An aerial, black and white photograph of a city. A large, circular structure, possibly a stadium or arena, dominates the left and center of the frame. The structure has a grid-like pattern of seating or walkways. To the right of the circular structure, there is a large, dark, irregularly shaped area that appears to be a shadow or a different type of terrain. The rest of the city is visible as a dense network of streets and buildings.

AN EXHIBITION ON THE EVERYDAY OF WAR

TRACES OF WAR  
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Jaranne Al-Ani | Baptist Coelho | Shaun Gladwell

Curated and Edited by  
Cécile Bourne-Farrell and Vivienne Jabri

**Traces of War,**  
*An Exhibition, 2016*

Artists:

Jananne Al-Ani  
Baptist Coelho  
Shaun Gladwell

Curators:

Cécile Bourne-Farrell and Vivienne Jabri

Inigo Rooms, Somerset House East,  
King's College London

26th October - 18th December 2016.

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Published by the Department of War Studies,  
King's College London, Strand, London WC2R 2LS

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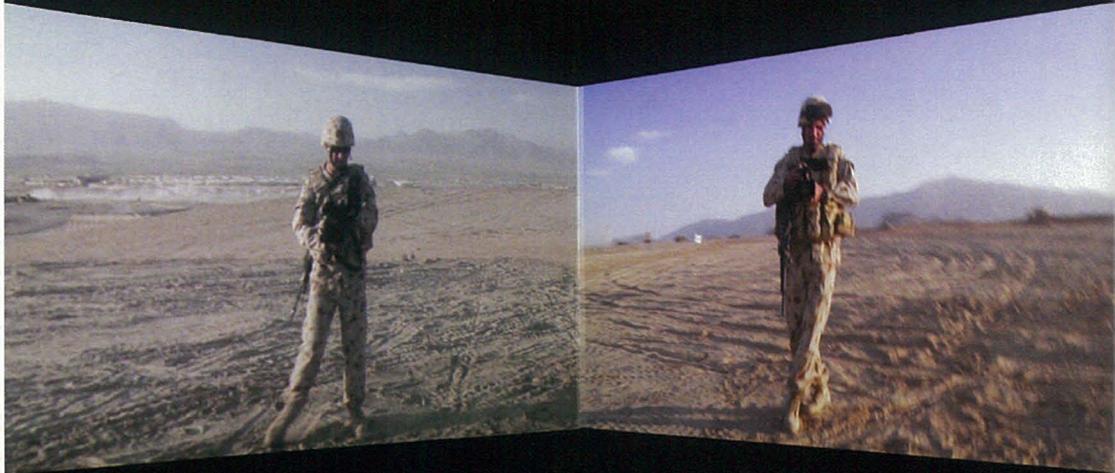
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

*ISBN: 978-1-5272-0471-3 (print and ebook)*

Typeset in Calibri by  
The Department of War Studies, King's College London  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Berforts South West, Hastings



Shaun Gladwell



◀ ▲ *Double Field / Viewfinder* (Tarin Kowt), (Exhibition view & Two-channel HD video still)



▲ BPOV MEAO: *Behind Point of View, Middle East Area of Operations*, (Digital colour photographs)



▲ AR 15 Field Strip, (360 degree video still)



▲ *Mark Gladwell Vietnam 1967/Shaun Gladwell Afghanistan 2009,*  
(Black and white and colour original prints & exhibition view)

## Who are you, and what are you doing here?: Intersubjectivity and the Phantom Subjective Image in Shaun Gladwell's war art works

*Kit Messham-Muir*

Shaun Gladwell was appointed an Official War Artist in 2009 and was commissioned by the Australian War Memorial (AWM) to create a body of works around the experiences of Australian troops deployed at the time in Afghanistan and the Middle East. He spent a month living and working amongst Australian Defence Force troops in Kabul, Kandahar and Tarin Kowt, Afghanistan and a staging base in Kuwait for Coalition troops entering Iraq. As a civilian, Gladwell quickly realised the subjective gap between himself and those whose experiences he was sent to address. However, in his interactions with the troops he noticed that, "every soldier, or more often than not, would have some sort of digital recording equipment. I would be talking to people about my camera and they would whip theirs out".<sup>1</sup> Gladwell's photographic equipment actually became the axis through which he built rapport with the troops, somewhat appropriately. Throughout the work that emerged from his commission, the camera became the locus for thinking about issues of intersubjectivity, particularly exploring the possibilities of creating meaningful empathic identification through still and moving images of war. In attempting to convey some sense of another's experience, Gladwell's war artist work explores different modes of points-of-view. Seven years after his time as an Official War Artist, Gladwell is still exploring the

possibilities for intersubjective engagement through shared visual points-of-view, which continues to be the irresolvable kernel at the centre of both new and existing works included in *Traces of War*.

