

Aesthetic Distance is David Cotterrell's third solo exhibition with Danielle Arnaud contemporary art. Focussing on his experiences observing British military operations in Helmand Province, Afghanistan in 2007, the artist has produced a series of visually arresting photographic and video works.

Two films document the transport and treatment of casualties during a Major Incident. In *Serial Loop*, the sound of a continuously arriving and departing Chinook helicopter accompanies images of a bleak and wasted landscape. A fire rages in the distance while antiquated ambulances lumber along to take wounded to treatment areas. *Green Room* gives an alternative vision of the same event. Medics wait for their assigned patients, their bodies and faces concentrated on the tasks to come over the next four hours, like actors preparing to go on stage.

A series of photographic works, *Supernumerary*, *Sightlines* and *Principals* are arranged as diptychs and triptychs. Shot in the Operating Theatre, these images reference painters famous for their use of chiaroscuro. The lighting and formal arrangements caught in the artist's lens for a moment distract the viewer's gaze, suggesting the sublime beauty within horror, the human scale compassion in the face of destruction.

A further series of images, *Gateway*, documents the handing over of casualties as they pass from Camp Bastion to Selly Oak, Birmingham. Transferred from one plane to another in the middle of the night on Kandahar's airstrip, the wounded are sedated and virtually unaware of their journeys. The grandiose scale of the planes belies the absolute fragility of their human cargo, soldiers who may take years to recover from wounds sustained in the fraction of a second.

Cotterrell's work for the exhibition reflects on a brief period of time in Helmand Province, in which two British soldiers died, 29 were wounded in action, 74 were admitted to the field hospital, 71 Aeromed evacuations were recorded and an undisclosed number of civilian, insurgent and Afghan National Army soldiers were treated.

David Cotterrell received an MA in Fine Art from Chelsea College of Art & Design in 1997. He is an installation artist working across varied forms including video, audio, interactive media, artificial intelligence, device control and hybrid technology. His work exhibits political, social and behavioural analyses of the environments and contexts that he inhabits.

Cotterrell is Professor of Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University. Over the last ten years, his work has been extensively commissioned and exhibited in North America, Europe and the Far East for gallery spaces, museums and the public realm. Recent exhibitions include: *Eastern Standard: Western Artists in China* at MASS MoCA North Adams, Massachusetts and *Map Games* at the Today Museum of Modern Art, Beijing and Birmingham City Art Gallery. He is currently researching and developing new work with advanced simulation company SEOS, with the support of an Arts Council England bursary.

This material was developed by David Cotterrell during a period of research commissioned by the Wellcome Trust. Cotterrell's work was enabled by the Ministry of Defence, who facilitated his stay at Camp Bastion in November 2007, and was further supported by the RSA, who invited him to stay in Kabul for a month in early 2008 in order to view an alternative aspect of Afghanistan.

