



Not My War

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GORDON INSTITUTE
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**MICHAELIS
GALLERIES**

NOT MY WAR

Michaelis Galleries
29 June - 25 July 2012

Curated by David Brits
With Exhibition Text by Natasha Norman

In the Foxholes of History by Natasha Norman

Border War. The War of Liberation. The Bush War. The Angolan War. The War in the North. The very naming of this war denotes the conflict of ideologies inherent in its opposing forces.

The term 'Border War' generally considers what happened in Namibia and Angola from the mid-60s through to the '80s from the South African perspective. Historian, Patricia Hayes, points out in a catalogue essay for John Liebenberg's *Bush of Ghosts* that:

Namibians do not use the term. For most Namibians this long war in the late 20th century was the war of liberation, *Ekondjo ye Manguluko*. (Hayes 2010: 10)

'Border War' is in fact an exceedingly vague term as to the geographical fronts on which the war was fought: 'border' referring to an Angolan/Namibian, Namibian/South African or the South African/Botswanan political-geographical divide. Later South African conscripts found themselves deployed as riot police in the black/white political-geographical divides instated within the nation by the Group Areas act. For the SADF the 'border' appears to be more the conceptual border of South Africa with the rest of Black Africa (Hayes 2010:10).

Not My War positions itself quite clearly in a post-apartheid rhetoric. It draws great inspiration from a particular exhibition forerunner *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* that was initiated by Fernando Alvim, an Angolan artist and curator. In 1997, together with Cuban artist, Carlos Garaicoa, and South African artist, Gavin Younge, Alvim arranged for a twelve-day stay at Cuito Cuanavale - the site of one of the bloodiest battles between Angolan, Cuban and South African forces that was instrumental in the ending of the war. The artists were chosen specifically for their lack of direct involvement in the war, with Alvim encouraging them to give their personal view on the issue. Rather than the quest for an 'official' version of this history, *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* was unique at the time in its quest to engender dialogue in a site of so much emotional and physical 'indigestion' as Alvim has described it. It is this desire to open up the history of the event rather than to close it in official readings that has so inspired the intentions behind this exhibition.

As the son of a conscripted man, curator David Brits is at pains to broker an engagement with his nationalist history. From the perspective of post-apartheid historical awareness, Brits recognises his ancestry that subscribed to ideologies presenting the 'Border War' as a necessity but tries to discern what this heritage of political brainwashing has left the new South African nation.

The recent growth in an emerging white discourse of the Border War is powerfully cathartic, however new borders are likely to emerge in this discourse if it is not kept

within the perspective of a larger socio-political framework. The individual or collective self-referentiality that recent memoirs and accounts have evoked in the cultural sphere are in danger of constituting a genre of 'white hell' that very rarely engages with the consequences of how these experiences impacted the 'someone else' on the opposite side of the conflict. (Hayes 2010:11) Photographer John Liebenberg has raised a concern over the truthfulness of memoirs being published in the last ten years. The danger of accounts of this war as 'books of bravado' is that human rights abuses will remain uncovered by the rhetoric. He is particularly concerned about the lack of discussion about the Koevoet detention centres in Namibia (Corrigall 2011:7).

But whichever side of the conflict the participants were on, this war on the Namibian and Angolan border has undeniably been a site of severe emotional and physical wounding, the pathological cruelty of which has been exported to civilian populations across Southern Africa by war veterans. In South Africa, recent accounts by conscripts speak of the residual trauma of memory and the feelings of guilt over their complicity in a state-instituted genocidal aggression.

Evidence given in the trial of Eugene de Kok (the 'butcher' of Vlakplaas) suggests that he too suffered post-traumatic stress symptoms after his Angolan service. This offers a substantial challenge to the clear rhetorical binary of victim and victimiser in such instances. The complicity of the war in the later acts of terror and torture within South African society has led David Bunn to assert the war as 'that place beyond the pale where the refinements of torture were perfected and then exported back to South Africa, mutilating tortured and torturers alike' (1997: 32).

Angola. The Border War. The War of Liberation. *Ekondjo ye Manguluko*. The war in the North. That abstract place 'on the border' where brothers and boyfriends, fathers and uncles did their military service against Communists and Cubans. A place of myth. Stories of death and heroes: terrs, foxholes, *Victor Victor* and jumping jacks. There, over the red line the risk/reward equation of life when the enemy is near.

Whether it was their war or our war or *Not My War*, this war came home to us because the veterans took it home with them.

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John Liebenberg (-)

Picnic on the Cunene River. Koevoet families at Ruacana near the border with Angola, 15 November 1987, 1987, Archival print, 42 x 59,4cm.

