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Shrouds on the Somme: Paul Emmanuel's World War I Counter-Memorial

Paul Emmanuel: Remnants brochure, Boston University Art Galleries, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, January 2016.

World War I is frequently referred to as The Great War, but just as a century later we may not remember why it was fought, so too the use of the descriptive 'great' seems to lack a solid referent. Presumably, it refers not simply to the victory of the Allied Powers (the Entente), but to the scope of the first of the twentieth century's world wars, which included combatants and non-combatants from European colonies in Africa, India, Australia and New Zealand. 'Great' surely must also refer to the scale of the slaughter: a total of 38 million military and civilian casualties in the four years between 1914-1918. In 2014, ceremonies commemorating the Centenary of World War I began and will continue at memorial sites throughout Europe and the United States until 2018. But what exactly will be remembered?

South African artist Paul Emmanuel has provided one thoughtful answer in *The Lost Men France*, a series of banners that were installed on a farm road adjacent to the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme in the Picardy region from July to October 2014. The third of his projects exploring the violent destruction of the male body during war, *The Lost Men France* invaded the Somme's battlefields, revising history to include black South African (and colonial) participation in World War I. But apart from expanding the historical record to include men of different ethnicities and national origins in this 'white man's war,' Emmanuel wished to make the public aware more broadly that "a war has lasting psychological effects that are passed from generation to generation ..."

The Lost Men France questions the meaning of terms such as 'sacrifice' that lend a religious gloss to the horror of death. The Thiepval Memorial (designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, 1928-32), marks the site of one of the major battles of the Somme: On July 1, 1916, there were 57,000 casualties on that first day of battle alone; bodies were torn to shreds by shrapnel and left to sink into the mud. Even today, the farmers ploughing the wheat fields adjacent to *The Lost Men France* turn up bones of the 'missing.'

In creating the panels, Emmanuel emulated the mud-embalming of the fallen by casting his body in plaster. Placing plastic letters onto the casts to spell out the names of men of all rank, ethnicity, and nationality that he had researched during a four-month residency in France in 2012, he lay down in the casts under weights for some thirty minutes until his inscribed flesh became a painful living memorial. (See *A Quest for The Lost Men France* (2012) and *Remembering A Counter-Memorial: Making The Lost Men France* (2014) in this exhibition.) Photographs of his naked, bruised body were then transferred onto silk *organdi* banners five meters square, and hung from metal poles flanking the road.

Gently floating overhead, the imaged body became a sort of resurrection for the men long buried beneath the earth: the delicacy and poetic beauty of the silken shrouds contrasting with the pretentious, oversized architecture. But the weather in northern France can be harsh, and by October the shrouds, like the bodies they memorialized, had been reduced to shreds by the wind and rain. Hanging in the 808 Gallery, these 'Remnants' are a powerful

metaphor for physical and emotional suffering, a memorial to the *sine qua non* of war: the violation of the human body and the concomitant destruction of human decency. If the names carved into the limestone arches of Thiepval provide a false assurance of eternal remembrance, as names become a mere string of letters once all who knew them have died, the fragile and transitory veils initiate a path toward genuine mourning for men's lost lives, as they reunite the name with a body, if a surrogate one.

An online blog, "The Great War Forum," includes several vociferous objections to Emmanuel's use of his naked body, but it is precisely its very nakedness that reveals the vulnerability and, significantly, the humanity of the missing soldiers. As Jonathan Jones wrote in the *Guardian* (20 August 2014): "Nudity in this context is unveiled truth."

Military uniforms, with their harvest of metal buckles, insignia and badges, provide the illusion of a protective cover for that vulnerability, and during his research at the Musée de la Grande Guerre where he sourced the various uniforms used during the war, Emmanuel noted with interest their resemblance to corporate business suits. The video *Remember—Dismember* (2014) references this close correlation between war and capitalist profiteering through the use of distinctive male clothing—military, diplomatic and corporate—that has symbolized identity, rank, and power throughout South African history. Although Emmanuel's body appears to remain intact throughout the wardrobe changes, the title reminds us that a selective history, told through the lens of a white ruling class, is an amputation.

A New York Times editorial from December 25, 1915 stated that: "It is one of the benefits of science that the art of destruction is so destructive that the process can't be kept up indefinitely." But 'the war to end all wars' was only the beginning of our current state of permanent war. If confirmed by France's Centennial Commission, the banners will be reinstalled this summer. The site is within walking distance of the Sir Herbert Baker designed Delville Wood South African Memorial to the 'white unity' between the Afrikaans and English-speaking whites of South Africa. In post-apartheid South Africa today, there is a strong call to dismember monuments like Delville that speak to a racist, oppressive past. But whether South Africans take down statues of Cecil Rhodes, or here in the US, we remove statues of Robert E. Lee, history cannot be erased, only repressed. *The Lost Men France* asks us to walk through an alternate memorial before encountering an earlier one, so that the public can rethink and revise the past it has inherited. This is the meaning of remembrance.

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