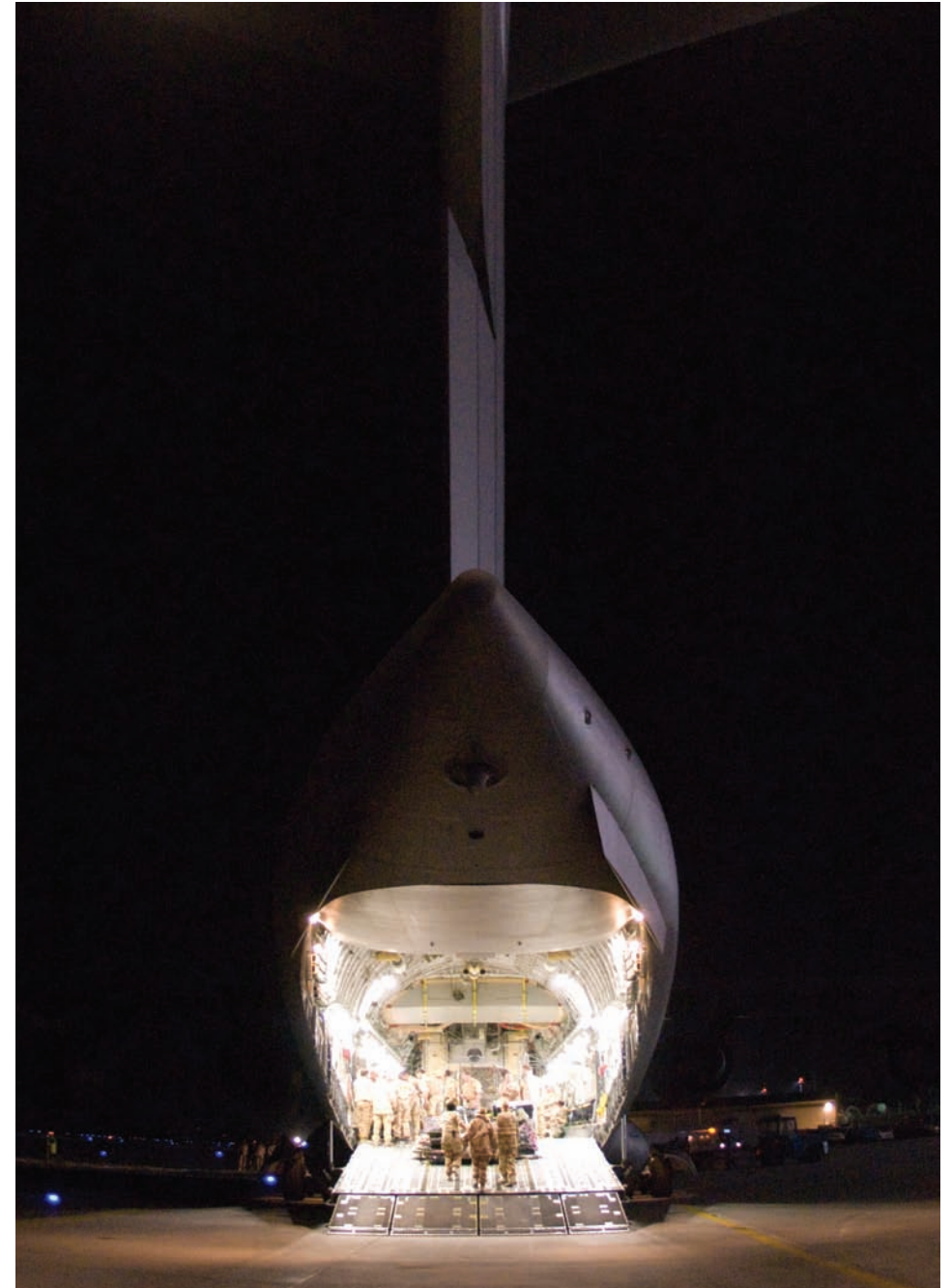
9 January – 15 February 2009
Private view: Friday 9 January, 6–9pm

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Cover image: *Gateway* (series) 2008 C-type print

David Cotterrell Aesthetic Distance





The flight is uneventful. Engineers improvise a repair to the cooker and time passes. The Load Master approaches: preparation for tactical descent. Body armour, helmet, Kevlar seats and backs are applied. I am told all lights out 30 mins before landing. I begin to feel nervous... we are told to watch for and report tracer-fire, missile launches or rocket attacks.

After two years of negotiations between the Wellcome Trust, Imperial War Museum and Ministry of Defence, David Cotterrell was invited to observe the Joint Forces Medical Group at Camp Bastion in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. He underwent basic training, was taught the rudiments of battlefield first aid and was issued with body armour. In November 2007, he flew in an RAF C17 from Brize Norton to Kandahar, the sole passenger in a plane loaded with half a million rounds of palletised munitions and medical supplies to join Operation Herrick 7. The irony of the plane's mixed load was not lost on Cotterrell, whose experiences of life alongside deployed military are iterated throughout his journal and the photo-sketches and films shot in Afghanistan.