The SADF's attempt to domesticate the bush is particularly pertinent in *Picnic on the Cunene River* (1987) where permanent force Koevoet families are depicted at leisure in armoured Casspirs in a dangerous border space. Civilian and familial relaxation is strangely harnessed to pacify the disturbing and dehumanising acts of racially motivated violence that these groups were deployed to enact. Historian Patricia Hayes remarks that the problem with trying to normalise a war by enacting ordinary or civilian activities is that the violence of the situation comes to infect the normative family activities after the event.

Facilitated by official secrecy the border war emerges as an educational field, a testing ground for social reproduction on the 'homefront' as the Apartheid government's war against Communism turned to deploying conscripts in the townships.



John Liebenberg (-)

Conscripts 'make their weapons safe' before entering their base, Ruacana. 1988, 1988, Archival print, 42 x 59,4cm.

On a full moon, the contents of file number 14 are dislodged, Liebenberg admits to Mary Corrigan in an interview for the Sunday Independent. File number 14 at the back of his mind - he taps his greying head - is where Liebenberg keeps the memories of his experiences as a war photographer in Namibia and Angola in the 1980s.

Liebenberg first went to Namibia in 1976 as a conscript, forced to build the SADF infrastructure in a large militarised border area known as Sector 10. His army days were characterised by filling sandbags.

Boredom and craziness.

He returned to Namibia as a photographer for the weekly paper, The Nambian, informed by a radicalised political awareness. Using both the SADF and alternative structures to approach his photography saw him develop a unique engagement with the conflict. His images convey an understanding of both warring sides but also the implications for civilians caught in the middle. The ordinariness of institutional and personally enacted violence is striking in his photographs. He had been 18 years old and 'full of shit' on the border too. Perhaps there is something self-reflexive there?



Jo Ractliffe (1961 -)

Mural portraits depicting Fidel Castro, Agostinho Neto and Leonid Brezhnev, painted on the wall of a house in Viriambundo, Angola, circa 1975, 2009, Triptych, Digital silver gelatin prints, 50 x 40cm.

The future is about different things.

While photographing a mural of Fidel Castro, Agostinho Neto and Leonid Brezhnev (the 'holy trinity'), Ractliffe is approached by a young school teacher who asks why she wants an image of these men. He is interested in how computers and the internet could aid education in a remote area such as his. The war has gone on too long, he concludes, and needs to be left behind.



Jo Ractliffe (1961 -)

The battlefield at Cuito Cuanavale, 2009, Diptych,
Hand-printed silver gelatin prints, 32.5 x 26cm.

The battle of Cuito Cuanavale was a decisive one in terms of ending the South African involvement in Angola. It was an event that led directly to the independence of Namibia, and later, many argue, democracy in South Africa. But war in Angola would continue for another 14 years until the resolution of the succession battle resulting from the death of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi in 2002. This civil war was characterised by the ideological ‘cleansing’ of civilians (limbeza) by armed civilians and special police forces. The scorched earth tactics after 1990 saw the destruction of the country’s remaining infrastructure: schools, factories, medical centres and the death of millions of civilians by the staggering number of anti-personnel landmines laid by the warring militia.



Wayne Barker (1963 -)

Untitled (Sertifikaat), 1985, SADF
Discharge Certificate, 21 x 29.7cm.

Barker has performed numerous cultural interventions and art parodies but one of his most astonishing has to his Charlie Chaplin rendition in the SADF.

"In the army I was three people – Umberto Eco, Carl Jung and Joseph Heller."

Taking his underground Johannesburg theatre experiences and Cape Town art school training to task, Barker's cocktail of off-the-cuff psychoanalysis and theatre "to get to the Corporal to get to the Sergeant to get to the Lieutenant to get to the Captain to get out," saw him duly released in a triumph of passive resistance that enabled him to evade both Basic Training and a 5 year jail sentence. Madness.

On his father's side there were three generations of fighter pilots, airforce pilots and military men from which he fled, challenging authority of every kind and earning him a temporary disowning by his family. As noted by critic Ivor Powell, "[In Barker's work] meaning is the point where the lies of one's childhood meet the realities of the present, not a fixed point but an intersection."



Christo Doherty (1959 -)

Koevoet Picnic 1, 2011, Archival Print rag paper (Photograph & Constructed Model), 58,4 x 45,7cm.

“The bush is an entity with agency. ”

Since turning 19 and leaving his 13 months of military service, Christo Doherty has had the door firmly shut on his memories of combat until his 2011 exhibition *Bos* at the Resolution Gallery where this group of images were first shown.

