
2014

WITNESS

Twelve (Visual) Statements
and comment

- the atrocities of war,
- the strength of Humanity
- the restoration of dignity.

by

Robert McNeil, M.B.E.

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INTRODUCTION:

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i o t a is most honoured to present **WITNESS** by Robert McNeil, M.B.E.

An exhibition of significance for all humanity, this work demonstrates the power of art as a means to express, process, mediate and communicate the most extreme of experiences. It demonstrates the power of human determination, by artist and subject. It presents hope and terror as well as inspiration.

Produced over a period of three years, in direct response to his forensic science work in numerous war zones, Robert McNeil explores various means by which to express his experience. Each subject is laden with symbolism. As with his work in war-torn regions demanded, he also delivers forensic detail in his art work. Humble and sensitive insight is offered, with clear warnings to the viewer.

This exhibition is about more than art. It is an exposé of the lengths that some will go to to destroy humanity, and a revelation on the lengths that others will go to to restore human dignity. We present twelve art works here, as well as information and comment on the tragic contexts which provoked them. We trust that the depth of this work will be carried forth by the viewer.

Modest in the extreme, regarding both his humanitarian work and his art, it is only thanks to his wife, Kathy, that i o t a met Robert McNeil at all. She introduced us to him for our 'What's in a Mile?' show, which canvassed for work by professional and amateur artists living or working within a mile radius of i o t a.

i o t a was established in 2010 by Duncan Scott and Monica McCarey to produce and promote artistic practice and collaboration across the Arts, at home and abroad.

Monica McCarey, **i o t a**

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i o t a UNLIMITED STUDIOS, 25 Hyndland St. Glasgow G11 5QE.

'Srebrenica line.'
Acrylic on canvas, 30"x24", Year.



A forensic technician (Alison Anderson MBE) has searched, removed from the bodies, photographed, washed and hangs out to dry, clothing from victims who were massacred by Serbian soldiers near Srebrenica, Bosnia Herzegovina in July 1995. The clothing may be used as evidence against the perpetrators. A Bosnian slipper, a Dutch football shirt (size 'Youth') a pair of youths trousers, a blindfold and a small child's shoe, represent the variety of clothing recovered from the victims.

Dutch UN 'Peacekeepers' were accused of 'hanging out to dry' over thirty thousand Bosnian Muslims who, following ethnic cleansing, had gathered in Srebrenica, a so called 'safe area' and handed them over to Ratko Mladic, the Bosnian Serb General and his army.

Mladic then ordered all of the Muslims to leave the town.

Over seven thousand men and boys were selected, murdered, then buried in mass graves.

Mladic was arrested and charged with war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide in 2011. He was then taken to the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, where he is currently on trial.

'An Unimaginable Horror'
Acrylic on board, 15"x20", 2011.



The title of the painting 'An Unimaginable Horror' was the title of a feature written by Melanie Reid for The Herald newspaper in 2001. The feature described the massacre of over seven thousand men and boys following the fall of Srebrenica, Bosnia in 1995.

Each of the items is placed on a Muslim prayer mat.

The two extinguished candles represent sudden death.

Plums are the main ingredient for the Bosnian national drink, slivovitz. Men were often under the influence whilst they executed innocent victims.

The blindfolded skull depicts the reluctance by the Serb soldiers to look their victims in the eyes when they killed them.

The book 'The Scientific Investigation of Mass Death' was written by Professor Margaret Cox as a result of experiences and lessons learned by international forensic teams investigating genocide and crimes against humanity in the Balkans.

**'(Blog for) Grave Faces',
Acrylic on Canvas, 36"x36", 2011.**



This painting was based on a photograph taken by Tim Loveless during the exhumation in 2010 of 400 WW1 Australian and British soldiers from mass graves, killed on-mass on the 19 July 1916. The soldiers were cut down as they were ordered 'over the top' to try to secure the German trenches ahead of them during the Somme offensive.

