15. The roots comes from 'idein' to see and 'eidolon' a form, image, vision, spectre or phantom. Though the eidetic process can be combined with memory, it is not exclusively bound by referents or actual experience. WARNER, M. 2002. *Phantasmagoria*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p124.

16. WARNER, M. 2002. *Phantasmagoria*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p124.

## Paintings 1 & 2: No-body; 5ftx4ft oil on canvas

In *No-Body* I consider the likeness of an absent soldier through imagining his photograph. Significantly, I did not reproduce his image, but through interpreting the negative aspect of a photographic plate, I painted the incorporeality of his dimly visible form.

The French Structuralist Roland Barthes in his study of photography, *Camera Lucida* writes that photography is a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made up face beneath which we see death.<sup>17</sup>

In encapsulating the photograph/painting as an evocation of loss, I am reminded of the early works of the French contemporary artist; Christian Boltanski and in particular a body of work entitled; *Resere—The Dead Swiss* (1989), in which faded black and white prints of photographs are placed on tin boxes. And in *Monument: The Children of Dijon* (1986), an installation Annette Messenger<sup>18</sup> (1997) describes as a memento mori or a “collection of relics from a dead past”. The photographs present the dead as if they are still alive, whilst recognising at the same time that they are irrecoverably dead. A memorial act motivated by the desire to bring someone back from the dead.

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17. PRINCENTAL, N. Basualdo, C Huyssen, A. 2000. *Doris Salcedo*, New York: Phaidon Press Limited, p51 (BARTHES. 1981. *Reflection on Photography*, New York, p14)

18. MESSENGER, A. 1997. *Christian Boltanski*, Phaidon.



The cultural historian Marina Warner<sup>19</sup> (2002) asks these questions. When someone kisses a face in a photograph what kind of materiality does the loved one in the image possess? and

“Can a phantom in the mind and an image  
made of light resemble each other?”

(Warner, 2002, p189)

Is it possible in the liminal space of a photographic image for a correspondence to be made between the unknowable frontier of a body and a spirit, between the animated physical form of a body and a ghost?

Can a photographic image of someone or something slip into a space between memory and its original image in order to summon the dead or the absent on behalf of the summoner?

In the First World War, a black and white or hand-tinted colour photograph was not only a keepsake or a reminder of a beloved, but also a visual elegy in the rites of mourning and memory to be placed on an altar, in a locket next to the heart or in the breast pocket of a uniform. As an icon of death, the photograph became a threshold to someone who was lost. It enshrined an identity and created a memorial that preserved the vitality of its absent subject and, in a sense, reanimated the return of the dead.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as an act of transubstantiation, the camera not only caught the spectral form but also

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19. WARNER, M. 2002. *Phantasmagoria*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p189–213.

20. The war saw the cataclysmic disintegration of cultural life, the appalling slaughter of four million men. Every family would have been in mourning for a husband, brother, son or friend as well as for those who couldn't obliterate the nightmare of memories or transcend its grief, with a mind in ruins or locked in the prison of a mental asylum.

became a medium for occult powers, harnessing smudges and whispery traces of spirit bodies<sup>21</sup>. The photograph became a consolation for the bereaved, offering a glimpse of life continuing after death as if the camera itself had become the container for the séance.<sup>22</sup>

*No-body* became the means of re-animating a ghostly presence,<sup>23</sup> a presence which continued to accompany and guide the work. I painted two versions of the photographs. The first painting is concerned with the portrait of the soldier taken before he left for the front; this served as a memory for his family. The second painting is based on the photographs of family and friends the soldier took with him to the front.<sup>24</sup> The second image was developed from Ivor Gurney's poem *Photographs*<sup>25</sup>.

“With pity and pride, photographs of all colours,  
All sizes, kahki brothers in France  
Or mothers faces warn with countless colours;  
Or girls whose eyes were challenging and must dance,  
...Though in a picture only, a common cheap  
Ill taken card...” (Gurney, 1918)

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21. Julia Margaret Cameron, Sally Mann and Christian Boltanski are artists who have used the medium of photography in their work that touches on discarnate spirit, memory and mourning.

22. The recourses of spiritualism. A French observer wrote during the war “after a murderous war who would doubt that the dead would try to communicate again”. Conan Doyle like many of the bereaved became interested in spiritual photography and attended séances in the hope of reaching his son (Jay Winter, p58–59, *Site of Memory Sites of Mourning*). Other references that I have studied include: BIRD, W.R. 1997. *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*, Ontario: CEF Books, PIXLEY, O. 1928. *Listening In*, London: L.S.A. Publications and MELECHI, A. 2008. *Servants of the Supernatural*, London: The Random House Group Limited.

23. Provided a link to my initial interest in spiritualism from 1914 to the 1920's. At the start of the research I had studied the ‘Un-Modern’ aspects of the First World War, but discontinued due to the lack of paradigms in contemporary art practice.

24. Postcard to Messrs Chapman from Epping 9th June 1915—message reads—“Why did they take them—or the drunken recruiting officer” (Stars in a Bright Night).

25. Gurney dated this poem St Albans, August 1918—Located at Arras.

The funereal function of photography, in its role of recording fleeting moments in time, is utilised and interpreted by suggesting a connection to or a symbiosis with, the embalmer's exacting skills in documenting life, through wax's capacity to summon a living likeness as a token of remembrance.<sup>26</sup> Both act as a memorial repository for the human body and, though the soul has retreated, the image is caught and acts as a testimony for the subject's earlier existence. Both suggest illusion and darkling phantom images. The portrait bids the absentee into the liminal space between mortality and immateriality, and in this site offers solace.

In *No-body* I did not intend to represent a nostalgic aesthetic, nor a unique record of the subject; rather, my primary aim was to establish the withdrawal of presence and the negation of life.<sup>27</sup> *No-body* as a relic encases the memory of the deceased. As a substitute object, it is altered into a 'fetish' inhabited by the spirit of a soldier. It is suggestive of the passage of a man's short existence in war to one of memory, a memorial with the aura of a life long gone.

The paintings are viewed from the imagined perspective of photographs that would have been taken from a Kodak box camera, glass plate or its undeveloped negatives, which are grainy and blurred. In the negative, cinematic, undeveloped photographic style of the painting I considered the work of the contemporary American photographer, Sally Mann and her landscape photographs of

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26. This has a link back to the wax paintings of Sequence 2.

27. As the war drew on, images changed and were no longer landscapes or pictures of friends; now shocking and grim, they were forbidden by the military. Fussell, 1975.

the American Civil War in the Southern States. For her 'sombre burnished atmospheres' she uses the 19th century ambrotype<sup>28</sup> method of making forensic studies of decomposing bodies<sup>29</sup>.

In 'No-body' the matt black borders that surround the paintings have two purposes—in the first instance, to point to the black edge of mourning and secondary, to act as a boundary or a containing device in the process of stopping seepage of the inevitable disintegration of the image. Within the flexible skin "of the ivory milk... and the white face of books"<sup>30</sup> (Gurney, p119) of the white gesso, I etched fine adjacent lines using a scalpel blade. These clusters suggest not only indistinct forms, but also de-materialized images and shadows. The black and brown printing ink pigment pressed into the cuts aimed to re-animate resemblances. However, during the process of smudging and rubbing away at the loose pigment, the core of the subject's identity was increasingly erased and, instead of reconstructing memory, I had inadvertently caused its absence. Submitting and threatening the image with disappearance, what remains is only a partial fleeting and disembodied trace. Tragically even in his final semblance of form, the referent soldier becomes absent. The themes of loss and invisibility now inscribed in the work are registered only by ghostly presence.

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28. Gelatin silver enlargement made from wet-plate collodion negative, dry-mounted, and coated with custom matte-surface varnish.

29. *What Remains* (2003), consists of five meditations on death focussing on the liminal edge between mortality and the parting soul, on decomposition and the earth which subsumes it.

Filmy insubstantial images float uneasily across the surface of the picture plane, whilst others remain imbedded within the darkness of the interior of the photographs.

I am reminded in *Matter lent*, *What Remains* and *Antietam* that in the photographic process, death is the prefigured subject. And though the process seems to resurrect life, what it manifests, is only a fragment of memory.

This parallels an essential aspect in the *No-Body* paintings—though intended as a subject for substitution, in fact now represent only an immaterial void.

30. *The Dearness of Common Things*, Ivor Gurney, p119.

## No Tears We Show (4ftx5ft Linen, oil paint, pigment and stand oil)

In this painting I have taken two lines of Ivor Gurney's poetry: *No tears we show*<sup>31</sup> from the poem *Annie Laurie* and, from the poem entitled *Requiem*, 'Nor grief nor tears should wrong the silent dead'.<sup>32</sup>

I juxtapose the tears with the metaphor of hair as an acknowledgement of my Grandmother's private grief.

One of the actions I considered as a metaphor for timelessness of mourning was the concept of 'weeping'. A continuous flow of saline tears—(influenced perhaps by reading the poet Paul Celan's *Landscape with Urn Creatures* (*Landschaft Mit Urnenwesen*) "A tear rolls back into its eye": 1945).

Separation from his beloved landscapes of Gloucestershire left an indelible mark of longing on Gurney.<sup>33</sup> His war poetry which shifts between France and the Cotswolds is littered with images of mourning, not only for the landscape but also of the city of Gloucester itself, with its towers, Roman walls, squares and cathedral. The names of places—Masemore, Hartbury, Framilode - became a litany recited in the savagery of the trenches.<sup>34</sup> At times his words convey an almost an unendurable sadness and is seen perhaps in these agonised lines:

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31. *Annie Laurie* October 1917, was dedicated to the composer Herbert Howells. GURNEY, I. Edited RKR Thornton. 1987. *Severn and Somme* and *War's Embers*, Northumberland: Carcanet Press.

32. *Requiem* dated around the 8th November 1916, East of Laventie.

33. Ivor Gurney only published two books of poems in his life time, *Severn and Somme* (1917) and *War's Embers* (1919), The Mid-Northumberland Arts group and Carcanet Press, Thornton 1987 ISBN 0-904790 59 2.

34. KAVANAGH, P.J. 1984. *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p1–7.

“The high hills have a bitterness  
Now they are not known  
And memory is poor enough consolation  
For the soul hopeless gone”<sup>35</sup>  
(Gurney, 1922)

In these poems I am reminded of two things: the private and hidden aspect of grief, and my own family’s history. I am connected to my past through these words and perhaps, at times, I can sense—when deeply involved in the painting—the melancholic weariness of women weeping. Tears are juxtaposed on the canvas with the signifier of hair as a sign of lamentation. Prompted by familial sorrow, I am reminded of the photograph found inside the wallet inside the yellow suitcase.

The pathos of weeping salient tears and the image of hair both maintain close links to the dead. “The tear (stained) way of seeing” (Carter, 1996, p57) is a perception that implies “a way of looking cognitive with mourning”<sup>36</sup> (Carter, 1996, p57) and conjoins with other liquid signs of suffering, the moisture of sweat and blood.

Hair on the other hand, is the last substance of the body to rot. In religion, it has links with the seat of the soul. It is used in jewellery as a relic, keepsake or memorial. As a sign of grief, hair is torn out. Tears and hair tell of the raw material of human longing and the plaintive misery of a life that has become so radically changed.

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35. GURNEY, I. 1919-1922. *The High Hills*, Collected poems of Ivor Gurney.

36. CARTER, P. 1996. *The Lie of The Land*, Faber & Faber.

The lacerated surface of the paintings provide a site through which grief leaks onto the surface of the canvas. On top of the muted black ground, frail, broken, etched white lines are hand-drawn in an upward and downward orientation to present an overall, delicate and repetitive format. Out of almost nothing, 'no-body', an image emerges from the hidden inwardness of the mind: an internal sign in an external world - something that is almost translucent, like broken tissue. And I am reminded of the last verse in Gurney's poem *The Day of Victory*,

"Rain fell miserably, miserably and still..."<sup>37</sup>

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37. *The Day of Victory* (Embers) was published in the Gloucester Journal. 11 January 1919.

## Series 2–Reduction

Titles:

- 10th March.
- The Ballard of the Three Spectres.
- Black Rooks about the Trees.

This body of work explores processes of painting that make explicit the reduction of the humanity of men in the trenches. The language of the paintings reflects a war in which imagery is drawn from an “ever present, eternally present misery, this stinking world of sticky, trickling earth ceilinged by a strip of threatening sky<sup>38</sup>. It is a war endured on the edge of human experience that writers and poets rendered in images of radical absence; a war that depicted an edge, a chasm and ruin that became a fractured time in history that severed its past from its future<sup>39</sup> (Haynes 1990, p.xi); a war in which men came to kill for their country and in which they were lost in the common grave of the trenches where they suffered in torment “a four year purge of fire”<sup>40</sup> (Gurney) a war of un-localised and un-differentiated earth; a no-man’s land morbid with the remains of skulls, skeletons and ‘dreadful trees’<sup>41</sup> (Gurney) that demonstrated the bitter progress of the war. This was a passage through war which left traces of blood and horror on the altered surface of a soldier’s mind and on ribbons of white chalk of the landscape and the oppressive mud.

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38. Gladdon. E.N. 1917. *A Personal Account*, Ypres: 65 (51) FUSSELL, P. 1975. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York: Oxford University Press.

39. HAYNES, SAMUEL. 1990. *A War Imagined*, London: Pimlico, p.xi.

40. GURNEY. I. *The Day of Victory*, Subtitled November 11th 1918.

41. GURNEY, I. *Trees*.



Earlier Ivor Gurney had written:

“So the dark horror clouds us and the dread  
Of the unknown”<sup>42</sup>

I revisited the analogy of the terror of the dark forest in order to find meaning in a visual language for the trauma where “the dull skies wept still”<sup>43</sup> (Gurney). Colour was no longer viable and the construction of the paintings needed to be altered into a stark abstract two-dimensional plain that allowed no light to be reflected, to suggest through a non-figurative approach, an interpretation of Gurney’s:

“The plain’s a waste of evil mire  
And dead of colour sodden grey  
The trees are ruined...”<sup>44</sup>  
(Gurney)

Here the absence of figuration—*No-Body*—stands not only for sacrifice, the lack of meaning given to a soldier’s worth, but also for the emotional vacuity and silence that resulted from the repetitious experiences of the trenches. In this aspect the work represents a process in which the incommunicability of experiences, described by Gurney in the lines “an army of grey bedrenched scarecrows in rows...” and “till pain grinds down or lethargy numbs her”<sup>45</sup>, can only be imagined through a grim palette.

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42. GURNEY, I. 1917. *Sonnets, To the memory of Rupert Brooke*, p49.

43. GURNEY, I. *The Day of Victory*.

44. GURNEY, I. *The Plain, (Wars Embers)*, p88.

45. GURNEY, I. *Pain, (Severn and Somme)*

Images of “the pityfull eyes of men foredone...or horses shot too tired merely to stir”<sup>46</sup>  
I could only imagine through interpreting a reductive methodology of minimalism.  
Repetition, size, scale and breadth of marks produced an overall format and were  
transposed into a coded nihilism and it was only through the compulsive repetition of  
marks, layer upon layer, that I could interpret ‘bitter taste’ of ‘The Forest of the Dead’  
in which “cross after cross, mound after mound” cover the ground.<sup>47</sup>

I used an approach that became an emptying out of all figurative context to leave  
an accumulation only of lines that contained few decipherable traces of meaning.  
Nonetheless, I was not content with simply pursuing the premise of reducing the  
paintings to just an essential quality of emptiness. Nor did I want to remove all  
identifiable context. I did not intend the work to be solely determined by just a  
random principle of lines. Rather, I wished to channel through the rough black  
vertical broken marks the idea of Gurney’s “A power of primal savagery so long”<sup>48</sup>  
into the paint. Whilst I wished to expunge all signs of individual humanity from the  
canvas, I also sought to incorporate a sense of other references that included:

“Cover him, cover him soon!  
And with thick-set  
Masses of memorial flowers  
Hide that red wet  
Things I must somehow forget”<sup>49</sup>  
(Gurney)

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46. GURNEY, I. Pain, (*Severn and Somme*).

47. FAIRFAX, J.G. GARDNER, B. 1964. *Up The Line To Death: The War poets 1914–1918*, London: Methuen.

48. GURNEY, I. To England - a note; *Severn and Somme*, p28.

49. GURNEY, I. January 1918. *To his love*. Gurney had subtitled the draft; One dead soldier. GURNEY, I. Edited RKR Thornton. 1987. *Severn and Somme* and *War’s Embers*, Northumberland: Carcanet Press.

A pattern of war that was shaped by nightmares;

**“So the dark horror clouds us and the dread**

**Of the unknown...”**<sup>50</sup>

(Gurney)

An innocent army that understood evil after the Somme on July 1st, where the colour of tunics changed from khaki and grey to dull red. This did not negate the abstract meaning of the paintings but, through the hybrid essence of juxtaposing the chaos of thick and thin marks, lethargy and broken men were intimated.

I structured the paintings through two planes. I incorporated more than one single element in the painting and through a reductive system of marks and colour, combined these elements simultaneously into one final spatial field. In these paintings, I consider if this might be the means to suggest the double vision of my inquiry. The idea of being emotionally present to grief, whilst distanced and excluded through history.

Thus my aim was to devise an innovative spatial scheme of time, whilst employing the outward primary elements of a visual minimalist language.

The first plane I covered with traces of innumerable scraps of blurred marks, that recalled a polymorphism of wretched fragments of dead matter. Charred and splintered bone, decay and putrefaction that had become one with the detritus of battle. And in picturing a war, notorious for its industrial anonymity I employed a mixture of brittle and narrow minimalist strokes to indicate the essential nihilism

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50. GURNEY, I. Sonnets 1917, *To the Memory of Rupert Brooke*, (For England: 49. Dated 13 February, 1917.

of violence. To make palpable the dehumanising monotony of armies trapped in constant hopelessness and fear, to suggest highly stylised gibbets of stumps of trees, smoke, gas and broken men.

As I worked on the canvas I developed a process that became increasingly a preconscious state of my own grief which I came to translate through the scratched cuts of Dermatillomania.

I pushed the process to emphasise this sense of anxiety, disorientation and fear. This involved a matrix of overlapping cuts, scarring and scratches that coalesced into the soft surface of the canvas. These notations suggest a trace and a mute sign of humanity so heavily compounded again and again that they are buried into the ground of the painting, leaving no individuality in the marks but a tense uniformity and monotony of grey and brown “Pain. Pain continual; pain unending”.<sup>51</sup> (Gurney)

This laid the groundwork for the second plane affording me a model to think through, and though certain images did point to the next stage, I wanted to assert a more brutalist violent language of war. To use the concept of a radical reductive methodology in which the lives of soldiers are interpreted through a serialist accumulation of dark static lines. To do this I employed a repetitious process of drawn sharp margins that stretched vertically from the upper edge of the paintings to the bottom. This continued horizontally to both edges. These dominated the whole painting and served finally to both be the substance and the subject of the work.

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51. GURNEY, I. February 1917. Sonnets–Pain. Located Somme or Crucifix corner, *Severn and Somme*.

These static rigid and mechanically stressed structure of lines were closely and evenly spaced. They served a variety of purposes: to obstruct our view and perception of individual lives fallen away, a fatalist army betrayed and trapped in a unifying industrial war, the movement of soldiers to and from the front and the melancholic despair of men hemmed in by “the naked mouth of hell”<sup>52</sup> (Gurney).

In the large-format paintings I again returned to and reinterpreted the non-figurative but visceral iconography of the patterning of the black narrow static lines of the early book drawings of the *Neroche*.<sup>53</sup> These drawings I now understand as pointing to an archetypal landscape that suggest the woods, trenches and the front line of the First World War. The lines reflect lines of men in the repetitive act of war buried in “waste of evil mire”<sup>54</sup> (Gurney). The grey depth of light reflects no redemptive horizon, but perhaps the horror of Wilfred Owen’s remembered lines “by his dead smile I know we stood in hell”.<sup>55</sup> (Owen)

During this period I considered the work of the German painter Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer positioned himself at a crossroads of associations in which his earlier work drew on the intimate connection between man and nature. Through the iconography of ancient myths of the forest and German history he was able to

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52. GURNEY, I. 1917. *The Volunteer* (To A.L.B.) Written in blue exercise book and sent to Marion Scott. War Embers.

53. I am reminded of the brutal lines of two of C.R.W Nevison’s paintings: *Returning to the trenches* 1914 and *A flooded Trench on the Yser*, 1916.

54. GURNEY, I. *The Plain*;

“The plain’s a waste of evil mire  
And dead of colour, sodden/grey  
The trees are ruined...”

55. OWEN, W. Early Summer 1918, *Strange Meeting*.

express his preoccupation with the Second World War. This is clearly articulated in such works as *The Battle of Teutoburg Forest* (1977–78)<sup>56</sup> and *Man in the Forest* (1971).<sup>57</sup>

Daniel Arasse, (Arasse 2001) in writing about Kiefer's art<sup>58</sup>, suggested that in his themes of war, the forest had a physical entity. The landscape occupied a deep receding space in which lines of trees reached for a horizon that barely existed. Here in his forest, there is only deep gloom; human suffering is transmuted into a traumatized personification of the land. To illustrate graphically the metaphoric landscape, Kiefer, like Max Ernst, employed the figurative use of frottage and tree ring motifs extensively in his paintings.

From studying archeologism and spatial flattening I also investigated frottage, the technique of rubbing black lead over a sheet of paper placed on a textural surface to understand how a melancholic light and sense of catastrophe could be indicated, whilst at the same time alter perspective by giving a sense to the work of being simultaneously close to and above the ground.

My objective in this sequence of painting was to make a picture plane retreat into something shallower—a flattening out of a two-dimensional surface and the destruction of a fictive depth in order to create an illusion of negation and disappearance. I had no specific desire to pursue the picture-ness of painting, either in its mimic or figurative function, but to develop strategies of painting as a means of expression through the materiality of its making: the visceral and

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56. The battle in Teutoburg forest in which three Roman legions were defeated in September 9 AD by Germanic warriors.

57. Painted in Acrylic on untreated cloth.

58. ARASSE, D. 2001. *Anselm Kiefer*, London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, p124.

repetitive quality of a flat horizon of toxic waste, “shell holes with shapes of bodies faintly showing through the putrid water and wretched unburied corpses on a battlefield”.<sup>59</sup> (Orpen, Gough, 2010, p174).