“When you are in it, no one explains to you what is going on. It is only in retrospect that you get to piece it all together.”

Doherty’s is a process tasked with both accessing the emotion of memory while simultaneously distancing the viewer from the event. The theatricality of the photographed models (made by professional military model-makers) is suddenly rendered alienating as one realises that the image is a photograph of a model that recreates an existing photograph of an actual event.

The push-pull from the actual event to the reinvention of the event in tableau is a poetics of trauma. The peculiar bind of attempting to distance oneself from an experience only to have it made present in a moment of post-traumatic stress is a haunting through time recounted by various conscripts who reacted instinctively in Civvie Street to a memory relived from the Bush.

The boundary between victim and perpetrator becomes a blurry one. Border War scholar David Baines recognises the ‘choiceless choice’ where the space to make choices was felt to be constrained for conscripts who felt they were carrying out what was expected of them.

“Once you’re in operations, then to survive you have to be part of it. When you are in it, you can’t suddenly decide to become a conscientious objector.”



Paul Emmanuel (1969 -)

3SAI: A RITE OF PASSAGE,
2008, Single channel, HD video,
stereo soundtrack, 14 minutes.

“You young men grew up very quickly. The boys of today take so long to grow up; they take a long time to get weaned away from their mother’s care and protection.”¹

Emmanuel’s poetically sequenced, non-narrative documentary is framed by a concern with the liminal spaces of initiation. Images of new army recruits having their heads shaved at the Third South African Infantry Battalion in Kimberley expose the symbolism of a social ritual: the threshold of a transforming experience. Time-lapse and slow motion cinematography exposes the transitions in masculine identity where one has surrendered a sense of self to the social machinery.

¹Mother of conscript interviewed in Cameron Blake’s 2010. *From Soldier to Civvy*. Zebra Press: Cape Town. P197.



Paul Emmanuel (1969 -)

number 05000674PV, 2010,
Manière noire stone lithograph on
Fabriano Rosaspina Avorio, 158,9
x 81 cm.

In a white South African society's ideology of manhood, this is the identification that characterises the process of belonging to that nationhood.

The gaze is without critique or comment. It was Emmanuel's own kin that forced young men to conscript to the national defence force under Apartheid.

I look again.

It is an acknowledgement: this moment, where the shift in values and self-identification that it represents, is marked on the body.



Chad Rossouw (1982 -)

The Other Side, 2009, Short Story.

The camp sleeps.
The candle splutters
its dying flame,
grinning its tiny havoc.

Now it is black.
A vague outline
of the battlefield is left.
I stretch enormously
and grind my cigarette into the sticky wax.

I lit the candle –
caused the whole scene.
Who lit the candle
that I am flying around?

– Anonymous conscript¹

¹'Who lit the candle?' in Karen Badley's (ed.) 2007 *A Secret Burden. Memories of the Border War* by South African soldiers who fought in it. Jonathan Ball Publishers: Cape Town. p66.



Colin Richards (1954 - 2012)

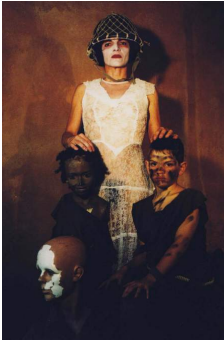
Words for my Father, originally written ca 1978, reworked in 1996, Archival print, 42 x 29,7cm.

For some who fought, the trauma of Angola is so deep as to demand the devotion of a significant part of their lives to managing its memory.

Disillusionment is one of the big things. On the Border itself, nothing that you've been taught for 18 years counts. Politeness couldn't get you anywhere. When you come back, you have to revert to being decent. It's very confusing. You don't know what's right or wrong, real or unreal, because its two worlds. You've got two souls, an army soul and this one.

– Anonymous veteran¹

¹Karen Bately, (ed.) 2007. *A Secret Burden. Memories of the Border War by the South African soldiers who fought in it.* Jonathan Ball: Johannesburg, p107.



Penny Sipois (1953 -)

Comrade Mother, 1994, C-Print,
Photograph by Jean Brundit, 27,5
x 42cm.

I found my father's army jacket in an old family suitcase. I had the feeling he knew exactly where it was. We tore it together. It was for a dress-up party. I remember how nonchalant he was about it. But the beret, that is kept with his most personal items: a medal of honour there in his dressing-room cupboard.

Objects evoke a curious connection to experience, particularly an experience shrouded in state secrecy. The military's heavy censoring of letters with black ink and the official forms of secrecy that conscripts were made to sign in protection of national security instituted the official silence that both civilians and conscripts have lived with ever since.

