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'Official war artists' and the cultural and political geographies of conflict

What is an 'official war artist?' In the UK this has tended to mean an artist commissioned by some branch of the armed forces or the Imperial War Museums (IWM) to produce work based on their experience of war or some kind of military operation. Various branches of the armed forces continue to commission artists and illustrators to spend time with troops on deployment and to create work (usually sketches and paintings) that records and illustrates their activities. This work also tends to circulate and to be exhibited within military and military-related contexts. But in the last ten to twenty years, IWM commissions have shifted away from a mandate to illustrate and to record, to creating work which reflects the forefront of contemporary art practice and engages questions about the representation of war in the context of broader public concerns and debates.

This shift is reflected in the books published from IWM commissions. Consider Linda Kitson's 1982 *Visual Diary of the the Falklands War*.

The cover shows a sketch of a soldier holding a machine gun, and the sketchbook is surrounded by military paraphernalia: binoculars, a fingerless glove, a compass and camouflage uniforms. The illustrative style adopted by the artist is clearly in evidence, and the book lists the headquarters and units she visited along the way. A foreword written by Frederick Gore RA, chair of what was then called the Artistic Records Committee, commends the work for conveying what it felt like to be a (British) soldier in the Falklands. Compare this with Langlands and Bell's body of work, *The House of Bin Laden*, which came out of a 2002 commission entitled *The Aftermath of September 11 and the War in Afghanistan*.

The cover of the book emerging from this commission, (*The House of Osama Bin Laden*) shows nothing specifically referencing war, the military or bin Laden himself. Rather there is a photo of part of a spare, undecorated room with a sandy floor, containing a wicker bed, and a blanket or robe lying tangled up in an alcove.

The body of work Langlands and Bell produced included photography, moving image and a digital interactive installation, of which the book was both document and component part. Unlike Kitson, The artists did not remain embedded with British forces, and in addition to the headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the US air force base at Bagram, visited NGO offices, Bamiyan (where giant statues of Buddha had been destroyed by the Taleban) and the former residence of Osama bin Laden at Daruntah. Their work was exhibited at the Imperial War Museum London in the usual manner, but was also nominated for the Turner Prize in 2004 and received a British Film and Television Academy (BAFTA) award for best Interactive Art Installation.

Steve McQueen's IWM commission, for which he visited British troops in Iraq in 2003, resulted in the work *Queen and Country* and also led to a book.

Unlike Kitson, who followed the troops into the Falklands, through landing sites and battle fields into

Port Stanley, and unlike Langlands and Bell, who were able to travel in Afghanistan outside the military bubble, McQueen was not permitted to leave the British base in Basra, for security reasons. Unhappy with the film footage he shot with his crew, *Queen and Country* was finally brought to realisation in 2007, and responded to McQueen's recollection of camaraderie among the troops and his concerns about the lack of appropriate recognition for soldiers being killed in Iraq. *Queen and Country* comprised a participatory project undertaken with the families of soldiers killed in Iraq, who supplied a photo of their loved one, a proposal for a series of stamps using the photos, an exhibit comprising facsimile stamp sheets mounted in a display cabinet, and the book. The book, which was published in 2010, reproduces one individual facsimile stamp on each page, with the name of the soldier and their rank, unit, date of death and age opposite. The stamps are preceded by a poem, Requiem, by Derek Walcott and succeeded by a page containing the statement, "This book is dedicated to all victims of the Iraq war", and a chronology of the project.

The books are a reflection of two broad modalities through which 'official war artists' have responded to recent wars involving the UK, one a more embedded/illustrative role, the other more reflexive and, in the case of McQueen, interventionist, each associated with distinct kinds of institutional and conceptual supports, and with different patterns of circulation and reception.

Two points can be made here. The first is that moving beyond the consideration of individual artists and art works and charting these modes and patterns is, I think, important to a fuller and broader understanding of how art reflects, represents and participates in the cultural and political geographies surrounding contemporary conflict.

The second is that it's useful to look across the range of responses to war and conflict beyond one set of positions – despite the differences between them, all the artists mentioned above are British and were clearly associated with British armed forces. This may seem obvious but I think it is a point worth making. It is rare that works emerging from the often quite radically different experiences that people have of, for example, the Iraq war, have been exhibited or analysed alongside each other. This is perhaps telling in itself. But acknowledging and tracking between these different positions – as well as the different modes of enacting 'art' – is for me essential to any geographically-attuned consideration of how artists have responded to this war, and to how we might think about the relationships between art, war and geography more generally.