In a new set of works, Gladwell juxtaposes his photographs from Afghanistan and Kuwait with the snapshots of and by his father, Mark Gladwell, deployed with the Australian Army in Vietnam in 1967. At first glance, these juxtapositions may seem as though Gladwell's images are a simple reflection, a mirroring across time, of his father's images. However, these pairings of images portray two very different ways of seeing war and its contexts: Mark Gladwell's images attempt to comprehend the everyday coexisting with the war, while Shaun Gladwell's images attempt to comprehend what he sees through the perspective of the military personnel whose experience he is sent to capture. Put another way, the initiated soldier frames certain scenes and selects specific moments, in many cases, to see the landscape without the war; the uninitiated war artist, an outsider, frames certain scenes and selects specific moments attempting to see the war amongst the landscape. Can Mark Gladwell fully comprehend the lives and experiences of the Vietnamese villagers he photographs? Can Shaun Gladwell fully comprehend the experiences of the soldiers he photographs? In both cases, neither Gladwell can make it all the way across the division, to see through the eyes of the other.

These images attempt to cross an intersubjective gap through aligning visually similar points-of-view from two distant points in both space and time. In terms of the narrative mode these images adopt, Gladwell's Afghanistan photographs create narratives that are (for the most part) heterodiegetic; that is, they adopt a point-of-view separate to the narrative pictured. Sure, Gladwell is there behind the viewfinder, as is his father in his Vietnam snapshots. However, Mark Gladwell's images are implicitly more homodiegetic, portraying a narrative in which his point-of-view is intrinsic, constitutive.

In the *Behind Point-of-View, Middle East Area of Operations series, 2009-10* (hereafter *BPOV MEAO*), two of which are included in the exhibition, Gladwell attempts an intersubjective behind point-of-view deliberately adopting what he describes as a Caspar David Friedrich model, 'where you're looking at someone looking'.<sup>2</sup> He refers specifically here to Friedrich's romanticist landscape painting, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog, 1818*, which depicts a middle class European gent standing upon an Alpine peak. We only see the back of the wanderer as he looks out over a sublime landscape of rocky peaks rising up from a misty valley. Unlike the pictorial traditions preceding

him, Friedrich's landscapes often included one or more seeing subjects over whose shoulders we see, such as in *Two Men on a Beach*, 1835-37, and *Evening Landscape with Two Men*, 1830-35. The wanderer he pictures above the sea of fog is thus as a proxy for the implied middle class European male audience of this painting in its time, effectively placing (a very specific) 'us' in the scene so as to make us aware of our presence. Without the wanderer, there is no implied seeing subjective position through which we, the audience, can enter the sublime experience of the scene. We effectively see through the wanderer's eyes. With the same intentions, Gladwell positions our view behind the military subject in these images, attempting an intersubjective entry into a point-of-view, trying to show us what the soldier sees as much as what they're simply looking at.

Gladwell takes a different approach in another two works from Afghanistan, *POV: Mirror Sequence* Tarin Kowt, 2009-10, (hereafter *Mirror Sequence*), and similar work, *Double Field/Viewfinder* (Tarin Kowt), 2009-10 (hereafter *Double Field*), which is included in *Traces of War*. *Mirror Sequence* is one of the earliest works to arise from his war art commission and was first exhibited at the AWM in Canberra in 2010, and runs for eighteen-and-a-half minutes. It is a two-channel video depicting synchronised points-of-view from two cameras – one held by Gladwell, the other held by an Australian soldier – shot on a hill just outside a Coalition military base at Tarin Kowt, Orūzgān province. The points-of-view are similar, but distinct differences in clothing set Gladwell apart from the soldier: Gladwell wears a khaki Official War Artist uniform, while the soldier wears camouflage battle fatigues, a helmet and an array of gear. Gladwell and the soldier record one another, so the audience see Gladwell from the soldier's point-of-view and the soldier from Gladwell's point-of-view. The two play a simple game as they circle each other, not looking up at the other directly, but instead keeping their 'opponent' in their camera's viewfinder, whilst trying to escape their opponent's view. As they strafe and stalk sideways, the military base slips past in the background, and we see a foreshortened landing strip, drone capture equipment, Bushmasters, distant hills and the golden hour sun low in the sky. The effect is a double feedback loop, or as AWM's Head of Art, Ryan Johnston, describes it, 'a representational *mise en abyme*' – the infinite feedback generated by facing two mirrors towards each other.<sup>3</sup> However, the points-of-view on the two opposing synchronised screens are asymmetrical in some important ways – it is noticeable that Gladwell moves differently from the soldier, and he is without a side arm, camouflage or helmet. Gladwell's stepping in the Afghanistan dust is hesitant compared to his opponent. Unarmed and in his War Artist uniform, he looks more like a civilian, like