I am invited to attend the 'ops' briefing at the MED GRP CP. Acronyms describe all units, events and places. I think the briefing is confidential, but even if it weren't I would need a code book to decipher the language. "Enhanced threat of VBIED reported by RC FOB Delhi." Enhanced threat of Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device reported by Regional Command, Forward Operating Base, 'Delhi'.

The 'hurry up and wait' of life timed to the second and observant of rules and structures that many outside would find hard to bear: when to sleep, what to wear, when to 'relax'...

The camp [at Kandahar] becomes busier, filling with soldiers. A huge selection of uniforms supported by apparently hundreds of men and women in civilian clothes. This could be quite normal if it wasn't for the fact that they're all carrying weapons: pistols

with Velcro leg holsters, SA80 and M16 rifles and even machine guns and grenade launchers. We walk to the boardwalk where Pizza Hut competes with tourist shops for dominance. Only the ostentatious firepower makes this youthful gathering seem foreign.

The most basic physical needs are catered for within the machine: eating, washing and dressing are overseen in a characteristically rudimentary manner, whether in the relative luxury of Camp Bastion or the bleakness of Sangin.

A long line of soldiers dutifully wait outside to wash their hands. Disease is more of a risk here and hygiene is constantly emphasised. I later find out that the convoy bringing milk was attacked so porridge is off. Another heavy cooked breakfast starts another baking day in the desert... Food is served and I must make an effort to learn naval parlance as quickly as possible. 'Scran' from the 'Galley' is available... and I queue up for a plate of mince with spaghetti. I soon become grateful for the darkness when eating the evening meal. Ten-man ration packs offer all the nutrition and energy necessary to keep soldiers fit and active, but they sacrifice, taste, texture and variety for the benefits of portability and a near-infinite sell-by date... I sit down on a step with my plate of brown-flavoured food...

Bastion's daily intake of casualties (civilian, insurgent, Afghan and British Army), their blood, bones, sinews and destruction were nauseating and exhausting. While 'glory' was thin on the ground, Cotterrell was aware of a dignity and professionalism that pervaded the place at every level. His relationship to the system was, by its very nature, problematic.

2 T1's and a T4. I assume a T4 is a light injury. I am wrong – T4 means dead. I don't know what to do. My problems of appropriate behaviour are insignificant compared to the enormity of the events taking place. I find myself feeling clumsy and self-conscious. I go to see the Regimental Sergeant-Major... He will coordinate the treatment and

reception of the fallen soldier. He says he thinks I should be there and to speak to Col Golbourne [who says] "Yes, alright, but no photos please." Almost out of habit, I nearly protest but pull myself together in time... Wrapped in a clear plastic bag within an open dirty green body bag is the soldier. There's enormous dignity offered to the dead man. The ambulance crew, assisted by two other soldiers gently lift the stretcher from the ambulance and place it on to the trestle base. We bow our heads and the Padre... says a short prayer. I feel shaky as I gaze at the unkempt and skinny frame of the soldier. His clothes are soaking wet and hang clumsily from him. He has developed a wispy full beard of inch long red hair. He has a blue tint to his pale and dirty skin. He is from Inkerman. I can't help but stare at [the soldier]. The doctor checks for signs of life. Pulse, light in the pupils, he uses my torch (and I am grateful to have a small purpose) and touches a cloth to the man's cornea. He is formally pronounced dead. The Royal Military Policeman steps forward with



Principals 2008 triptych C-type prints

a camera and begins to purposefully and efficiently photograph the body from several angles. The kindly look on his face belies no acceptance of my presence and I still sense his distaste at having a voyeur in the room... I am beginning to realise that I may never lose the images viewed this morning.

The pace of wounded flowing through the camp was unrelenting. Cotterrell was overwhelmed by his role as 'witness' and its demands.

