



DERRY CITY COUNCIL



Human Cost of War exhibition

Evaluation Event – Tower Museum

Saturday 15 January 2011

To mark this closing day of the Human Cost of War exhibition, Roberta Bacic, Guest Curator, invited a varied group of people to attend a final event in the Tower Museum. The idea was for people to exchange thoughts and experiences they had had from either visiting the exhibition or taking part in one of the workshops that had been run as part of the exhibition programme.

The first contributor was Deborah Stockdale who had facilitated three of the workshops and who spoke to the “Lost Children of War” one. This workshop had been small in numbers but very moving. It had led to discussions about the different situations people find themselves in during and because of conflict. People told their personal stories, speaking in four different languages.

Marlene Milner took part in the “Hearts and Flowers” workshop facilitated by Irene MacWilliam. She pointed out that hearts and flowers are usually seen as symbols of love and happiness. However, she said, not everything related to hearts and flowers are light and joyful. In some cases the heart can be fractured and torn from the centre. Marlene also brought the piece she had made and spoke directly about it.

Joanne Downes, who is a member of a woman’s group in Belfast, had visited the exhibition and taken part in the workshop “The Fabric of Conflict: the Conversation”, facilitated by Healing Through Remembering. She reflected that her first impression of the exhibition was that the international representations of war, violence and conflict were much stronger than the Irish pieces, which seemed a little sanitised in her opinion.

Joanne then spoke about the wheel that the group produced which showed their different experiences of war and conflict. She mentioned her own piece within the wheel which illustrated her own family experience. She had found the exhibition very powerful, emotional and therapeutic. For others it clearly opened up the floodgates of memories. One of the group likened the finished piece to a tombola which is spun around and no-one knows where it will stop -- a bit like fate.

Rob Fairmichael then spoke about the workshop he had facilitated, “Men's Insights into Women’s War Textiles”. It allowed the participants to say what the exhibition meant to them within the theme of The Human Cost of War. Five of the group responded with more than words, having made their response by playing an instrument, writing a song, creating a video, drawing a picture and presenting both a picture and a carving.

Cahal McLaughlin said he had thought about the issues in making a response. In doing so, he thought about the delicacy of the work on display and how the use of everyday items such as cloth can be turned into something entirely different. His response was to create a short film and linking it to a piece of music which he knew a fellow participant, Víctor Henríquez, was working on. He thought Victor's music would enhance his theme, which was to use a storm at sea to represent, impressionistically, the sea's chaotic violence and its recycling to calm when it met the land. Similarly, people try to heal themselves and return to calmness after the chaos of conflict. Roberta then drew a link between this idea in the film and the exhibition's "Da capo al Fine" piece by Mara Loytved-Hardegg.

Victor's contribution was a piece of music played on the charango and was inspired by how the workshop unlocked responses and emotions in him. He felt that the workshop brought out how men can feel isolated and how the expectations of their behaviour in war and conflict puts pressure on them. The music has a waltzing, cyclical feel to it.

The collaboration between Victor and Cahal was entirely spontaneous as they had created their responses separately. Only on hearing and seeing the other's responses did they see how the music, which captured the rhythm of the sea, was so suitable to the film.

Colm Mulhern produced the drawing he had created as his response, which stressed the idea that men are responsible for war. The uniformed cluster on the left represents those who make war and domestic conflict -- a right-wing Spanish militia-man, a Tokyo riot police, a civil guard, a Second World War and soldier and an Irish gunman. They're trampling over flags in pursuit of some frightened woman. The central male figure, the 'civilian', looms large as it is usually he who fills the uniforms, votes for wars, urges countrymen and women to support war. The image of the Nicaraguan woman is taken from a photo around the time of the Sandinistas revolution. She not only symbolises women who somehow maintain family life during times of strife but also all ordinary people who strive to cope the stress of conflict. The top right of the drawing shows a section of a Renaissance Florentine woodcut from 1508. The personification of death is the same in that their work is imbued with a sense of morality and message. This woodcut showing death and war from 500 years ago could be said to indicate the limitation of art to make people go beyond looking at it and to take its lesson to heart.

Anthony McCann wrote and sang a song inspired by the exhibition and other experiences. He said he might give further thought to other ideas he has about crafting responses.

Rob Fairmichael created two pieces. The first was a carved piece of bog wood called the "Lap Dog of War" which draws on the common phrase "Dogs/Hounds of War". It looks like the dog is emerging as it is created with words such as hatred and prejudice, factors that lead to war, painted on. The symbols of the dollar, the pound, the euro, the rouble and the yen are also painted on as the five leading currencies of war in the world.

The second piece is marbled ink on paper with a peace poppy which was created as a response to Heidi Drahotá's piece "Cast Lead". There is an explosion coming up or down and represents terror in violence but added to this is the peace poppy as another response but the poppy is not of a pure white colour. This piece will join Heidi's for a further exposure in Geneva at the World Council of Churches.

Roberta then commented on how enhancing and useful it is to preserve records of the different ways of responding to and sharing experiences of the exhibition. She mentioned that, over the duration of the exhibition, she had given thirty-one guided tours to a widely diverse range of people.

Dr Martin Melaugh commented that there is now an online archives of documents and photographs of all the exhibitions and associated events that have taken place since The Art of Survival exhibitions in 2008 (cain.ulster.ac.uk/quilts). There are details of over 30 exhibitions, plus dozens of workshops and other associated events. Due to the increasing amount of information, photographs, and documents, it has been decided to produce a database which will allow users of the site to search for information on events or on individual pieces. The database will be available later in 2011.

Bernadette Walsh, Archivist of the Museum Service, reflected that this type of evaluation event provided a good opportunity for those who have visited an exhibition to express their thoughts, ideas and creative responses. This pointed to another way of compiling an archive that could be added to and opened up to a wider audience. It also gave a new dimension to archiving and would act as a way of encouraging more direct involvement with the exhibition. It has proved to work well with the current online archive.

Margaret Edwards, Education Officer of the Museum Service, noted that this had been a very significant exhibition and workshop programme. "It has enabled the Tower Museum to reach a new and wider audience," she said. "This reflective event to close an exhibition was a first for the Museum Service. We haven't always had the opportunity to work collaboratively with such a mix of people in this way. This has been made possible by the cordial and professional relationship that has grown between Roberta Bacic as guest curator and the staff of the Museum Service since 2008. It has prompted us to reflect further on our work and role in delivering our exhibition programme and to consider how we can learn from the direct responses of people, such as we saw and heard today."

Margaret Edwards
February 2011