Review of International Studies (2009), 35, 871–882 Copyright © British International Studies Association
doi:10.1017/S026021050999043X

Three images by Suzanne Opton



Figure 1. *Solder: Pry, 210 Days in Afghanistan.*

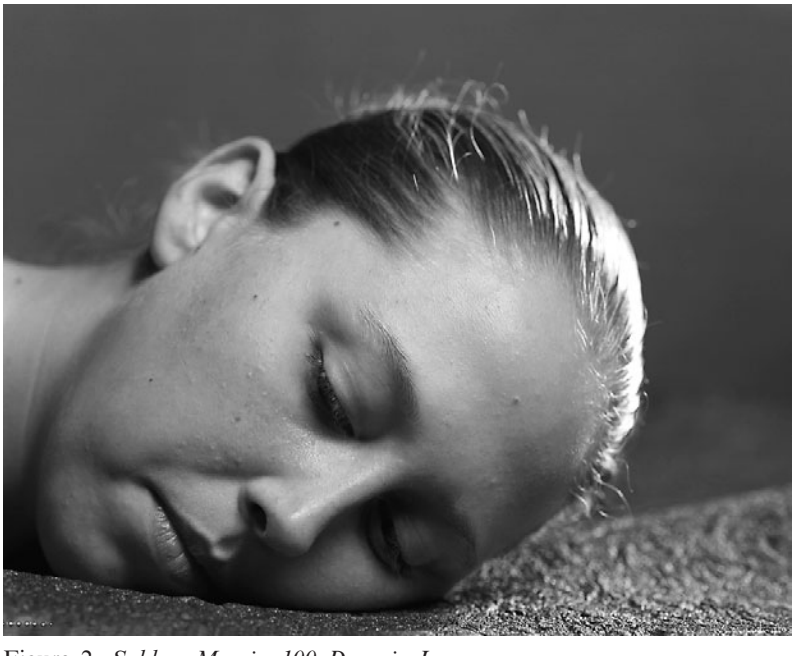


Figure 2. *Solder: Morris, 100 Days in Iraq.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990283 Published online by Cambridge University Press

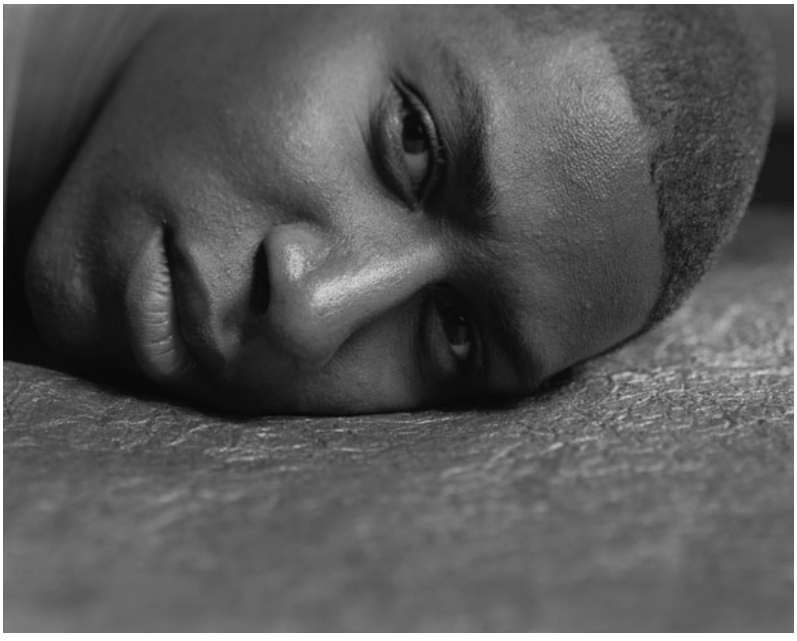


Figure 3. *Soldier: Jefferson, Length of service unknown.*

As a source for all of the images under discussion, please visit: {www.suzanneopton.com} soldier + citizen series, chapter I.

doi:10.1017/S026021050999026X

Images of war

TIM CROSS

The usual images of war, and of the soldiers who fight in them, are of confused battle scenes. Men and women in combat clothing – 'battle fatigues' – with faces covered in camouflage cream and sweat, carrying the weapons of war and portraying a hardness of heart and a gung-ho attitude.