one of us. Having never seen military service, I identify with Gladwell more readily than I do the soldier. The depiction of a point-of-view of the artist himself creates an autodiegetic approach not seen often in Gladwell's work since his early *Linework* videos, 2000, in which Gladwell experimented with aligning his lens with his own point-of-view, looking down at his feet as he rides a skateboard following lines on roads in Sydney. However, like some of Gladwell's *Stereo Sequence* works that followed in 2011, *Mirror Sequence* gives its audience an asymmetrical loop between the autodiegetic point-of-view of the artist and a homodiegetic depiction of the artist from the point-of-view of his subject.

*Double Field* is a very similar work to *Mirror Sequence*, created at the very same location in Tarin Kowt and replaying the same stalking game. The notable difference between *Mirror Sequence* and *Double Field* is that Gladwell's point-of-view and presence is replaced in the latter version by another Australian soldier. The work arose from Gladwell's desire, 'to hand the cameras over' and let the soldiers portray their own point-of-view.<sup>4</sup> The two soldiers wear near-identical uniform and equipment as the soldier in *Mirror Sequence*. Consequently, the image is more symmetrical, the soldiers look alike and, interestingly, they move alike, appearing almost choreographed in their shared gestural characteristics. Of course, these are individual subjects, but their visual resemblance and uniform mirrored gestures tends to efface their subjective individuality. Consequently, their points-of-view appear homodiegetic, but not autodiegetic, in turn reinforced by the absence of the artist (the implicit author of the work, if not the 'narrator' of the point-of-view) from the frame.

Together *Mirror Sequence* and *Double Field* demonstrate a catch 22 in Gladwell's approach. To depict the experience of the troops in Afghanistan, Gladwell must surrender his point-of-view. Yet, once relinquished, the loop becomes closed and the gaze becomes that of the military 'eye'. *Double Field's* attempt at intersubjective points-of-view is thus thwarted, as Gladwell himself says, 'it's an impossible empathy'.<sup>5</sup>

*AR 15 Field Strip*, 2016, is not in any straightforward sense one of Gladwell's war art works; yet it possesses certain resonances in its content and continues to push the experimentation with point-of-view that features in Gladwell's war artist work. A bearded and blindfolded man, kneeling as if in prayer on the concrete floor of a crowded suburban garage, field strips an AR15 assault rifle – the same type of automatic machine gun used in the 12 June 2016 Orlando night club massacre. During his task, his fingers run quickly along the contours of the rifle as he disassembles it, removing the long metallic components and laying them before him on the concrete

floor. His handling of the gun, blindfolded, suggest ritualistic action, a routine playing-out, rich with layers of familiarity. The work is ambiguous, but suggestive of a 'lone wolf' preparing his weapon of choice. The suggestions within the work's iconography are loose; however, in the context of *Traces of War*, the work could be understood as an extension of Gladwell's war art work, updated to address a molecularisation of representations of war and violence in very recent times, since the 2014 Lindt Café siege in Sydney, the 13 November 2015 attacks in Paris, or the 2016 Bastille Day attack in Nice.

However, *AR 15 Field Strip* possibly raises more questions around the subjectivity of its point-of-view as it does of the identity of its performer and the circumstances of the scene. Who are you? And what are you doing here? I'm reminded here of Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark*, 2002 – a film extraordinary for its continuous point-of-view perspective, shot in one single take, which meanders through the Winter Palace in St Petersburg. At the beginning of the film, we the audience enter the point-of-view at the exact moment the protagonist enters – against blackness, his first lines are 'How strange... where am I?' *Russian Ark*'s continuous first-person point-of-view is only sustainable for the film's 96-minute duration because the protagonist's subjectivity is completely effaced at the start, beginning from zero. As Murray Smith suggests, the point-of-view shot alone can only represent the phenomenology of a characters visual experience in 'glorious isolation',<sup>6</sup> cut loose of any subjective history and future, removed from any subjective temporality. Similarly, in *AR 15 Field Strip*, we enter the scene knowing nothing about the point-of-view we have entered. Yet, quite unlike *Russian Ark*, and any of the other works discussed here, *AR 15 Field Strip* is a Virtual Reality (VR) work, which problematises, or rather completely overturns, the traditional structures of cinematic point-of-view. Unlike two-dimensional photographic and video work, the audience is placed at a spatio-temporal point *within* the scene; fixed within its space and time in a very different way from a screen image. However, our presence is not simply inserted into the space and time of the scene in any way equivalent to 'being there'. Rather, we have an ocular presence that is not corporeal, which is powerfully reinforced if, while immersed in this VR work, we look down towards what should be the sight of our body and see *no body*. We occupy a very specific point in the space and time of the scene, yet we have no proxy through which we can enter a subjective point-of-view.

