

Jonathan Jones on art Art and design

Why nudes are a fitting tribute to the Somme's fallen soldiers

Paul Emmanuel's battlefield 'counter-memorial' features ghostly images of nudes. But this provocative piece has much to say about the travesty of war



Memory ... Paul Emmanuel: The Lost Men France.

Art and war are locked in a fatal embrace. Ever since ancient times, artists have treated war as a special subject: spectacular, serious and worth remembering, something to treat in lofty, violent, or simply pitiful images.

This is surely why, in this centenary of the first world war's outbreak, so many works of public art have been commissioned. In our bones, we feel the great war deserves great art; only art can do justice to its horrors. This assumption has led to the commissioning of dazzle ships in Britain, and it is shared in France too. On the battlefields of the Somme, a public artwork by South African artist Paul Emmanuel has been installed with French state support. It is a field of banners, emblazoned not with the traditional heraldic and national totems that decorate military banners but pale, ghostly images of male vulnerability. The names of the WWI dead of all nations are printed on their flesh.



Artist Paul Emmanuel's body after servicemen's names were pressed into his skin. Photograph: Charl Fraser

These fragile nudes floating in the breeze over the sad spaces of northern France represent the "lost men" of the Somme.

Located next to the official British memorial at Thiepval to the missing of this monstrous battle, this is a daring war memorial, in that it shows naked bodies in a public place. It's probably something that would have been forbidden when veterans of the war itself were likely to visit Thiepval. Yet France is right to support this provocative nude war art. Personally, I find it much more moving than our dazzle ships.

This "counter-memorial" is very telling about the French experience of the first world war - and how it shaped modern art in France. British soldiers suffered horrifically at the Somme, but the first world war as a whole ravaged France in an exceptionally severe way. So much of the fighting took place on France soil, and by the end of the war, more than 1.3 million French soldiers were dead. One result was that French art after the war examined masculinity in troubling, uneasy ways. So many young men had died or been maimed that it was an unavoidable subject.



Paul Emmanuel: The Lost Men France (2014).

André Breton, leader of the surrealist movement, served in the first world war as a medical orderly. Shellshock helped him see the power of Sigmund Freud's ideas, which led to surrealism's cult of the unconscious. In surrealist art, men are portrayed as damaged goods. In Max Ernst's early surrealist painting Pietà or Revolution by Night, for instance, a young man (the artist) lies weakly in the ghostly arms of his father. Ernst, who came to Paris from Cologne, was the first artist to rise to Breton's challenge to make "automatic" art, but it wasn't just surrealists who depicted fragile men in 1920s France. In Picasso's great 1923 painting Seated Harlequin, he uses the sad clown from traditional commedia dell'arte as an emblematic image of a lost generation. His painting Pipes of Pan from the same year goes even further in its homoerotic tenderness and melancholy. Who are they mourning, these nearly-nude youths? Perhaps it is Picasso's beloved friend, the poet Apollinaire, who had died of a war wound.

Emmanuel is therefore following in the footsteps of Ernst and Picasso, who witnessed the war's sad impact on France, in mourning the vulnerable bodies of a lost generation. He reminds us in a simple stark way that war is not about ideas or causes or hardware but the destruction of human beings. Nudity in this context is the unveiled truth.

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