Wearing body armour they are protected in close combat from the direct and indirect fire of the enemy; and when that fails the images switch to limbless and blooded victims surrounded by medics whose job it is to keep them alive as they wait for the helicopters to sweep in and carry them away to the field hospitals – and then home to 'Blighty'. Images of glory – parades, medals and speeches for our heroes.

But, behind the steel helmets and the hardened masks of courage lie individual hearts and minds struggling to come to terms with all that they have seen and heard; all that they have experienced. As I look into these images I see many questions and few answers. If I didn't know they were soldiers I would struggle to place them – indeed a first reaction might well be that they are actually dead, not alive; maybe university students caught up in the latest shooting. But their

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close-cropped hair perhaps gives them away, and there is life in at least some of the eyes.

Lying on the hard floor they seem vulnerable. Amongst them I see a mixture of naïve youth – wide eyed surprise – and hardened maturity. Some look intently and deeply into the camera; others avoid the lens, gazing into the distance with far off thoughts, lost in their own worlds. In most of them there is a mixture of grief and fear, hopelessness and anger. In some of the faces I sense an acknowledgement that they couldn't take any more.

Whilst one or two of the gazes are steely, most are dead-eyed. Stripped of their protection and their friends, these soldiers are now alone. Alone to face up to the events that they have been through and the world that they have returned to – a world that will have little or no comprehension of what they have experienced.

In Figure 3, I see suspicion and a resentment of all that has gone on; a somewhat scornful stare into the camera lens with eyes that have seen too much to be fooled by the speeches of the politicians and the trite words of those who sent them away. In Figure 2 there is introspection – a heaviness of heart. Sad and traumatised, the eyes looking down and refusing to engage with the camera as she reflects on memories of people and events perhaps best forgotten.

But both of these images stand in contrast to Figure 1. Here I sense a slight smile of satisfaction, of contentment. Deep in sleep, bone tired but a job worth doing has been well done. Glad to be home – maybe he has found something within himself that he hoped would be there but only the ultimate test of battle would confirm. There is contentment here; contentment not reflected in the other images.

Over the 36 years of my commissioned service I deployed on several operations; Northern Ireland in the 1970s, Cyprus in 1981 with the United Nations, three times in the Balkans in the mid-late 1990s, and Kuwait and Iraq in the 1990/91 and 2003. Operating as we now do in a fully professional Army, the vast majority of the people living in Western democracies have no personal links into the military; most seem to assume that soldiers are unthinking automatons, keen for a fight and uncaring of the consequences. The reality is far from that.

It has been said that the young men and women who end up in places like Iraq are a mixture of missionaries, mercenaries and misfits; and there is some truth in that. Words like honour, duty and integrity certainly mean far more to them than most, and for many the military is the one place where they find true friendship. As James Elroy Flecker's poem puts it: 'Go out as a pilgrim, and seek out danger . . . pit your very soul against the unknown and seek stimulation in the company of the brave.' Clothed in the outward equipment given them to wear in battle, they are trained to try to become what the image portrays; hard and tough. But take away the paraphernalia of war and you are often left with an individual trained to wear a mask; and too often not trained to cope when the mask slips or is stripped away.

Most of the soldiers I have commanded over the years are good people – some are the best I have ever come across. From patrolling the streets in counter insurgency operations, to fighting their way into places like Iraq, to dealing with the humanitarian fallout of what we now call 'Complex Emergencies', they have responded with humanity and humour to whatever has faced them. But they too ask the questions that others outside of the military ask. Questions like: 'Why?' or:

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'What is this all about?' or: 'How can people be so brutal to one another?' or: 'Where now?'