One of the German soldiers involved in this battle was a corporal, his name was Adolf Hitler.

Forensic Anthropologist Ambika Flavel describes to VIP visitors from the War Graves Commission, the work involved in the exhumation of 80 of the soldiers. They appear shocked, and perhaps moved, by the horror of what they see.

One gentleman brought a camera but it hangs limply from his hand, demonstrating how inappropriate it would have been to take photos. Another elderly man nervously scratches his hand, as if to stop him from showing his true emotion.

The young woman stares ahead appearing as if she doesn't want to look anymore at what is in the grave, and the man on the right looks with interest and empathy at the reaction of his elders.

Artifacts found in the grave are laid out on the table.

4.

'Blow flower'
Acrylic on canvas, 12"x12", 2010.



Blowflies can be a curse during the post-mortem investigation. Soon after the victims were killed, the flies gathered in their thousands, invading the decomposing bodies to lay their eggs. The larvae then hatch and 'feast' on the human tissue

Witnessing the maggot's feeding frenzy on a body can be an unpleasant and upsetting experience. The flies are an incessant nuisance and never leave you alone especially when you are eating or drinking. Outbreaks of dysentery occurred after eating food contaminated by the flies.

This painting is a homage to the all-powerful fly.

'Ghosts of War' / 'In Search of the Truth'
Pastel on paper 18" x 18", 2010.



During the forensic investigation each team member wears a protective paper suit and rubber wellington boots. They have to be removed during toilet or lunch breaks.

They can become very dirty on the outside and because of the heat of the sun, they generate copious amounts amount of sweat (graves are usually exhumed during the summer when the ground is soft).

They also smell strongly of death.

It's desirable not to wear someone else's suit so most people put their names on a label when they hang them up.

Sometimes, in certain lights, the suits took on a strange appearance, almost revealing to me the essence of a human form.

'X - Ray'

Pastel on paper, 9"x11", 2010.



This body part was discovered in a mass grave in Northern France in 2009.

It belonged to an unidentified Australian soldier killed during the battle of the Somme in 1916. He was one of four hundred men killed who were buried in mass graves by German soldiers.

