

Songs of Experience

*What the anvil? What dread grasp, Dare its deadly terrors clasp!*¹

The scarring of a total struggle runs deep. It affects the land, generations of those who fought, their families and friends as well as the institutions created to contain the forces of disassociation that conflict can unleash.

What place has art in this? The poets and artists of the first world war have left us a resounding testament to the power of art to engage these difficult themes. But the work continues. In wartime fearsome images of sound, spoken language and sight can enter our inner landscapes unbidden, unless we work with them they can run amok through the generations, at the level of an individual, a community or an entire society. As with physical wounds their effusions may be staunched, their 'fearful symmetry' wrestled with, connections established. 'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?' asks Blake in his famous poem *The Tyger*. The establishment of relations between disparate materials is one of arts defining activities. The primal roar of the Tyger is 'contained' in Blake's poem. So too we can act against the disassociations that fearfulness, pain, conflict and loss may materialize. Yet this pathway has a mystery at its heart.

Standing on the edge of a great plain three artists have come together to share a journey, an exploration of the 'landscape' they inhabit. They come to reflect on the Great War, on war in general, aware in one case of a childhood in Northern Ireland, in another seared by the terrors of the Bush war in Zimbabwe. Their immediate landscape presents them with contradictions and provoking associations. An open plain containing prohibited space. Villages, once home to living communities, emptied. They find fragments of the Great War from collapsed trenches to the 'Fums up' good luck charms Henny Burnett works with; baby dolls with winged feet carried by soldiers as protection against bullets, shells and gas.

The film by Susan Francis hints at a further truth. On her journey through an isolated landscape we see barbed wire enclosures where nature is allowed free rein. These images reverse those of the garden whose enclosing walls keep rampant nature at bay. But in the garden is the mystery. Acts of enclosure help us relate to the whole; the garden enclosed, the charm, the research laboratory, are ways of resisting the overwhelming character of the wild - of the open plain or the engulfing forest or the terrors of an unknown death. Disassociation can be a mechanism that allows necessary acts of survival. Through one lens it seems to be a falling apart, yet through another it represents an act of containment, and a new assemblage becomes possible, paralysis potentially overcome.

The plain's monuments - circles, avenues and pathways - indicate other acts of connection that art makes possible - the use of ritual and myth: re-enactment. There are hints of this in Pru Maltby's drawings scarifying the paper surface, part

¹ From 'The Tyger' by William Blake, *Songs of Experience*, 1794

map, part dream, part pure embodiment. Her grandfather, Joseph Cribb, worked for a while at Ditchling in Sussex alongside the great poet of the first World War David Jones – mythologizing was the path Jones trod in his great long poem about the war *In Parenthesis*.

So what is a scar, a *cicatrix* (Jones would have loved the word - it sounds like the name of an ancestor sleeping beneath the barrow). It is the new tissue that binds a wound together, the evidence, after the trauma, of inter-connections that holds things in being. In this exhibition it is the theme that reaches out to visitors, binding past and future, ourselves and others, in shared reflection amidst the ambiguous legacies of human conflict.