When they return home they are left with the memories of failure and violence, death and injury, as well as the successes and the moments where they have individually and collectively made a difference to the lives of those caught up in the maelstrom of war. For some – indeed many – the experiences build and enhance, bringing confidence and a sense of justice and righteousness. But for many others the memories become too much; and too often they are left to pick up the pieces alone.

How many of the young men and women shown in these images will find themselves locked in depression and loneliness – abandoned, along with many others, by the very nation that sent them off to war in the first place? We may never know; but it is a question worth asking – unnerving though it might be.

doi:10.1017/S0260210509990271

Portraits of war

NICK VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS

Suzanne Opton's 'Soldiers' consists of seventeen black and white and twelve large-scale colour portraits of serving US military personnel. Each soldier has recently returned from Iraq or Afghanistan and is on leave, awaiting redeployment, at the Fort Drum Military Base near the New York-Canada border. The photographs reproduced here are of Soldier Pry ('210 days in Afghanistan', 2005), Soldier Morris ('100 days in Iraq', 2005) and Soldier Jefferson (details unknown).

In an interview about the series, Opton talks about her difficulty accessing the soldiers at the base: 'They asked, "Is this a political project?" I said, "No, this is art"'.[1] Elsewhere, she writes: 'We all experience strategic moments when we feel most alive. These are the moments we will always remember, be they transcendent or horrific. After all, what are we if not our collection of memories? In making these portraits of soldiers, I simply wanted to look in the face of someone who'd seen something unforgettable'.[2] However, despite the apparent simplicity of her stated aims and the distinction she draws between art and politics, Opton's series inevitably raises many difficult ethical-political questions about war photography and subjectivity as well as post-9/11 US military adventurism.

According to Susan Sontag, war photography has typically focused on 'the ruin of faces [...]: the faces of horribly disfigured World War One veterans who survived the inferno of the trenches; the faces melted and thickened with scar tissue of survivors of the American atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the faces cleft by machete blows of Tutsi survivors of the genocidal rampage launched by the Hutus in Rwanda'.[3] If Opton's aim is to grapple with the transformative experiences of war then it is interesting that she should choose such

[1] K. Nagy and J. Stocke, 'The Human Face of War', *Wild River Review*, {http://www.wildriverreview.com/spotlight_humanfacesofwar.php} accessed on 14 February 2008.
[2] S. Opton, 'Soldier', {http://www.lightwork.org/exhibitions/past/opton.html} accessed on 14 February 2008.
[3] S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 74.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990283 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ordinary and visibly unscarred faces that could be almost anyone: 'the everyman soldier'.[4] Other than the men's cropped hair and some glimpses of Soldier Pry's standard-issue green US army t-shirt, there is little to suggest that these are serving members of the armed forces. Indeed, the absence of weapons, uniforms and other military regalia challenges conventional images of soldiers as portrayed in both the stiff formalism of official mug-shots and action heroism of field journalism.

On the one hand, this move could be criticised for sanitising warfare by rendering invisible the pain and suffering of those caught up in conflict in whatever capacity. On the other hand, by refusing rote ways of drawing attention to and provoking discussion about war, the affective impact of Opton's series is arguably more hard-hitting. Indeed, if Sontag's claim that the 'mounting level of acceptable violence and sadism in mass culture' has led to a desensitisation of war imagery among populations is correct, then perhaps the power of Opton's work lies in its deliberately understated and thought-provoking approach.[5]

Although Opton wants 'the public to see the impact of war on a young person's face', 'Soldiers' nevertheless refuses a single narrative or coherent message: the expressions of her subjects do not clearly convey a particular story either individually or collectively.[6] Rather, we are left questioning: What have they seen? How have they been affected? Is Soldier Morris staring down because she is ashamed, remorseful or simply bored? Are Soldier Pry's eyes closed because he is at peace or playing dead? Does Soldier Jefferson's gaze reflect vengefulness or sadness or both? Moreover, the unusual horizontal positioning of each head extends and further complicates the range of possible interpretations: 'From this vantage point', Opton comments, 'the head becomes a single object. I meant the head to be isolated and vulnerable, and for the soldiers to forget that a camera was trained on them'.[7] Here the reference to vulnerability is potentially helpful: the pictures achieve a sense of nudity and expose faces otherwise concealed beneath head-gear. We share an unusual degree of intimacy with these soldiers because from this angle, one that is reminiscent of lying in bed next to someone, their guard is down.