I aimed through the archeologism referred to earlier, the vertical dimension of memory, coupled with a slow meditative time sequence, to move towards a new direction in my painting that would lead to a form of reductive abstraction, not as the visual means of eliminating the unessential but the reverse. I intended to gather memory of matter that had been splintered, broken, blown apart and yet conjoined in the history of the art-making process. This included the fine multiple layers of sanded gesso, the density of painted lines through the delicate layering (for these in my mind are human bones) of paint, coupled with coarse black lines, until all meaning was extinguished in the no-thingness of an impenetrable, clotted sombre darkness.

During this period I investigated contemporary art's framing of discourse around mourning, in particular with specific reference to memory and grief caused through loss. Pertinent to this was the inclusion of physical material iconography that extended thematic associations of absence. I became interested in understanding how a relationship with material correspondences could open up further perspective on how their inclusion could point to both the accessibility and yet a distanced sense of meaning. This correlation of ideas I found in the work of the American installation artist, Ann Hamilton, and the sculptor Doris Salcedo<sup>60</sup>.

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59. GOUGH, P. 2010. *A Terrible Beauty*, Bristol: Sansom & Company Ltd. Orpen, 'An On-Looker in France' *A Terrible Beauty*, Paul Gough, p174.

60. AKIRA IKEDA GALLERY. 2002. *Ann Hamilton—The Picture is Still*, Taura: Akiri Ikeda Gallery.  
PRINCENTAL, N. Basualdo, C Huyssen, A. 2000. Doris Salcedo, New York: Phaidon Press Limited. Boltanski, the French artist also works within these themes of historic memory. MESSAGER, A. 1997. Christian Boltanski, Phaidon.

Their practices helped me to define how memory of trauma, that is not of primary experience can be communicated. In this regard to configure an expression of secondary memory, whose effective response is engendered through a felt sensation rather than identification with the war, or its illustration.

The trans-active nature of grief of Gurney's poetry had become an emotive force and effective trigger for mourning and had touched me directly. Motivated by these emotions, Hamilton and Salcedo's art forms enabled me to establish a nexus between mourning and painting. Encountering another's grief and trauma through sensation rather than cognition.

The vertical nature of time is ingrained as an experience of memory in Hamilton's installations. Though not critically present, the body in her work is generally implicated. Its absent form recovers meaning through the specifics of the material and a material component she uses. For example, in 'The earth never gets flat' 1987, a tree, grass seed suit and a book are incorporated into a live version of the title. In 'lids of unknown position' 1984, she uses mussel shells, a wooden table and sand, to conflate an experience of time.

One of Hamilton's most widely known works is *Welle* (1997). *Welle* is not only a catalyst for the timeless and non-ending state of mourning, but also the universality of grief. The installation comprises of the *Weeping Wall* (22m×5m) displaying a visual sign of lamentation. Many flows of water/tears seep continually through a white blank façade. In later pieces, bourbon stains and replaces the



water, in another, the permeable skin is seen to sweat. Though it is unclear for whom it weeps in its secular reading, it could be said to reflect Christian icons which were perceived “to cry, bleed or even lactate”<sup>61</sup> (Saltzman 2006, p10).

In Salcedo’s installations, of 1987–88 and in particular the *Untitled* series, dismembered assemblages of furniture are partially repaired by means of fragile animal skins and fabric. In later works steel boxes are covered in coarse hair and in another body of work, stacks of white shirts stiffened by plaster are impelled by metal rods.<sup>62</sup> (Untitled 1989/90).

I was particularly drawn to this heightened level of sensitivity and material spatial correspondences, through which the sensuous use of gathered documentary evidence became the ground for the secondary witnessing of conflict and trauma. Through this work I was able to perceive how a spatial dimension of sculpture is used to suggest mourning. Even though their use of three-dimensional space is the reverse objective of a flat canvas. I saw this work as a piecing together of first-hand and secondary information to make work of substitution and of experience.

Though bodies are never shown in either of the artist’s works, I was keenly aware of how traces of material, including animal fibre, concrete and discarded clothing, were used to heighten the tension of a negative space in which absence is now the only presence.

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61. SALTZMAN, L. 2006. *Making Memory Matter*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p10.

62. PRINCENTAL, N. Basualdo, C Huyssen, A. 2000. *Doris Salcedo*, New York: Phaidon Press Limited, p45.

I saw in the delicate aesthetic fabrication of their craft, the suppressed expression of violence and how this was unified in a singular piece of work to become a relic or fetish<sup>63</sup>. I realised that work on canvas could similarly reflect this spatial quality. I understood that I had to push my practice beyond the mere handling of paint, in order to realize the hurt I felt for my own personal grief that rose out of the First World War<sup>64</sup>.

Salcedo commented in an interview with Carlos Basualdo<sup>65</sup> (2000) that she was not concerned with the visibility of her sculpture. On the contrary, she constructed the work as a sign of invisibility, to express the powerlessness of victims to escape suffering. This resistance to visibility in Salcedo's sculpture, I also recognized as a leitmotiv to my own research. I wanted to prompt the idea of no-thing-ness, to suggest, through a physical form of memory and matter correspondences, mourning for the men that had left no decipherable trace. At the same time I aimed to pursue through the painting *Reduction*, the transference of emotions and narratives that point to the essential quality of Gurney's poetry contextualized in:

"Dying in shell-holes both, slain by the mud  
Men broken, shrieking even to hear a gun—  
Till pain grinds down, or lethargy numbs her..."<sup>66</sup>  
(Gurney)

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63. Their work had particular relevance to my practice because I trained as a sculptor before I became a painter, and had learnt then how space is never neutral.

64. A parallel could also be traced through the work of Hamilton, Salcedo and Kiefer, all at times in their art used wood as a metaphor. Both Salcedo and Kiefer's work incorporated the poetry of Paul Celan.

65. PRINCENTAL, N. Basualdo, C Huyssen, A. 2000. *Doris Salcedo*, New York: Phaidon Press Limited, p64.

66. GURNEY, I. Edited RKR Thornton. 1987. *Severn and Somme* and *War's Embers*, Northumberland: Carcanet Press. Pain: 50, located Somme, crucifix corner by SSIG Carcanet press.

However, to define Hamilton and Salcedo's practice is to understand the topography of grief in spatial terms: a site for disappearance in which affective experience is registered.<sup>67</sup>

Salcedo tells the story of a young girl in Bogota, Colombia, who witnesses the gratuitous violence of her mother's death. Shortly before she was killed, her mother had made her a dress which she wore continuously. The dress (like the Yellow Suitcase) was not only a marker of memory but also an index of death.

Salcedo<sup>68</sup> frequently used a methodology of correspondence in her working process to provide the connection between the material transposition of the event, its memory and its spatial presence. A crucial element in the work, until 2002, in which dozens of chairs were placed into a public space (*6x7 November 1985*) was the large and small fragments of furniture torn from their previous locations to be re-configured and cajoled into forms of mutual precariousness. In her use of metonymy, chairs and tables stood in part for the individual victims of trauma. Whilst larger pieces were mutilated to reflect on the affect that loss has on the survivors.

Further the Sculpture *La Case Viuda* (1994)—refers to the universality and the underlying trauma of widowhood—a crucial concern in Salcedo's work. A state in which the outcome of war and violence is seen to revolve around family members lives who have become empty through the disappearance of loved ones. A general experience in which time can be suspended but life cannot be ever made coherent again.

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67. PRINCENTAL, N. Basualdo, C Huyssen, A. 2000. *Doris Salcedo*, New York: Phaidon Press Limited.

68. IBID, p92.

The ritual aspect of memorialising events is seen in the unfolding research and investigation Salcedo conducts into the intimate tracing of the history of the victim. Yet this is rarely evoked for the individual in her work, instead it is used as a reminder of the commonality of grief.

But perhaps one of the most disturbing aspect of her sculpture is the imbalance caused through the configuration of industrial materials and flesh. The weakness of the wound of the body and the sinister primacy of metal. This painful dimension is taken to extremes in *Tenebrae* (1999 to 2000) in which metal rods barricade and criss-cross the space of the installation, suggesting that the body—the ‘organic’ now only relates to a past.<sup>69</sup>

In 2001 in a former torpedo arsenal in Yokosuka—Taura, south of Tokyo, Ann Hamilton created an installation, titled *The Picture is Still*, in which thousands of branches of burnt charcoal hang from a ceiling at different heights forming a dense cloud of charred slithers of timber. In this collective gathering of lines of grey charcoal, Hamilton asks if visual correspondences can be used to suggest the way history haunts and inheres in the present. Hamilton enquires;

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69. BASUALDO, C. Mengham, R. 2004. *Doris Salcedo—Neither*, London: Jay Jopling, White Cube, p33.

“Might the eye of one’s finger carefully tracing the surface of the picture not make present a time that is still, here in a picture that is still?”<sup>70</sup>. In many of her installations Hamilton creates work based on memories that she gathers not only from history but also through her fingertips. Within these bodies of work she contends that the realization of a specific art installation “is informed by a process that is physical whereby understanding becomes an embodied act”<sup>71</sup>.

To enter Hamilton’s forest of dry charcoal, one has to bend down to pass beneath its sea of sound. An effective zone is created in which the forest becomes an estranged site of whispering movement. The nature of the forest fades away and the hushed silence generates an anguish, which detaches itself from the present context to create a rupture in which old grief is absorbed in the echoing space of held breath.

However, in the schematically rendered forest of my paintings, and the limitation of a two-dimensional site, visual narrative can only be suggested by paint that supposes a blood-stained clearing. The claustrophobic, rendered dissidence of lines clashing up against each other provides little knowledge of a three-dimensional space. There is only a flattening out that cleaves lines together in a crosshatching of scattered tissue; a convergence onto the plane of a unifiable whole, that infuses the scene with the nightmare of something out of reach, and the rendered, radical negation of hope which point to ‘no-thing’ and the “homeless ones”—“the noiseless dead”<sup>72</sup> (Owen).

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70. AKIRA IKEDA GALLERY. 2002. Ann Hamilton - *The Picture is Still*, Taura: Akiri Ikeda Gallery, p7–44.

71. IBID.

72. WILLIAMS, MERRYNN. 1993. *Wilfred Owen*, Mid Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press Ltd. Sick Leave—originally titled Death’s Brotherhood—Owen.

Joseph Beuys<sup>73</sup> stated that the greatest strength of a graphic language was in its ability to produce analogies through the repetition of rhyming groups of marks or motives. I interpreted this concept when I used a repetitive, inscribed and scratched line to reinforce the idea of the linear quality of the war. I wanted to convey the idea of a numbing passage through its horrors: the slow alteration of a soldier's mind, the disintegration of his body, the transitory and vulnerability of his spirit—all this contained in a kind of parenthesis of loss. The spectre of the countless numbers caught up in the purgatory of violence is illuminated by the thousands of lines I have carved and cut into the yellow bone whiteness of the paint, and by the continual gesture of criss-crossing broken marks, some fragile and brittle, others coarse and thick.

In *Reduction* the dark black, thick and rigid vertical lines painted on the surface of the canvas dominate the paintings' shadowy spatial depth. I used this pictorial device to indicate the columns of armies of marching men and artillery as they moved across the brutalized landscape.<sup>74</sup> The trajectory of the lines was used to intimate the loss of an individual's self-determination, locking him into the inescapable maelstrom of the war. Damaged men, trenches and the war-torn trees, stripped into splints, were compressed between the edge of a brutalized terrain and a horizon that no longer existed.

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73. TEMKIN, A, ROSE, B. 1993. *Thinking Is Form: The Drawings of Joseph Beuys*, New York: Philadelphia Museum of Art & The Museum of Modern Art, New York, p47–96.

74. I am reminded of two works by C.R.W. Nevinson *A Flooded Trench on the Yser* (1916) dry point on paper 29.3cm x 45cm, and an earlier work of 1914 *Returning to the Trenches* Oil on canvas 51.2cm x 76.8cm.

In the later paintings the horizontal format became static across the whole surface and was designed to emphasize the sinking and slow burial in mud: the emaciated and twisted bodies of men and horses reflecting Ivor Gurney's words "the dead land oppressed me"<sup>75</sup> (Gurney). The lines suggest the creeping barrage of attrition and the weight of grief that continually distances us from the event.<sup>76</sup>

Throughout this body of work I had been exploring the working methodology of Francisco Goya's<sup>77</sup> *The Disasters of War*, a collection of 80 plates of drawn and etched images of the bleakness of the Spanish Insurrection of 1808 and the resulting Peninsula War with the French. Goya used a deeply cut intaglio process in which a needle-thin line was cut through a wax ground into a copper sheet and placed in an acid bath. This was later inked with a velvety, mars-blackened pigment ready for printing.

During this stage I reinterpreted this printing technique and included it into my working process. I explored the gradual build-up of textured ground by cutting into the thick layers of paint to create a haze of different depths through the fineness and variety of crosshatching. I developed the paintings further by adding more heavily etched lines on top of the surface of the smaller, fractured, rigid and inert marks. This had the effect of uniting both layers through combining the shadows and insubstantial imprints of drawn and rubbed intersecting threads. This strategy for combining techniques from other art practices added to the archaeological

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75. GURNEY, I. Edited RKR Thornton. 1987. *Severn and Somme and War's Embers*, Northumberland: Carcanet Press: *Trees*, p48.

76. MCCARTHY, C 2006. *The Road*, United States: Alfred A. Knopf: 70—Cormac McCarthy describes a salient he was fighting in as blackness "without depth or dimension": a calligraphy of war fought in incessant toxic rain; a lethal terrain made from a blasted landscape and the broken surfaces of men's bodies; a dense, poisoned, seeping atmosphere brought together and condensed in a paralyzing, oscillating activity of frenzy and stifling calm. Though a post-apocalyptic landscape of unspecified time in history, his description could well equate with the devastated landscape of the Western front.

77. LUCIENTES, F. G. 1967. *The Disasters of War*, New York: Dorset Publications.

building processes of the paintings and became another strand in the work. Not only did it acknowledge the graffiti drawing in Sequence 1 but gave the paintings a potential for a visual language of unfathomable, dense, black objectivity.

## 10th March

*10th March* is the title of a group of paintings suggested by an extract from prose and a poem written during a period after Gurney's longest spell in the trenches. These are painted in oil on linen canvas and each painting is 5ft by 4ft.

The prose and poem below, became instrumental in this series;

"You cannot think how ghastly these battlefields look under a grey sky.  
Torn trees are the most terrible things I have seen. Absolute blight and  
curse is on the face of everything."  
(Gurney)

"The dead land oppressed me  
I turned my thoughts away  
And went where hill and meadow  
And shadowless and gay...  
...Let my thoughts slide unwitting  
To other, dreadful trees...  
And found me standing, staring  
Sick at heart—at these!"<sup>78</sup>  
(Gurney)

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78. GURNEY, I. Edited RKR Thornton. 1987. *Severn and Somme and War's Embers*, Northumberland: Carcanet Press. Trees, located at Arras, p127.



In considering how to interpret the lines 'dreadful trees' I turned to Casper David Friedrich's<sup>79</sup> tragic landscapes of Northern Europe and in particular, *Evening* (painted between 1820 and 1821). This is a work composed of three horizontal planes—the sky, the forest and the foreground. I utilized his central motif of stark, vertical lines of trees as a model for a way to paraphrase the symmetrical ordering of space in which a claustrophobic, militaristic environment is suggested. In this way, a site is established in which the foreground and the horizon no longer exist.

I used this analogy of Friedrich's *Evening* to suggest a schematized forest as a context for the *10th March*. The loss of identity, sacrificial and passive suffering, the expectation of a brief and broken life, demanded that a more tenebrous form should become a more urgent and purposeful presence in the painting.

Through the filter of the sombre tonality of the canvas, the heavy black lines bar access, resulting in the intimating of a substratum of exclusion, silence and the withdrawal of meaning. To amplify this affect the linen canvases were stretched over wooden supports, but I left out framing devices in order to imply and allude to a number of characteristics of the war: the absence of boundaries or physical endings; the lines of trenches that cut through Belgium and France like blasphemous scars; the endless numbers of men killed and injured in both armies; the never-ending tragedy, melancholy and mourning endured by widows and families whose "lives were altered by death"<sup>80</sup> (Salcedo), an extended ritual of mourning that continues into the 21st century.

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79. The German Artist work represented a new genre in landscape painting. Many of his paintings were composed through a compositional procedure that evolved either a vertical or horizontal arrangement with grids and strips. Through his particular stance of Romanticism, he introduced a new form "of the tragedy of landscape". HOFMAN, W. 2000. *Casper David Friedrich*, London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, p137.

80. PRINCENTAL, N. Basualdo, C Huyssen, A. 2000. *Doris Salcedo*, New York: Phaidon Press Limited, p92.

In this series 'Reduction' all the paintings were treated in the same manner (to underline the reduced lives of men in war) with only a slight variation in the palette of blacks, browns, madder reds and cold greys, coupled with the same intense level of fine detail. The paintings, though varying in the quality of blackness, lack any individual narrative or subjective importance. The flatness of the canvas echoes the dull dread of men's lives. To indicate this quality of concentrated existence of war, I used a combination of stand oil and powdered pigment to give a slightly wet, glossy surface to the paint which I juxtaposed with a dry and dull matt line in order to give a slight variance in the assemblance of a shadow, to point to the cohabitation of the living with the dead.

I wanted to create a language that demonstrated diminished lives and the great chasm, bitterness, muteness and time that separates generations. I felt this could only be conceived if I pushed the anonymous quality of abstraction as far as I could without losing the work's graphic quality.

## **Ballad of the Three Spectres**

*Ballad of the Three Spectres* are two separate diptychs, each section is 5f x ft<sup>81</sup> and are hung together.

"As I went up to Ovillers  
In mud and water cold to the knee,  
There went three jeering, fleeing spectres,  
That walked abreast and talked of me..."  
(Gurney)

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81. Ivor Gurney, The title is taken from the *Ballad of the Three Spectres*. Oil on Linen canvas diptych.

In this work the forest is systematised, comprised of abstract, rigid, vertical lines, in which there is no demarcation, threshold, entrance or perspective. Men are reduced to industrialized ranks and rows of crosses. The ritualistic quality of repetitive, formulaic lines and marks reinforce and reinstate repeatedly the continual unremitting progress of a never-ending war in which desolation is complete and the 'abridgement of hope' is contemplated<sup>82</sup> (Fussell).

Melancholic, light, formless surroundings and the monotonous uniformity of grey and khaki fighting men are pre-echoed through a schematically reduced and constructed forest. Lines uniformly and rhythmically transpose marching men. Importantly the three separate lines of squalid, troglodytic trenches reflect the recurrence of the number three in war: the tripartite routine of duty, the three-part plan of attack, the 'counting of by three's' and the three-part 'transformation of man into corpse'<sup>83</sup> (Fussell). The historian Paul Fussell suggests that because simplification is a characteristic of ritual, ritual is likely to flourish where experience is simplified to essentials. Ritual came readily to those whose experience of life and the dread of death has undergone drastic simplification<sup>84</sup>.

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82. FUSSELL, P. 1975. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York: Oxford University Press. Gibbons quoted by T Harvey.

83. FUSSELL, P. 1975. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York: Oxford University Press. (Charles Sorley, p126) and (Paul Fussell, p131).

84. FRYE, N. 1957. *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, New Jersey, p87. Frye reminds us that a romance quest has three stages. The first stage is the 'Perilous Journey', the second is the 'Crucial Struggle' in which a battle is fought where either the hero or the foe is killed and the third, the 'Exaltation of the Hero', whether he survives the conflict or not.

*The Ballad of the Three Spectres* paraphrases the triad character and the ritualised significance of the numeral three in the First World War. I painted it as two pictures both 4ft×6ft. Following the same trajectory as in the majority of the work in this series, (in which paintings were monotone and reductive in the process of construction), I covered layers of paint and gesso with small cut repetitive lines into which I rubbed black and brown oil and pigment. Vertical black lines 1.5cm in width and spaced 1.5cm apart were superimposed on top, diminishing the drawing underneath. I punctured the lines of the canvas near the base of the painting and used First World War string<sup>85</sup> to thread and tie together groups of three lines in a repetitive ritual. I knotted the individual threads three times and three times again on the ends. The two paintings were then hung as a diptych reflecting an open book of the first series.

The coarse, black lines reflect thresholds, transitions and mood changes as the initial optimism altered to horror, when despair was glimpsed through the blankness behind soldiers' eyes as they caught site of the tragedy of lives wasted as the war dragged on. The black lines when viewed from a distance are prominent, harsh and uncompromising. They obliterate the individual, fragile marks underneath that make up the surface of the canvas.

The process of making this work was intimate, intense and achieved at close proximity and I was reminded of the stitching of a wound in the making of the paintings, the threading of the string—and the broken filament of the Red Yarn. The physicality of painting and the words of the poems which I repeatedly endlessly became a visual liturgy.

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85. String that I found amongst my Grandmothers belongings.

## Black Rooks About The Trees

*Black Rooks About The Trees* is a diptych each section is 5f x ft, oil on canvas.

The title is taken from *Omens*, Ivor Gurney, 59.<sup>86</sup>

“Black rooks about the trees

Are circling slow...

They call like tongues of dread

Prophesying woe,

Rooks on the sunset red

Not heeding how

Their clamouring brings near

To a woman the old fear,

For her far soldier dear.

That harsh and idle crying,

Of mere annoy

Tells her how men are dying

And how her boy

May lie, his racked thought turning,

To the home fire on the hearth burning,

The last agony be learning”

(Gurney)

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86. This was written as a rough draft in pencil in the ‘Green Notebook’ between June and 1st December 1917, *War Embers*, p59.

The rationale and main formative influence for finding a visual precedents for Owen's *Black Rooks About The Trees* came from Caspar David Friedrich's *The Chasseur in the Woods* (1814). The painting portrays a young chasseur, after Napoleon's defeat, entering a snow-covered forest. Above him in a tree a black bird sings a song of death. The winter scene and the fatal landscape inform him that he will never return home again. In *The Raven Tree* painted eight years later, Friedrich has transformed the tree into a monstrous, devouring creature possessed by ravenous black ravens . Its malevolent character is reminiscent of the 'Dry Tree' in William Morris's gothic romance. Through Gurney's lines; "prophesying woe", I imagined the compressed distance between the committal of appalling acts of violence and their own personal suffering from nightmares, weariness and death, haunted constantly by insubstantial shadows and fears.