This photographic work was inspired by the artist's son's discovery of his father's military uniform.



Gavin Young (1947 -)

Forces Favourites, 1997, South African Post Office bicycles, vellum, television monitors, looped video, 12 minutes, Dimensions variable.

Forces Favourites references the title of a radio show aired for SADF troops deployed in the Angolan conflict. Its title track provides the soundscape for video footage of Cuito Cuanavale filmed mostly on the back of a post office bicycle that the artist brought with him to the village in 1997.

Jill Bennett¹ observes that Young's camera does not penetrate in the manner of ethnographic or documentary film. It records the flow of life without interpretation (no 'insider' knowledge) but through the eye of the visitor. Journeying becomes the vehicle of negotiating an encounter with the survivor in such a space. The landscape recedes and sharp edits foreground a pace of life living on beyond the devastation of war. The particular unmaking and remaking in the wake of trauma, a trauma that Young did not experience. Tasked with finding an extension of violence and loss in the material world, Young chose to focus on the process of inhabitation – the relationships to place and community that emerge in the aftermath.

Objects startling to a visitor have become commonplace to the inhabitant – abandoned military vehicles are the springboards to children's games in the river and a mokoro sails through footage of a wrecked boat in the Cuito river. Young's use of vellum, a skin sutured to the bicycle frame, encases the objects like a growth upon the structure. These memories and inherited landscapes of trauma develop their own scar tissue in the flow of life thereafter. Damage is revealed through the processes of regeneration.

¹Jill Bennett (2000) 'Material encounters: approaching the trauma of others through the visual arts' in Gavin Young (2007) Prothesis exhibition catalogue. La Noire Gallerie: Paris. p21-27



Gavin Young (1947 -)

Mutoko, 1997 (recovered 2010),
Oil painting on salvaged duck
board, vellum, linen thread, 92 x
88cm.

In the overwhelming sight of destruction to human life and habitation one can easily overlook the impact of a blasted biodiversity. Taking shelter in the cool of a relatively well-to-do Portuguese family's ruined home, Young began to rearticulate the coloured plates of the Lisbon publication *The Birds of Angola* on fragments of parquet flooring. He was interrupted periodically by villagers who would gesture excitedly at the images saying the names of the missing birds in various local dialects: "Ntento!" "Kawanambulo!" "Ondia Makunde!"

Traditionally associated with the colonial intellectual tradition, Younger's ornithology is less an ordering of unfamiliar species than a haunting evocation of a casualty of war. The last colonial war fought in Africa.



**Christopher James Swift
(1973 -)**

Decoy, 2012, Found object: Mirage F1 CZ, brake shoot & army medic box, courtesy Chris Teale of the SAAF Museum at Ysterplaat, Dimensions variable.

Swift first exhibited *Decoy* at the 2012 annual Afrikaburn creative event in the Tankwa Karoo. He recounts with surprise how many veterans came to share their stories with him based on its presence the breaking of a twenty-year seal of silence. It is a found object, like the body of the conscript signed over to the nation in their klaaring in papers: property of the SADF and holder of state secrets.



**Christopher James Swift
(1973 -)**

Portuguese Man-of-War, 2012, Mirage F1 CZ brake shoot & umbrella stand, Dimensions variable.

Anyone unfamiliar with the biology of the venomous Portuguese man-of-war would likely mistake it for a jellyfish. Not only is it not a jellyfish, it's not even an "it," but a "they." The Portuguese man-of-war is a siphonophore, an animal made up of a colony of organisms working together.

From 1655 to 1975 Angola was occupied as a colony by the Portuguese. The Angolan war of Independence is dated 1961 – 1974. Angola's subsequent civil war lasted until 2002 making a total of 40 years of conflict in the area.



Penny Sipois (1953 -)

Somnambulist (Scarf), 1994,
Cowrie shells and scarf of a South
African Defence Force conscript,
170 x 55 x 12cm.

Sipois recognises the intimate relationship between owner and object and the way it evokes a haunting of memory – an embodiment of the past that the philosopher, Benjamin, articulates as a ‘dwelling’ in history. The object elicits a charm over its viewer, manifesting as both a representation of the past and an illusion that it will unite one with an original experience. An heirloom, embodying - in this particular instance - one man’s lived realities of a nationalised ideology.

At they call we shall not falter,
Firm and steadfast we shall stand,
At thy will to live or perish,
Oh South Africa, dear land.¹

¹Extract from 1960s national anthem The Call of South Africa (official English version).



Paul Emmanuel (1969 -)

3SAI: A RITE OF PASSAGE,
2008, Single channel, HD video,
stereo soundtrack, 14 minutes.

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