Yet, at the same time, what makes this perspective also somewhat disturbing is the implicit reference to injury and even death: literally the portrayal of a 'fallen soldier' in the case of Pry whose complexion and expression is corpse-like. Again, an array of diverse, even contradictory, readings can be identified: Is this simply a sentimental and patriotic 'remember our boys (and girls)' campaign? Or, alternatively, could it act as a reminder of our own proximity to and complicity in the sanctioning of warfare? Whilst it is ultimately unclear what specific response 'Soldiers' seeks to mobilise, it is a series that nevertheless demands us to stop and examine our own consciences about the consequences of war on individuals' lives. In this way the photographs are confrontational and, despite Opton's commentary, profoundly politicising: her exposure of the vulnerable faces of soldiers lays bare the human foundations and consequences of conflict. Our own responses elicited by these faces become the centre of attention and it is at this point that the distinction between art and politics breaks down.

[4] Nagey and Stocke, 'The Human Faces of War'.
[5] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 90.
[6] Nagey and Stocke, 'The Human Faces of War'.
[7] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990283 Published online by Cambridge University Press

doi:10.1017/S0260210509990283

Public/private, connected/disconnected

CYNTHIA WEBER

Chapter I of Suzanne Opton's photographic series 'Soldier' is at first glance an arresting commentary on the effects of military service in Iraq on individual US soldiers. Shot in varying degrees of close-up, the series is composed of nine individual head and neck shots photographed in color, evoking traditional portraiture. Or, at least these images might evoke traditional portraiture if each were turned ninety degrees counterclockwise. For each head appears sideways in the frame, lying on a piece of parchment paper and at a slightly different height to the other heads in the series. The shots are predominantly lit from the top, so that the top half of each soldier's head is illuminated while the bottom half is more in shadow. The background is completely dark. Each shot is captioned with the word 'Soldier:', followed by the soldier's surname.

There is nothing about these photographs that resembles the images of soldiers viewers regularly consume as portraits – uniformed, upright bodies, standing at attention in front of a flag, and looking directly into the camera. Laid side by side in a sequence, Opton's photographs might be the heads of fallen soldiers littering a battlefield or on gurneys in a veterans' hospital, but only because we know these photographs are of 'soldiers'. Read without their captions, the images in Chapter I of Opton's project might as easily be photographs of any individuals. For neither flags or uniforms are found in any of these frames. All that might suggest some of these individuals are soldiers are the occasionally closely cropped haircuts and 1000 yard stares emblematic of modern military photography.

Opton's aesthetic set-up in Chapter I takes viewers back and forth across a series of paired terms, just as the viewer's eyes move back and forth across the two differently lit sides of each soldier's face. These dichotomies include safety/danger, passive/active, dead/deadening, and bodily/disembodied. The viewer cannot rest either their eyes or their minds on either side because both sides are so strongly represented at the same time. So viewers are left to wonder if each soldier is trustingly resting their weary heads after a hard tour of duty on a parchment pillow (safety) or if each soldier is sticking their neck out onto a chopping block, with the parchment evoking the idea of the sacrificial lamb (danger). What are viewers to make of stationary heads (passive) with eyes that actively return or refuse to return the gaze of the camera (active)? Are these images meant to conjure up the censored photographs of dead bodies of US soldiers returned from Iraq (the dead) or do they offer a glimpse of how war deadens the living not only because of the horrors of war but also because of the estrangement soldiers experience upon their return 'home' (remember, these photographs were taken of US soldiers returned from Iraq)? As portraits, these photographs re-present (a part of) the body, but they also very much beg the question, 'Where are these soldier's bodies, and what might they be doing?' For as Opton shoots them, what is unseen in these portraits is every bit as interesting as what is seen.

