

David Cotterrell: artsandecologyblog : Afghanistan - art and war

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Artist David Cotterrell was on Radio Four this morning talking about his installation Theatre that opened last weekend as part of the

War and Medicine

exhibition at the Wellcome Collection (until Feb 15th 2009). Cotterrell initially went to Afghanistan with the Army to document the medical facility Camp Bastion; it's a collection of his photographs and video there and closer to the front line. There was a poignant moment when he talked about the awkwardness of the artist as observer:

Sarah Montague: How did you feel going there, because you're an artist and you're in an extreme situation where someone's life is in the hands of the other people around and - I hate to say you're just standing, watching - but did you feel incredibly uncomfortable.

David Cotterrell: There's a great deal of guilt in being an observer at a trauma and it's extremely difficult to rationalize your own position. I was jealous of the medics who had a very clear role, and for me it was my moral and ethical justification for being there was something that was being defined as I stood there. It became obvious that to people around me they felt it was valuable having a witness, somebody who would actually be keeping a record of something which they felt was under-represented and should be more discussed and understood by the wider public.

His role as record-keeper was doubly useful for the wounded soldiers. Many of them had little idea of what happened to them between being wounded and waking up days later.

The photos show a profound respect for medics and soldiers, but also an ambivalence towards their role there that shows in the dispassionate observer's eye. Dispassionate or not, as his diary printed recently in The Guardian shows, he returned home shaken by the experience:

I arrived back in Britain feeling a great sense of anger. I was frustrated by my previous ignorance of the frequency of injury. Soldiers are surviving wounds that would often have been fatal in previous conflicts. Body armour, medical training and the proximity of advanced surgery to the front line have led to a "disproportionate" number of casualties surviving.

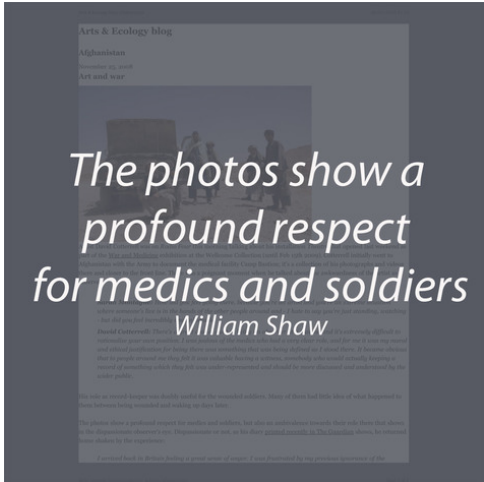
In the media, we hear only about the deaths, with occasional reference to the wounded. I came home assuming the violence I had witnessed in Afghanistan would be the focus of the news. But reality television, local politics and other less dramatic events occupied the headlines. For me, the incongruity between what I had seen and what was presented as the public face of conflict was, and continues to be, profound and irreconcilable.

After his stint with the army medics, David Cotterrell felt the need to return to look at Afghanistan from an un-embedded point of view. He went back this spring, a residency that was funded by RSA Arts and Ecology: you can see some of the resulting images from his more recent return to Afghanistan here [sic]. We'll be getting some more material from that residency up on the main site soon, hopefully.

Listen to the full BBC interview here.

William Shaw

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