



## Main

November 27, 2008

## Theatre

Wellcome Collection • 22nd November - 15th February 2009



The Wellcome Collection's new temporary exhibition is entitled '[War and Medicine](#)' and focuses on the individual human consequences of war rather than the overall statistics of death and destruction that impersonalise and almost glorify military combat and which we are most often presented with. Soldiers are heroes when they die for their country but uncomfortable representatives of horror when they return wounded and disfigured.

Installation artist [David Cotterrell](#)'s film, specially commissioned for the exhibition, attempts to rectify this. Covering three walls of a darkened room, the film shows wounded soldiers, with varying degrees of injury, being loaded onto a flight back to England from Helmand Province in Afghanistan. The only soundtrack is the constant hum of the plane's engine, an eerie backdrop to the calm, efficient activity taking place on screen. There is an unsettling disjunction between our inclusion in the scene through the way it is presented to us and the alienness of the sight before our eyes. This slightly dreamlike atmosphere helps separate the artwork from the realms of documentary photography and helps us understand the confusion of this homeward flight, which we are told in the information outside, is often only partially remembered by the soldiers.

What is most striking about this piece is the individual humanity behind the uniforms of the men and women depicted. On the left are the walking wounded with a variety of arm slings and facial injuries being tended to by medical staff and waiting patiently for their journey to begin, on the right, more distressingly, a person is carried in on a stretcher, connected to breathing apparatus. It is heartbreaking to realise that although most of these people will probably survive, and so not register in the public consciousness, they will have been scarred for life both physically and emotionally. I began to see them as people beyond whatever my personal attitudes to their profession and the war they are fighting in was. A harrowing counterpart to this work is [Cotterrell's written diary](#), where he describes with civilian horror, the daily minutiae of life amongst the medical staff in Camp Bastion. The exhibition's mission statement is to explore the dichotomies in a society that is simultaneously developing ever more sophisticated means of destroying life and protecting it. The stalemate futility of this situation is given a human face by [Cotterrell's work](#).

David Cotterrell is featured in issue 10 of the magazine, out shortly.

Written by [Prudence Ivey](#) | Posted on November 27, 2008 5:56 PM

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