This last question is suggested in another chapter in Opton's Soldier series.[1] In Chapter III, soldiers are not pictured individually. Instead, soldiers' heads are

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cradled and supported by someone else's hands, those of loved ones or other soldiers. The effect of the work in this chapter is to suggest another pairing of terms – individual/collective – that are again conflated. For each individual returned soldier seems to require either propping up or soothing by a collective body, presumably the family or the corps. What remains unrepresented here, though, is any wider collective beyond these now intimate, private spheres. What is missing, in other words, is some US public sphere.

This private/public divide is again echoed by how the photographs are lit, with one side of the soldier's face their private face and the other their public face. While what is private is usually what is in shadow and more difficult to access, Opton's photographs seem to reverse this. For what they illuminate is the private pain of individual soldiers. As Opton puts it, 'I wanted to see beyond the uniform and make vulnerable portraits of individual soldiers'.[2] What is less illuminated, then, is the public face of these soldiers and what these soldiers officially represent – some collective US body politic. This is what these symbolically 'cut off' soldiers' heads seem to be violently cut off from.

Playing with these ideas of the public/private and the connected/disconnected, the Light Work gallery in Syracuse, New York, which first exhibited Opton's Soldier series placed these images not just in their gallery but in the wider community. Billboards and banners of Opton's soldiers could be found in car parks, on street corners, etc. The effect of placing these images in public spaces was not just to connect the pain and suffering of the disconnected soldierly body back to a wider (albeit local) US body politic. The effect was also to provoke a wider meditation on how some US body politic engages (and disengages) with the war on terror, specifically through its engagement (or lack of engagement) with corporality, the corps, military men and women. The overall effect for this viewer at least is to transform Opton's individual portraits of individual US soldiers into a commentary on the warring US state, specifically about how the realities of war come 'home' to 'rest'. This is a very powerful 'portrait' to draw of the US at this particularly moment in history.

If I have one criticism of Opton's series it is how she has either directed or at least selected some images in which the gazes of her subjects conjure up well-worn stereotypes of race and gender. Jefferson, the black male soldier ever so slightly aggressively looks directly into the camera in line with racial stereotypes. Morris, the white female soldier, averts her eyes downward in line with feminine stereotypes. And Pry, the white male soldier shown in this special issue, closes his eyes which may allow him to serve as the white universal icon of the returned soldier peacefully at rest (one way or another, despite some viewer's concerns about his continued vulnerability). Whether Opton chose these particularly images to reproduce or to question these stereotypes, I do not know. Maybe it was just to make the images that much more accessible to a general US public.

This criticism notwithstanding, I commend Opton for what is by far one of the most powerful reinventions of the war photography genre at a time when war itself is again so brutally being reinvented. Her work is a testimony to the political power of aesthetics to make us take notice of what can be so very difficult to look

[1] See www.suzanneopton.com, accessed on 20 February 2008.
[2] {http://www.lightwork.org/news/pr/opton2006.html} accessed on 20 February 2008.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990283 Published online by Cambridge University Press

at – the pain and suffering we inflict on both ourselves (a general US public at home) and on others (US soldiers sent abroad to fight for us but also Iraqi citizens caught up in this fighting; see Opton's photographic series 'Citizen' about displaced Iraqi citizens).[3]

doi:10.1017/S0260210509990295

On 'Soldier' by Suzanne Opton

ANGUS BOULTON

The three series of portrait photographs by Suzanne Opton, economically entitled 'Soldier', are presented in chapters, each distinct from the others, though linked by a common thread. These are quiet studio images by a portrait photographer who, reading reports of reintegration problems encountered amongst some of the troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, responded by making a project well away from the battlefield. Opton realised she knew no one directly involved in the ongoing campaign in the Gulf, and has stated in interviews that she simply wanted to 'look into the face of someone who'd seen something unforgettable'. The realisation of this body of work followed a prolonged period of research, one in which Opton encountered continual unwillingness by the military to give access to their personnel. Following a fortuitous phone call to her local base at Fort Drum, permission was eventually granted. Perhaps understandably, these images were made at the beginning of the war, under the guise of an art project, before the ongoing campaign began to evidently deteriorate.