The painting's methodology replicated the vertical ordering of space and the same ritual of preparing the canvas of the earlier work. The field of the canvas was again covered in layers of fragile marks, but in this instance the drawings are no longer orderly, but have become the wearied "faces of men in fear"<sup>87</sup> (Gurney), broken, fragmented, chaotic and exhausted. The diptych is split and grafted in the centre by a narrow black canvas panel upon which I sewed scores of crow/rook/raven feathers. The feathers range in size, age and condition—some dry, dusty, damaged and others sleek, shiny and vibrant. I started collecting these feathers at the start of the research, finding them in many different sites—urban, industrial and rural locations. I included feathers that I had collected from a forest in Germany.

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87. GURNEY, I. Edited RKR Thornton. 1987. *Severn and Somme and War's Embers*, Northumberland: Carcanet Press: The Strong Thing. Located East of Laventie by SSIG.

“...That Harsh and idle crying  
Of mere annoy  
Tells her how men are dying...”  
(Gurney, 1917)

Is surely one of the oldest symbols of the battlefield. This powerful metaphor of death I came to interpret through my search for feathers. I considered this action as an act of remembrance and regarded these feathers as a powerful sign for the souls of dead men. Kiefer similarly interprets the bird's<sup>88</sup> connection to the battlefield and this is illustrated in the 'ash black wings' (1982) of his winter landscapes, his Icarus and the forged feathered wings of the *Wayland Smithy* (1982). Vincent Van Gogh also understood the power of the carrion image when he names his last painting *Crows over a Wheatfield* (1890). But perhaps one of the oldest example of the 'corvus's' role in war is provided by *Beowulf* (written between the 8th and early 11th Century). The heroic epic poem is of a great Scandinavian warrior who battles with the Chthonic monster Grendel and his mother:

“The sweet harp won't waken warriors, but  
The Raven winging darkly over the doomed will have new  
Tidings for the eagle of how he hooked  
And ate,  
How the wolf and he made short work of the dead”.<sup>89</sup>  
(Beowulf)

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88. A familiar theme in old English poetry linked the carrion bird of the 'Celtic Warrior' culture to the 'cutter of the thread'—the tutelary totem of Anwen in her screeching, bloody and dreadful aspect of the death deity. Conversely, the black rook/raven/crow also has positive attributes in her dichotomous role as the releaser and transmuter of souls, who feeds on the flesh of the slain, not so much the bringer of death as a transformer, one who brings what was dead back to life. Here I acknowledge Kiefer's use of ancestral myth as an extension to the subject of battle.

89. HEANEY, S. 2000 (2008). *Beowulf* Translated by Seamus Heaney, London: W.W. Norton & Company: lines 3024–77.

## Findings

By interpreting the experience of the melancholic endurance of the First World War through Ivor Gurney's poetry, I structured the paintings as a site of mourning. This implied not only a bounden duty to history but at an affective level, the paintings summarised my own response to the pain expressed in Gurney's poetry.

The welts in the skin of the paintings registered the sensation of terror and reflected Gurney's increasingly tortured mind and through this, the image of the ruined and defaced skin of the canvas mirrored the violation of the body in war.

As a secondary witness to the First World War through its poetry, I felt anguish for a young soldier. I saw in a more profound way, the evil of the trenches.

The minimalist stance that I had chosen was not a retreat of meaning, but a sign pointing to the impossibility of picturing the event. The poetry triggered an embodied affect, which ultimately rendered my response as the subject of the inquiry inciting a particular frame of thought that arose from empathy.

I suspected the thread I followed would carry me forward step by step to end in an abyss of anguished 'no-thing-ness'. The summary of the action was to become subsumed by the earth—a changing terrain that became radically different from the start. Like vegetation which degenerates to humus, the deep red interior of nothingness and silence emerged onto the surface of the canvas.

Through the analysis of poetry I went in search of a soldier but found a man broken by war. I saw the fractured gap in his poor soul and his crippled mind, and I was scarred by the encounter.



During this sequence of paintings I considered the art critic Daniel Arasse's<sup>90</sup> (2001), discussion of Kiefer's referential art-making process of the Second World War. This became an important model for mobilizing memory—the building of a mnemonic structure that is “without recollection” (Arasse 2001). Kiefer constructed his ground through a methodology of “archeolgism”, (Arasse 2002) an approach in which unknown memories can be retrieved by the appropriation of an extensive range of differing sources. This transference of knowledge enabled the building of a personal myth of war.

Kiefer's iconography was drawn from a complex layering, interweaving and re-working of themes and motives that included German myth, history, landscape, the Kabala, the poetry of Paul Celan and so on. He developed a skeletal framework upon which further new knowledge could be constructed. Arasse suggests that it is through the reanimation of the past that the sensual echoes of a “phantom presence” (Arasse 2001) of that past can be repositioned in the present.

Looking towards Sequence 4 I reinterpret these themes of memory “without recollection” (Arasse 2001) as one of the strands of the thread. I would work within a new and evolving painting methodology (that would include releasing the canvas from its supports coupled with the use of industrial materials) that would point to the continuation of the theme of excoriation, the scratching away of ‘no-thing’ to reanimate the wound. Within this process, I aimed to jettison traditional forms of paintings.

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90. ARASSE, D. 2001. *Anselm Kiefer*, London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, p23



The Eidetic Photograph 1 & 2



No Tears We Show 1





No Tears We Show 2





Detail of No-Body



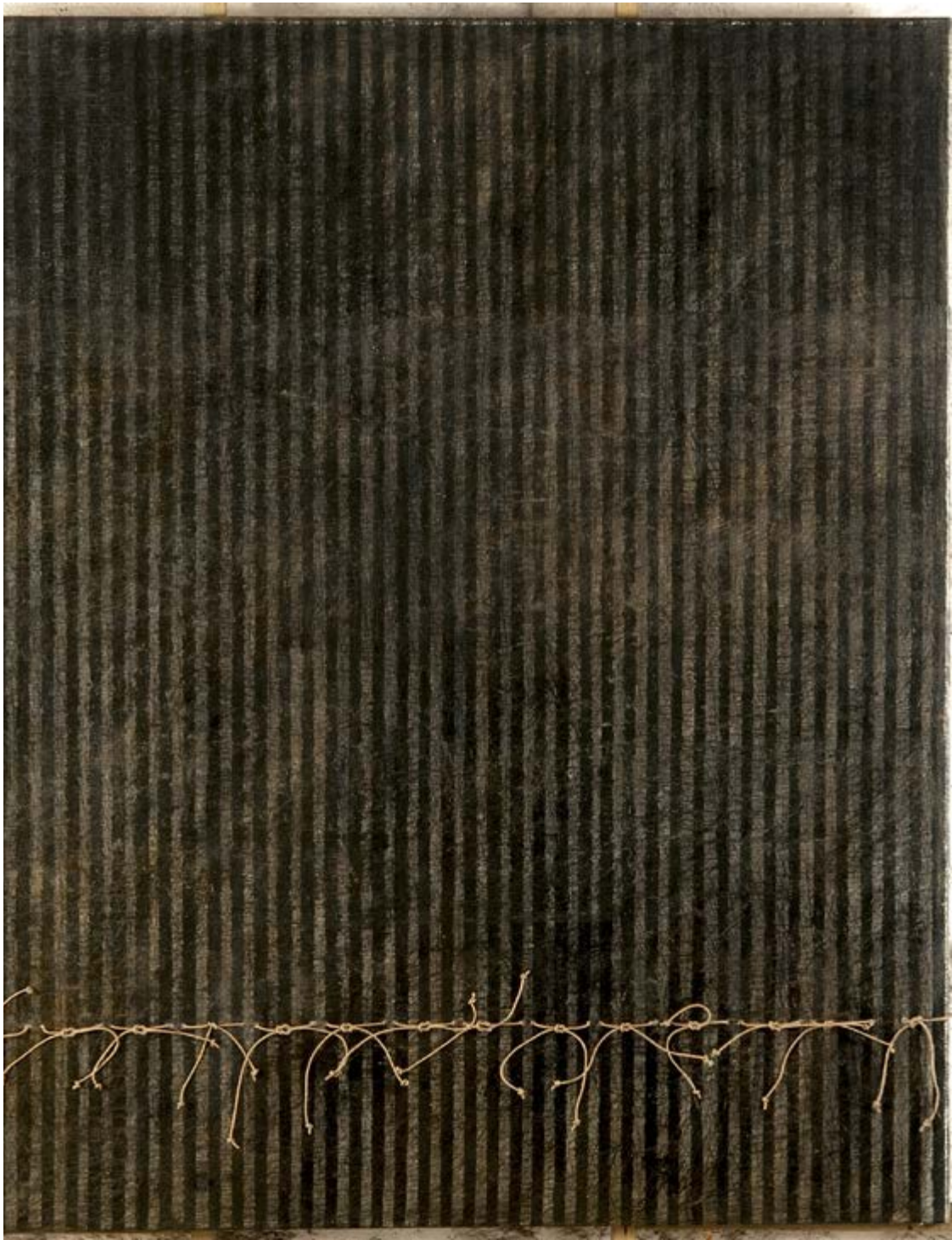






The Ballard of the Three Spectres









The Black Rooks About The Trees







# Sequence Four

## (No-Thing)

### Critical Overview

This sequence, in four parts, considers a soldier's death. The parts are titled: 'Fragment'; 'Green Sea'; 'Dead Scribble' and 'Bitter blood'.

Arising from the preceding sequence, the inquiry intended the use of the canvas as a site for wounding, mirroring the fundamentally altered position of the body in war, thereby problematising the metaphorical connection of canvas and skin. Skin was eventually to be perceived neither as integument of the body nor as a boundary, but as a collapsed surface reflecting the no-thing of the individual.

The inquiry examines barbarism and vandalism as valid artistic strategies in such circumstances, and assesses situations in which foreign substances merge with skin either through injury, contamination, disruption or partial repair. Joseph Beuys' powerful concept of 'memory matter' arises, and leads to a consideration of the actions of excoriation and grafting as a means to embody wound-residues. The work is then drawn into a confrontation with concepts of proxy occupancy and cadaverous corporeality.

A further intention was to combine the aural memory of wartime texts with visual experimentation to enrich the work through a fusion of contextual information with radical process. This research suggested other apposite connections between poets and artists, in particular between Paul Celan and Anselm Kiefer (and also between Celan and Doris Salcedo) that had the unintended consequence of making my own work increasingly susceptible to the voice of Wilfred Owen, one of many voices from the First World War I had been studying deeply in pursuit of a fuller emotional understanding of that epoch.

Though the sensuous 'palpable body' of Owen's iconography remained an important theme, through a process of physical deconstruction, and a search for the 'no-thingness' of the dead soldier, I arrived at a fundamental shift of approach, and a powerful new insight. The canvas was consequently released from all forms of support and was forced to bear its own burdensome weight.

## Critical Reflection

The art historian Andrea Lauterwein<sup>1</sup> in her thesis on Anselm Kiefer, has suggested that Kiefer developed the polyphonic range in his paintings by summoning voices from the past. These voices include those of Rainer Maria Rilke, Richard Wagner and Walter Benjamin, but the voices Kiefer has repeatedly returned to over the last twenty-five years are those of Ingeborg Bachmann and in particular Paul Celan.

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1. LAUTERWEIN, A. *Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan*. Thames & Hudson.

Celan's experience as a Jew living in Europe during the Nazi years constitute an important theme in his work and necessitates understanding from this point of view. The loss of his parents in an internment camp in Transnistria and his early persecution left indelible wounds. His intellectual and emotional world had been destroyed and he found it difficult not to be both repelled and attracted to the German language.<sup>2</sup>

Broken, spare, surrealistic images describe life and death in the concentration camps. The central images of cremated ashes rising into the air became a re-occurring theme in later work<sup>3</sup>, coupled with negation, new word formation, the related dialectic of dark and night and the experience of being God-forsaken. Darkness is admitted into his work because he that speaks the truth "speaks the shade"<sup>4</sup>.

He spoke rarely in public, but when he did, Celan described poetry as a process of coming close to the "unutterable—a groping forward—a search—the practice of art as driving the practitioner into the inmost recesses of himself, his narrowest place and as a setting free"<sup>5</sup>.

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2. Throughout his later years he suffered acute crises, breakdowns that affected his personal and professional life. GLENN, J. 1973. *Paul Celan*, New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc, p29.

3. *Speak You Also* (Sprich Auch Du) from *Von Schwell Zu Schwelle*, 1955. *Alchemical* (Chymisch) From *Die Niemandrose*. 1963.

4. HAMBURGER, M. 1988. *Paul Celan*, London: Penguin Books, p31.

5. IBID, p32.

An essential characteristic of Celan's thinking and one in which he directly sought the "dark springs of the unconscious"<sup>6</sup> was his contention that the wrongs of the past can never be forgiven or forgotten; each event alters reality and the present can never be isolated from its effects. A feature in the later work became the unidentifiable 'you' that is addressed.<sup>7</sup>

Daniel Arrase suggests that, by associating the art of memory with powerful subjects such as the attic, forest, landscape and Jewish history, Kiefer, through images of sensation and destruction, constructs a German history he has only experienced indirectly. Since the early 1980's, Celan's writing provided for Kiefer an intense dialogue with the past that was extricably linked to the Holocaust. The singular most important of these poems was *Death Fugue* (Todesfuge). Its intricate linguistic associations led Kiefer to confront his own fascination and disgust of a history that connected him to the Third Reich. As its expression he began to embody Celan's influence and text within his own practice.

Celan wrote *Death Fugue* in 1945 while living in Bucharest. This was the year Auschwitz had been liberated by the Red Army following the defeat of Nazi Germany. During the same year Kiefer was born in Donaueschingen. Andrea Lauterwein comments that, with hindsight, one could view *Todesfuge* as the unconscious cradle of the German painter.<sup>8</sup>

The poem describes a concentration camp from the perspective of its victims. The speakers are at the point of death: the gas, in the last stanza, is beginning to take effect. After the anticipation of death, they fall into their final sleep.

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6. GLENN, J. 1973. *Paul Celan*, New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc, p29.

7. HAMBURGER, M. 1988. *Paul Celan*, London: Penguin Books. p33.

8. LAUTERWEIN, A. *Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan*. Thames & Hudson, p123.

“He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot youothers sing now  
and play  
he grabs at the iron in his belt he waves it hiseyes are blue  
jab deeper you lot with your spades you others playon for  
the dance”  
(Todesfuge, 1945, p33)

At the heart of Kiefer’s visual traspositions are the last two lines of the poem. “Your Golden Hair Margarete, Your Ashen Hair Shulamith”. The ashen hair of Sulamith suggests the black hair of Jewish women as well as the effects of cremation. The sensual implications of Margarete’s golden hair is more complex.<sup>9</sup> Influenced by their narrative, he develops a new element in his painting in which the materiality of straw, the colour of hair, and ashes are included to represent a raft of associations<sup>10</sup>.

Layers of culture and aesthetics lend influence to a degenerate landscape and to slaughter. From now on in many of the pictorial transitions a palimpsest environment is filled with a juxtaposition of substances that include lead, sand, straw, hair and earth. All have a metaphoric dimension and evoke a sick history. Through this filter, Andrea Lauterwein believes that Kiefer’s critical and creative interpretation of the poetic phenomenology is rendered as a form of a materialization of memory, carried out though a metaphoric and geological physicality. This she names as the ‘imagination of materials’.<sup>11</sup>

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9. This has implications to straw and German mythology.

10. These include the coupling of Margarete and Faust, writing that is constantly under threat of fire and the violation of the land art and Germany. Lauterwein, p130.

11. LAUTERWEIN, A. *Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan*. Thames & Hudson, p87.



Each phase in the painting<sup>12</sup> is developed through a pre-occupation with the imagery expressed in the poetry and its complex echoes in a material correspondent are incorporated and heavily worked within the body of the paint. Further parallels in the work have equivalence in colour. The physiological combinations of earth hues—the dis-colouration of black, white and grey indicate death and oblivion. Red points to the wound of history and green to the fertilized poisoned plants fed on the ashes of the dead in a form of cannibalistic growth.

This encountering of materials, Lauterwein believes, has extended Joseph Beuys's notion of 'matter' as the seat of consciousness into a new form which can be called 'memory matter'. By including material, Kiefer has increased the visual message of his work<sup>13</sup>. The plasticity of spatial imagery holds not only the associations he has seen in the poetry but also the ghostly presence of Celan himself. This has the added dimension of stimulating and intensifying the emotional impact of the painting's meaning.

In January 1948, Celan arrived in Vienna and met the surrealist painter Edgar Jene. In one of his essays *Edgar Jene Und der Traum vorn Traum* he interprets four of the painter's gouaches. In the third painting, which depicts strange creatures crossing a red and bloody landscape<sup>14</sup>, Celan stated the reason for valuing the importance of art is that, through its form, it is easier to "recognize the nightmare—spirit of old reality, aren't we able to hear the scream of man, our own

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12. Painting such as *Your Golden Hair Margarete* (1981) and *Your Ashen Hair Shulamith* (1981). A central motif in these series of landscapes is the curving bundle of yellow straw stuck onto the surface of the canvas. Andrea Lauterwein suggests, not only does the corn represent hair, but if we follow Elias Canetti's supposition, it also represents a "Diminished and Subjugated forest". In later work the symbolic and material shadow of straw, which is outlined in charcoal, echoes the memories of burnt stubble, as well as the ashen imprint of 'Shulamith'. Anselm Kiefer, Paul Celan and Andrea Lauterwein; *Sisters of Memory*, p87.

13. LAUTERWEIN, A. *Anselm Kiefer/Paul Celan*. Thames & Hudson, p18.

14. Celan refers to this under the title 'Das Blutmeer geht uber land' (The blood—sea goes over the land). GLENN, J. 1973. *Paul Celan*, New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc, p32.

scream louder than visual and more piercing?”<sup>15</sup>: a reality that is both terrible and absurd which can only be expressed through a negation of words and images, “which confuse the normal relationship between the senses and which on the surface seem to distort rather than clarify reality”<sup>16</sup>.

Kiefer’s themes; loss, absence or inaccessibility of meaning has a correspondence to the embedded forms of the vanished existence of victims of conflict of Doris Salcedo’s installations. Salcedo alludes to working with a sense of precariousness in her sculptures which comes from the way she has to work with very little. Direct experience is not available to her. In order to draw close to a victim of trauma and to create work out of another’s experience, she has worked with their testimonies as a foundation for her art processes. This sense of precariousness, of being on the edge, is an essential quality and is most keenly demonstrated when she is reduced to using materials from the remains of the body itself—clothing, hair and bone. The work has a precariousness that emanates not just from an image of a tragic situation, but also from the way it implies the final absence of the victim<sup>17</sup>.

In broadening the search for authenticity and the memory of violence and in common with Kiefer, Salcedo draws upon her response to Celan’s “scales of grief”<sup>18</sup> to find a vein of knowledge to which she can relate. Through Celan’s poetry she has discovered a source of equivalences that provide visual metaphors for absence. A linked language of disappearance, sparse vocabulary on the edge of muteness, broken syntax and reticent images that are bound together.

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15. GLENN, J. 1973. *Paul Celan*, New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc, p33.

16. GLENN, J. 1973. *Paul Celan*, New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc, p32.

17. This is demonstrated in works such as; *La Cassa Viuda II*, 1993–1994. Wood, metal, fabric and bone.

18. *I Weep* Paul Celan.

Salcedo's silent and broken furniture reflect trauma, mutilation, and objects made strange by states of transformation, articulate a belated awareness of 'an other's'<sup>19</sup> suffering. Vulnerable, intimate, spectral surfaces from which ribs of white concrete emerge, signal a shared empathy with the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart" of Celan's poetry.

The linking of traumatic memory of trauma with encounter demands a different model of thinking through practice; one in which perception is moved from a solid form to something less substantial. New visceral images are presented in which a frailty of marks intimate Celan's "green as mould is the house of oblivion"<sup>20</sup>. With the reframing of material that once spoke of individual trauma, Salcedo moves into a broader field. She creates a new iconography in which to poeticise absence rather than its narrative by establishing a slow, ritual evocation of the oppressive presence of death<sup>21</sup>.

In her revulsion of violence and pity for the victims of the cruelty of conflict in Culumbria and for the emotional void left by scars that fail to heal, Salcedo constructed *Atrabiliarios* as a reliquary that houses intimate materials that was once connected to the missing. *Atrabiliarios* is a reminder of the anonymous victims of violence: the trace left by those who have disappeared<sup>22</sup>. In the Surreal installations of 1991–96 shoes are placed into box like niches and inserted at eye level into cavities in a wall. Memories are sealed and veiled within translucent

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19. *Otherwise than Being* (extracts) 1974. Emmanuel Levinas. (Salcedo – Artist Choice. PRINCENTAL, N. Basualdo, C Huyssen, A. 2000. *Doris Salcedo*, New York: Phaidon Press Limited, p132.

20. *Sand it ran the Urns*, p45. *Der Sand Aus Den Urnen*.

21. Salcedo names this as 'Art is the transmission without words of what is the same in all human beings' PRINCENTAL, N. Basualdo, C Huyssen, A. 2000. *Doris Salcedo*, New York: Phaidon Press Limited, p137.

22. In an analysis of *Atrabiliarios*, Princental (Salcedo) reasons Salcedo had in mind the impossibility of burying victims of violence or affording them elaborate mourning rituals. This emotional abscess fails to heal and therefore the work signifies an empty void.

animal skins. In this body of work, comparisons can be made to the discarded clothing and shoes in the Holocaust museum and in particular to the work of the French artist Christian Boltanski in which he stresses the power of personal affects to connect the dead with the living<sup>23</sup>.

In a series of works *La Casa Viuda* (The Widow's House, 1992-1995), damaged and dislocated doorways collide. In seams and splintered cracks, material is buried. The altered life of the widow is hinted at in patched fragments of lace. In the side of one bureau, subtle links to the body are visible in the form of a half opened zip and small buttons crammed into the wood. Faded strips of material frame missing window panes and a metal seat is immobilised by steel bars. Altered lives of ordinary people, violence and decay are portrayed in a body of work *Untitled* (1997). The assemblage of blank ponderous monuments of domestic furniture, are filled with layers of smoothed concrete. To stop the collapse from the physical weight of grief, metal rods are hammered in.

