

Exhibition Review

***Aftermath: Art in the Wake of World War One*, Tate Britain,
5 June - 23 September 2018.**

<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/aftermath>

Book: *Aftermath: Art in the Wake of World War One*. Emma Chambers (editor).

Tate Publishing, 2018. \$24.99, 128 pp.

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This large exhibition was mounted at the venerable Tate Britain as the end of the First World War centenary approached; the famous armistice date in 2018 marked its one hundredth anniversary. As the title indicates, we are now entering the war's aftermath phase, the study of which remains every bit as remarkable and fraught as that of its origins and conduct. 150 pieces of art were arranged into seven distinct areas comprised of objects created between 1916 and 1932. The narrow time frame indicates the exhibition's focus on the immediate aftermath, while the starting date reminds one that even as it ground on and well before it ended, the war was engaging artists to determine how best to depict it.

The title of C. R. W. Nevinson's oil painting "Paths of Glory" will remind many of the 1957 Stanley Kubrick film of that title. Kubrick produced a study of self-promotion, mule-headed tactical miscalculation, callous disregard for enlisted men and utter cynicism on the part of French general officers. Nevinson's painting, on the other hand, depicts ordinary battlefield death. Two dead soldiers lie face-down, prone and sprawled on a battlefield tangled with barbed wire. Along with the barbed wire, other details confirm the Great War setting: the steel British helmets issued to Tommies, puttees, the style of light assault pack worn. The aqua-tinted

blue used by Nevinson in the small sky he has painted is echoed skillfully in the small swashes and highlights he uses in the foreground, including on the men's uniforms.

The painting's ironic title was taken from Thomas Gray's beautiful eighteenth-century poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." Nevinson's frank depiction of unburied dead soldiers (who won't be coming home for a churchyard burial) ensured that it was censored while the war was still on. Nonetheless the artist exhibited the painting in March 1918, hanging it for public viewing with a strip of brown paper hiding the corpses and marked with the word "censored." Official response to this rebellious act was divided: the War Office reprimanded Nevinson, while the Imperial War Museum bought the painting.

Although it could be argued that "Paths of Glory" is essentially a battlefield painting, because of its suggestive powers the picture does justify its inclusion in an exhibition devoted to the war's aftermath. It has become a commonplace to state that the war undermined old verities and threw into question all manner of received truths, including the nobility of patriotic sacrifice on the battlefield. Poets, novelists and artists turned to the skeptical and ironic in the post-war years. Efforts to debunk and the urge to expose surfaced even before the war had ended. The subject of Nevinson's painting implies an invisible corollary: the millions of families who will live in the aftermath without a husband, son or brother who was lost on the battlefield.

Such thoughts are invited particularly in the first room of the exhibition, which is entitled "Remembrance: Battlefields and Ruins." Paul Nash's "Wire" shows a blasted tree stump, a crater-ponded field and tangles of wire surrounding things as if it were live growth, seeming vines winding naturally around tree and rock and fence. If such Great War landscapes are more or less familiar now 100 years on, it is only because photographers and painters such as Nash have

made them so. The immediate post-war generation had to deal with the truly massive and industrialized destruction of the land. Such destruction had not ever been seen before. Nash's painting—this one more straightforwardly realistic than some of the artist's cubist-tinged warscapes such as "The Menin Road"—invites the viewer to contemplate the wounds to the land, and the anxious uncertainty that faced whole classes of farmers and landowners after the Armistice. French and Belgian farmers still turn up war debris in their fields, with richer "iron harvests" occurring this century on account of the heavier and more powerful farming machinery now in use.

While much of the work in this room was done in a realistic vein (echoed in the smaller objects, such as actual helmets, on display in vitrines), two sculptures represent more modernist aesthetic strains. Jacob Epstein's "Torso in Metal from 'Rock Drill'" is part of the Tate's permanent collection and would seem to represent the artist at his most experimental. While it is natural that the Tate would want to show off this relatively famous part of its collection, it is not clear why it has been located in this particular part of the exhibition. The torso is at once militaristic and futuristic, heavily influenced by Epstein's early-career fascination with machine aesthetics. Wilhelm Lehmbruck's "The Fallen Man" is less well-known but has captured the attention of the British Press in exhibition reviews. It is an expressionistic bronze of a nude man on all fours, with elongated limbs and neck, whose posture suggests exhaustion, a state of utter done-in-ness.