I am interested in these images because they are so unlike my own, focusing on the human form rather than the landscape to illuminate the relationship between war and damage. What, then, is the connection between the way portraits and landscapes convey damage, trauma, ruin and decay? While damage to the landscape is recognisable – be it shattered trees, a bomb crater, a bullet ridden building – damage to individuals is harder to detect. What makes Opton's portraits compelling is their ambiguity: is she suggesting that these soldiers are merely resting? Or inferring that they are actually damaged – mentally, emotionally and physically?

In these images, soldiers Jefferson, Morris and Pry all appear bathed in soft light, clearly defined in colour by a large format camera, their heads resting on a table; simple almost subtle images. An initial impression of their head position, unusual within portraiture, suggests these images might have been taken prior to sleep. It is the disarming nature of the faces in Chapter I that sets them apart within a series that also documents soldiers in uniform and soldiers embraced by loved ones. Jefferson looks peacefully at the lens, apparently at ease with his surroundings, Morris's eyelids droop, her gaze down at the table, while Pry has his eyes closed, lying at peace. Little evidence of their profession is betrayed within each photo, the occasional hint of a khaki t-shirt perhaps, the close-cropped haircut, and then one reads the title and caption associated with each image, which

[3] See {www.suzanneopton.com} accessed on 20 February 2008.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990283 Published online by Cambridge University Press

simply states their name and length of time served in Iraq or Afghanistan. With this textual information, a secondary reading of the different facial expressions implies another perspective, a reassessment of their thoughts. Finding that they have been asked to adopt such an unnatural pose for a portrait, having submitted to a slow picture making process made with cumbersome apparatus, might give the individuals pause for reflection. Such reflection also extends to the viewer: we are encouraged to ask ourselves, 'what could they be thinking?' Are they recalling the recent past, perhaps lying in a similar position under fire? Having been asked to adopt this pose in more peaceful surroundings, did it remind them of the recent past? Did it reaffirm their survival? These images and their context inevitably ask the viewer a larger question as well: 'is it possible to read past experiences – especially difficult, traumatic or uncomfortable experiences – from a portrait?'.

Opton wisely chooses not to offer a direct answer to this question. Instead, she merely presents us with images of fresh-faced young recruits, recently returned from a dangerous war zone and, through inference, asks us simply to look and decide for ourselves. The problem, of course, is that while capturing a face *does* tell us a story, it is never the whole narrative, nor is it necessarily a coherent narrative. What, then, are we to make of the title captions? To what extent are they meant to shape and direct our interpretations?

Whether we know it or not, our interpretations are not just guided by title captions – they are also guided by the tradition of portraiture itself. Portraits play a part in our lives from an early age, from the school photo right through to weddings, holidays and family reunions. However, frequently they are made in happier times. Opton explains that one mother asked for a copy of her son's portrait, specifically because all she possessed were photos from high points in her son's life. She knew he had suffered a great deal in Iraq, and she wanted a record of that time to make her family archive somehow complete.[1] Yet again we confront the desire for pictures telling us the whole story.

While a mother's feelings about a portrait of her son are one thing, Opton's images also raise the question of how we view portraits of unfamiliar subjects: do we really look as closely or as patiently at a subject we do not immediately recognise? As artist and writer Jermy Millar has written, 'cynically, we might say that "identity" is to portraiture as "place" is to landscape'.[2] With this in mind, would the portraits of crying men, made by artist Sam Taylor-Wood, have received the same reception were the subjects not well known actors or celebrities.[3] For me, Taylor-Wood's project commented more on the pervasive nature of celebrity culture rather than notions of masculinity or the tradition of portraiture. Here, Opton has attempted to do the opposite of Taylor-Wood: she has chosen to raise the profile of the unknown soldier. She has taken a representative selection of the overlooked younger generation, sent to fight a war that is becoming less popular the longer it continues, and imbued them with a presence, even a degree of dignity.