Perhaps the most directly addressed connections to Celan lie in the three 'memory' sculptures: *Unland – The Orphan's Tunic* (1997), *Unland – The Irreversible Witness* (1995–98) and *Unland – Audible in the Mouth* (1998). These were inspired by an early poem *Shroud*<sup>24</sup> but more importantly by a late work found posthumously in the poet's papers, an untitled poem given the sub-title *The Orphan's Tunic*. The subtitle is taken from a short poem *Night Rode Him* (*Ihn rtt die Nacht*) in the collection, *Liechtzwarg* (1970). The tone of the poem is condensed, fractured and harrowing, demonstrating the continual presence of

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23. MESSENGER, A. 1997. *Christian Boltanski*, Phaidon, p49.

24. *Shroud* from *Huhn Und Gedachtnis*. (1952).

earlier themes. The 'Se-cret-speckled skin' indicates orphan hood. Celan uses broken, fragmented particles of language that have been splintered to form new words to convey new meanings.<sup>25</sup>

In *Unland* every day household furniture is similarly disrupted and reconstructed. However, although Salcedo shares Celan's desire to signal an understanding that has only been possible through 'darkness'<sup>26</sup>, her interest lies in attempting to join and repair what has been torn apart. Charles Basualdo<sup>27</sup> suggests that processes such as grafting and mending have been employed to restore life to the unhealed wound in order to resuscitate its pain.

A melancholy introspection shrouds the three isolated sculptures. Two halves of ill-matched tables, naked and vulnerable, are wrenched together to intimate associate and disassociated forms. A protective skin of pale frayed silk sheaths legs and table tops covering cracks and scar tissue. A shadow of black hair is painstakingly threaded through the surface as if to mend, repair or support the burden of grief. In *Irreversible Witness* a metal crib—its bars also covered in silk and human hair—is upended and protrudes from the surface of two conjoined tables thrusting against each other for support.

The impossibility of burial or elaborate memorial for the disappeared (of Columbia) suggested to Salcedo the necessity to construct a site of memorial, to mitigate the effect of removal from the world. A location in which to signify the emotional void of death.

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25. HAMBURGER, M. 1988. *Paul Celan*, London: Penguin Books.

26. A darkness that is contained within – Celan's conception of the shadow that suggest death. (Speak As Well – 'sprich auch du' Von Schwelle Zu Schwelle – From Threshold to Threshold) 1955.

27. BASUALDO, C. Mengham, R. 2004. *Doris Salcedo – Neither*, London: Jay Jopling, White Cube, p51.

I interpret Salcedo's work as a mnemonic device—a signifier of perhaps even, though not akin to a wax image, a death mask in its silent reanimation of a trace of the body. The enduring nature of her sculpture is not a form of a preservation of memory, but as a substitute for a cadaver, and as a vehicle for irredeemable absence. Through acts of sacrifice and destruction differing dimensions of trauma are presented as an emptied evacuated presence.

However, her sculptures are more than evocations of loss. The furniture represents the collapsed lives of the bereaved. It is in the 'silence'<sup>28</sup> of contemplation during the process of making work that she believes the life witnessed in the work can become present. During these moments of meditation, grief reaches out to make a link between one generation and another. The intimacy of this experience is grounded, made visible and enduring within the context of the utilitarian objects being altered into the medium of art.

Through referencing Kiefer and Salcedo's methodologies of making 'a model of memory', I became aware that it is possible to construct through my own practice, a memory of the First World War that is without personal recollection. From this insight, a question arose. Might a new reading of the 'brooding spirit' of Wilfred Owen's First World War poetry trigger the shock needed to restore pain to the wound? My interest in the poetry lies not in the expression of the universal pity and horror of war, but in the spectre of the dying soldier: a mind "surveying the whole process of wasting spirit, art and blood in all its instant and deeper evils"<sup>29</sup> (Blunden, 1928, p.xxxiv) set against the collective horizon of pain.

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28. PRINCENTAL, N. Basualdo, C Huyssen, A. 2000. *Doris Salcedo*, New York: Phaidon Press Limited, p137.

29. BLUNDEN, E. 1928. *Undertones Of War*, London: Penguin Books, p.xxxiv.

Patric Dickinson, who was poet-editor on the BBC's Third Programme, discovered Owen's work during the 1930's. He wrote:

"It was as if an unknown hawkmoth a creature of beauty and of powerful flight had flown by choice into the furnace of evil and in its own immolation extinguished the flames but left a flameless and inextinguishable radiance—a light to see by, such as I had never known before or had known since, an inward light to read by, reason and understand...Owen was dead, killed when the war was within seven days and seven nights of silence. I thought of that one week, I have often thought of it. Seven less days<sup>30</sup> of cold November Suns, he would have lived".

(Dickinson, 1965, p116)

Owen enlisted with the Artist Rifles in 1915. Gazetted to the Manchester Regiment, he joined the Second Battalion during 1917 on the battlefield of the Somme during the harshest of winters, before the Germans withdrew to their new trenches. He was shot on the 4th November 1918 while endeavouring to transfer his men across the Sambre Canal. On the last day of 1917, in a letter to his mother in which he reviewed the past, he wrote:

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30. The Good Minute 1965 p 19 (p116).

“I heard the reveling of the Scottish troops who are now dead,  
 and who knew they would be dead...but chiefly I thought of the  
 very strange look on all faces in that camp; an incomprehensible  
 look, which a man will never see in England, though war should  
 be in England; nor can be seen in any battle. But only in Etaples.  
 It was not despair, or terror, it was more terrible than terror,  
 for it was a blindfold look and without expression like a dead  
 rabbit. It will never be painted, nor actor will ever seize it”<sup>31</sup>  
 (Owen, 1917)

I am drawn to Owen’s poetry<sup>32</sup> not only because of the position he occupies with Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Isaac Rosenberg as one of the major First World War poets but because the particular stance of his poetic vision<sup>33</sup> which affords me the means to retrieve an imagined experience of the diminution of war.

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31. *A Memoir*. Edmund Blunden: xxx. OWEN, W. Complete Poems by Wilfred Owen, with an Introduction by Siegfried Sassoon, and a Memoir by Edmund Blunden. Pickering: Blackthorn Press.

32. Wilfred Owen’s Grandfather on his paternal side was a tailor. Ivor Berty Gurney was a son of a tailor. Both were born on the boarder counties between England and Wales – Wilfred Owen from the obscure border town of Oswestry and Gurney in Gloucester. Owen was born on the 18th March 1893 and Gurney 3 years earlier in 1890 on the 28th August.

33. Dylan Thomas described Owen as a poet “of all times, all places and all wars” 1946. (Quiet Early one Morning: 49). Earlier Sir Henry Newbolt – The patriotic poet (casebook 65) had written “I don’t think these shell shocked war poems will move our Grandchildren greatly”.

John Middleton Murry wrote in his review of the first collection of Owen’s poetry (1920) “He was not a poet who seized upon the opportunity of war, but one whose being was saturated by a strange experience who bared himself to the horror of war until his soul was penetrated by it...it had to record not the high hopes that animated English youth at the outset, but the slow destruction of that youth in the sequel; more than this it had to record not what the war did to men’s bodies and senses, but what it did to their souls” (The Poet of War, casebook, p61).

The words “poet of war” Merryn Williams (p47) suggests this is limiting phrase in describing Owen and his poetry. His words trouble us in their power to still have an immediacy we can respond to. It is said (Williams, p47) that the poet Sassoon, perhaps is capable of satire and anger, but in recognising the terror and disgust of war Owen affords us the means to retrieve an imagined experience of its pity, grief and despair.

Edith Sitwell spent time ‘disentangling the various versions of Wilfred Owen’s war poems (sometimes almost indecipherably from the mud of the trenches smeared over them. Williams, M. 1993. *Wilfred Owen*, p46.



“Twitching agonies of men among the brambles - Exposure

The smell of men who lived their years and left the curse in the den,

If not their corpses...

(The Sentry)

Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh”

(Mental Cases)

These are lines by which we, who have not ourselves witnessed war, can receive an impression of its horror<sup>34</sup>. Shocking words to jolt us out of our complacency, compelling us as the addressee of his poetry the obligation to see and to hear.

Owen’s text is indissolubly linked to my existential preoccupation with the narrative of suffering. His poetry haunts the paintings, occupying and guiding the thinking process giving me a precise focus on a site for grieving. Added to this the poetry provides images for interpretation, images which evoke material substances such as mud, metallic red oxides, sand, blood and bone.

The incorporation of symbolic substances into the physical reality of the paintings provides a dual value. It enables me to expand on the Beuysian concept of memory matter, whilst at the same time pointing to a methodology which amplifies the emotional impact of the painting. The depth, texture and sensual memory of images lodged in the mind, intensifies the painting’s capacity to express the violence of war, which I extended through the association of material correspondences.

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34. The young Wilfred Owen in his early Christian doctrine had been schooled in understanding hell as a place of darkness and torment – now during the war he believed he was experiencing its reality. Williams, M. 1993. *Wilfred Owen*.

In writing from the trenches and in the “Sleep walking to their doom”<sup>35</sup>, Owen pictures for us the horrors of men sinking into the blackness of untimely, passive, benumbing silence, and of ghosts gathered around the edges of life where “sunlight seems a blood-smear, Night comes blood black...”<sup>36</sup> and the terrors of “The blackness of darkness maybe held for me, And barren plunging without end.”<sup>37</sup>

Profound images of the blood, smell and dirt of Owen’s text underpin the vulnerable tissue of the already compromised canvases. The paintings, as material signs of reciprocity, provide a skin that mirrors the film which formed across the meniscus of the oily red waters of craters in No-man’s land, or the shadow of transient smoke that mingled with mist and gas as it drifted across the parapets of trenches. Flawed surfaces of the paint are brought about by the grafting of incompatible materials. Hybrid equivalences are suggested by the text and describe the fleshiness of men thrust against the terrible, brutalized anger, hates and murder of war: iron/blood, rain/tears, mud/and “the hurt of the colour of blood”<sup>38</sup>. These are submerged into the flawed surfaces of the paint.

In the paintings *Fragment* and *Green Sea*, the soldier’s body does not end at its boundaries but continues outwards, into the earth, mud, slime and shell holes and, further out still, into the dust of the air.

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35. OWEN, W. *Complete Poems by Wilfred Owen, with an Introduction by Siegfried Sassoon, and a Memoir by Edmund Blunden*. Pickering: Blackthorn Press.

36. *Mental Cases*, Owen.

37. *This is the Track*, Owen.

38. *Insensibility*, Owen.

During this period I was reading *Fragment* a collection of four short poems.

'I saw his red mouth's crimson deepen as it fell

Like a Sun, in his last deep hour;"

(Owen)

This signaled a new direction. Owen's poetry became the framework through which I sought to transpose the memory of the terror of war onto the canvas.

In *Fragments*, I recognized the character of evil. The starkly realistic hellish landscape of 'Cramped In That Funneled Hole' implied the blankness of men knowing their existence was balanced on the liminal edge between life and death.

Images such as "they watched the dawn" to be later juxtaposed with "Under the mud" pointed to the verticality of war, one in which I could interpret through a differing archeological depth of paint surfaces and through later excoriation to arrive at the "Jagged rim".

The excoriation into the pigment was carried out directly on the canvas—superimposed montages of intersecting planes, the coupling of incompatible materials and mix modes of techniques were all used as devices to evoke "they were in one of the many mouths of hell"<sup>39</sup>. And in order to transcribe "only felt" incantatory and fragile lines were butted up against brutish marks and acrid spills of paint.

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39. *Fragments*, Owen.

Through this physical response, I became aware of the inherent importance of a move into a more tangible interpretation of 'felt' objectivity, to synthesis the residue of wounds and to extend the paintings role into a more visceral response to grieving.

Jay Winter<sup>40</sup> suggests that the ritual of touching war memorials and, in particular, the names of the dead is an essential act in the process of separation. In his view, these gestures of grief extend beyond the limitations of time and personal history. I found that the imperative to make and touch with my hands developed beyond narrow, bodily sensation into an anguished awareness of something deeper and more profound. Through my hands I became an active participant within the context of mourning and felt at the same time the physical sensation of reciprocity.

Ann Hamilton writes that the conception of her installations, is more of a physical experience than an intellectual one. Her hands and eyes are her primary tools, she probes "the old scars of history" with her fingertips. Hamilton contends that the realization of her work "is informed by a process that is physical whereby understanding becomes an embodied act"<sup>41</sup>. Knowledge taken in through the skin "enables us to see what has hitherto been invisible".<sup>42</sup> Likewise, Doris Salcedo communicates the sense of touch through hands making "a metaphoric presence"<sup>43</sup> in her sculpture.

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40. WINTER, J. 1995. *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p15.

41. AKIRA IKEDA GALLERY. 2002. *Ann Hamilton – The Picture is Still*, Taura: Akiri Ikeda Gallery. Tomoaki Kitagawa, 'The picture is Still', p44.

42. IBID.

43. PRINCENTAL, N. Basualdo, C Huyssen, A. 2000. *Doris Salcedo*, New York: Phaidon Press Limited, p98.

Jill Bennett, the art historian<sup>44</sup>, describes the 'felt' sensation as one that is experienced in the now rather than as a remembered memory which can only be a representation of the original object. In contrast to this, I suggest that the 'felt' sense can derive not only from a bodily memory of the sharp immediacy of pain but also from the prolonged 'felt' psychic trauma of mourning and loss. This may be a slower process of perception but one which can be revealed in the referent of the canvas and in the extended time of painting. Michael Hamburger<sup>45</sup> writes that it is in the nature of Paul Celan's work that the process of reception of its anguish cannot be other than gradual and slow.

The individual elements that comprise the paintings were in places never fully integrated, but remained splintered and 'jagged' around the edges. From the start I abandoned traditional painting materials in favour of substances that were only available from the studio, farmers' suppliers and the surrounding environment of the forest. I used little else but ash, soil, dust, sand and charcoal mixed with white tractor paint. This I combined with pigment and gesso to represent the carbonization of war and other forms of matter.

In *Fragment* (painting), images were not defined and the nature of the narrative was never fully present. Indeed, its indeterminacy suggested the fading of memory: memory that had become summarised and corrupted by time. I had little ability to articulate "when bones and the dead were smelt"<sup>46</sup>. Instead, the outcome represented only a memorialisation of the event. I could only reflect

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44. BENNETT, J 2005. *Empathic Vision*, California: Stanford University Press, p10.

45. HAMBURGER, M. 1988. *Paul Celan*, London: Penguin Books.

46. *Fragments*, Owen.

on the poem's lines, thus in the end the paintings actually recorded very little, apart from the means of coming into contact with a hubris of the incorporeal—of no-thing-ness in the poetic language of mud “and this coffin of a bed”<sup>47</sup>.

Memories of war cannot be viewed on a single level. They do not happen simply, on a single plane. They occur on multiple planes in cruel juxtapositions of things that are volatile and which manifest themselves simultaneously in an antagonistic way. This realization prompted me to find parallel means for the construction of the paintings.

I worked with the narrative and the visual imagery of the poem through the slumped physical plane of the canvas. I incorporated a hybridization of materials as processes of substitution. I used my fingers to develop pictures from the images in the text. I envisaged different moments of communication in the development of the work when certain phrases interested me, such as “the throat of phlegm”<sup>48</sup> in which the soldier is made present in the work. I mixed carbonized wood ash into the gesso to mutate and discolour the paint, suggestive of the coughed, spluttering, tactile, sticky quality of mucus. In the early stages of the developments of the paintings, residues from the experiments in the earlier ‘Black Books’ of Sequence One once again became an underlying influence in the paintings. Not only in the handling of the paint, but in the lack of perspective and horizon. In this body of paintings I used a shallow perspective to suggest the grim narrow prospect of men in the trenches or imprisoned in craters in ‘No-Mans land’ to suggest “they were in one of the many mouths of hell”<sup>49</sup>.

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47. *Wild with all Regrets*, Owen.

48. *Fragments*, Owen.

49. *Fragments*, Owen.

## Fragment (5ftx4ft)

“Cramped in that funnelled hole, they watched the dawn  
Open a jagged rim around; a yawn  
Of death’s jaws, which had all but swallowed them  
Stuck in the bottom of his throat of phlegm.  
They were in one of many mouths of Hell  
Not seen of seers in visions, only felt  
As teeth of traps; when bones and the dead are smelt  
Under the mud where long ago they fell  
Mixed with the sour sharp odour of the shell”.<sup>50</sup>

(Owen)

*Fragment* is constructed from two individual canvases, separate but emotionally grafted from the same poem. They are hung as a pair, without the support of a stretcher, so each supports the other. Each painting relates to the same two verses. I have constructed the work by showing not so much the violence of war but the thickening expression of latent death; the invisible sign of transformation from life to death; the expression of the subtle bodies, ghosts, fetches and spectral soldiers where they hover “under the mud where long ago they fell”.

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50. OWEN, W. 1917. ‘Cramped in That Funnelled Hole’, *Fragment*.

The edges of the paintings are frayed and etched black. Along the top are metal rings for hanging the paintings. While the gesso and white paint was still sticky, the work was creased, folded and pinned, then cut and slashed. The edges of the slashes and the raised, etched lines were overdrawn and rubbed with charcoal. Charcoal (carbonization) was chosen as a pigment due to its correspondence with the forest burnt by war and the ash and sediment left by the burning.

The second of the two paintings has a deeper dark margin and within the layers of white gesso the lines are more deeply etched. The tops of the paintings are darker and gradually fade to a greying, dirty, grimy white. Protruding from the base of the second painting is a single thread of string that describes the remains of a hill and Ivor Gurney's 'Red Yarn'. Black pigment has been rubbed over both surfaces and later brushed off.

Meaning, image and the haunted nature of the work is hinted at the periphery of vision. Other reference lie under the surface as for instance the allusion to a film by Abel Gance. *J'Accuse*, was filmed in 1918/19. In the final sequences, the hero Jean Diaz, a wounded soldier-poet, begins to lose his mind. He relates a dream in which he saw, in a battle field, a simple graveyard covered in wooden crosses. Beneath an overwhelming black cloud, the dead emerged from the ground, like stumbling Frankenstein monsters, to learn if their sacrifice had been in vain.

Another latent presence of an earlier painting—*The Angel of Mons*—is registered in the paint. However, the canvas was re-used and re-worked in favour of *Fragment*. Its earlier forms dissolved into the body of the canvas and had merged into a monotone of grey light.



The titles of the poetry, their memory and meaning I embodied within the strata's of paint. At times I inscribed a word or a fragment of a line into the gesso as a compulsive repetitive act, which in time came to resemble the making of memory through ritual.

It was at this stage whilst working freely and directly onto the canvas, I initiated a change in the painting's structure. Frustrated by the inflexible restrictions placed on the work by its controlling stretcher and frame—and to give me the ability to manipulate the surface—I cut the canvas away.

I saw this as a barbaric act in which the painting released from all support would in the future and in isolation bear its own burdensome weight. At the most fundamental level, by ridding the paintings of both their support and presentational devices, I understood that by evoking these strategies I had contributed to their final ruin.

As the canvas collapsed, the corroded and spoilt paintings splintered. Surfaces became disturbed and in rubbing up against each other, scabs were torn and the paint that was still wet underneath the skin dripped onto other areas of the painting, causing further debasement and damage—dermatillomania made evident.

I hung the canvas from cankered tears and holes I had previously cut in the paintings.

Through these alterations, the canvas mirrored Mathias Grunewald's *Crucified Body of Christ* (painted in 1515). In this painting, the fingers are stretched and elongated by the force of iron nails; blood seeps from the gash in his side; the grey and sallow flesh is pockmarked by festering wounds. The body is

surrounded by bowed and weeping figures, laden by the weight of their sorrow. This notion of a Calvary figure came whilst I was reading Owen's poem *At a Calvary Near the Ancre*<sup>51</sup>.

Defined from this perspective, the canvas gained a mutable role in that it appeared as having a quality of little substance in an authentic painterly sense. However, as an object with a physical presence and understood as performing a passage from inert material to one of brutalized transformation, it performed as a marker for a wider dissemination of themes.

By interpreting the canvas as a substitute for the body and as a metaphor for the skin, I treated the malleable soft tissue of the gessoed canvas as flesh upon which violence and wounding had been perpetrated, thereby creating phantasmic scars that do not heal but slowly spread like mould over the body surface to form infected, dark, weeping crusts.

The move to consider the painting through its mutilated and unsupported structure became a significant turning point in the development of deploying the role of painting to reflect grief. This changed my approach to the research. These insights offered the potential not only to transpose ugliness, the anguish of terror and the dull shadow of death into the paint, but in contesting the conventional stretched canvas; the collapse of the body in war.

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51. "One ever hangs where shelled roads part.  
In this war He too lost his limb,  
But his disciples hide apart;  
And now the Soldiers bear with Him." (Owen).

As a consequence I was able to characterize, through thinking through mourning, a mode of practice that I termed the 'visceral object-hood of painting'. Painting that is predicated on a damaged, violated material presence. By understanding painting in this light, I was able to express the frailty of the body and the unbounded pity of Owen's poetry.

## **Green Sea—'I Saw him Drowning' (Subtitled The Yellow Suitcase)**

The title derives from *Dulce et Decorum Est*

"Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning."  
(Owen)

Among the many alterations wrought by war, there is the process of grafting. Foreign substances are grafted onto and into the body by disruption and injury. Through reciprocity, the blood and the skin of the wound is grafted onto and into the land. Surfaces are modulated by mud, iron and gas or subtracted by amputation and the emptying of body and mind. A physical record, being an interpretation of exchange and alteration, reflects the negation of boundaries.

"He lost his colour very far from here  
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry  
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race  
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh."<sup>52</sup>  
(Owen)

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52. *Disabled*, Owen.

The freshly exposed wound, reanimated by the repetitive act of dermatillomania, reflected the emphasis placed on my own subjectivity and response to Owen's text, and the unconscious development of this in the painting. However, when I quote excerpts from Owen's poetry, I do not illustrate the text, but through the painting marry the aural memory to the visual image. Another form of transference is made from using phrases from the poetry that evoke materials. I transposed these concepts into the actual medium of the canvas. Through this I create a transfusion from the sensual and visceral layer of the text into the body of the painting (which no longer rests on the exteriority of words).

