

David Cotterrell: The Big Issue : Tools of Combat

The Big Issue

Date: 19th January 2009

War And Medicine is an informative, unflinching, often moving account of medical advancement as witnessed during major conflicts since the Crimea War. It is a tribute to those whose job it is to pick up the pieces.

David Cotterrell's exhibition opener, Theatre, puts the viewer in the position of an injured soldier being evacuated to safety in a Hercules transporter plane. There are nods to clever conceptual art - the film is actually a reconstruction of a training exercise - but these don't diminish the work's atmosphere, its sense of blurred claustrophobia and the terrible drone of the plane's engines that can be heard throughout the show.

Normally, sound leakage of this sort would grate. Here, as time and again we witness the destruction wreaked by machinery of various kinds, the noise creates an ominous soundtrack.

We see pierced helmets, a splintered skull, a set of operating knives for saving lives on the battlefield, a liturgical kit for delivering the last rites. Though this is not really an art exhibition, there are many examples of art by those terrifyingly close to the action.

The German Expressionist Max Beckmann, who was 30 when the first world war broke out, served as a medical orderly until he was discharged following a nervous breakdown, and in his 1914 print he plunges us into the tumult of the operating theatre.

Paintings of facial reconstructions by the British surgeon and war artist Henry Tonks - who worked at the plastic surgery unit in Sidcup during the first world war - are the closest meeting here of art and science. Elsewhere, survivors' stories, their achievements, agonies and quiet testimonies, bring to mind Bertrand Russell's comment that "war does not determine who is right, only who is left."

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