Thinking about the figure of the unknown soldier, these images put one in mind of previous soldier portraits made during an earlier period when photographers were permitted greater access to the battlefield. A notable example would be the

[1] Suzanne Opton, 'Soldier' (Studio 360 Radio Interview, New York, 23 February 2007).
[2] Jeremy Millar, 'The First of all Things – A Very Short Introduction to the History of Place', in Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar (eds), *Place (Artworks)* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), pp. 11–26.
[3] Sam Taylor-Wood, 'Crying Men' (Matthew Marks Gallery/ White Cube/ Steidel: 2004).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990283 Published online by Cambridge University Press

portrait 'Shell shocked soldier, Hue, 1968' taken by Don McCullin during the Vietnam War.[4] Occasionally the extended caption appears, which informs us that the subject sits awaiting withdrawal from the frontline following the assault on Hue. Without this anchor, it is possible to read the slightly upward looking gaze of McCullin's soldier differently: is he attending a religious service, looking on as the company Chaplain blesses troops before an impending assault? With the caption in place, the soldier is immediately identified as a casualty of war: we are drawn to questions of post traumatic stress disorder and the lamentable '*thousand yard stare*' – empty eyes focussed nowhere in particular, always in the middle distance, possibly raking over vivid nightmares from the recent past. What makes McCullin's portrait so compelling is that it forces the viewer to confront not only the consequences of war, but the possibility that war has no redemption.

Those kind of soldier portraits were easier to capture, of course, before photographers were corralled into pools or 'embedded' alongside military minders. Opton's 'Soldier' is one inventive example of how an artist has responded to military censorship by producing a challenging group of images that exist in conversation with an earlier less-censored tradition of soldier photography. Created at a time when imagery from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are frequently negative or portray an absence of humanity (for example, the Abu Graib images), this intriguing series perhaps offers us an insight into how soldiers live with their war experiences once they return home.

doi:10.1017/S0260210509990301

Soldier, I wish you well

CHRIS BROWN

'Soldier, I wish you well'

The street sounds to the soldiers' tread,
And out we troop to see:
A single redcoat turns his head,
He turns and looks at me.

My man, from sky to sky's so far,
We never crossed before;
Such leagues apart the world's ends are,
We're like to meet no more;

What thoughts at heart have you and I
We cannot stop to tell;
But dead or living, drunk or dry,
Soldier, I wish you well.

A.E. Housman *A Shropshire Lad* no. 22 1896

[4] Don McCullin, *The Destruction Business* (London: Open Gate Books, 1973).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990283 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The faces that gaze out at one from Suzanne Opton's photographs are strangely compelling, but it is difficult to put in words why they have the effect they undoubtedly do, at least on this observer. My inability to articulate a response may be partly because, in so far as I have a strong aesthetic sense, it is focused on literature and music rather than the visual arts, and so it is fortunate for me that these remarkable photographs immediately brought to mind the poem quoted above – and this alternative reference point is not simply literary but also musical; Housman's cycle, once amongst the most popular of poems, is now best known through settings by early 20th century English composers, most particularly the doomed George Butterworth, killed by a sniper on the Somme in August 1916.[1] The contrast between the way Housman and Opton express what are, on the face of it, similar thoughts is, to my mind, fascinating.