The poetry of war has led to an understanding of that war. I have understood the poetry not as a critical examination, but through the power of the poetic images to inspire visual expression. At times the meaning was so deeply buried or emotionally raw that it took time to reveal itself. During these periods I had to have trust in the process, understanding that what I was seeking would become distilled in my mind and in the canvas. Knowledge for that which I mourned was revealed only when I became intensely involved with the making of the painting. The canvas at times, like the camera box in an earlier sequence, became a site of séance.

In these paintings the underlying theme is the latent kinship between the ravaged and diseased iconography and the physical means of expressing these motifs. Polar images were used to focus on the vulnerability of flesh and the alien industrial war that aimed to violate it: the irreducible dichotomies between the weakness of the soft flesh and its "appalling vulnerability to damage by iron".<sup>53</sup>

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53. BOURKE, J. 1996. *Dismembering the Male – Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, London: Reaktion Books Ltd, p300.

The poetry offers a portal into the horror of the disfigured mind and body that was once beautiful and vital but is now a mangled corporeal thing that will eventually become a corpse on the battlefield. Owen presents wrenchingly pitiful images of bodies and minds spoilt by disfigurement; by wire, shrapnel and other instruments of war which cause extreme lacerations and multiple fractures; wounds that contain pieces of clothing and dirt driven into the pus of weeping tissue and the sinister sweet “mouse-like smell”<sup>54</sup> that characterize gas gangrene.

The title, *Dulce et Decorum Est*, comes from the Latin text by Horace. It translates as “it is sweet and becoming”, the further words ‘pro patria mori, to die for your country’ being understood. It became a well known quotation during the war and is still often quoted as an ironical reference to the slaughter. It has particular personal resonance. In the midst of my research, I received photocopies of my Grandfather William Cole’s papers. He died in England of gangrene of the lungs after being gassed at the Western Front. My mother remembers his painful struggles to breathe leading to his early death. These memories remained as a shadow across my mind as I worked.

The *Green Sea*, is smaller than the earlier *Fragment*. Narrow and body-sized, the imprint of the dark stain of the support around the frayed edge is still visible. The paintings are hung together for support (like soldiers blinded by gas).

*Green Sea* was painted on the stretcher during the first stages, but when finished it was damaged deliberately, by being cut, broken up and placed on the floor. Yellow industrial JCB farm paint was poured and puddled onto the surface in imitation of drowning. The paintings took on the appearance of skin, cloth,

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54. BOURKE, J. 1996. *Dismembering the Male – Men’s Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, London: Reaktion Books Ltd, p34.

shroud. The body of the canvas was used to express his “hanging face” and “froth-corrupted lungs”<sup>55</sup>. The yellow paint mirrored the mustard-yellow colour of the suitcase. The chemical paint material peeled back to reveal the void of the canvas. The paintings contained no figure of a man, nor re-enforced drawings, structural or skeletal frame. Instead, the use of industrial materials orchestrated some fundamental questions about the frailty of the human body in war and the incarnated memory of Owen’s words:

“If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon we flung him in”.<sup>56</sup>  
(Owen)

At the conference in The Hague in 1899, chemical warfare was outlawed and not used until after the Russo-Japanese war in 1904-05 when Britain, Germany and France carried out tear gas experiments. During January 1915 at the Imperial College in South Kensington, scientists identified ‘ethyl iodoacetate’ as a possible gas that would not corrode metal. After inconclusive evidence a young boy was offered a shilling to enter the dug-out to prove its success. Chlorine kills by irritating the lungs to such an extent that they flood with fluid, and the victim virtually drowns. Face and lips turn blue as the blood becomes starved of oxygen<sup>57</sup>.

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55. *Dulce et Decorum Est*, Owen.

56. *Dulce et Decorum Est*, Owen.

57. JONES, S. 2007. *World War 1 Gases Warfare tactics and Equipment*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd.

Two months later it was used at Ypres:

“At 5pm on the afternoon of the 22nd April 1915, with a loud hissing, jets of chlorine merged to form clouds in front of the German trenches and drifted towards the French lines. As the puzzling greenish/yellow clouds reached the French trenches and revealed their nature, the defenders fled”<sup>58</sup>.

(Jones, 2007, p3)

On April 24th, 15 tonnes of chlorine drifted in a dense, compact cloud over the cool earth of no-man’s land. Major Matthews described a greenish/yellow wall of vapour at least 15 feet high which enveloped his men in less than three minutes.<sup>59</sup>

Numbered among the victims of gas was the man who was later to become the Nazi Fuhrer. Adolf Hitler, serving in the Bavarian Reserve Regiment 16, was one of the casualties of a mustard gas bombardment during the British Flanders attack during the nights of October 13th and 14th. He was returned to his headquarters with his eyes like “glowing coals”.<sup>60</sup> It is calculated that one million soldiers were either injured or killed by gas during the First World War and new versions were continually being researched throughout the conflict.<sup>61</sup>

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58. JONES, S. 2007. *World War 1 Gases Warfare tactics and Equipment*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd.

59. IBID.

60. IBID.

61. In 1991, ‘The Ecstasy of Fumbling’ was painted by the Gulf War artist John Keen, after an incident in which he witnessed a gas attack during a visit to the war zone in the Gulf.

Professor Fritz Haber of the Kaiser Wilhelm institute, a Jewish scientist, took charge of the German chemical war programme and in 1918 received the Nobel prize for his work, under the guise of pest control, on the synthesis of ammonia. His chemical research led to the development of the gas ZYKLON B, later used in the extermination camps by the Nazis.<sup>62</sup>

## **Dead Scribble: Works on canvas**

For the next series of paintings, I took the title *Dead Scribble* from the poem *The Road Also* in which Owen speaks of the dead scribble on the walls. This I have re-interpreted as a working methodology to translate visually Owen's poem *The Show*.

“My soul looked down from a vague height with Death,  
As unremembering how I rose or why,  
And saw a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth,  
Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,  
And fitted with great pocks and scabs of plaques.

Across its beard, that horror of harsh wire,  
There moved thin caterpillars, slowly uncoiled.  
It seemed they pushed themselves to be as plugs  
Of ditches, where they writhed and shriveled, killed.

By them had slimy paths been trailed and scraped  
Round myriad warts that might be little hills.

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62. JONES, S. 2007. *World War 1 Gases Warfare tactics and Equipment*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd.



From gloom's last dregs these long-strung creatures crept,  
And vanished out of dawn down hidden holes.

(And smell came up from those foul openings  
As out of mouths, or deep wounds deepening.)

On dithering feet up gathered, more and more,  
Brown strings towards strings of gray, with bristling spines,  
All migrants from green fields, intent on mire..."<sup>63</sup>  
(Owen)

In the summer of 1918, Wilfred Owen wrote *The Road Also*. It was a late work and not fully completed:

"...Though their own child cry for them in tears,  
Women weep but hear no sound upstairs.  
They believe in love they had not lived  
And passion past the reach of stairs  
To the world's towers or stars".  
(Owen)

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63. Excerpt from 'The Show', (Owen).

Two different versions exist. The author Merryn Williams<sup>64</sup> reports that, in a later edition, Owen dropped the haunting lines “on their doors a strange hand taps” and also in verse 3 “as the dusk unearths old mournful odours”. The poem led Williams to conclude that his thoughts were dwelling at this time on twilight, terrible sadness and the bitter rift between women and their sons, neither side able to hear the other in their weeping.

There is a line I turned to frequently as I tried to decipher its meaning: “and the dead scribble on the walls.” Williams suggests that Owen could have had in mind the “recently dead”; who were still around and who wished to pass their message on of survival after death<sup>65</sup>. Whether or not this meaning was intended—and Williams herself thought it was not clear what the poem was about—I have interpreted ‘dead scribble’ as a reference to the popularity of spiritualism during the First World War<sup>66</sup>. Many believed in the use of automatic writing through which the souls of dead soldiers could send messages of hope to the bereaved<sup>67</sup>.

Thousands of families who were in mourning turned to spiritualism and psychic phenomena for comfort during the war. These included prominent thinkers of the day, such as Conan Doyle and the scientist Oliver Lodge.<sup>68</sup> During the tragically mounting death toll, many soldiers who feared they would not survive, made contracts with those left behind; they promised to return if they were killed, to give their bereaved families hope and solace.<sup>69</sup>

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64. WILLIAMS, MERRY. 1993. *Wilfred Owen*, Mid Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press Ltd.

65. I attended various spiritualist groups in order to gain better knowledge of the history of Spirit communication and this led to meetings with a spiritualist First World War guide.

66. The historian J Winter, writes upon the subject of spiritualism in his book; ‘Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning’ WINTER, J. 1995. *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p54.

67. WARNER, M. 2002. *Phantasmagoria*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p280.

68. The Irish poet ‘Yeats’ used these means to increase his imaginative input into his writing.

69. *A Ghost With Warm Hands* and *The Quick and the Dead*, Richard Van Emden.

Whilst reading the agonized and tormented lines of *The Show* in which it is suggested that it is men who make up the material of war, on reflection I considered that I could perhaps render the automatic writing<sup>70</sup> of the 'dead scribble' as a visual tool to transcribe the ugly and grim images of war. The Automatic Scribble would interpret the different perspectives of 'The Great Battle' and the dark energy of war conducted in a world where "from gloom's last dregs these long-strung creatures crept."<sup>71</sup>

Merryn Williams suggested that there were two sources for *The Show*. One was Hardy's "The Dynasts", a verse play which spoke of Napoleon's retreat from Russia. Hardy conceived the retreat as a great caterpillar, shrinking gradually as men died. The other influence was Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu*.<sup>72</sup> "I saw their bitten backs curve, loop and straighten" perhaps could be considered as being allied to the coiled and crawling serpent in the second version of Kiefer's painting *Resurvexil* (1973) a visual narrative that is designed to account for the destruction of Divine Order. Or to the chaotic and malevolent universe of H.P Lovecraft's *Cthulhu Mythos*.

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70. William James the philosopher and president of Spiritual and Psychic Research during the mid 1890's considered in the universe "of defuse soul-stuff, unable to get into consistent personal form...the discarnate voices" could "by profiting by weak spots in the armour of human..." could make contact by various means that included telepathy and automatic writing. Marina Warner *Phantasmagori*.

71. *The Show*, Owen.

72. Siegfried Sassoon introduces *Le Feu* to Owen. It was published in 1917 in English as *Under Fire*, 'The Story of a Squad'. M, Williams p88. In the winter of 1916–1917 Owen had written from Aimiems on the 4th February: "But extra for me there is a universal perversion of ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises...the distortion of the dead...the most excruciable sites on earth" OWEN, W. *Complete Poems by Wilfred Owen, with an Introduction by Siegfried Sassoon, and a Memoir by Edmund Blunden*. Pickering: Blackthorn Press.

In this writhing, crawling 'battle', everything that occupied the landscape was equally engaged in the drama of constructing a ravaged world of war "intent on mire"<sup>73</sup>. The moving caterpillars were men in brown or grey khaki, each one intent on murder. The dead filled the ditches and the living disappeared down tunnels and dug-outs. The air was foul and the soldiers seemed inhuman, insect-like, as the poet fell from a great height, seeing the nightmare of his own freshly severed head.

For a while this grim vision of no-man's land severed the connection between my imagination and the discovery of a coherent personal language. This void manifested itself in a period of loss in which I worked without an outcome. I could not find images for the despair of the "deepening groan". I went through a period of passive detachment, which I interpreted at the time as mirroring to some degree the first line of *The Show*: "My soul looked down from a vague height".<sup>74</sup>

During this period I returned to Joseph Beuys's notion of 'matter' and to Kiefer's conception of 'memory matter'. I conceived the canvas as a dense palimpsest, a skin of texture and diseased material. By using material equivalents in the form of vehicle resins, acid, sand, industrial agricultural paint, iron oxides, mud and cloth, I was able to describe the physical resonances of the paintings; to interpret through 'matter' the unequal contest between flesh and iron; and to demonstrate the destructive action that the substances I used would have on each other and on the canvas. This would reflect the suicidal and cannibalistic aspects of war.

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73. 'The show' was army slang for a battle.

74. *The Show*, Owen.

Similarly, red oxide (natural and chemical) acted as a correspondance for blood: for the wounds of the injured soldier, for the bloom on a young man's cheeks and his red lips, for the blood dripping from barbed wire, for the red rose and blood-red poppy.

Other colours used for the memory of matter, are the blacks mixed with browns and greys. They indicate the great battle itself as in: "Brown strings towards strings of grey..." These painted dark scribbles are constructed on a larger scale, and dominate the canvas when viewed from a distance.

As I wrestled with the paintings, the work went through many stages. The result was a scarred terrain of compressed, barren, despoiled canvas. The paint was worked and re-worked through the application of layers of automatic writing, ripped, burnt and torn to expose areas of paint like the septic scab of wounds. The canvas became a skin exposed "to a thousand pains"<sup>75</sup>.

I worked one small area of detail at a time, continually stepping back to work on the whole. This fluctuating position I interpreted as being reminiscent of war's multiple dimensions and a reflection of my inability to comprehend the entirety of its horrors.

Through these processes, the meaning of the work resided in the felt and tactile manner of its making: the accumulation of countless visual marks, paint disruption, blisters, cracking and peeling. These forms of destruction and conflict between materials lay at the heart of the painting process. The use of industrial

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75. *Strange Meeting*, Owen.

paint, spills of acid that caused erosion and industrial resins formed the ground for the practice in which to explore the great battle. Through this process the work displayed both a visual and tactile transformation.

I used oxides to suggest iron as well as blood and mixed the paint with other unrelated materials to articulate a corrupted abstractness. Explicit detail remaining was mutilated beyond recognition.

The lines of “the dead scribble” had the effect of changing the work according to the distance from which it is viewed. At a distance the marks appear as a dark, veiled, disintegrating, chaotic field. Viewed close to, the single lines can be seen and traced. This transition in the layers only partially hides and reveals the corrosive droplets of the purple oxides. The lines, which vary in thickness and depth, give a raised appearance to the canvas. They are suggestive of ‘thickets of barbed wire’ and trenches, as well as bodily veins and arteries. Through the bramble-tangle of wire, it is impossible to distinguish the grey from the brown khaki uniform.

In two of the works, I cut and re-stitched army tents and tarpaulins to use in place of canvas. I retained remnants of their former use, such as stains and bullet holes. In other paintings I covered the frayed edges of the canvas with strips of khaki army blankets, not only to suggest the troglodyte nature of the trenches, but to imply the covering for a soldier in both life and death.<sup>76</sup>

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76. Not the felted life saving blanket of Beuys.

My intention was to trigger the ambiguity of the depictive space, the confusion of perspective and horizons lacking any central image to focus on, would add to the tension created by mixing unrelated substances. I purposely composed a pictorial field that had no clear parameters, physical form, spatial boundaries or territory to define the paintings structure. Instead the poly-variant nature and abstract vocabulary of the paint, gave me the freedom to express simultaneously a number of aspects of the Great Show.

Through these processes and correspondences, the work changed from the descriptive to a more affective methodology, which allowed for critical decisions to be taken in the light of continual interaction between the poetry, myself and the painting. By not imposing any premeditated order apart from the red ground, nor by planning the painting's outcome, I was able to move towards achieving the objective of developing a site of reciprocity.

I rubbed pigment into the scratches of mutilated cuts and burnt canvas to accentuate a deeper penetration into the body of the canvas. I saw these deep cuts as metaphors for machine gun fire which pierces the skin, for invasions into no-mans land and actions that dug into the past. All dimensions were lost in the process and the canvas became clogged with matter. Through its lack of chromatic scale and confused mass, the dark, brutalized terrain of the canvas reflected an incoherent battlefield.

I learnt that the imbalance, which was brought about through the unpredictable effects of mixing incompatible materials and the disappearance of images absorbed by the darkness of the paint, caused absence and alienation to occur. Increasingly, reality lost its material referent. The fragmented surface gradually

became a barrier, not only to sight and memory, but to knowledge buried beneath its layers. The final dragged areas of paint obliterated any residue of lives that had become subsumed in dark matter in a grief infected soil.

### **Series 3: ‘Bitter blood’ (subtitled 4th November 1918)<sup>77</sup>**

The title is taken from the last verse of *Has Your Soul Sipped*.

“...Or the sweet murder  
After long guard  
Unto the martyr  
Smiling at God;  
To me was that smile,  
Faint as a wan, worn myth,  
Faint and exceeding small,  
On the boy’s murdered mouth.  
Though from his throat,  
The life-tide leaps  
There was no threat  
On his lips.  
But with the bitter blood  
And the death-smell  
All his life sweetness bled  
Into a smile.”  
(Owen)

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77. Owen’s date of death.



The central theme of 'Bitter Blood' lies in the desolate landscape of that murdered boy's smile. The ground is pitted, scarred, barren, full of indescribable horrors and the blood that contaminates it. I sought to express in the paintings the dialectic of a life on the boundaries of death and oblivion. The paintings are limited to the non-colours of black and white and their combination in grey. Burnt and charred matter extended the range of tones. Discolouration, soiled white and yellowed greys are the colours of ash and create a connection with the dead. Where there is red it points to the wound. Matter has been incorporated into the paint.

The states in which men collapsed and slipped away are expressed in the vulnerability of materials. Salt suggests tear glands and the elements that pollute water. Cuts act as a visual wound through the skin of the canvas into "the sweet murder". There is no concept of composition, its absence informs that the weight of suffering is too great to bear or even comprehend.

*Bitter Blood* articulates visually, the movement from corporeality to expiration, the separation of the spirit from the material body, the last ebbing of breath. *Bitter Blood* refers to something shameful and hidden.

I am constantly challenged by the fragile nature of the subject. The passage from a soldier's incarnate form to something altogether nonexistent, something which is even more dematerialized than in Sequence Two's spirit photographs or the dead scribble on the walls; the slipping away into no-body or no-thing-ness; the expression of the subtle body; the transmigration of souls; the felt presence of ghosts and fetches who call the living into the land of the dead; all this I aimed to summon up with the imprint on the surface of the wet canvas through the dying blush on the cheek of a young soldier.

As I worked, I envisaged the fear as soldiers watched for dawn. I imagined their vitality seeping into the sucking mud. I could not make these thoughts disappear. As I sought their ghosts, something split apart in my mind. I saw spirits take their first steps into a different future. I felt the soldier's "wan"<sup>78</sup> smile not as moving air, but as a raw awareness. I became a 'summoner' and took in their misery and wove it into something visible.

Working on the paintings with my senses stripped bare, I tried to shield my mind. I stood still on the ground of my own making and mirrored palpable textures of men's nightmares. By breathing in the terror, fear spread through the work.

In *Bitter Blood* I resolved to think in fresh terms how I might interpret "faint as a wan, warn myth..."<sup>79</sup> and what it signified. Moreover, there was an emotional shift between the present work and the paintings produced previously. This shift was more than just a move away from forms echoing the violent gestures of a catastrophic event, the 'self'-harming of the canvas or even from abstract expressionism in which work is influenced by artistic emotions. Rather, in the wake of the reductive form of earlier paintings, the challenge became one of finding new visual strategies.

I looked for comparisons within a group of contemporary painters that include Luc Tuymman and Michael Raedeker. In the fleshy tones of his paintings Twyman negates images in general. His figures are only partially represented and the face is absent as in 'Body' 1990. In his work there is a refusal to deal with emotional content, but at the same time his paintings imply an attack on the limitations and inadequacies of art in demonstrating a true representation of its subject.

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78. *Has Your Soul Sipped*, Owen.

79. IBID.

In 1986, Twyman painted *Gas Chamber* as though it was experienced in the present. Painted in fleshy tones, the work expresses both the void in the room and the emptiness in ourselves. Michael Raedecker similarly uses a monotone palette, usually dominated by grey. He creates tension in his work by coupling unsettling images with the ambiguity and unease of strangely depicted spaces. He uses a combination of acrylic paint and materials that included fibers and threads. The unease, absence of colour and of life constitutes a disturbing factor for those viewing his paintings. The lack of any particular narrative, coupled with the employment of unrelated though seemingly familiar materials, create a vacuum in which only a sense of emptiness and loss exists.

It was helpful to look at the work of these artists for it threw into relief the barren forms of absence—its language, colour, malevolence, malignancy and its curse. However, I no longer wished to structure the flattening out of form or the emptying out of signs of “poignant misery”<sup>80</sup>; nor to negate the memory of suffering. Rather, I sought to make work which would in some way make up for my previously inadequate response to war’s horrors. The work would be my response to Owen’s message in his poem *Insensibility*:

“Whatever shares

The eternal reciprocity of tears”<sup>81</sup>

(Owen)

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80. *Exposure*, Owen.

81. *Insensibility*, Owen.

I worked on *Bitter Blood* in the open air and away from the studio. The canvases had no support structure and I worked on them in the early stages flat on the ground. When they were semi-dry, I crushed and pleated them ready for the next stage. Later I hung the paintings over fences, allowing paint to drip onto the soil contaminating the earth beneath. As the paintings were no longer encased by borders or frames, the surrounding area became an extension of the work.

Violent handling at the beginning of the process had caused the canvas to become mutilated, so cracks were visible in places where the paint was thinnest. Later, the fragile intimacy of working on the paintings contrasted with the brutal language of the industrial materials I incorporated.

I used sponges, rollers and cloth flooded with liquids and juxtaposed them with resins, material, mud and ash. I used the materials as though the paintings were sculptures. The object of this labour was not to accumulate small, Cezanne-like gestures, but to take the opposite approach which privileged chaos and disruption, achieved by constructing multiple layers of matter and interminable revisions.

This physical expression caused a shift in the work signaling a departure away from the dark, clamorous presence of the earlier paintings. The methodology was strategically altered; the tonal range changed from dark blacks to white. A new range of textures and materials released different qualities in the painting which produced a fresh hybrid of results. The main change was in the inference derived from “all his life’s sweetness bled into a smile”<sup>82</sup>: blood red lips draining to white. This constituted a major departure from previous work which underlined the

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82. *Has Your Soul Sipped*, Owen.

importance of colour to carry meaning. The body could now be understood as drained of blood/colour, white being used to make the existing message clearer. White, like black, articulates the ultimate trauma in the painting.

Text from Owen's poetry written in graphite and charcoal and drawings of war were embedded into the white gesso'ed ground. This created layers of sediment and created the foundation upon which the rest of the painting was constructed. I worked and re-worked alternate layers of crudely applied, opaque, liquid gesso with white, industrial and agricultural paints. By building up these unstable depths, the original drawings were only visible in places around the edges.

