



Baden Pailthorpe  
**SPATIAL OPERATIONS**

7 FEBRUARY – 26 APRIL 2015

**NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY**

1 LAMAN STREET NEWCASTLE NSW 2300 | 02 4974 5100 | [www.nag.org.au](http://www.nag.org.au)



## CURATORIAL FOREWORD

*In peace prepare for war, in war prepare for peace. It is a matter of life and death. A road either to safety or ruin.*

*Sun Tzu, The Art of War*

In the fifth century BC, Chinese philosopher and military strategist Sun Tzu wrote about the importance of information in winning a war. He told us to know yourself as well as your enemy - and that the best war fought was one where you beat your opponent before any blood was spilt.<sup>1</sup> In the twenty-first century, it seems little has been learnt about how to wage war. Both war and its effects remain a constant part of our lives.

To coincide with national debates around the centenary of the First World War, Newcastle Art Gallery presents *Baden Pailthorpe: Spatial Operations*, on display from 7 February to 26 April 2015. Featuring an installation of 210 papier-mâché helmets, the work examines military mythology and the 'construction' of the modern day soldier.

Newcastle Art Gallery holds a small yet notable collection of war art that is indicative of its wide spread effects. Unique to this collection is its response to war in a broader sense. Not bound by official histories, it is through art that the underlying agendas of politics and religion, as well as the mythologies and legacies that frame our official war narratives are discussed.

Featured in the Gallery's modernist collection are works by two well-known Australian artists Donald Friend and Russell Drysdale. While Drysdale looked at the emotional and physical fatigue of war in a series of drawings of Australian soldiers, Friend's war work was concerned with the effect of war on the human condition. In his painting, *Japanese dead from suicide raid, Labuan 1946*, he records the unpalatable subjects of death and suicide, depicted through a gruesome scene of twisted sinuous corpses strewn across a collapsing wooden structure.



Other works turn their attention to Australia's involvement in contemporary conflicts. Penny Byrne's sculpture, *War on Terror Waltz 2009* takes aim on our military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan. By transforming a pre-loved porcelain figurine into a kitsch political statement, the work presents two aristocratic figures, locked in a waltz, dressed in army helmets and camouflage clothing. Grenades are strapped to the lady's waist, while the gentleman carries a gun with a War on Terror Service medal pinned to his uniform.

*Spatial Operations* offers a critical voice to discussions on war in the twenty-first century. The work focuses on two military elements: one, Victorian Cross winner Ben Roberts-Smith's VC MG helmet, and two, the Chief of Army's Reading List, an official group of texts carefully selected and made available to all army recruits as a resource. Together, they speak to both the physical and intellectual armour of the modern day soldier.

Newcastle Art Gallery is proud to present this ambitious new work by Pailthorpe. Drawing to conclusion an eighteen month project that commenced with an artist residency at the Australian War Memorial, it offers a timely reflection on contemporary conflict and commemoration. More commonly known as a new media artist, it also represents a defining moment in Pailthorpe's practice as he moves into the discipline of sculpture.

**Sally Cunningham**

**Assistant Curator  
Newcastle Art Gallery**

<sup>1</sup> Tarver, D.E., *The Art of War: Sun Tzu*: in plain English/ D.E. Tarver, Inkstone Press [Para Hills, S. Aust.] 2007

Penny Byrne *War on Terror Waltz 2009*  
vintage porcelain figures, vintage porcelain  
action man accessories, miniature 'War on  
Terror' service medal, retouching medium and  
powder pigments  
25.5 x 33.0 x 19.0cm  
Gift of the Newcastle Region Art Gallery  
Foundation 2009  
Newcastle Art Gallery collection



## SPATIAL OPERATIONS

Australia has a violent past. From the frontier wars that followed European settlement of Indigenous Australia, through the tragedy of the Gallipoli landings, World War II, and our more recent participation in conflicts throughout Asia and the Middle East, both our official narratives and our under-acknowledged histories are frequently defined by our involvement in military conflict. One hundred years since the ANZAC mythology was forged, it is worth examining the way that it operates in Australia today. This work, *Spatial Operations 2014* offers a contemporary monument to the mechanics of our particular military mythology.