The most obvious injury is to his foot. Bone and flesh hang from its centre. The heel protrudes about two inches from the base of his sole. The x-ray explains. There are no fragments of shrapnel; the force of the blast has travelled through the armoured vehicle into his foot and with devastating effect has forced the bones from the base of the foot upwards. The neat lattice of bone and tendon has been rotated and pushed away from his heel. The anaesthetist is beginning his work. The soldier keeps shouting "Sir" as he deliriously looks around

"Don't take my legs" he appeals. "Have I got my legs?" He doesn't believe the doctor who reassures him that the remains of both are still attached to him. I am wearing a heavy x-ray apron and find myself welling up. The activity seems further away and I find myself cold and sweating profusely. I struggle to stop myself fainting. I mustn't faint.

This month at Bastion is the beginning of a longer, ongoing project. Jono Lee, whose injuries are related here, and Cotterrell have been in touch by phone, email and text. They have met in England and plan to continue doing so. For Lee, Cotterrell's proximity at this first surgery is not problematic. It is welcome and offers a sense of closure. His left foot and lower leg were subsequently amputated at Selly Oak, Birmingham but he still hopes to return to Afghanistan to complete his Tour.

The abstraction of Jono Lee's injuries continues to worry me. Casualties arrive, as if from Mars, ferried from Second World



War skirmishes to the hygiene and monotony of the NHS through the Bastion gateway... I feel dislocated and aimless. I am not certain if my anxiety comes from my ethical fears of delivering a facile response or from thwarting of adolescent fantasies. I am not certain of my own intentions.

Cotterrell became obsessed with gaining access to the Forward Operating Bases which were supplying so many of the injured. After many thwarted attempts, he was finally able to travel to Sangin, where he stayed for ten days. Ironically, a stay intended to rationalise and make sense of the incoherence of warfare is characterised by erratic and disjointed journal entries.

Gunfire/explosions nerving-pres for major op. Offered lift to Inkerman by armoured support company. 1½ hours over desert – race across hostile ground. All subject to Brigade Helmand Task Force Veto. Watch practice and talk to Nazir about Massoud (Northern alliance) second chess match against CMA Alistair. He beats me.

Even! Bumped off flight. Maybe get out tomorrow, maybe. Looks hard to leave here could be stuck until 24th. Only 10 men left to defend the base tonight. This is where I wanted to be 10 man ration packs – trying to avoid the toilet and loving the taste of dust. Helicopter comes and goes without us rumours spread of no flights until the 26th – stranded for a week. I am a little panicked about Jordan and Thomas Davies the mechanic helps me make contact. Watch the 100 man operation leave at 2am sit up with the 2¼C chatting until 4 then fitful nights sleep with strange dreams of med-flights to Inkerman and returning home with MERT.

The artist's relationship to the military machine continued to produce more questions than answers, with the dead soldier's repatriation ceremony taking place while Cotterrell moved forward to Sangin via Lashkagar.

Although the journey doesn't pass through Lashkagar, a parallel ceremony is held here.



Nikki has rushed to get permission for me to photograph the ceremony. I am grateful and with cameras hanging from my neck, we rush to join the ranks of over a hundred soldiers waiting in near silence. Nikki hurriedly directs me to a vantage point to one side of the parade. I hold the camera to my face and the shutter clicks. I drop the camera to my waist ashamed. Stares from the civilian FCO workers are directed at me. I must look just the same as the reporters that I saw running around the Remembrance Day parade. I want to explain that [he] is real to me. I saw him arriving dead in Bastion. I will never forget his face. I do understand the significance of this ceremony, but I sense it is too late to contradict the symbolism of my behaviour and equipment. I feel dirty, like press at a funeral. I don't attempt any further photographs and join the rear of the parade in silence. There is an unsatisfying sermon. I think I want a profound explanation for the death, but instead there is a brief reading. This isn't the place for answers.