Festering paint, peeling, bleeding and broken coverage added to the already violated skin of the canvas of matt and shiny dirty whites and yellowed skin. Within the final surface of the painting I alluded to vitrines in their capacity as containers for memories or memorials. I used a translucent, three-dimensional substance made out of mixtures of resins and boat varnish which yellowed and cracked with time. I embedded in this translucent skin, fragments of ash, charcoal, bleached bone, tatters of cloth and other foreign substances thrown up by the soil. These I connected with the barest trace and tissue of a red thread<sup>83</sup>. The memorial aspect of vitrines provided a link back to Sequence 2 in which wax was used in its metaphoric role as a link to death. Underlining the increasingly mortuary role of the paintings. I edged the bottom of the painting with nine inches of cream army blanket which rested on the floor in recognition of a "life's sweetness bled out".

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83. In acknowledgment of Ivor Gurney's trajectory through war.

The materials were not chosen by artistic decision but were determined by a local modern agricultural community. The importance and role of these materials resided in the fact that these paints reflected the replacement of natural materials by industrial substances. The vitreous qualities of the resins, the fragility of the memory of the narrative and the insubstantial imprint of the body had the effect of turning the painting into a reliquary, a container of holy relics. This indicated something that was marginally present in a physical sense, yet not identifiable; something or someone whose very 'bodyness' was tenuous within the process of becoming non-existent and exhausted.

I painted in the intimate space standing before the canvas, working in minute detail on one small area after another, using my fingers to pick at wounds or to caress. The paintings only became remote when I stepped away.

The dominant experience for me in *Has Your Soul Sipped?* and also in "I saw his round mouth's Crimson deepen"<sup>84</sup>, is the tenderness I feel emanating from the words Owen used to describe the moment of a young boy's murder. These lines do not express the thunder of guns or the "frantic shell"<sup>85</sup>; instead, they are "sweeter than nocturnes, of wild nightingale...".

*Has Your Soul Sipped?* is one of the most wrenchingly beautiful and poignant of all of Owen's war poetry. The power lies not simply in the anger, sorrow and irony of his work, nor solely in the haunting spectre of "all his life's sweetness" that "bled into a smile". It also lies in the incantation of words that lead to the ritual of dying in war: a death that is enhanced by the impression of falling as the boy slips "unto the Martyr Smiling at God".

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84. *Fragment*, Owen.

85. *The Sentry*, Owen.

These fragile images are not robustly matter-of-fact like others in many of the poems. We do not hear the soldier's voice as we do in poems such as the *Last Laugh*: "Oh! Jesus Christ I'm hit he said; and died..." Or in *The Chances*:

"E's wounded, killed, and pris'ner, and all the lot,  
The bloody lot all rolled in one. Jim's mad".  
(Owen)

In contrast, the images in *Has your Soul Sipped* mark the dematerialising transformation that is unfolding before our eyes:

"From his throat  
The life-tide leaps"  
(Owen)

The language is so tight and sparse that in its evocation of loss, the utter negation of a young boy's life spans the temporality of history and brings the experience into the immediacy of now.

In a letter from the trenches, Owen wrote to his mother in which he described the distress he felt at the sight of the fragile "greenish pale" teenagers he had to train. He considered his role in the war was to make things easier for his men.<sup>86</sup>

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86. There is a similarity here with Blunden. Both considered their role in the war was to be 'simple shepherds' to their men.

In this body of work I have paid particular attention to the passage of life that moves from “sweetness of sweets” to the ubiquity of sediment and erasure, the mutilation of a man’s body and his inability to escape the situation of “The sour sharp odour of the shell.”<sup>87</sup>

## Triptych

The triptych in the *Bitter Blood* series represents the final work. It is loosely hung from hooks and is more minimal in construction than previous work. It consists of layers of white gesso<sup>88</sup>, white chemical industrial paint, and black horizontal lines. Where the paint is chipped away, charcoal drawings are visible underneath. The work is fragile and is on the edge of disintegration. The central panel is whiter than the two which flank it. All three panels have horizontally-angled black lines crisscrossing in the bottom third of the canvas.

I specifically orchestrated that this silent and motionless work would evoke a very different response to those of the earlier, chaotic, dark paintings. I intended these paintings to imply an idea of absence through its deathly aspect and, from its triptych form, suggest a shrine or altar piece.<sup>89</sup>

I did not make preparatory drawings, so that the process of exploration was carried out directly onto the canvas. This meant that it often took considerable time to get to know and experience the work and understand its trajectory.

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87. *Fragment*, Owen – “cramped in that funneled hole”.

88. Gesso is made from Gilder’s whiting with size. Zinc white is added for extra smoothness and whiteness. Whiting is made from Calcium Carbonate. By using Gesso both as a foundation to the painting and as a material in its own right, I establish a link back to Gypsum used in the funereal practices of the past. It suggests an indexical link to the cadaver of the soldier.

89. A soldier’s view of the Somme two years later; everything appeared bleached, white skulls, fragments of cloth and iron.



I used materials as visceral correspondences: white gesso and ash, lime and salt and calcified material to represent no-thing-ness. The assimilation of natural gesso and industrial paint gave rise to a new register of meaning linked to imagery of body and war. It became an enactment of cremation, a radical act of erasure to accelerate the process of decay.

As I worked, the unstable white triptych became damaged and corrupted. Disintegration and disappearance of the body left little but a silent void.

Weighed down by its own weight, occupying an un-supported site and hung precariously as though in a state of exhaustion the edge of the paintings touched the ground.

The black lines painted in the lower third of the work suggest parapets and fallen Calvaries, old trenches, barbed wire, blasted trees and are seen against the whiteness of nothingness. The paintings have gone through many violent actions and what remains is a ravaged and seared terrain. The absence of horizons signifies that there is no redemption. The black lines that were once vertical and straight are now haphazard, horizontal, no longer parallel but irregular and broken. The only strength they retain is in an attempt to construct a barrier—to allow for the silent soldier a withdrawal into his own past.

In my attempt to sanitise memory by layering gesso as a final coat, I failed, the gesso splintered revealing patches of older actions and disintegrating paint residues visible underneath. The marks of trauma had been so deeply inscribed into the canvas that it had become reflected in a brutal transposition of experience that had become visceral. In some cases the grief produced by the

poetry's text was so shocking and overwhelming that I was unable to absorb it into the making. In this series the work is no longer spare, but reflects the fact that I could no longer hold the war at a distance.

Death creates an emotional absence for those who come after. The painting became a personal means of connection between the living and the dead (the past and the present). The heaviness of the material and emotional weight caused the canvas to fold in on itself and give way. The specific properties of certain materials used, slowly turned through a web of associations, the paintings into a fetish object. At the most basic level I deliberately set out to destroy the aesthetic quality of painting in order to establish ruin, absence and withdrawal of presence.

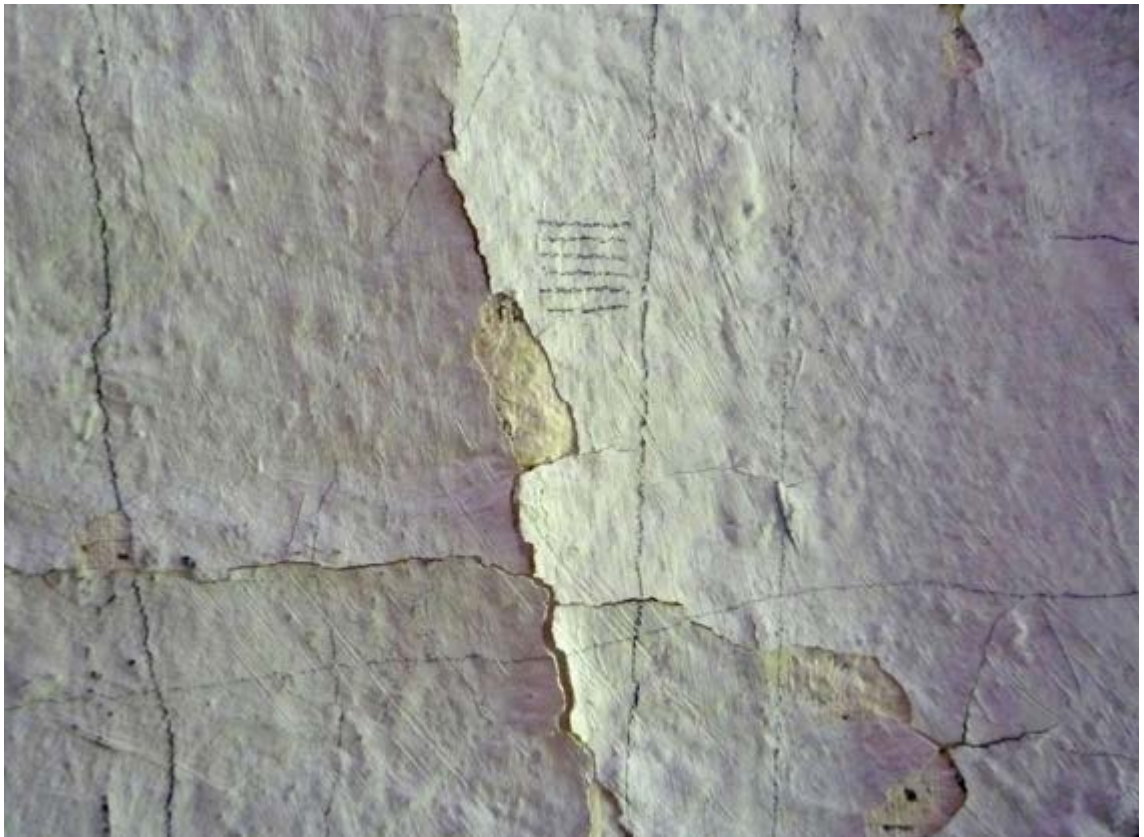
The site of the canvas became broken and its tormented surface created a sense that all representation of form had become sunk and buried beneath the burden of paint. Bone-white became the filter through which I considered concepts of mourning. White is the colour of ash, calcified matter and skulls that appear like mushrooms from the mud of the trenches. White is the reductive colour of death. White is the colour of dried lime which dissolves bodies.

Through this process, picturing became a methodology of depicting nothing but its own presence, dismembering a fictive space into a site where the primary source of the subject and his memory no longer existed. Where the image became illegible, it no longer retained any graphic value; voices were silenced, and the image became a ghost of itself. This attack on representation was not a refusal or an action to ignore history, but the means to use the practice of concealment, trauma and destruction as tools for rendering images as lost and absent. In this context, the significance of the young soldier in Owen's poem was only of secondary importance. The paintings had become anonymous and, in this context,

they simply stood in for nothing. The paintings were built on a reality that in the process of transformation lost their corporeal referents. The motifs increasingly occupied a marginal position as if the body could only be found within the sheer weight and materiality of the canvas. The surface of the painting increasingly developed a barrier to meaning. Meaning, in fact, ceased to exist.



Detail of Fragment 1



Detail of Fragment 2





Fragment 1 & 2









Green Sea 1 & 2









Dead Scribble 1









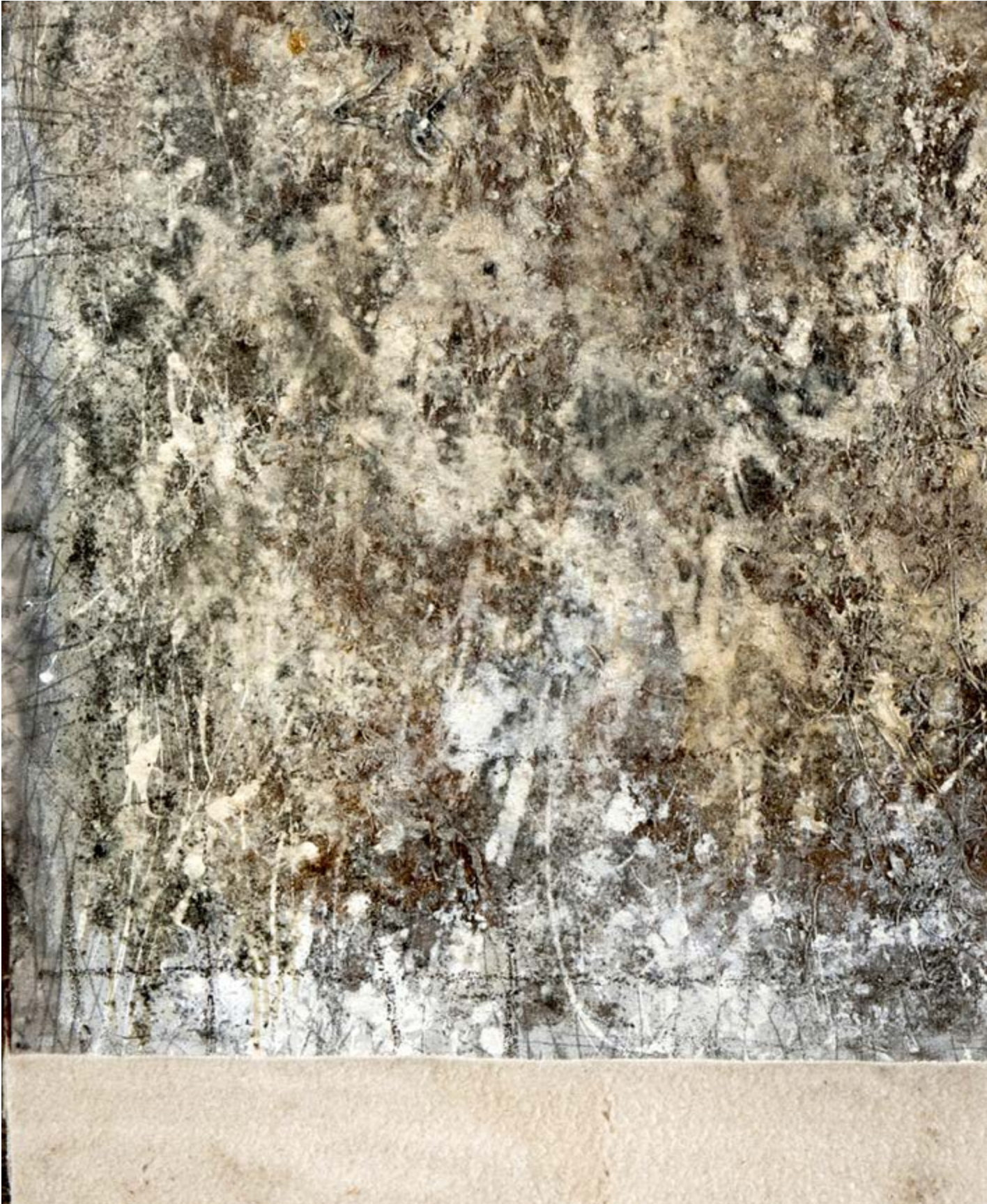
Dead Scribble 2





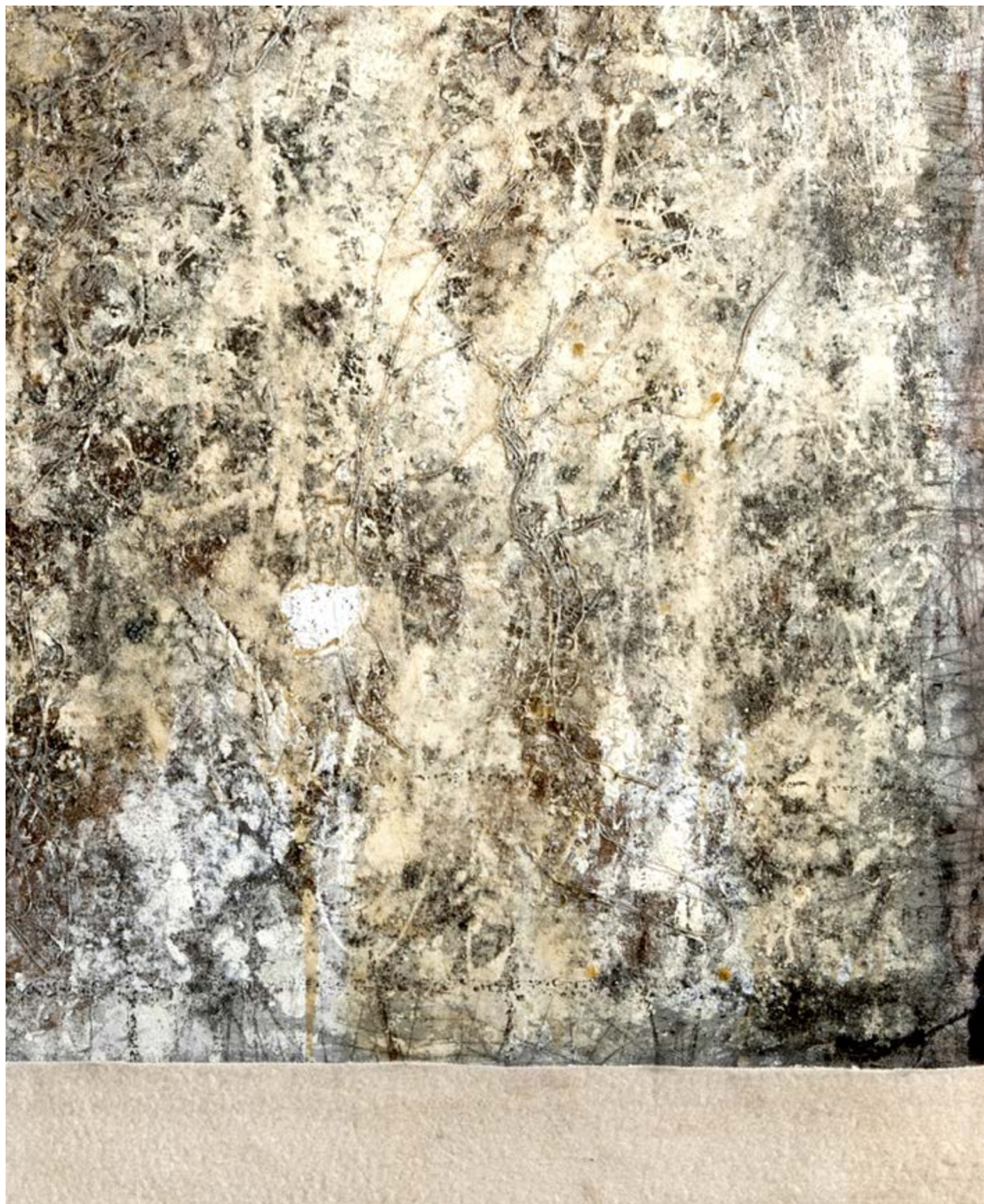
Dead Scribble 3



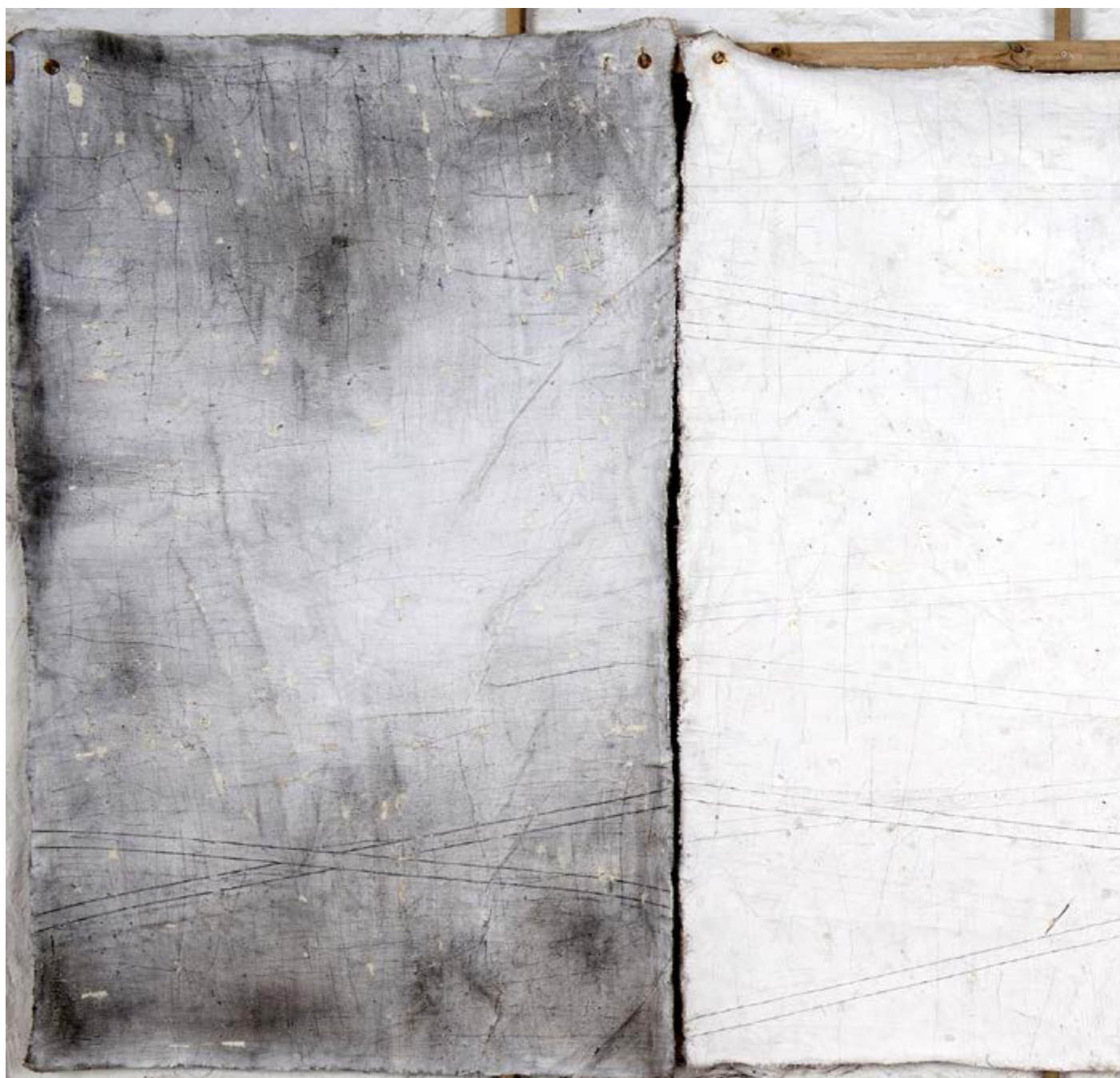


Bitter Blood 1









Bitter Blood 2







# Conclusion

A major preoccupation of this inquiry was a consideration of how two temporal dimensions, the historical past and the physical present, might co-exist and conjoin within a single site, on paper or canvas. The radical shifts in my practice during this time reflects the difficulty of this task, the conclusion to which will be demonstrated in my hanging of the discrete components in the summative exhibition.

