

When We Were Soldiers... once and young

Installation by Bettina WitteVeen
The Brooklyn Navy Yard Hospital Building, New York

September 19-October 24, 2015
Press Preview: September 17, 2015, 10am–12pm



NEW YORK – “**When We Were Soldiers... once and young (WWWS)**,” a photographic installation by German artist and social activist Bettina WitteVeen, will be on view at the Brooklyn Navy Yard Hospital from **September 19–October 24, 2015**. This will be one of the most ambitious installations to be staged in the Brooklyn Navy Yard in recent years. It is also the first time that an artist has been given the use of the building where soldiers were treated from the American Civil War onwards to World War II, and which has been closed to the general public. The Brooklyn Navy Yard location is in keeping with WitteVeen’s philosophy of using historically significant sites for installations to underscore her humanitarian message. The installation is open daily from 12pm to 6pm. http://www.bettinawitteveen.com/BWV_home.html

Presented as a visual poem, **WWWS** will weave together over 100 black and white and color analog photographs culled from historic archives, sculptures in the form of large crosses and a walk-in altar with a sound installation. The installation, including WitteVeen’s wide-ranging and visually rich photographs, will philosophically and artistically explore the depth of humanity’s collective shadow as it finds its ultimate expression in war and genocide.

“We are not hard-wired for war,” says WitteVeen. “Warfare is a tragic aberration of the neurotic aspects of a society. Let me explain that I am an abolitionist of warfare. Like the abolitionists of slavery who published painful images to show the inhumanity of slavery and to rally support, I show the reality and ravages of war.”

Collectively titled “The Heart of Darkness,” **WWWS** is the fourth in global series of installations by WitteVeen. The **WWWS** title derives from one of the most significant books about the Vietnam War, the account of LT. Gen. Harold Moore and war journalist Joseph Galloway of the Battle of Ia Drang in 1965.

In a powerful narrative that unites a wide range of subject matter including historical, philosophical, ethical and spiritual themes, **WWWS** will shed light on the impact of military conflict on the individual that goes beyond the loss of innocence and the direct wounds of war. While military and press photography have brought a new capacity to document war, WitteVeen, a practicing Buddhist and pacifist, offers a different way of seeing. While addressing war indirectly, her view is directed with inexhaustible persistence and rigor at the people who suffer in warfare, thus creating a powerful social panorama. She uses different points of view to convey a long story of loss and sorrow. By going back and forth in time and location, she approaches the subject of war from an unusual perspective.

There is a poetic beauty to the Goyaesque scenes in this body of work that represent some of the darkest and rawest memories of American soldiers in the installation. They encompass events from the American Civil War, the Crimean War, the First and Second World Wars, the Korean and Vietnam Wars and the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The timely humanitarian premise of the art project is that industrialized warfare can be overcome. Thus WitteVeen uses the pastoral beauty of landscapes once destroyed in violent conflict, such as the battlefields of the Alma on the Crimea, Ukraine as a hauntingly powerful metaphor of resurrection and hope. The red poppy as a symbol of spilled blood, sacrifice and the obligation to remember, but also as a soldier's most powerful palliative in the form of opiates, is an ambivalently explored theme in this artist's work.

The project does not only explore human destructiveness, but illuminates also the altruistic deeds the individual is capable of by including, for example, a portrait of Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross and the great American poet Walt Whitman who served in the Sanitary Corps in the American Civil War.

In the former patient treatment rooms on the hospital's main floor the artist installs images of weapons, the injuries they inflict and the heroic nurses, doctors and stretcher bearers in such a configuration that they form visual **Crosses of Suffering** of devastating emotional impact. In the hospital's hallway a film-like sequence of combat and landscape imagery evokes the inner experience of terror, exhilaration and loss of reality the soldier experiences during battle.

In addition, the exhibition traces the development of robotics from the artificial limbs of WWI. Photographs of war robots and drones can be seen in a cold room under the title of **War Invisible**. A black robotic hand reaching into a black mirror seems to ask pertinent questions regarding this form of remote warfare. In **That Which Remains** Bettina WitteVeen exposes the long-term devastation of trauma in a series of installations in the hospital's basement; there is the triptych of the victims of a drone strike poignantly illuminated from behind. There is the desolate image of a woman and her cow in Paris, a symbol for refugees then and now. **Memories of the Heart**, though hopeful that wounds can heal and permit a blossoming life, does have a rusty barbed wire running through the hauntingly beautiful photographs of rambling roses and abundant wisteria of a Yalta garden. The bloody red portrait of a young woman hiding her face, aptly titled **Anonymous**, is hung in a former prison cell and harshly lit to not only evoke the terror of rape, but also to call attention in stark terms to this widely employed weapon of war.



Bettina WitteVeen, *The Memories of the Heart*

The experience of **When We Were Soldiers... once and young** in the dilapidated naval hospital will be memorable. The state of the building and its history of use add a thought provoking dimension and expanded context. The sorrow and pain is transformed by the sacredness of the walk-in altar inspired by the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin, Germany and the angelic voices of a Johan Sebastian Bach Cantata that uplift the spirit.

The installation is an artistic endeavor of remarkable integrity and most relevant for a time when contemporary warfare is at a crossroad. It is not sensationalist and invites the viewer to make up his/her own mind and permits a wide range of individual experiences. When exiting this former military hospital, a former soldier hands the visitor information about organizations helping war victims.

Footnote: All photographs were taken with a Hasselblad CM500 and analog printed. Individual images are rephotographed and extensively retouched. As a Buddhist the artist believes in the principle of impermanence and so does not date her photographs.



Bettina WitteVeen, *Body*, Alma Battlefield, Ukraine

Armed conflicts of which sites photographed 1994 to Present

Crimean War (1853-1856)
Third Seminole War (1855-1858)
American Civil War (1861-1865)
Anglo-Zulu War (1879)
Spanish-American War (1898)
Boer Wars (1880-1881, 1899-1902)
Russian Revolution (1905-1924)
World War I (1914-1918)
Stalinist Russia (1924-1953)
World War II (1939-1945)
Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)
First Indochina War (1946-1954)
Indian Partition Violence (1947)
Cuban Revolution (1953-1959)
Vietnam War (1965-1973)
Cambodian Civil War (1970-1998)
Pathet Lao (1970-1989)
Uganda Civil War (1981-1986)
Sri Lanka Civil War (1983-2009)

Countries where battlefields, military installations, concentration, work, re-education camp sites, places of uprisings, execution sites, memorial sites were photographed for "The Heart of Darkness" global installation project:

Africa

Republic of Kenya
Republic of Seychelles
Republic of South Africa
United Republic of Tanzania
Republic of Uganda

Americas

Commonwealth of Barbados
Republic of Cuba
Commonwealth of Dominica
Jamaica
Commonwealth of St Lucia
United States of America
Commonwealth of Puerto Rico

Asia

Republic of the Union of Myanmar
Kingdom of Cambodia
Democratic Republic of Timor-Este
Republic of India
Japan
Lao People's Democratic Republic
Republic of Singapore
Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka
Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Europe

Republic of Austria
Kingdom of Belgium
French Republic
Federal Republic of Germany
Italian Republic
Grand Duchy of Luxembourg
Republic of Poland
Russian Federation
Kingdom of Spain
Ukraine

Oceania

Republic of Fiji
Republic of Kiribati
Republic of the Marshall Islands
Federated States of Micronesia
Republic of Palau

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