

# Traces of War at King's College London

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Double Field - Viewfinder, (Tarin Kowt), 2009-10

Shaun Gladwell/Australian War Memorial

New collaborations between the Department of War Studies at King's College London and three international artists yield a fascinating glimpse into a multitude of multimedia vantage points on the impact of conflict

What does war consist of once you remove the actual fighting? Combat itself may dominate the popular imagination regarding any discussion of 'war', yet the knock-on effects it creates can be as informative and poignant as any actual military action. *Traces of War* explores the faint perspectives and objects behind war, the whispers heard only on the fringes of a war zone.

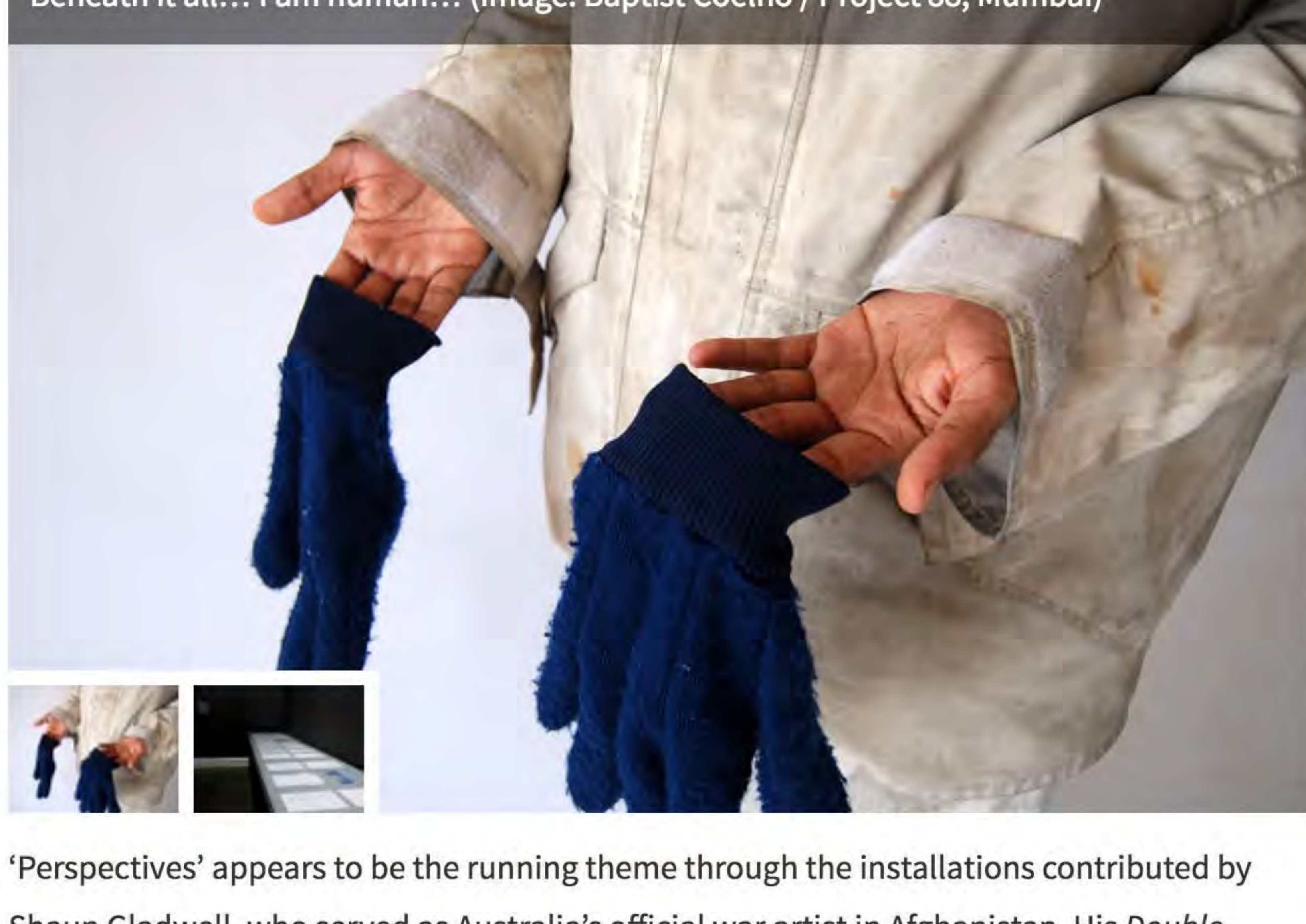


Traces of War Installation (Image: Kate Anderson)

