

Helmand Return: a fresh perspective on the photography of conflict



Rose, Theatre Equipment Support – Robert Wilson: Helmand Return



Five Crosses, Theatre Equipment Support, Camp Bastion



Robert Wilson at the National War Museum

Someone is sculpting a rose from scrap metal, a gift perhaps for a girlfriend or mother. In the very same room – ‘Theatre Equipment Support’ as it is known – five metal crosses are lined up on a table. Welcome to Afghanistan.

Except that the British Army is now leaving – has left in fact. One of the largest operational sites in recent years was dismantled in 2014, and war photographer **Robert Wilson** was there to record its dismantling. Last week Wilson’s new exhibition *Helmand Return* opened at the **National War Museum in Edinburgh**; it gives a fascinating and rarely seen glimpse of life inside Camp Bastion and the process of withdrawing from a war zone.

Wilson first visited Afghanistan in 2008 at the height of the

British military operation, invited by the Commander of Forces in Helmand to work with the British Army 52 Brigade; the result ***Helmand: Faces of Conflict*** was exhibited at the National War Museum in 2009 and again in 2011. This time, as well as revisiting Helmand and Kandahar, Wilson was able to travel north to Camp Qargha in Kabul to film some of the local Afghan troops in training.



Foxhound Journey, Kabul

Wilson wanted not only to capture the official Draw Down but also to find images that would allow us some connection with the troops in the field, 'Elements that we would recognise in our own lives rather than just objects of war that we could choose to ignore'. So in ***School Run*** we see children walking and taxis driving against a backdrop of concrete fortifications; in ***Foxhound Journey*** we are inside a Protected Patrol Vehicle as it navigates 'normal' rush hour traffic – but in ***Training Compound, Sign Awareness*** target practice consists of a hardboard figure, robed and veiled, wielding a machine gun.



Meanwhile in ***Tented Accommodation, Camp Bastion*** and ***Downtime, Tented Accommodation II***, phones and ipads, brightly coloured duvet covers, a cafetiere and photos from home all create a cosy domestic scene, but, in a stunning row of individual portraits, each soldier's eyes reflect the things he or she has seen and felt in the war zone. Some are fresh-faced, others sand-blasted, but every one has taken on responsibilities that few of us can imagine.



Afghan National Army

Officer Training, Camp
Qargha, Kabul

The photos of the British soldiers are interspersed with those of **Afghan National Army Trainee Officers**. **Stuart Allen**, Principal Curator of Scottish Late Modern Collections at NMS, commented that these images 'invite reflection not just on the recent British experience but also on the future for Afghanistan'. It is a future that these young men hold in their hands.



Surveillance Pod, Kandahar
Airfield



Alongside these thoughtful and engaging images, Wilson has also found time for fun: front-on, a surveillance pod looks more like a puzzled pelican, whilst a kaleidoscopic wheel hub becomes an eyeball, or maybe a roulette table.



Atlas Air, Camp Bastion

Someone has arranged a face in a stack of distorted scrap metal; in **Atlas Air, Camp Bastion**, the open hold of a plane is a gaping mouth, waiting to gobble up containers being fed into it by a huge, metallic daddy long legs. Camp Bastion contained vast amounts of equipment and machinery, plus all the usual detritus of everyday life; now, in containers of junk waiting to be shipped out, we see discarded cross-trainers, fridges, fans and plug adaptors. There is stuff farther than the eye can see. It's like Steptoe of Arabia.



Helmand Return is created by **Robert Wilson**, curated by

Catherine Collins and **Rhiannon Adam**, and loaned by **Gallery One and a Half**. It is at the **National War Museum, Edinburgh Castle** until March 2016: admission is free with entry to the Castle.



National War Museum,
Edinburgh Castle