Since its opening in 1941, the Australian War Memorial (AWM) has been the major incubator of official war narratives, mythology and history. It has documented and commemorated almost every conflict in which Australia has taken part.<sup>1</sup> Under the Official War Art Scheme, the AWM has sent nearly seventy artists to war, from WWI to the most recent conflict in Afghanistan. Yet in 2013, the AWM invited one artist to look *inside* the institution for the first time. Rather than being sent to war, I was embedded for three months within the nation's official "guardian of memory."<sup>2</sup> The focus of my research was not the specific actions and experiences of soldiers, airmen or sailors, but the objects in the AWM's vast collection that were associated with them. Underneath the grand narratives of history, there lies a complex architecture of objects, documents, collection policies and curators. Yet mythology is powerful stuff. It is used by our leaders to attempt to define our national character, and it infuses otherwise banal objects with the burden of history.

During this residency, two major operations of Australian military mythology stood out to me: the construction of a contemporary war hero, Ben Roberts-Smith VC MG and the military's own intellectual ideal, the Australian Chief of Army's Reading List. Together these two elements represent the complimentary operations of mythology: an ideal of body and an ideal of mind. At the same time, and for the first time ever, the AWM commemorated a conflict that had not yet ended. *Afghanistan: the Australian Story* (2013 - ) documents the war in Afghanistan through the eyes of Australian military personnel with interviews, military equipment, IED's (improvised explosive devices) and a rich multimedia installation. Yet its unique contribution to the official record of that war was not its content, but its timing. It represented a radical shift in the standard operations of official remembrance. Commemorating a war that wasn't yet over struck me as a form of *present remembering*, a 'real-time' history. The speed of today's media coverage and the length of this war undoubtedly contributed to this shift. However it was a personal anecdote that Dr. Brendan Nelson, the director of the AWM, often cited in speeches that speaks to the commemorative urgency felt for this war. Describing an encounter during a visit to Australian soldiers in Afghanistan shortly after the announcement of his appointment as AWM Director, Dr Nelson recalled:

*"During my visit a soldier there said to me... 'I go to the War Memorial quite a bit and I take my son and I can show him what his great grandfather and grandfather did in the wars. But I can't show him what I'm doing here in Afghanistan.'"*<sup>3</sup>

This focus on the personal within official commemoration of war is now a consistent strategy of the AWM. After all, at its simplest conception, history is



composed of the interactions of numerous individuals. At the same time, the war in Afghanistan has produced Australia's most highly decorated soldier, Ben Roberts-Smith VC MG. The unprecedented media attention that Roberts-Smith received thrust him into the limelight and, arguably, helped cement him as the physical incarnation of the ANZAC myth.

The usual invisibility of Special Operations soldiers was quickly replaced with a total and ubiquitous visibility, including special appearances at football grand finals and commemorative events, on TV shows, in men's magazines, and giving motivational speeches for corporate clients.<sup>4</sup> He is also the chair of the National Australia Day Council. The figure of the hero is constructed through symbols, and throughout history cultures have sought to embody myths in the human form. The ANZAC mythology similarly thrives within such an appropriate vessel.

Military objects are produced in their millions, yet museums of war only collect certain kinds of objects. They must have *provenance*. That is, they have to be attached to a significant event, personal history or action. This is one of the first steps in the mechanics of mythology: curation. Following his citation for actions in Afghanistan, Ben Roberts-Smith VC MG donated his body armour and military uniform to the AWM. As a result of the mythology around this soldier, these otherwise unremarkable objects are now treated with reverence. The way in which the material reality of these objects is regarded is transformed: his Kevlar helmet suddenly becomes *fragile*, an object to be handled with utmost care. In moments like this the power of mythology approaches a form of alchemy, the collection policy becomes a choreography performed through the careful and disciplined gestures of the AWM's conservators. This is the flip-side of military training:

a set of tactics, strategies and practices that govern *commemorative operations*, performed in demarcated remembrance zones and protected exhibition spaces by highly-trained officials. When we enter these spaces we immediately feel it: the atmosphere is different, it is special. We adjust our mood and our behaviour accordingly. We become instinctively disciplined and respectful. This is because mythology is ultimately, like art, a deeply aesthetic experience.

