Paul Emmanuel in France

Artist Paul Emmanuel writes of his impressions while undertaking an artist's residency in France.



People dancing to Salsa on the Rive Gauche or South Bank of Paris on weekends.



A window into the Douamont Ossuary, Verdun.

I was lucky enough to have been awarded the Institut Français' *Visas Pour la Creation* artist's residency based in Paris to conduct research for a public artwork I am planning to create. The work will be a continuation of *The Lost Men Project*, which commenced its journey at Grahamstown's National Arts Festival on the tenth anniversary of South Africa's democracy in 2004. This installation was also installed in the grounds of the Sylt Foundation situated on the island of Sylt, where I undertook a two month residency in 2009.

The Lost Men 2016 will be a new site-specific (and time-specific), temporary, outdoor memorial installation. This new ephemeral work will comprise of photographs of my body embossed with the names of fallen Allied and German soldiers who died fighting in France in World War One, and will include the names of the many black and white South African soldiers. I plan to install it somewhere on the battlefields of the Somme in France. The timing of this installation is intended to coincide with the centenary commemorations of the First World War that will take place between 2014 and 2019.

During my residency I often ventured out into the quiet French countryside to experience the landscape and walk on forest floors still scarred with the vestiges of trench warfare. There, one can still find live artillery ammunitions almost a hundred years old. The authorities spray these with luminous paint before they are collected, to warn passersby. Sometimes, one can find the bones of men.

It is the names of these men that I wish to cast in steel type and blind emboss onto my own body. These fleeting impressions on my skin will be photographed before the temporary bruising fades. The photographs will be printed onto large, delicate, semi-transparent silk organza sheets that will then be hung outdoors in a specific configuration in the landscape and left to the wind.

It is so difficult to imagine the devastation of the trenches of the Western Front of the First World War. As I walked in the landscapes in the region of Picardie, I was surrounded by rich farmland stretching to the horizon in every direction. Almost 100 years ago, the scene was very different and men from all over the world scurried in trenches of slippery mud infested with opportunistic rats. While visiting Fort De Vaux, constructed in the side of a hill close to the town of Verdun, I stumbled across one of the heavy iron shells that were fired deafeningly from the canons; with my slight frame I couldn't lift it. A hundred years ago these things screamed through the air and bombarded the earth continuously. It

must have seemed as if the sky was raining steel. All I could hear was the wind through the trees.

At the South African Delville Wood Memorial, there is a single surviving tree from the original forest that was witness to the devastation, named *Die Laaste Boom*. Around it and embedded in the folds of its gnarled trunk, pilgrims have placed flowers, crosses and other tokens commemorating the dead. It would seem that *The Last Tree* draws more devotion than the man-made edifices of remembrance close by.

On visiting a network of excavated limestone caves called *Le Caverne du Dragon* (The Dragon's Lair) on the mountain road known as *Chemin Des Dames*, thousands of black men from the French colonies joined their white colonisers and the Allies to fight against the Germans. For military registration purposes they were photographed from the front and the side.[1] They were all stripped of their nationality and simply referred



The Last Tree – a Hornbeam at The South African Delville Wood Memorial, the Somme.

to as 'Senegalese'.[2] On the one hand, German propaganda criticised the Allies for the illegitimate recruiting of people from Allied colonies. On the other, they framed these recruits as barbarians. They 'accused African and Indian soldiers of all sorts of atrocities, poking out eyes and cutting off ears or whole heads of captured or wounded German soldiers'.[3] Attempts were made to prove 'that using "savages" against "civilised people" was prohibited by international law'.[4]

Against this backdrop, the globally branded sophistication of the city of Paris to which I returned took on a slightly darker hue. While relishing the simple pleasure of sipping my glass of rouge seated *à la Parisienne* at the famous *Café de Flore* on Boulevard Saint Germaine, I watched the people walking by in the street and wondered if they ever contemplate the fragility of this urbane social fabric.

As I thought about these things in my studio at *The Cité,* I saw the tragedy of the Marikana massacre unfold online; and while I was reading Ken Follet's *Fall of Giants,* which brings together five fictional families through the world-shaking dramas of the First World War, I could not help but draw comparisons between the protest at Lonmin's platinum mines and Britain's coal-mining strikes of 1914, just before the outbreak of this war.

It drew me deeper into understanding the defining nature of this war and its importance as a turning point in human history; a war that was once referred to as 'the war to end all wars'.

While viewing footage of a global brand's 2012/13 men's formal wear fashion show, the militaristic nature of the suits and the steel, medal-like designs of the details, also struck me. Even contemporary men's corporate fashion is influenced by war. Perhaps this is a response to the economic uncertainties of our time – trying to reassure ourselves that we are in control and ready for battle.

Amid the sophisticated fashionistas and bustling tourists, are many homeless people in the city – even in the old and expensive *Quatrieme Arrondissement* district, where the *Cité des Arts* studio complex is located. One man I saw every day slept on a large metro air vent, which blew warm air from underground. Over this same air vent, wealthy tourist



The South African Delville Wood Memorial designed by Herbert Baker.

children played with their light inflatable plastic toys, making them float mysteriously in the rising air currents. Delighted moms and dads clicked away with their iPhones.

Walking across the bridges of the Seine, I saw two men kissing and hugging – openly and in public; and I'm not talking about light pecks on the lips. They were long, drawn out French Kisses. I was taken aback by my own sense of surprise. Right then, love between two men seemed so much less likely than war. On the *Passerelle des Arts* bridge I marveled at the thousands of metal padlocks– all relics bearing the inscribed initials of people in love.

I am about to inscribe the names of fallen soldiers onto my skin. With what passions did they love the country they died for? …

REFERENCES

1. Personal communication from Caverne du Dragon Museum, Chemin des Dames, Picardie, France.
2. Chemin des Dames: Le Memorial Virtuel website: http://www.memorial-chemindesdames.fr
3. Dendooven, D and Chielens, P. 2008. World War I: Five Continents in Flanders. p18. Tielt, Belgium: The Lannoo Publishing Group.
4. Ibid.