In narratological terms, *AR 15 Field Strip* could be seen to collapse the narrator and viewer into a single point in three-dimensional space. However, in removing

the suggestion of subjectivity from that point-of-view traditional narratology is problematised. While the visuality of the experience powerfully suggests presence within the space and time of the scene, an intense homodiegesis, the lack of one's own body within the scene creates a corporeal disjuncture that removes us from the scene. We are both present and absent, seeing yet unseen. The point-of-view is paradoxically both homodiegetic and heterodiegetic. It is a point-of-view without subjectivity, akin to what Harun Farocki terms a 'phantom-subjective image', borrowing from a 1920s cinematographic term, when a shot is 'taken from a position that a human cannot normally occupy'.<sup>7</sup> An example Farocki cites of a phantom-subjective image is the American 'smart bomb' videos that arose from the 1991 Gulf War, which show the point of view of guided missile cameras as they rapidly approach their targets. We find phantom-subjective images often in popular film and television – *Trainspotting* shows us the point-of-view of two suppositories Renton has just expelled from his bowels, *The Big Lebowski* shows us the point-of-view of the finger holes in a bowling ball, and the TV series *Breaking Bad* is littered with points-of-view from bags of money, guns, insides of bags, air vents, cisterns, a shovel and a stuffed toy. These points-of-view are *phantom*-subjective because they cannot possibly be occupied by a subject. It is in effect a point in space and time that sees but is empty, devoid of subjective agency.

Gladwell's works in *Traces of War* experiment with issues surrounding intersubjectivity and the still and moving image. We see in the juxtaposition of Mark and Shaun Gladwell's images from war zones an attempt at intersubjective alignment through visually similar points-of-view extending from two distantly positioned points in both space and time. We also see in the two-channel video *Double Field* Gladwell's attempt at intersubjective alignment through two points-of-view that are synchronic yet marginally displaced in space, which mutually visualise the position of the opposing point-of-view. Interestingly, *AR 15 Field Strip* transcends this paradigm, not by establishing a more perfect alignment of subjectivities through shared points-of-view, but rather radically problematizing the sense of subjectivity at its point-of-view. *AR 15 Field Strip* is only the second completed VR work by Gladwell, and begins to open up relatively uncharted territory surrounding issues of intersubjectivity, point-of-view and cinematic narratology. In the context of contemporary war, VR technology, the phantom-subjective images from drones and the portrayal of subjective experience more firmly materialise what James Der Derian anticipated in the merging of 'the production, representation and execution of war' within a totalising system of the 'military-industrial-media-entertainment network'.<sup>8</sup> There is much still to explore as

issues surrounding the image in contemporary war evolve into new media, becoming more complex, problematic and loaded with very real consequences.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Shaun Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, Hyde Park, London, 30 September 2010 (transcribed by Susan Cairns)

<sup>2</sup> Shaun Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, Paddington, Sydney, 26 April 2010 (transcribed by Susan Cairns)

<sup>3</sup> Ryan Johnston, *'Recalling History to Duty: 100 Years of Australian war art'*, *Artlink* 35:1, March 2016: 16

<sup>4</sup> Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, 26 April 2010

<sup>5</sup> Gladwell, interview with Kit Messham-Muir, 30 September 2010

<sup>6</sup> Murray Smith, *'Imagining from the Inside'*, In *Film Theory and Philosophy*, eds. Murray Smith and Richard Allen, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 418

<sup>7</sup> Harun Farocki, *'Phantom Images'*, *Public* 29 (2004): 13

<sup>8</sup> James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*, (Boulder: Westview, 2001) xx.

*Traces of War* is a new exhibition that brings together three internationally renowned artists, Jananne Al-Ani, Baptist Coelho, and Shaun Gladwell to explore the relationship between war and the everyday, locating it in spaces where it would be least expected.

Working primarily with photography, film and multi-media installations, all three artists have direct experience of conflict and war, from Iraq to India, Bangladesh to Afghanistan and then 'back home', where the traces of war are revealed again, as if there is no such thing as leaving war behind.

ISBN 978-1-5272-0471-3



Cover Image: Jananne Al-Ani, Production still from *Black Powder Peninsular*, 2016