Housman provides some, but by no means all, of the context necessary to read the poem. It is clear that the person who makes fleeting contact with the narrator is a soldier, a redcoat, indeed the observer is drawn to the scene in the first place by the soldiers' tread – but what may not be clear to a twenty-first century reader is that there is something slightly threatening about the scene Housman is describing. Britain's army in the 19th century was small and professional, with the ordinary soldiery drawn from the ill-educated, not to say brutish, rural poor. It was mostly based abroad in the Empire, and the relatively small numbers of soldiers based at home were largely on ceremonial duties or used for riot-control. Soldiers marching through the streets of industrial or mining towns were not infrequently stoned by the crowd; in Housman's small market towns the situation would have been somewhat less fraught, but soldiers in the street were rarely welcome. The Shropshire lad who is both the object and subject of these poems has a fascination with premature death, his own and that of his friends and lovers. Possibly, as a result, the military feature far more prominently in the cycle than might have been expected in what was still an overwhelmingly civilian society – still there is no natural affinity to be expected between the narrator (much less his classicist creator) and the redcoat who happens to turn his head at the right moment. This is a fleeting encounter with no chance of any meeting of minds, which gives a particular purity to the benevolence expressed in the final line of the poem. Eye contact alone produces this sentiment, but a simple expression of well-wishing without this very brief encounter would have a different, and lesser force. I can imagine the local squire or magnate toasting the troops as the upholders of the natural order of things, and although the sentiment would be quite genuine, it would have none of the emotional force of the simple statement, 'Soldier [not soldiers, for this is an individual], I wish you well'.

Suzanne Opton, unlike Housman, interprets her pictures – but then she has to, because the pictures on their own defy interpretation. I can see the head of a young

[1] Irritatingly, Butterworth did not actually set 'The street sounds to the soldiers tread', but Arthur Sommervell did. Although written in a less ironic age, Butterworth's setting of 'The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair', with its final couplet

> They carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man,
> The lads that will die in their glory and never be old.

can still be surprisingly evocative when sung with the right emotional force, as Simon Keenlyside proved at the Wigmore Hall on 9 January 2008, explicitly referring to our current wars.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990283 Published online by Cambridge University Press

person resting on a textured surface that might be a carpet, and I am told that this is the head of a soldier – the exhibition is, after all, called 'Soldiers' – but this is something I have to take on trust; for all I know they might be models; after all, a buzz cut does not a soldier make. Their names are provided, it is said that they have recently returned from Iraq or Afghanistan and that their faces '[hint] at the transformative experiences of war'; more, the blogger David Mixner tells us that 'you can see the war etched into their faces'.[2] Interestingly, the *National Public Radio* report on Opton's exhibition adds that 'in some of the portraits, nothing would indicate that they have served in the military, leaving the context to be read from their faces'.[3] This is interesting because it is patently false – there is no way you could read any kind of context from these faces, any more than you can see war etched on them, whatever that means. Changing the subject for a moment, these photographs pose some of the same problems as 'programme' music, music that is designed to evoke an extra-musical idea. Thus, for example, there is nothing in the *music* of Elgar's *Falstaff* (Op. 68) that could not just as easily be a portrait of my grandmother or the Director of the LSE, or for that matter not be a portrait at all. The point being that if we take seriously the programme suggested by the composer (and there is no reason why we should) we do so simply because we recognise his authority as *auteur*, not because of anything in the work of art itself that gives us any kind of context. Being suggestible by nature, we hear music we are told is cheerful as cheerful, but if we had been told differently we would hear it differently.

This is very much to the point when we look at Opton's photographs. What we (or at least I) actually see is a set of human faces. Although I suspect that, according to her aesthetic, I ought not to allow her the privileges of an *auteur*, I'll take Opton's word for it that they are soldiers who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan, and not artists' models whose expressions convey the boredom associated with their trade rather than the thousand-yard stare of the combat veteran. It really does not matter. These are people we have not met before and 'we are like to meet no more'; we do not know what is in their hearts and they do not know what is in ours – but, for some reason that it is still difficult to put into words, we can, and I do, wish them well.

[2] *Light Work* Press Release {http://www.lightwork.org/exhibitions/past/opton.html} DavidMixner.com {http://www.lightwork.org/exhibitions/past/opton.html}.
[3] {http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7403169}.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990283 Published online by Cambridge University Press