A further preoccupation was how to employ the evidential trajectory of the inquiry as a critical methodology. Insights into the imaginative process at each stage of the practice became as important as understanding its final outcome. It was in phases of doubt, confusion, uncertainty, non-understanding and fear that the creative impetus and breakthroughs occurred. This suggested that, in the twin processes of making, and thinking about making, formal logic may

paralyse intuition, blocking the imagination, and impeding insight<sup>1</sup>. It was only in unguarded moments of silence<sup>2</sup> brought about by such uncertainty that I was finally able to hear Wilfred Owen's words clearly:

“...If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs...”<sup>3</sup>  
(Owen)

Such moments of insight served to alter the practice and allowed me to comment upon previously concealed or suppressed horrors. I moved from working with images reflecting an indifferent passivity into a period of suffocating, feverish dreams. Gradually I found images capable of expressing empathy and understanding, reinvigorating and renewing the act of painting, permitting static lines of history and poetry to be reactivated in visual manifestations. In order to bear witness to indelible scars, I became the addressee.

If a melancholy of mourning shadows my paintings, it reflects a comprehensible reaction to the mangled bodies and minds confronted in the research, and expresses my sense of the irreconcilable fracture of a distant world. As Emmanuel Levinas would say, “I arrived late”<sup>4</sup>. Yet this inquiry sought neither salve nor reconciliation, as in the fat and felt of Beuys's self-therapy. Beuys wished to “begin with the wound”, and his sculpture embraces both the world's

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1. An argument Salcedo expresses.

2. “In art, silence is already a language – a language prior to language – of the unexpressed and the inexpressible. Art is the transmission without words of what is the same in all human beings – the tragic hero's silence is silent in all art and is understood in all art without a word”. (Silence and duration 137. Salcedo – Franz Rosenzweig, The star of redemption). PRINCETAL, N. Basualdo, C Huyssen, A. 2000. *Doris Salcedo*, New York: Phaidon Press Limited.

3. *Dulce et Decorum Est*. Owen.

4. LEVINAS, E. 1981. *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*, Pennsylvania: Duguesne University Press.

suffering, and his own scars, to offer possibilities for healing on an individual and collective level, a redemptive strategy adopted by his student Anselm Kiefer. In contrast, my work recognises the wound as traumatized witness to horrific events, an 'unhealing' that signifies the continuing trauma arising from received memory. Importantly, the wound is significant in the context of *Dermatillomania* as a force for reanimation. It becomes a semiotic wound: a gash of poetry made legible, brought back to the domain of the visible. Yet is also an arching wound, illuminating a juncture between the present time and a past that is slipping beyond our awareness.

Throughout the project I was striving to offer an embodied experience of grief. The particular mode of correspondence was engendered through self-reflective acts of grieving, acts that provided a counterpoint to forgetting, and allowed the paintings to become, through the body of the canvas, a site for mourning. The visual language situates alteration and absence at its centre. By attempting to reconfigure memory through reference to a dead generation and dead poets, whose non-being defies the notion of representation, the process risked becoming fundamentally empty. The paradox of representing the absent with a presence, the past with a present, meant that I was often contemplating failure, but it was within this prospect of failure that the practice found a new vitality, and a meaningful register.



# Appendices

## Appendix 1

Benjamin Britten and Wilfred Owen

### War Requiem<sup>1</sup>

“...it is a function of creative men to perceive the relations between thoughts, or things, or forms of expression that may seem utterly different, and to be able to combine them into some new form”.

(William Plomer)

Edmund Blunden<sup>2</sup> said of Wilfred Owen, “he speaks as a soldier with perfect and certain knowledge of war at grips with the soldier; as a mind surveying the whole process of wasted spirit, art and blood in all its instant and deeper evils, as a poet giving his readers picture and tune that where ever they are reconsidered afford a fresh profundity, for they are combinations of profound recognition”.

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1. The first performance took place in Coventry Cathedral on the 30th May, 1962.

2. Britten owned the 1955 impression of Edmund Blunden's 1931 addition of Owen's poetry.



## War Requiem Background

In a feature published on the 27th April 1940, Benjamin Britten wrote “By coupling new music with well known musical phrases I think it is possible to get over new ideas”<sup>3</sup>.

With the aim to develop new strategies, context and a creative methodology for the research—to reply to Wilfred Owen’s “Reciprocity of tears” and to achieve through a contemporary practice a new means in which mourning for the First World War can be expressed. I have turned to the *War Requiem* composed by Benjamin Britten to mark the concentration of the new Coventry Cathedral on 30th May 1962. I interpreted and adapted Britten’s generative compositional system of juxtapositioning un-related material in the resolution of his work, in the development of my own practice to advance the process of interpreting mourning. This process has necessitated moving beyond the historical norm with the aim to the development of new considerations that might be valuable and applicable in a wider setting and would allow for the transferability of ideas. By interpreting Britten’s criteria of the combination of multi-laying divaricate materials has pointed to a new direction in determining ideas for a multi-meaning structure of working rather than an approach that had formally only carried a narrow meaning.

In promoting a contemporary role for the ‘Requiem’—the most solemn of Christian ritual, Britten broke new ground by creating a powerful and visual dimension through juxtaposing incompatible layers of sound, text and poetry. This strategy of implanting tensions and conflict through the uneasy mixing of the verbal music and unrelated sound underpinned important themes in Britten’s work. In

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3. COOKE, M. 1996. *Britten: War Requiem*, Cambridge University Press.

the Requiem, pacifism and conventional religious dogma created unsettling discordant resonances. But most radically, throughout the non-liturgical setting of the mass, in its traditional Latin form, Britten juxtaposed nine of Wilfred Owen's war elegies and poems.

In 1945 Britten accompanied by the violinist Yehudi Menuhin gave a recital at the Belsen concentration camp. The horror of this visit haunted Britten and was to influence the stark nature of much of his later work. This was to be demonstrated in 1958 when he chose two of Wilfred Owen's poems—*Strange Meeting* and *A kind of Ghost* for a radio programme.

Britten considered Wilfred Owen to be the most important poet of the First World War. Owen not only reflected in some degree Britten's stance on questioning the moral justification of war, but provided a direct connection through the poets haunting imagery to the grim ugliness of the trenches. Two years later, when composing the *War Requiem*, Britten wrote to Dietrich Fischer Dieskau concerning the nature of the requiem and the pivotal role of the inclusion of Owen's poetry.

"These magnificent poems full of hate of destruction  
and a kind of commentary on the mass" <sup>4</sup>.

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4. COOKE, M. 1996. *Britten: War Requiem*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Mervyn Cooke suggest that it was logical for Britten to have chosen Owen's poetry, not only because he was moved by the vividness and emotional resonances expressed, coupled with a brilliant poetic technique, but also to the emotive power of Owen's anti-war sentiments and his increasing antipathy towards traditional religion, in particular the "Mechanisms of the liturgy and the ritual of the Church"<sup>5</sup> (The poem, *Maundy Thursday* – France 1915).

Cooke suggests that the power of the Requiem was influenced by Britten's desire to use the most dramatic possibilities that were available in the liturgical music and that the Requiem was characterized by the emotions that could be communicated through the ritualistic rhythmic repetitious patterning of words. In order to develop this further, Britten inserted rests between individual words and to achieve a greater depth employed and juxtaposed a structural procedure that included overlapping vocal entries, funeral gongs strokes, the toiling of bells, un-harmonized octaves, different pitches, fan fares, sharp yells, martial sounds, the organ, tintinnabulation, percussions, bell strokes, two orchestras (a full orchestra and a chamber orchestra), boys choir and the "Clamorous vocal dis-synchronization"<sup>6</sup>.

Britten's intent was to shock – "to disturb, discomfort, confront" his audience. (Donald Mitchell<sup>7</sup>).

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5. COOKE, M. 1996. *Britten: War Requiem*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

6. COOKE, M. 1996. *Britten: War Requiem*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p67.

7. Decca Music, Introduction, p58.

The *War Requiem* was to break new ground by differing disparate elements that supported the compositional processes. The implied incompatibility of the massive settings for the religious sentiments for the 'Mass of the Dead' was juxtaposed with Owen's clear text. And throughout the Requiem, Britten uses Owen's bleak vernacular poetry to disturb and hinder the stylised religious prayers of condolence and consolation of the Mass.

Within the *War Requiem*, Britten utilised three distinct levels or planes. In the foreground stands two soldiers - one English and the other German. They are accompanied by a chamber orchestra. Beyond them are the celebrants of the mass – which contain three opera soloists two choirs and a symphony orchestra. This section represents the formal ritualised expression of mourning and includes a liturgical plea for deliverance from darkness, bloodshed and chaos (Christopher Palmer). In the continual juxtapositioning lies a third dimension – ghostly boy's voices intoning a liturgy that appears to point to a place beyond death. This intoning is not only physically separated from the other performers but separated also in the remoteness of the historical inappropriateness of the archaism of the religious concepts of the liturgical transcription of "pseudo – archaic idiom" (55) that contained the medieval style of plane song.

To sustain an internal cohesion to the multi-layered juxtapositioning of references contained within the three planes of performances – "the lush brilliance of the choral" (69) the sparseness of the religious ritual – the agonising of the clarity of Owen's elegies mingled with the voices of young boys, symbolising innocence and soldiers cries from the battle field, Britten used an abstract 'tritone unifying device' that underpinned and gave unity to the Requiem.

Through juxtaposing the traditional religious nature of the ancient Latin Mass with the poetry of the Great War, combined with two orchestras, tenor and baritone soloists and choirs, Britten had acquired a rich and varied potential and recourse in which to construct the ambiguous and irresolute nature of the *War Requiem*.

## Nine Poems

Within the Latin Mass, Britten situates nine of Owen's poems. In places he has reduced the text in order to underline or unsettle the original religious Latin liturgy. The selected poems include:

- *'Anthem for doomed youth'*
- *'Bugles song, saddening the evening air'*
- *'Untitled'*
- *'The next war'*
- *The Sonnet 'On seeing a piece of artillery brought into action'*
- *'Futility'*
- *'The parable of the old man and the young'*
- *'The end'*
- *'Strange meeting'*

Wilfred Owen died in the early morning of 4th November 1918, a week before Armistice whilst helping his men to cross the Sambre Canal near Ors in North East France. Owen was twenty five years old and left only a small collection of poetry. The most profound was written during the last two years of the war and became a passionate and raw outcry against man's inhumanity to man and the horrors and despair he had witnessed in the trenches. Owen's passionate storming against the terrible betrayal of war, afforded Britten the means to undermine the traditional consolatory role of the Requiem.

In choosing Owen's text and using it in relation to the liturgy, Britten demonstrated his imaginative ability to create tensions and conflict through verbal and musical images and this confrontational strategy underlines important themes in Britten's work. In the requiem Britten not only wishes to confront the audience with the subject of war, but also with the nature of conventional religious dogma. However, at the heart of the requiem, lies the essence of Owen's 'pity', of which Frank Nicholson commented; "must have been strong in him by nature and had been intensified by experience"<sup>8</sup>.

Britten, by interpreting these sentiments revealed a new and direct emotional direction between the ancient liturgy and the haunting savage image of war. During his compositional processes, Britten spent long hours walking in the Suffolk landscape, this coupled with considerable preliminary work spent in planning the broad structure of the Requiem suggests much of the work was done before any details were committed to script. Many drafts generated quantities of discarded notes indicating perhaps the difficulties Britten had to struggle with in defining his ideas. These discarded papers tangibly reflected on the problems Britten faced in bridging differing and unrelated elements that he wished to conjoin and juxtapose within his complex imaginative compositional practice. The *War Requiem* was bound in blue boards with a leather spine and corners and was dated on the final page Aldeburgh 20th December 1961.

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8. WILLIAMS, MERRY. 1993. *Wilfred Owen*, Mid Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press Ltd.

## Red Note Books

In the Blunden edition, the pages are heavily drawn with pencil annotations, and reflect Britten's reliance of a pencil as a creative tool. Throughout the majority of the *War Requiem*, Britten used the pencil for corrections, re-workings, discarded drafts and reconsiderations. The entire libretto of the *War Requiem* – the texts from the *Missa Pro defunctis* and Owen's poems, were transcribed by hand into his old school note books that dated from 1928. These note books comprised of seventy three folios bound in red boards that measured 22.8cm × 17.7cm. The exercise books had been used in two directions – from the front as his early German school books and inverted and re-used from the back – fresh pages in which Britten could now experiment and juxtapose possible texts for inclusion in his music.

Whilst composing, Britten employed the use of double page spreads to accommodate the complexity of his layout; the words of the Mass were written in pencil on the left, Britten's own translation occupied the centre with Owen's poetry placed on the right. Brackets and arrows were used to indicate that the placing of the text from the poems into the sequence of the liturgy. Owen's elegies were transcribed either in ink or ball point, suggesting perhaps they were added later, or their extreme value to the composition.

Within the Owen text, Britten sketched in pencil which particular voice – tenor or baritone, would be needed by which poem.



## **‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ – Tenor solo**

### **Requiem Aeternam**

Chorus–

“Requiem aeternam dona et Domine  
et last perpetua luceat eis”.

“Rest Internal grant them Lord; and may  
everlasting Light shine upon them”

Boys choir –

“Te decet hymnus, Dues in  
Sion et tibi reddelur votum in  
Jerusalem; Exaudi orationem  
meam, adte omnis caro venlet.”

“Songs of praise are due to thee,  
God in Zion; and prayers offered  
up to thee in Jerusalem hear my  
prayer, all flesh shall come to thee.”

Juxtaposed with *Anthem for Doomed Youth*.

Tenor Solo –

“What – passing – bells for those who die as cattle?  
Only the monstrous anger of the guns  
Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons  
No mockeries for them from prayers or bells,  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, -  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells...”

(92)

Owen names ecclesiastical details—the passing bells, orison prayers, choirs, candles, palls and flowers in his setting *Anthem for Doomed Youth* in order to stress the failings of conventional religion in the abomination and desolation of the battlefield. Britten reflects and echoes these sentiments with nervous and brittle sounds, mirroring the martial noise of “shrill demented choirs of wailing sounds”. In vivid descriptions of the battlefield, Britten adopts a new range and depth of juxtapositioning to build on Owen’s themes of the futility and utter despair of war.

### **Agnus Dei**

At a Calvary near the Ancre

Chorus – Agnus Dei

“Qui tollis peccata mundi

Donna eis requiem”

“Lamb of God

Who takest the away the sins

of the world,

Grant them rest.”

Tenor Solo

“One ever hangs where shelled roads part.

In this war he too lost a limb

But His disciples hide apart,

And now his soldiers bear with Him.”

A deeply troubled poem whose powerful message was shared by many war artists and writers—the bleak and mutilated horizontal or broken forms of the Crucifixion contained stark warnings of despair—that could be interpreted either,

the Christ figure continued to receive wounds to atone for the sins of the world, or God's indifference to the suffering or the implications that the presence of a God or salvation no longer existed on the battlefield.

### **Strange Meeting – Libera me**

Chorus and soprano solo.

Latin Requiem	Free me, Lord from eternal death,
<b>Chorus – Libera me</b>	on that dreadful day. When the skies
Domine de Morte aeterna	and ground shall quake,
In die illa tremenda:	when thou comest to judge
Quando coeli movendi sunt	our generation through fire!
et terra: Dum veneris judicare	
Saeculum per ignem.	

“...I am the enemy you killed my friend.  
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned  
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed,  
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.”

Tenor and Baritone solo's sing “let us sleep now...”

The catastrophic tense atmosphere of ‘Libre Me’ is intensified by a funeral march that gradually spreads out of the final stages of the Requiem to conjoin within its rhythmical skeleton form to other orchestral idioms of the Mass. In the final stages, Britten combines Owen's eerie atmospheric poem ‘Strange Meeting’, with the timeless words of the Latin ritual for the mass of the dead. ‘Strange meeting’

becomes a disturbing lament in which two soldiers from apposing sides (“I am the enemy you killed my friend”) meet in hell and despair over the bitter irony of their wasted lives.

Britten unhappy with Owen’s final meeting of reconciliation taking place in hell omits lines 9 to 12 of *Strange Meeting*.

“And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,  
By his dead smile I knew we stood in hell.  
With a thousand pains that vision’s face was grained,  
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground.”<sup>9</sup>  
(Owen)

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9. Sassoon called ‘Strange Meeting’ Owen’s passport to immortality.

## Appendix 2

Collected notes on: Spiritualism – Necromancy – The Darkened room of the Séance and the Unnatural World of the Trenches.

David Cannadine<sup>1</sup> denigrated spiritualism as the “private denial of death”. However, that was to underestimate the terrible desire and yearning of the public, and the soldier suffering at the front for a belief in the continuation of life after death. The Trench Observer L.Lambert wrote “after a murderous war, who would doubt that the dead would try to communicate again”<sup>2</sup>.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle lost his son, a medical officer in the First Hampshire Regiment, from wounds he received on the Somme. Lily Loder-Symonds, a nanny to the family who had lost three brothers in 1915, was able, in her capacity as a medium, to relay messages from the dead and this connection helped enable Conan Doyle to finally dismiss any last

“lingering skepticism ...about the possibility  
of communication with the dead”<sup>3</sup>.

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1. WINTER, J. 1995. *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p227.

2. WINTER, J. 1995. *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p58.

3. WINTER, J. 1995. *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p58 (Conan Doyle and the Spirits, p109.

Furthermore, Conan Doyle's interest in Spirit Photography developed during this time and he and his wife attended many Séance's held by a variety of mediums. Writing of his own wartime spiritualist experiences Conan Doyle recalled:

"The sight of a world which was distraught with sorrow, and which was eagerly asking for help and knowledge, did certainly affect his mind and caused him to understand the these psychic studies, which he had so long pursued, were of immense practical importance and could no longer be regarded as a mere intellectual hobby or fascinating pursuit of a novel research. Evidence of the presence of the dead appeared in his own household, and the relief afforded by posthumous messages taught him how great a solace it would be to a tortured world if it could share in the knowledge which had become clear to himself"<sup>4</sup>

Spiritualism was present not only in the darkened room of the Séance but in the uncanny and phantasmagoric world at the front.

In his introduction to *Spiritualism and the Lost Generation* Jay Winter comments on the Great War "the most modern of wars, triggered an avalanche of the 'un-modern'. The communication between the dead and the living became a powerful feature in which the dead "helped to lift the burden of grief borne by families" a mean by which "the living saw the dead" and their "return" helped survivors coped with their loss and their trauma"<sup>5</sup>.

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4. CONAN DOYLE, A. *The History of Spiritualism*.

5. WINTER, J. 1995. *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 58 (Conan Doyle and the Spirits, p53–57. I saw samples of this whilst studying in the archive departments of the Somerset and Plymouth museums.

Many eminent Victorian thinkers in Britain and Europe who rejected mainstream religious and practices and beliefs turned to spiritualism as a means of reconciling science, deism and socialism” these included such eminent men as Hugo, Ruskin, Tennyson, Thomas Mann, Lord Rayleigh, Cavendis Professor of Physics at Cambridge and Nobel prize winner in 1914. The Russian court was immensely interested in Occultism and in Germany those interested even included Kaiser Wihelm II and J.C.F Zollner, Professor of Astronomy at the University of Leipzig.

Women played a pivotal role in the spiritualist community however, the Roman Catholic Church vehemently opposed the movement, not only because of the number of women involved but, of their understanding of the scriptural text of Leviticus 20:6 and Deuteronomy 18:10:12 in which it is forbidden and a sin to communicate with the dead (it was commendable to pray for the dead but not to have any relationship to those that had died). In Rome Pope Pius IX had condemned the twin evils of spiritualism and socialism. (Winter).

There were numerous papers published on the Occult which included *Light*, the *Occult Review* and for a more intellectual review there was *The Society for Psychical Research* (founded in 1882). Sir Oliver Lodge, Professor of Physics at Liverpool and later principle at Birmingham University was President between 1901 and 1903.

Even Before 1914, Lodge was experienced in Telepathy and had carried out many experiments in paranormal psychology.<sup>6</sup>

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6. WINTER, J. 1995. *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 58 (Conan Doyle and the Spirits, p61.



Raymond his youngest son, a 26 year old engineer was killed on the 14th September 1915 in the Ypres Salient. During the months that followed Lodge and his family were helped to contact him by a celebrated medium; Mrs. Osbourne Leonard through Raymonds 'Guide' a fellow spiritualist and intellectual F.H.S Myers, a fellow of trinity College Cambridge, who died in 1902. Through this they built up a picture of Raymonds life in what they call Summerlands, producing a "Supernatural Odyssey" in a book titled *Raymond* (Winter).

The Book was reprinted many times and became a 'best seller' at home and in the trenches.

Whatever doctrine was taught, soldiers turned to the supernatural. Many had little difficulty in accepting the incongruous and the uncanny as part of every day life. One Catholic scholar noted at the time "The enormous range and variety of psychic phenomena at the front, which in other circumstances would be 'laughable' "but to laugh at them would be a mistake"...."They are manifestations of obscure and profound needs in the popular soul, intimate yearnings which seek their way and which, without wise orientation, will lose their way"<sup>7</sup>.

However, many clergyman were hostile to spiritualism and argued that "The superstitious man must either be a polytheist or a devil worshipper, or more probably just a fool". This negativity and lack of empathy towards the soldier struggling with his fears caused a rift to develop between the men and their chaplains.

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7. LEED, J. E. *No Mans Land*.

## The Occult The Pagan and Necromancy

In Venessa Chamber's article *A shell with my name on it: the reliance on the Supernatural during the First World War*<sup>8</sup>. Chambers suggested soldiers relied heavily on a vast range of supernatural props to strength and aid them during the unprecedented brutality of the First World War. These took the form of charms, rituals, premonitions, sittings, supernatural portents and protective objects.