Relationships can be amongst the first to suffer, and this is eminently expressed with *Blueys*, an installation by Mumbai-based artist **Baptist Coelho**, the current Leverhulme Artist-in-Residence at the Department of War Studies at King's College London. Fractured relationships and blunt, unfamiliar communication can result from the separating of families when soldiers are called up to fight, which is only too evident from reading the selected letters (written on blue paper, hence known as 'blueys') between British Forces and their families during the 2003 Iraq War. By juxtaposing the highlighted emotional vocabulary contained within these letters with the direct military language soldiers are encouraged to learn the Arabic translations for while in the field, Coelho illustrates the growing rift in language between the two worlds a soldier has to try and simultaneously inhabit.

Then there is the body, and the objects which both protect it, and identify it as that of a soldier. Firstly, the film *Beneath it all... I am human...*, depicts heavy altitude clothing being slowly, piece-by-piece, removed from a soldier serving at 18,000ft on the Siachen glacier between India and Pakistan ('the world's highest battlefield') to remind us that, underneath the boots, jacket, gloves and other protective clothing necessary for protection in those extreme minus 60°C conditions, is still the body of a human being. Coelho takes this a step further with *Mountain Lassitude*, a time capsule of objects (especially bandages) from over a century of mountain exploration, the title of which comes from Major Hon. Charles Granville Bruce quoted in Tom George Longstaff's 1906 booklet *Mountain Sickness and Its Probable Causes* (price: one shilling), discovered in the RGS-IBG archive. Through this and more contemporary publications, Coelho explores the dangers and methods of survival associated with extreme altitude, such as the Siachen glacier.

Beneath it all... I am human... (Image: Baptist Coelho / Project 88, Mumbai)



'Perspectives' appears to be the running theme through the installations contributed by Shaun Gladwell, who served as Australia's official war artist in Afghanistan. His *Double Field/Viewfinder* (Tarin Kowt) is an oddly mesmerising dual-screen film showing two soldiers standing in the low-lit Afghan desert landscape, pointing video cameras at each other while walking in circles in a way reminiscent of a cliché stand-off. It's a vivid immersion into this physical place of conflict, which their uniforms and the large military vehicles rumbling past don't allow us to forget, despite the relative calm of the setting itself. Gladwell also presents a fascinating glimpse through the ages, showing the accidental parallels between his photography from Afghanistan in 2009 with that of his father, Mark Gladwell, when photographing the Vietnam conflict in 1967. From enormous planes and tanks, to dozing soldiers and vulnerable-looking local children, the sense of history repeating itself is stark.

Taking immersion to a new level, Gladwell additionally embraces virtual reality, whereby a VR headset and accompanying headphones drops the participant into a dimly lit, dingy room accompanied only by a kneeling man repeatedly disassembling and reassembling a 'military grade rifle', including while blindfolded. *AR 15 Field Strip* is an experience of a mundane, domestic space of urban conflict, a place seemingly devoid of warfare itself, but undeniably a vestibule which in one way or another connects directly and chillingly with war.



Finally, Iraqi-born, London-based artist **Jananne Al-Ani** explores aerial views of conflict zones across the ages. Her film *Black Powder Peninsula* and screenshots from past film *Shadow Sites II* combine to juxtapose the human-created urban landscapes from northern Kent with regions of the Middle East, both parts of the world with rich military histories. The drone-captured footage provides new perspectives on historical sites such as the Curtis and Harvey explosives factory at Cliffe and the ruins of Palmerston forts in the Medway estuary, remnants of past conflicts which resonate to this day.

The overall exhibition is a truly eclectic mix of installations, depicting an immensely wide range of objects, people, places and times in which war has played a major role. Yet the thread which runs through them all is powerful; that faint traces of war can ripple through time and space, remaining identifiable, hidden in the shadows, long after a conflict has ceased to rage.

***Traces of War* is available to view at the King's College London's Inigo Rooms, Somerset House, until 18 December. Free of charge, open Wednesday to Sunday.**

**For more information visit**

**[kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/warstudies/traces/index.aspx](http://kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/warstudies/traces/index.aspx).**

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