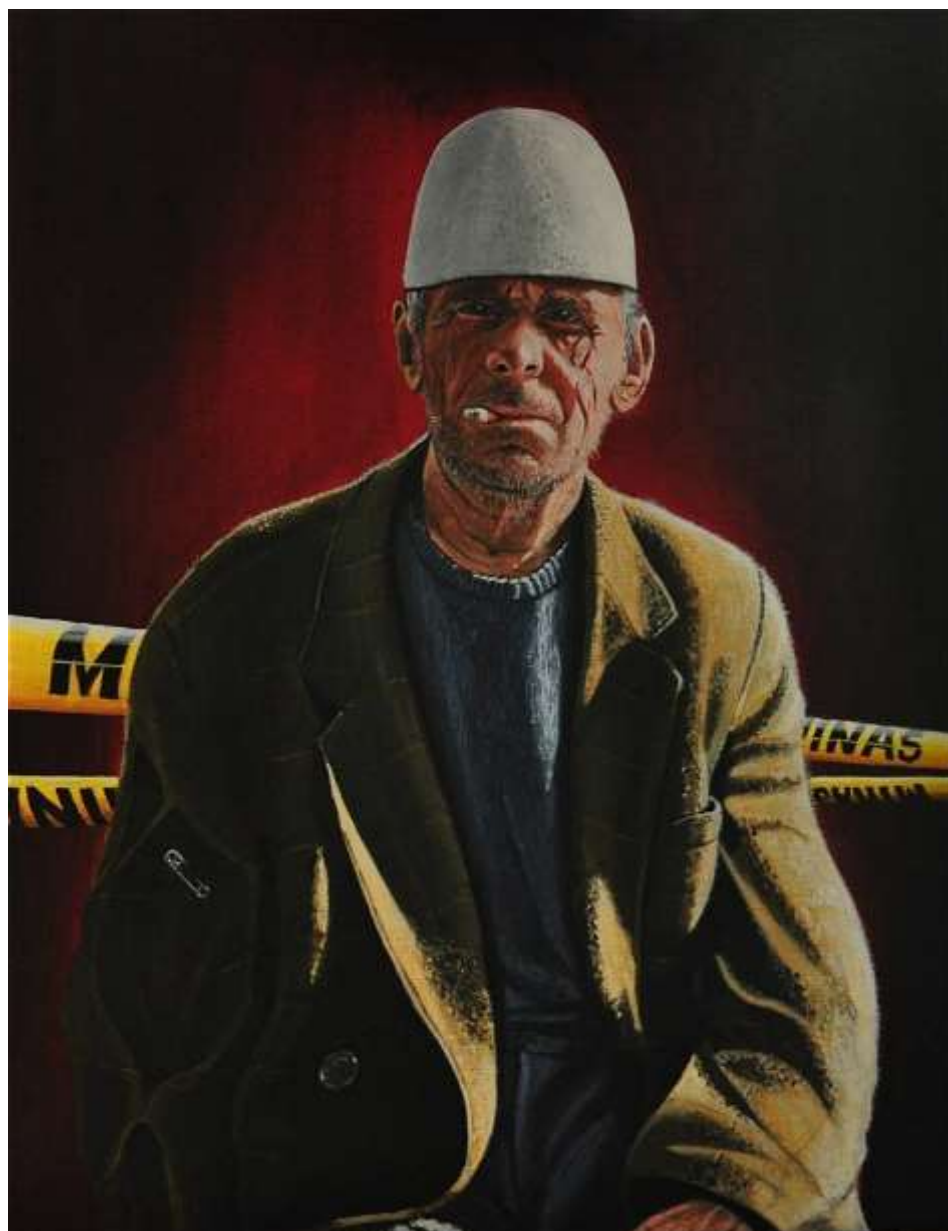
I was struck by the beauty and vulnerability of the bones of the human foot trapped inside the 'hob nailed' boot.

However, the threat of the sharp nails piercing the skin was a minor inconvenience compared to trauma caused by the madness of war.

The foot was eventually reunited with the remainder of the body and buried respectfully and with honours in a new grave beside his comrades.

'MINAS/KOSOVO MAN'

Acrylic on board 280x355mm, July 2011.



On a hot summer's day in Prizren, Kosovo in 1999, I joined this old gentleman sitting on a wall and we watched together as a Serbian house across the road burned to the ground. He appeared to me as if he was enjoying the sight.

A few weeks earlier, NATO bombs had forced the Serb army, led by indicted war criminal Zeljko Raznjatovic (better known as Arkan) to retreat.

The Serb army was intent on 'ethnically cleansing' all Kosovan Muslims into Albania. Many Serbian civilians left their homes and fled to Serbia because they feared reprisals from the Muslims.

However, some Serbs, many of them elderly who had lived in Kosovo all their lives, were unable (or unwilling) to leave their homes. They were summarily killed.

I witnessed many Serb homes in flames, set alight by local Muslims. Some Serbs still in them were allegedly burned alive.

The forensic team was warned that if we were to accept Serb bodies into our mortuary, we too would be burned out.

The old man noticed me looking at a safety pin attached to an 'empty' sleeve on his woolen overcoat.

"MINAS!" he said by way of explanation. The 'Mine' warning tape (left by UN de-miners) was often ignored.

He chuckled when I asked if I could take a photo of him.

The red and black background reflects the burning house and also represents the colours of the 'new' Kosovo flag.

8.

'Mass Burial.'

Oil on canvas, 30" X 20" , Year



On the 11th August 1999, nearby the village of Krushe Madhe, Kosovo, the burial of seventy nine Kosovar men, women and children, exhumed from a number of mass graves took place.

The victims had been killed over a three day period earlier that year.