There is a body of evidence in the photographic archives of the Imperial War Museum, London, showing soldiers with their lucky charms and mascots – Paul Fussell suggests that “one would have to be mad, or close to it to credit Talisman in the first quarter of the 20th Century with the power to deflect bullets and shell fragments” and “yet no front line soldier or officer was without his amulet, and every tunic became a reliquary”<sup>9</sup>. Even Sassoon carried a fire opal. Stated belief in lucky charms had a history reaching back into myth and folklore of the past. Numerous men even the volunteers did not depart for the front without a charm of some kind.

Some soldiers were known to have a farthing sown into their left brace positioned over the heart. (A practice traced back to the Crimean War). Others used bibles and prayer books not in the religious sense but as Talisman. Protestant soldiers intrigued by the richness of the Catholic churches often sought out small relics from shelled and destroyed churches.

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8. JSM (ISSUE 2). 2004. Journal For the Academic Study of Magic, *A Shell With My name On It*. The Reliance on the Supernatural During The First World War, Chambers, V, Oxford: Mandrake of Oxford.

9. FUSSELL, P. 1975. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York: Oxford University Press.

In the hideous physical surroundings exposed to mud and weather of the trenches, sleep deprivation, noise and hunger, soldiers were constantly haunted by what they saw and the continual presence and fear of death. Plowman describes the war as “a land of foreboding even of horror, where blind death keeps groping hideously” making them susceptible to dark fears, superstition and the supernatural. Plowman describes one such event:

“I saw the blanket slowly lifted and the hand appeared in the dim light of the candle. I hardly repressed a scream of horror, and an icy numbness gripped me as I scanned a blackened face, thick lips and aquiline nose, big eyes that stared at me...it was the face of a dead man that I had buried”<sup>10</sup>.

Other portents of disaster and emotional motif for the weary soldier was the number three – which either could suggest good, or bad luck, such as ‘third time lucky’ or common folklore that suggested death came in three’s, as in “they sent me over, this is the third time”. Blunden in his book the ‘Undertones of War’ reports in the common belief that a shell had your name on it if it was your turn.

## **Tripartite Divisions and zones of war**

The trenches were composed of three lines” Front, Support and reserve. A battalion would spend a third of its routine duty in each. Max Plowman explains “Day and Night we have here men to every bay: one on sentry while the other two rest or sleep”<sup>11</sup>.

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10. PLOWMAN, M. 1928. *A Subaltern on the Somme*, New York: E.P. Dulton & Company, p129.

11. IBID, p87.

Colours were also organized into threes – “The white of the smoke, the red of the shrapnel and blood, the green of the grass” (described by an observer before an attack on Gommecourt July 1st 1916).

For the Poet Charles Sorley, the transformation of a man into a corpse was also a three part action. Counting off by three, Fussell suggests that “no soldier will ever forget its portentous implication” in the military organization of the battle field. Another aspect of three’s was the Triad of traditional myth and ritual that fed into some of the meanings and implications to the military three and as Northrop Frye suggests ‘the three fold structure’ is an essential part of the historic romance. With the quest undertaken by the third son (example, the *Well at the Worlds End*) or in achieving success on the third attempt. Ivor Gurney’s *Ballad of the three Specters* is suggestive of the number three as being not only magical but sinister.

## **Necromancy**

A common link with the front and those at home was the belief and hope in the return of the fallen – with stories of the dead forming their own armies to assist soldiers on their epic struggle. Fathers appearing at their sons side in battle and ghosts of soldiers visiting the bereaved at home. Most soldiers were not spiritualists but in the Phantasmagoric and unnatural world in which they fought the trenches provided an un-wholesome morbid environment for the spread of stories of supernatural phenomena to spread.

Carrington Harward in his book *Psychic Phenomena* recounts numerous cases of spiritualist activity in the trenches and in particular Harwood writes, of the reported cases of the dead contacting the bereaved by sending messages of hope and consolation to their grieving families.

“These spirits tried to lift any inordinate grief among the bereaved. Not only was such lingering sadness necessary, but it tended to mar the happiness of our friends beyond”<sup>12</sup>.

Another occurrence of contact with the spiritualist world was the use of psychic photography. An example of this, are the photos taken on ‘Armistice Day’ by a Mrs Ada Emma Deane showing the dead gliding over the living in Whitehall I 1922 during the two minute silence.

Artists such a Stanley Spencer, Andre Breton, used automatic writing of a sign of the spiritual realm, Victor Brauner was a medium and Max Beckman also considered these themes.

Winter stated “The presence of Pagan or Pre-rational modes of thought under the appalling stress of combat should surprise no one” and quotes a Swiss Anthropological study that investigated the multi-strategies for coping with war and its stresses which included ingenious use of cards carried in different pockets, soil of places of pilgrimage, mascots, amulets, written prayers and rituals<sup>13</sup>.

A proliferation of stories concerning the dead, magical forces and the uncanny can be found in numerous accounts and letters written by the soldiers<sup>14</sup>.

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12. HARWARD, C. *Notes of the Month*, Occult Review, p22.

13. WINTER, J. 1995. *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p65.

14. BIRD, W.R. 1997. *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*, Ontario: CEF Books.

Further more Winter points to the overlapping of pagan elements, folklore and conventional modes of religious expression. On the continent Marian and Fatima cults flourished and many miracles on the battle field were reported in religious almanacs. Soldiers reported evidence of prophetic dreams, psychic messages and metaphysical occurrence and on occasions premonitions of a soldier's death, together with uncanny knowledge of family members learning of a soldier's death or injury before they were officially notified.<sup>15</sup>

The 'divine legends' that attended the first two years of the war such as the 'Angel of Mons' gradually gave way and became dominated by ghostly apparitions. The weight and magnitude of numbers of the dead in a seemingly endless war dominated all other concerns. Winter comments that even conventional Christian modes of burying and honoring rituals of the dead had become irrelevant.

**"The dead were literally everywhere on the Western Front,  
and their invasion of the dreams and thoughts of the living  
was an inevitable out come of trench war fare."<sup>16</sup>**

Lieutenant George Goddard of the royal artillery voiced what many men felt when he wrote "In a world of death, one would expect to penetrate the veil when it hangs so constantly before one"<sup>17</sup>.

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15. Owen's brother reported that he knew of Wilfred's death days before the news had been released.

16. WINTER, J. 1995. *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p69.

17. Goddard. E. *Orthodoxy and the war*.

## Ghosts and Accounts of Spiritualism

*Listening In* – A record of a Singular Experience by Olive C.B Pixley, Chelsea Feb 17 1928.

Is a narrative of a psychical event that took ten years to find the courage to share publicly. An intimate personal experience. Olive Pixley declared “I write not for the scientist or the intellectual skeptic but for people like herself who have lost the dearest of companions—the vital focus of their lives”.

*Listening In* is a record of a brother and sisters psychic contact after he was killed. Both earlier had possessed a certain amount of psychic ability and interest. Which before the war had manifested itself in automatic writing. Captain John Nicol Fergusson Pixel of the 4th Battalion Grenadier Guards aged 27—known as Jack, was shot by a sniper through the heart. He was commanding a company and after returning safely from a terrible engagement had just gone to look after his men. He was killed at Egypt House, north of the Brombeke near Houthulst Forest, dawn October the 12th 1917. Soldiers carried his body back for burial at the ‘Guards Plot’ Artillery Wood, Boesinghe.

The telegram was telephoned through and two days later, Jack started a process of communication with his sister to insure her that all was well. Jack also appeared to two of his greatest friends in the army and to another member of the family.<sup>18</sup>

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18. First published in 1930 by L.S.A Publications Ltd. 16 Queensbury Place, London SW.



Sassoon on Theosophy:

“I thought the worlds a silly sort of place  
when people think its pleasant to be dead  
I thought “How cheery the brave soldiers would be  
If Sergeant – Major taught theosophy”

### **Cameos of the Western Front – Poets and Pals of Picardy<sup>19</sup>**

Mary Ellen Freeman’s account is a personal pilgrimage to Flanders and Picardy started in 1985 continuing over many years. The insights of the journey came through the poetry, narratives of the young soldiers, the wayside graves and the sacred ground of the battlefield.

“The wearied hearts and the broken lives”

Second Lieutenant Walker Lightowler Wilkinson 1/8th Battalion Argill and Sutherland Highlanders killed in action 9th April 1917 aged 31. Buried Highland Cemetery, Rodincourt, France.

The Sorrowing Wind

“...Will you come back? Tom asked ‘afterward’  
I mean to see how it looks?”  
...”If were dead we’ll come in spirit  
There’ll be plenty of ghosts wandering through

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19. Freeman Ellen. M, published in 1999.

France and Belgium in the years to come”

(Mary E Pearce)

Ghosts have Warm Hands by Will R Bird

“If I don’t come back

maybe I’ll find a way to come and whisper in your ear”.

Will Bird of Amherst, Nova Scotia, served from 1916–1919 with the 42nd Battalion, The Black Watch of Canada. He was at Vimy, Passchendaele, where men fought in 3 feet of mud and at Amiens, Arras and Cambrai. Bird’s writing of his war is remarkable in that not only does he give an account and insights into the terror and confusion of the battle in which many of his friends were killed, but also in the non physical realm where he was visited and assisted by his brother who had been killed in 1915.

Will Bird wrote that under the stresses of the Great War “Every human emotion ran its full gamut...and prolonged intensity of feeling wrought strange psychological changes which warped the soul itself...unconsciously there were born faiths that carried over through critical moments, and tortured minds gripped fantasies that served in place of more solid creeds”.

Will Bird died in 1984. His *Ghosts have Warm Hands* gives exceptional detail into “a rarely discussed event—the psychic side of war.” And in his preface to ‘And We Go On’ he aimed to reveal “the psychic or supernatural effects war had on its participants”.

Bird was strongly affected by the death of his youngest brother killed in France 1915, and he suspected that the strong personal connection he earlier had with Stephen enabled them to connect after Stephen was killed.

Even though during and after the war spiritualism was an important belief system for many thousands of bereaved, Bird suspected that his own experience would be difficult to understand not only by himself but by others, so he painstakingly recorded the events in his diary "Every care of premonition I have described in actual fact; each of my psychic experiences were exactly as recorded".

Though supernatural experience are not now in war memoirs the accuracy of these records added credibility to the belief system of the time.

## **Notes on the War and Transformation of Men**

A Gulf/abyss developed between families at home and the broken soldiers brutalised by their deeds, depravation and a life filled with bitter and hateful things. Inexperienced and fearful in a war zone causing many soldiers to become dulled inured to the disquietening experiences, vicious cruelty and savage deprivation of the war. The monstrous cruelty of the conflict had cut soldiers from their roots, corrupted values, conscious and coarsened men, making tenuous their links with home and humanity. The past had grown now so remote and unsubstantial that any other way of being could no longer be imagined. The stark tragedy of the war, in which no power could atone for the suffering and degradation of the soldier, weighed relentlessly on his spirit and predisposed him to periods of bitter melancholy and pessimism.

The soldier blinded by the fury and the lust of killing in his eye and the sinister impulse to destroy is described by J.G Grey:

“With a mixture of feelings, evoked by blood thirstiness rage and intoxication, we moved in step...I was boiling with a mad rage, which had taken hold of me and all the others in an incomprehensible fashion. The overwhelming wish to kill gave wings to my feet...The monstrous desire for annihilation, which hovered over the battlefield, thickened the brains of the men and submerged them in a red fog”<sup>20</sup>

Later after the vengeful atmosphere of battle, oppressed by a spirit of evil, an evil that seemed to suppress normal human consciousness in its Lovecraftian malice, the remaining soldiers returned across the blasted scene of no mans land.

Moods of despair apprehension and inquietude were caused by the dread of a soldiers own inadequacies and he dwelt on involuntary actions in a critical moment that might be a cause directly or indirectly in the death of others.

Louis Simpson speculates on why on their return home infantry soldiers fell silent. Seldom rendering their experiences in language. A foot soldier's war was entirely physical and to have to put it into words—many couldn't find the vocabulary. Language seemed to falsify the war and many felt writing and speaking about their experience betrayed lost and dead comrades.

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20. GLENN GRAY, J. 1970. *The Warriors Reflections on Men in Battle*, London: Harper Colophon Books, p52.

To some extent Winter suggests that the real reason for the silence was that those not caught up in it shunned its awfulness and did not want to be informed. However, soldiers were also reticent about contaminating the home with the horror and trauma of the conflict and to speak about their experience was to relive the event. After blood letting, the ache of guilt in the disquietening cruel climate of war troubled men in their actions – And in the heart of the carnage, which weakened the will, confused the intellect – their killing rose up to haunt them exhausting them with feelings of self disgust. The war robbed them of self identity, ego and left them unable to direct their own fate. The encompassing grimness of the violent and irrational environment, continually charged with fear and loathing changed men. The soldier killed and for now he had escaped being killed. The war turned men inwards on themselves.

The very nature of the war was violence and in taking part the soldier discerned himself trapped in a situation in which he was incapable of altering. The only course possible was to change and make himself a tool and accomplice in the instrument of the battle and in this altering of himself, he found himself lost, violating, betraying his deepest instincts to the will of another. The stark tragedy of the war had rendered him expendable –his freedom constricted, lonely and isolated, his inner most melancholic thoughts weighed heavily on his spirit. There was no power that could atone for his suffering and degradation or his loathsome sense of guilt.

“My conscience seems to become little by little sooted....if I can get out of this war and back on the soil where the clean earth will wash away these stains”<sup>21</sup>

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21. GLENN GRAY, J. 1970. *The Warriors Reflections on Men in Battle*, London: Harper Colophon Books, p175.

The very substance of the war was the dead.

The dead appeared unreal and yet death was common place. The chief victim in the war were the young men or youths on the eve of becoming men. In the dying the young soldiers life seeped out, in agony, alone and without dignity. A life terminated by another, who cared little for the anguish he caused.

Soldiers were unable to ignore not only the multiplicity of the killing, but the intimacy of the dying. The strangeness of the dead's passiveness, the ease in which soldiers died when only a minute earlier they were alive. And the haunting unnatural and contorted positions taken up by the dead.

Confused, weakened by the tiredness, lack of food and the continual repetitive military action caused the soldier to be suspended in a lethargy of unawareness of the moment of deaths significance. His self awareness dimmed by the negation of war.

Stupefied by weariness, the soldier often welcomed death, conceiving, dying as the end of exhaustion and the stopping of agonizing mutilating pain and fear. The transition between life and death was imagined and made visible for the first time for the young soldier.

For some, to die was the last goal—a reduction of all things. “Attracted to death as the Moth is to flame”<sup>22</sup>. Many had had an attraction at the beginning of 1914, to the romance of the war poetry of Robert Brooke in which death is sought as affording life’s authenticity and creative power. Life intensified and made real by deaths presence.

Other concerns haunted the living – survivors not being able to retrieve the wounded from no-mans land, burying their comrades or affording them the respect and decency of last rites. This gave rise to soldiers revisiting the battlefield and the dead in their dreams and memories. A binding as any obsession or obligation. This ritual was highlighted in a letter Wilfred Owen wrote to his mother during February 1918, in which he explained the need was as compelling as visiting cemeteries.

Robert Jay Lifton, like many troubled by the guilt of survival (J Winter 214) describes his survival as a burden he carries like a cloak around his shoulders.<sup>23</sup>

## **Notes on Finding a Language**

In writing to his brother from the Somme during March 1917, artillery Subaltern Christian Croswell Caver evokes a scene at night, where the river flows through a scene of devastation, obscenity overshadowed by death.

“In our steel helmets and chain visors we sometimes recall Pilgrim’s  
Progress, armed figures passing through the valley of the shadow...”

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22. GLENN GRAY, J. 1970. *The Warriors Reflections on Men in Battle*, London: Harper Colophon Books, p175.

23. WINTER, J. 1995. *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p214.



Another young soldier wrote:

“The bare poles and brick heaps of Souchez looked perfectly weird and unnatural as the sun came out and threw it all up into a livid pink- hued distinctiveness. I knew I should never be able to describe its sinister appearance but that I should never forget it”<sup>24</sup>.

He added that it reminded him of an old wood cut of Bunyans *Pilgrims Progress* that his Grandfather had hanging on his wall.

Fussell commented that due to the true extent of the war’s unparalleled incoherent brutality it was becoming almost impossible to find an adequate language to describes its horror. And to some extent Jay Winter suggests that by returning to the ‘Unmodern’ literature – dialectical language of the past, at the beginning of the war, was one of the only forms adequate enough to describe the obscenity of the war and the sacrifice of the young. Providing an appropriate language, with its motifs of loss and terror, that could take on new meaning and new forms.

David Jones with his Victorian and Anglo Celtic background in his preface to *In Parenthesis* was able to draw on the *Matter of Britain*<sup>25</sup>.

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24. FUSSELL, P. 1975. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York: Oxford University Press, p138.

25. *The Matter of Britain* is the legendary history of Britain, that was created in part to form a body of patriotic myth for the country. (9th Century - ).

“I think the day by day in the wasteland, the sudden violence’s and long stillness, the sharp contours and unformed voids of that mysterious existence, profoundly affected the imagination of those who suffered it. It was a place of enchantment. It is perhaps best described in Malory (Book IV – Chapter 15) – “The landscape spoke with a grimly voice”. – No mans land and the unknown world beyond it projects on the landscape of the trenches and the soldiers minds”.

Later in a ‘Day in the Trenches’ Jones further compares the battlefield at the front to King Pellam’s Launde, The waste land of Malory’s maimed king of the ‘Grail story’. The Celtic underworld of “The wild land of hell” and the persistent Celtic themes of armed sleepers lying under the mounds of earth. His theme was of association and during a battle on the Somme during the 30th June surrounded by the dead of his battalion, Jones conflates the visions of horror he witnessed “These men were disemboweled and torn apart by machine guns” with the “dismembered antique gods in sacred groves” of old literature<sup>26</sup>.

However, 1914 was also unique in that English and classical literature was studied not only in schools and universities but also by many at Workmen’s Institutions and through the National Home Reading Union. Fussell believed created an appreciative and educated audience for literature that was unique and contemporary history. An example of this was provided by the Oxford book of Verse, in the Bells of Hell’ soldiers appropriated the words for a trench song which apparently was used as a charm directed towards the enemy, a dead comrade and in the event in a battle the poem provided protection for the singer.

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26. In March 1919 at Dunkirk for returning survivors of the war, many saw the “Big Ship....in terms of a mythological ‘pseudo-Arthurian’ image or as ferrying them back to Bunyans Celestial City.

An enormous amount of letters and poetry flowed between the trenches and home made possible by an efficient postal service. Literature provided a deep bond for the soldiers with those at home.

In an attempt to achieve a fragile respite poet soldiers could crawl into their poetry—as an escape from the presence of the war, using the language of poetry to “contemplate a shared unimaginable experience”. A shared heightened experience in which at any moment they could die. Poetry and prose was able to provide an actuality of war experience of the young soldier seen through the familiar images of their ‘beloved’ literature.

Literature provided a rendering and an expression of a situation that exceeded ordinary endurance. Soldiers were able to trace a semblance or link between a looking back to an unmodern literature and their own suffering. The literature furnished them with support and for others it was consolatory<sup>27</sup>.

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27. FUSSELL, P. 1975. *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York: Oxford University Press, p168.

## Appendix 3

### Visual Catalogue – War Injuries and Dermatillomania



#### Painting Section

### **Appendix 3**

#### Visual Catalogue – Industrial War



Painting Section



## Appendix 3

### Visual Catalogue – Industrial War



### Appendix 3

#### Visual Catalogue – Neroche Forest





## Appendix 3

### Visual Catalogue – The Forest





### Appendix 3

#### Visual Catalogue – Ground 1





**Appendix 3**

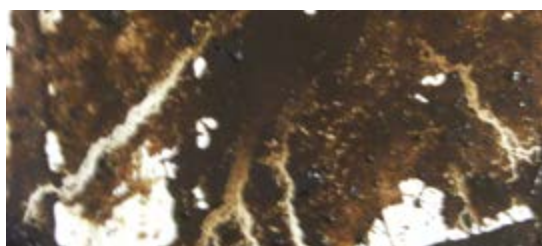
Visual Catalogue – Ground 2





## Appendix 3

### Visual Catalogue – Studio 1



## Appendix 3

### Visual Catalogue – Studio 2



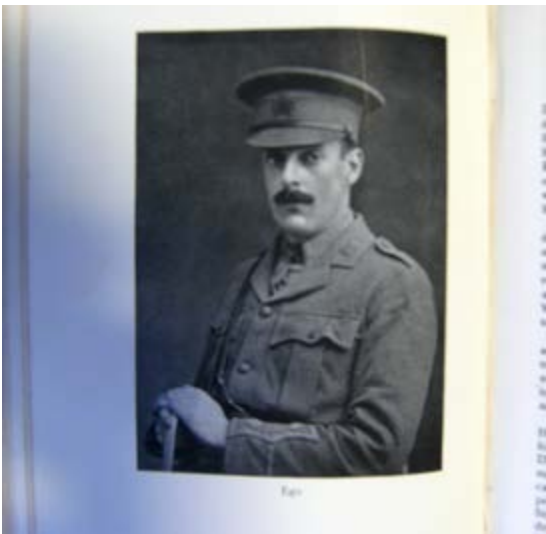
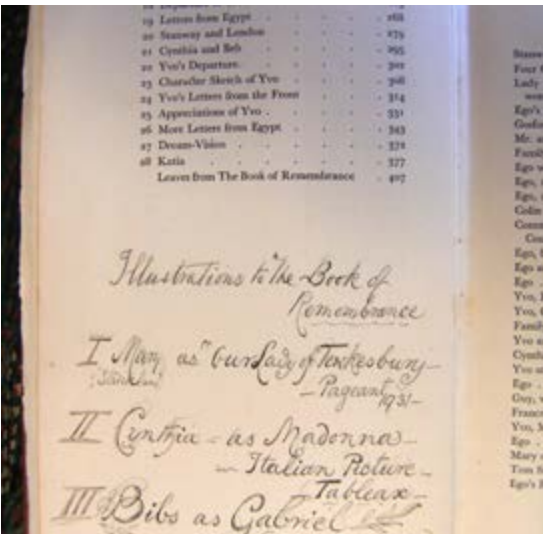


### Appendix 3

#### Visual Catalogue – War Material



Appendix 3  
Visual Catalogue – War Memorials



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