

Marking the Occasion

MIX Artists started discussing a potential Anzac related project early in 2013. Right from the start the group recognised the possibilities and embedded politics of presenting an exhibition in Albany that was more than a veneration and commemoration of the 100 year anniversary. As Don Watson so succinctly writes in his essay [‘lest we go over the top’] reprinted in this catalogue “*The experience of war very much depends on where one happens to be standing at the time. This is true for those whose fate is decided in battle and for those who, having sent them to fight watch from an expedient hillside. It is also true for those who come later: writers of all descriptions who go on scavenging among the dead and wounded long after they are dust...*” And so ‘homeFRONT’ has developed in the past 12 months or so. Sixteen female artists from Albany and the Great Southern region have individually developed embryonic ideas and processes into exhibited artworks which examine and respond to war and history from the *expedient hillside* here in Albany.

Anzac Day is firmly embedded in the national calendar with all the accompanying possibilities: dawn services, community breakfasts [think sausage and eggs], main street march pasts, flag waving and maybe a beer enhanced afternoon filled with old war stories and even the ubiquitous beach cricket match. This exhibition provides an alternative arena - one for the thinking person. Much of the work in the show critiques the ‘why’ in general terms of war - its horrible consequences physical and mental. It also examines and documents some of the work carried out by the home front, the internment of enemy aliens, the forgotten and undocumented war dead, the war horse and the ever-hopeful correspondence between the home-family and the warrior.

Sounds pretty grim? Well I suppose it does and for sure this exhibition’s subject matter is serious. But...the work itself I believe does transcend the grim and presents us with many very poignant, hand-crafted moments of individual thoughtfulness. The knitted jumper that Peta Davies presents is a contemporary reworking of the Greek myth of Penelope; the neck of this jumper’ while it is never completed, signifies the hope that the beloved husband or son will return safely. Sheryl Stephen’s pair of grey woollen partially unravelled socks stands as metaphor for the endless cycle of war events. The never-ending video shows the completion of a set of socks only to unravel and start again, and again... Jillian Green’s work questions the role of mothers in the ‘equation’ of war – the equal and opposing stance, the closed gun covers suggesting denial.

Lynley Campbell’s tea tree eucalyptus impregnated hand-felted shroud is a tribute to the unknown dead warrior. Indra Geidan’s reprinted WW2 photographs show a jolly pair of liberated girls dressed in their best home-made recycled curtain-frocks, next to their boyfriends of the moment amongst the war-torn rubble of Frankfurt, Germany.

The stark remainders of war, its ultimate evidence is placed before us in Michelle Frantom's digital image 'The Spoils of War'. Jenny Crisp's skull reminds us that collateral damage is not all physical. Renee Farrant's work 'Internment' is a tribute to all those innocent war victims interred for reasons of national security. The constructed origami swan bristles with raw, unsheathed scalpel blades.

Words are a potent weapon of war: propaganda, moments of half-truth, blatant lies and the victors re-telling of history are all familiar rhetoric in the arsenal of justifications before and after the event. Nikki Green's 'Patchwork Peace' has lifted quotes from the Ataturk memorial in Albany as an ode to the mothers. Ann Copeman's 'Lament' examines the plight of the shell shocked using perforated sheets [reminiscent of the Pianola scrolls in common use at home during WW1] of simple brown paper spelling out the silent words which echo their shadows on the gallery wall. Kerrie Argent and Terri Pikora have both examined the act of war correspondence, the writing to and fro. What can be said? What will constitute news to the warrior and what he can or cannot reveal to the mother and wife back at home?

Rachel Mordy has made a series of small diary-style oil paint sketches - imagined musings of the life of a horse at war [known as 'Walers' as they originated in NSW]. Annette Davis with 'Left Right Left Right' has documented the 2014 Albany Anzac Day March - the thigh-down images suggest the anonymity embedded in war statistics, evidence of community participation and the need to venerate and show respect for the national day. Nat Rad with 'Articles for Armistice' has presented us with a cheeky take on the camouflage uniform. A fashion-fabric overlaid with other designs breaks down the original intention of the printed cloth. Robyn Lees' installation 'White Feather Flotilla' is a stark reminder of the fate of many young men coerced into the armed forces through pressure evidenced by the white feather [a symbol of cowardice] from their community.

This exhibition transcends the personal and potentially critiques the national veneration of the Anzac myth. The 16 artists in this exhibition have presented us with work that each in its own way examines that myth and pulls apart some assumptions embedded in this national day of commemorative remembrance. The centenary of Anzac Day and Australia's involvement in WW1 is surely an opportune time to re-evaluate attitudes; personal, communal and national.

Paul Moncrieff

Curator 'homeFRONT' January 2015