In parallel, if the operation of mythology takes place through objects and the special spaces around them, then what spatial form would the intellectual ideal bound up in the Chief of Army's Reading List take? Would this tailored knowledge of military history, philosophy, tactics, strategy and politics not form a kind of knowledge armour? For me, the hidden form bound up within this list of texts found a metaphor in part of the armour that Ben Roberts-Smith VC MG had donated: his helmet. *Spatial Operations 2014* combines these two national ideals, the body of the hero, and the mind of the military.

Giving form to this idea was technically simple, but the scale of the work made it extremely challenging to complete. There were a number of ways to create helmets from these books, but ultimately it was the most basic strategy that prevailed: *papier-mâché*. In the early stages of the project, I undertook complex 3D scans of Roberts-Smith's helmet, but ultimately these scans did not provide a useful model. Instead, I had moulds created from an exact copy of the helmet Roberts-Smith was wearing during his VC citation. After much experimentation, I developed a papier-mâché technique that was efficient enough to complete each of the 210 helmets by hand. In the end, much of the process mirrored the exact military qualities that I was investigating: discipline, logistics, organisation, training and repetition. Further echoing the practices of



military training, each of these helmets was put through the same mould, yet each has its own unique quality.

There are several thematic rhythms like this throughout the artwork. The first echoes the fragility that now defines this piece of armour. These helmets, crafted individually by hand using the most domestic and mundane of crafts: *papier-mâché*, undermine the precision of the high-tech military-industrial complex. As an artist more usually associated with the cutting-edge technology of military imaging and simulation, this choice of material and process is inherently political. What's more, the shredding of documents, in this case texts rendered political through their inclusion on the Chief of Army's Reading List, is an obviously political act.<sup>5</sup> Yet just as former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice once referred to the abhorrent violence in the disastrous Iraq war as "growing pains", destruction and creation are often cut from the same cloth.

This shredding of books in this artwork is not destruction. It is *transformation*: a continuation of aesthetics by other means. It releases a metaphysical form of this list from its formal literary constraints. And although these texts have been rendered illegible in one sense, they now offer an alternative reading of how Australian mythology is constructed through objects and the way it operates through bodies, policies and spaces.

**Baden Pailthorpe**  
**February 2015**

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> One notable (and crucial) exception is colonial Australia's frontier wars.

<sup>2</sup> General David Hurley AC DSC "Afghanistan: The Australian Story Exhibition Opening, Australian War Memorial." 2013

<sup>3</sup> 'Telling The Afghanistan Story', <http://www.defence.gov.au/news/armynewseditions/1311/1311.pdf> pp.6-7

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly though, Defence Department photographs from Roberts-Smith's VC citation were only released after a FOI request from News Limited papers and were heavily redacted once released. The image of the hero is, where possible, tightly controlled.

<sup>5</sup> In 2013, Pailthorpe organised a performance at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, where French soldiers read and then shredded an excerpt from a French military text, *Regard d'un militaire sur la société française : La République nous appelle*, Bruno Mingot, (2007). The destruction of texts was also a hallmark of the Nazi regime.

#### Images from left to right

Studio photos of production of work, Sydney

#### Above image

Baden Pailthorpe *Spatial Operations* 2014 (detail)  
 paper pulp, pva, cellulose powder  
 24.0 x 30.0 x 22.0cm (each), 210 pieces  
 Courtesy of the artist and Martin Browne Contemporary, Sydney



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Front and back cover images:

Baden Pailthorpe *Spatial Operations* 2014 (detail)

paper pulp, pva, cellulose powder

24.0 x 30.0 x 22.0cm (each), 210 pieces

Courtesy of the artist and Martin Browne Contemporary, Sydney