The forensic team, who carried out the exhumations, investigated allegations of crimes against humanity and facilitated identifications on behalf of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, was invited as honoured guests to attend the funerals and lay floral tributes beside each of the coffins.

Earlier, during an exhumation, I had wondered why surviving family members had gathered and insisted on taking photographs of their dead loved ones, some of the victims showing terrible and cruel atrocities committed against them.

Our interpreter explained; "To show the photos to their children and grandchildren, so they will never forget what the Serbs had done to them."

The dead included multiple members from the same families (including a doctor and two professors).

Twenty of the seventy nine victims were unidentified, including at least one child. It was assumed that the entire families had been killed. Not one family member was left alive to mourn or remember their dead loved ones.

'Where are the children?'

Acrylic on canvas 12"x12", 2010.



Whilst checking a shoe removed from the body of a male Muslim victim of genocide that was found in a mass grave near Tuzla, Bosnia in 1996, I found a small faded photograph of a young boy, aged about 6 and a girl aged about 10, hidden under the insole of his shoe.

Two women, possibly their mother and grandmother were standing beside the children.

Apart from this treasured photo there was a personalised prayer to the victim, presumably written by the imam from his village, on a screwed up piece of paper.

There were no other possessions found on the victim. He died after being shot in the head. His hands were bound together with wire.

We wondered what happened to the women and children.

Both the photo and the prayer helped identify the victim.

As well as whole bodies, many hundreds of separate body parts were discovered in 'secondary' graves. The primary graves had been exhumed by the Serbs and buried in new graves in an attempt to conceal or disrupt the evidence.

Many of those body parts, through time, were reconstructed and eventually returned to the families for respectful burial.

This painting represents to me both the human and de-humanising aspects of the horror of war.

'Witness to Genocide'

Acrylic on board, 16"x12", 2012.



July 1995 over 7,000 Muslim men and boys were murdered by the Bosnian Serb army and Serbian paramilitaries near Srebrenica, whilst politicians throughout the world sat on their hands.

Many of the men and boys, after being beaten, were led blindfolded, with their hands tied behind their backs with wire, shot and then buried in mass graves.

At first the forensic team thought that blindfolding the victims was a bizarre act of humanity. It was later discovered, through eyewitness testimony that the killers didn't want to look their victims in the eye before killing them.

'Woman of Srebrenica'

Pastel on paper, 24" x 24", 2010.



The women came to the mortuary to identify the clothing of their loved ones, missing following the massacre of over seven thousand men and boys from Srebrenica.

I dreaded those 'identification days.'

The women on recognising clothing became inconsolable as they realised that their menfolk were dead, instead of as they had hoped, in work camps.

Sometimes women who, unable to recognise any clothing, felt at first relief and then panic as they turned to us, begging us to find their men.

'Subjugation'

Acrylic on canvas, 20"x 26", 2010.



In 1999 in Kosovo, as part of the forensic investigation into crimes against humanity, we removed and washed the clothing from human remains exhumed from mass graves.

Some of the victims had suffered terrible atrocities that were clearly visible. Formal identification by the relatives was not an option.

Instead the clothing was laid out on the ground for the relatives to identify as belonging to their missing loved ones.

A woman on seeing a jumper hanging on a rail to dry collapsed to the ground in tears. She recognised it as her husband's jumper.

The interpreter explained that her husband was a professor of literature at the university of Pristina and the jumper was presented to him by the WWF for his work in saving endangered animals. She said that he was so proud of it that he wore it every day. She couldn't persuade him to remove it for washing.

The woman appealed to us to allow her take the jumper home. We didn't have the heart to say 'no.' She clutched it to her body as she left the mortuary, supported by members of her family.

I wondered if the woman would notice the bullet entry point around the heart area and the exit point in the lower back area, indicating that the victim may have been forced to his knees (or perhaps in prayer) when he was killed.

I used my own favorite jumper for this painting.