The second room's theme was "War Memorials and Society." Here various media and various aesthetic approaches were directed to the same fundamental questions: how best to form a shared, public memory of the war, how best to create official formulations of that

memory. Charles Sargeant Jagger was a Sheffield-born sculptor of post-war renown, earning various commissions for public statuary, including the Royal Artillery Memorial at Hyde Park Corner. His highly skilled "No Man's Land" is a long and narrow bronze relief that depicts the ruins of what seems to be a recently shelled area at the front. The work transcends simple categorization as either heroic or unheroic. There is nothing superficially noble about the subject matter, which depicts casualties in ungainly positions and postures, broken weaponry and strewn equipment, including an upended stretcher that seems to free float at the very center of the relief. Some viewers have interpreted one of the seven bodies depicted as still alive and hiding out. And yet, there is something about the piece that invites the viewer to think on the bravery of the men and not on their status as hapless victims, or clichéd sheep to the slaughter. The scene seems to imply that they had a job to perform and they died while performing it. British viewers would have known that the slaughter did end in victory. The German invasion of other countries was repelled and could not have been without loss of British life. Jagger's aesthetic reveals that memorials could be brutally realistic without that realism automatically translating into the anti-heroic or debunking mode.

Britain is home to many large-scale war memorials in prominent public places, of course. They range from the conventionally heroic to the more self-consciously modernist. Ernst Barlach's "The Floating One" is a much more intimate, much less conventional memorial. The sculpture is cast in bronze and floats above the viewer's head, face-down in a rigidly prone position with arms crossed and folded against the chest. The floating, berobed figure suggests an angel, and one is left to contemplate the sculptor's talent in making a bronze figure seem lightsome. Even so, the facial expression is the most remarkable feature, and it is the expression

which carries Barlach's memorializing intentions. Many have described it as haunted and grief-stricken. While it is certainly possible to see grief in the somewhat drawn expression, I find it more enigmatic than haunted. Is the floating one withdrawn into self for regeneration? For sheer psychic survival in the face of terror, pain and loss? How much of the viewer's attribution of particular emotions is informed by knowledge that Barlach designated the work to be a war memorial (it was originally hung from the ceiling of the cathedral in Güstrow in 1927). Whatever emotions are evoked, it certainly cannot be said to be heroic. The Nazis designated this work as degenerate and melted it down (was it used to make munitions, then? very likely). But a copy had been made and kept secret so that it could be re-installed after WWII ended.

The exhibit's third room devoted itself to wounded soldiers. British artists were enlisted to assist plastic surgeons, in particular those treating the men with often hideous facial wounds, the sort well captured by the French phrase *les mutilés*, or *les gueules cases* ("broken faces"). Naturally men without noses, men with one side of their jaw blown off or missing eyeballs, were wounded not just physically but psychologically. Artists were of great help because men could be fitted with masks, the more skillfully formed, fitted and painted, the better. Some masks attached to strings, while others attached to eyeglasses. Plastic surgeons also worked in tandem with artists, who were able to sketch out versions of what the wounded soldier should look like without his disfigurement. Practical and fine arts traditions merged in a humanitarian effort.

