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# David Cotterrell's Monsters of the Id

By Sarah Thompson - 15/03/2012



Image: Searchlight 2 by David Cotterrell

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war artist

This show is curated jointly by Helen Sloan of SCAN and the John Hansard Gallery, Southampton. There is both curatorial interest in the technological aspects of the work as well as the subject matter of the war artist. Sloan was approached by the Arts Council in terms of initiating a project for the 'Interact' series of commissions, on which she worked with David Cotterrell. In 2007, Cotterrell went to Afghanistan as artist-in-residence for a month in a field hospital. At his residency in 2008, at SEOS (now Rockwell Collins), a company that makes flight simulators. He explored the nature of representation itself, and particularly 'the suspension of disbelief'. This relates to our relationship with digital data, and how often we regard it as more real, due to its nominal representation of reality and our use of this as information.

What appear to be 'A-life critters', are in fact scaled down human forms. Trawling across a dust-sculpted landscape, the real of the chalk dust intersects with the virtual projections of the A-life program which is mapping the movement of these forms to the reality of the sculpted landscape.

David Cotterrell doesn't want to show pictures of the atrocities of war, but instead focuses on the complex experience of lived space in territorial combat and its mapping. He presents a kind of 'topo-analysis' of an imaginary space, with nominal figures located and moving in spatial relationship to one another. In *Observer Effect* the gallery viewer triggers the movement of the virtual entities who are attracted by a 'sphere of influence' to the viewers position in the gallery space. In this way, the phenomenon of space, location and relationship and the concomitant fear of combat, casualty, and mortality are implicit in the context of this exhibition.

Cotterrell has chosen to interrogate image making using technology, much as Vilém Flusser recommended, together with a lack of acceptance of the 'normal' indexical uses of photography and film about which he is ambivalent, although he used these media in Afghanistan.



Image: Observer Effect by David Cotterrell (all images courtesy of the artist)

What these works achieve is the proposition of a 'possible world' where depersonalisation is understood as part of the virtual, nominal, mapped collective fantasy, which somehow then relates to the changing 'world view' of the Western citizen. It is also where the reference to science fiction comes from, 'Monsters of the Id' referring to the film *Forbidden Planet*. Science fiction is perhaps referred to in order to re-conceptualise our thinking as part of this Western view. In this sense it is about empowering us to think differently about the portrayal of conflict itself in the twenty-first century and to understand it as lived experience within specifically managed environments.

This is largely achieved through Cotterrell's translation of his own experience as war artist in Afghanistan. He seems to want his experience to affect the viewer in a way which is different from that which he witnessed, to a reliance on the imagination instead, provoked by the portrayal of the landscape and militarised environment. Instead the exploration is one of attempting to convey the sense of isolation he felt in the military field hospital.

What becomes apparent on seeing this work, is that we are being presented with data objects, which we are then encouraged to relate to, as though they are the nominal representation of real subjects. It is significant that the work is realised with new technology. All three main works in the show explore a similar landscape but use three different projection systems. In *Observer Effect* the system relates to interaction with the gallery visitor who influences the installation in spatial relativity, through a device that senses and then calculates, through the algorithms and maths of a game engine, their relationship to the virtual space. Alternatively, in *Searchlight 2*, there is a synthesis between real and virtual as the figures traverse the landscape. He has said in relation to this piece that 'from a great distance we lose empathy with the figures crossing the landscape'. In *Apparent Horizon*, the viewer encounters a semi-immersive relationship with video projected onto specially designed hemi-spheres, a view of the horizon, and a lengthy period of waiting for something to happen, which captures the tension between periods of violence. In this sense the artist has worked both as a war artist and as an artist using and developing the application of new technologies.