Depicting physical wounds is one challenge. Such depictions surely brought forward an element of the war that many would wish to ignore or avoid; as well, the challenge of incorporating unbeautiful aesthetics is also obvious. Depicting mental, emotional, or spiritual wounds in visual arts is perhaps even more challenging. Otto Dix captures every sort of wound

in his drawing "Prostitute and Disabled War Veteran: Two Victims of Capitalism," which shows an aged, pock-faced woman and a man with only one eye and a mutilated mouth and cheek. His one eye stares wildly straight at the viewer. Dix was alive to exploitation and degradation, bringing a strong political element to his depictions of marginal people living in the 1920s Weimar Republic. Dix's bludgeoning subtitle makes clear that sex and violence are underpinned by capitalism, though one must take his word for it. There is nothing in the visual representation per se that advances that specific argument. (Pre-capitalist societies did not have wars? Non-capitalist societies do not have prostitutes? One wonders what Dix would have made, say, of the explosion of prostitution in post-revolutionary, Castro-era Havana.) Politics aside, Dix was able to combine great sympathy with his depictions of the ugly, the sordid or the merely misfortunate. One can see this in his 1920 "War Cripples" (not exhibited at the Tate) which shows amputee veterans wearing their military attire in public. Here the evocation of trauma combines more successfully with social critique, for the painting depicts a truth of the time: the nations of Europe, Weimar Germany included, often did a poor job of finding employment for such men as he shows.

One room alone--a room exclusively devoted to prints--justified a trip to the exhibition. Here were prints from the Frenchman Georges Rouault's "Misery and War" series that included sixty-five different works and spanned more than two decades of work. Even for a man as religiously devout as Rouault, the war was not quickly gotten over. It has been said that Rouault's paintings and drawings take on the appearance of stained glass, which can be seen even in a black and white etching such as "Arise You Dead," which depicts three skeletons who seem to be doing exactly as they are bid to do by the title. One wears a cap, and Christian

iconography appears in the background. Whence recovery? Whence restoration? so many artists seem to ask.

For the deeply religious Englishman Stanley Spencer, it could be found in Christian belief. His oil painting "Unveiling Cookham War Memorial" combines his great affection for his hometown with the desire to honor the dead. Spencer figured Cookham as "a village in heaven" in a series of painted scenes that combine biblical themes with his idiosyncratic stylizations of townsmen and village scenes. He had served for some two and half years on the Macedonian front, first as a medical corpsman then, upon his own request, as an infantryman. He lost a brother in the war, professed his own difficulty in returning to work after his front line experience, but did not arrive at anything like a stereotypical anti-military point of view, nor did he subscribe to the bitter anger or self-pitying elements found in the Trench Poets. For such an artist, the painting must have been at once an affectionate portrait of his beloved town, an act of commemoration and a personal catharsis. His brother's name can be found inscribed on the memorial's cross.

Rouault's lithographs notwithstanding, the French were more thinly represented than Germany and England. The pre-war Parisian avant-garde scene was cosmopolitan. While many German artists served in an Army that eventually returned in defeat, a good many of the famous names associated with French art were not Frenchmen and did not serve in the war. Having passed through the Fauve movement, the pre-war Parisian avant-garde was primarily focused on form and spatial relations. This stimulus was most influential in battlefield landscapes and combat scenes such as those by Paul Nash and Nevinson. After the war, many French artists

participated in a "return to order," which meant a re-adoption of classical norms rather than a return to photographic verism.

The last two rooms have been questioned by some viewers on the grounds of relevance. They are thought to attenuate the theme of aftermath insofar as their direct relationship to the war is difficult to see. There is merit in this criticism, though several masterful paintings can thus be seen, including Christian Schad's "Self Portrait." It can also be noted that some average works seem to have been included merely to fill out a theme, and that good works sometimes sit beside great, revealing the fact that historical thrust and aesthetic discrimination cannot perfectly align in such an ambitious exhibition.

World War I was thoroughly photographed, and was also the first war to receive extensive filming, but such documentation cannot bring to life the subjective elements that creative art can awaken. The viewer is privy to emotional landscapes that would otherwise remain buried. For combatant artists, the psychic turmoil produced by the war resulted in profound developments in style and outlook, not to mention previously undreamt of subject matter. For some, the resulting work would be the most original and intensely realized of their careers. As this exhibition and its accompanying catalogue amply illustrate, the war changed the art world for combatants and non-combatants alike.