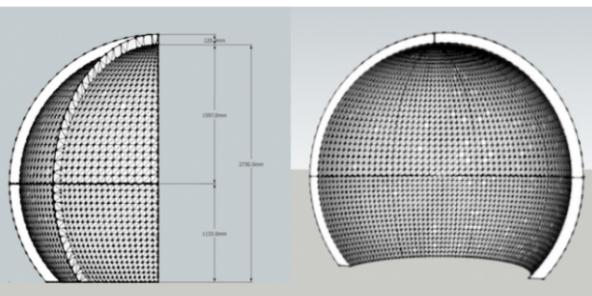


Image: Apparent Horizon Diagram

He talked about computer programming having a tendency towards 'megalomaniac control', and that the installation was addressed towards 'how an audience inhabits a gallery', with no 'fetishizing of computers'. The residency at SEOS has obviously affected the nature of the technology employed in the work, with two 'black boxes' enabling aspects of the projections, as well as the hemi-spheres as immersive hardware. The system of *Observer Effect* is adaptive and therefore responds to the accumulated impact of viewers in the gallery. He talked about how a commercial games company would find it easy to make, but for him it had been a steep learning curve.

Cotterrell was able to return to Afghanistan in early 2008, due to support from the RSA, and was therefore able to look at the territory of the desert 'outside the bubble of the military', which had given him a limited understanding of the environment, a sense of dislocation, and the apprehension of casualties brought from the desert war zone. On this occasion he grew a beard and was able to disguise himself sufficiently so that he could interact with different groups of Afghani people and to gain a 'pluralism of experience', as on this occasion he was not part of the chain of command. In this second journey, he was 'low value' and therefore able to wander more freely.

Initially, he found it difficult to deliver art work in response to what he had experienced in Afghanistan. He was aware of the historical dilemma of the conflict between medicine and war. But for him, the trauma was 'quieter' and involved loss of identity. For example, the twenty-one year old soldier who after severe injury was ambigous about what would happen for the rest of his life.

He found the operating theatre at the field hospital was 'like a stage set', and he took photographs of the surgeons, but found that the documentation 'didn't document' sufficiently his lived experience. At one point he left a video camera running, documenting the arrival of casualties and then, when he was back at home, he edited the footage and left only the moments when attendant individuals 'allowed their guard to drop'. He questioned though, whether 'it was right to document trauma'. This left him with the 'impossibility of conveying content'.

As war artist he has chosen to explore the military and political relationships with the technological portrayal of soldiers and civilians within a territorial combat zone. This is sufficient for Cotterrell in order to convey the sense of isolation and the particular landscape of Afghanistan. In this way, apprehending the virtual or nominal as a way of perceiving what could be real, and is real in a conflict situation, puts the viewer in a complex position, of both suspending disbelief and recognising the construct. The final work *Monsters of the Id*, includes in a small installation an army tent, desk and military communications equipment. This conjures up an image of Cotterrell's experience as a war artist, although in fact it is his portrayal of how we might think of it - as naive in other words.

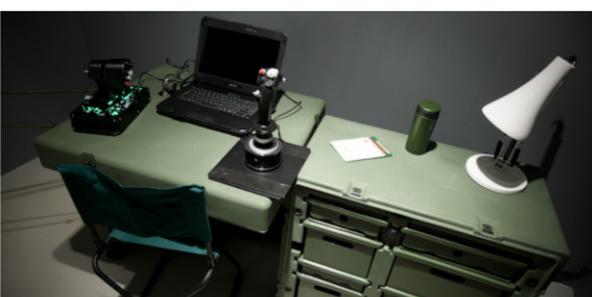


Image: Monsters of the Id by David Cotterrell

For the team of curators, gallery staff, and the artist, it has been curatorially important to work within the gallery space and Cotterrell claims that the 'virtual can only really be understood in a gallery context.' This is enabled through the works being not fully immersive so that you can stand back and reflect. As such the show is all about 'the manipulation of imagery' informed by the residencies in Afghanistan and at SEOS.

The exhibition continues till 31 March 2012 at the John Hansard Gallery, Southampton

www.davidcotterrell.com  
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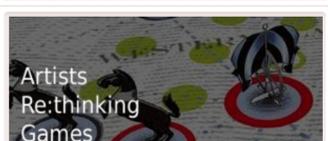
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