

Digital artists document war



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The stories of the Afghanistan war are being told by digital artists through video, multi media and music.

Transcript

TONY JONES, PRESENTER: It's now more than 10 years since Australia committed troops to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The wars have produced a new generation of veterans and they've also spawned a new wave of cultural references and artistic expression. This report from our defence correspondent Michael Brissenden.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN, REPORTER: War is humanity exposed in all its raw brutality, a powerful emotional experience that has consistently produced a powerful creative response.

RYAN JOHNSTON, ART CURATOR, WAR MEMORIAL: Art becomes such a powerful vehicle because perhaps unlike other artefacts or objects associated with war that we collect here, it allows for a creative, imaginative and very diverse perspectives on history and I very much like to think of the artists in our collection as visual historians.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Every war is a product of its time and every one has produced a unique catalogue, but Afghanistan is our first truly wireless digital war.

RYAN JOHNSTON: Every generation writes its history in its own media and culture and I think what we see, particularly at the moment in Afghanistan, and this is where Sean's work I think comes in and is very interesting, is a proliferation of digital media.

SHAUN GLADWELL, ARTIST: The experience was so powerful that I feel like I'll be making work about this for many years to come and I think that I saw a lot of soldiers over there experiencing - you know, they were experiencing things that they will remember for all of their days.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Like many artists before him, Shaun Gladwell saw something in the human experience of war that changed and inspired his work. Part of a high-tech generation, he's responded with digital multimedia, the first digital artist to be commissioned as an official war artist by the Australian War Memorial.

And as a war artist I saw that that was one of my functions was to really try and tell the story from their perspective. And in the end I actually handed my cameras to a couple of the guys and let them sort of record experiences with me. You know, some of the troops were, you know, in their early 20s and I think that's a huge experience to have at that point in your life. They're really giving over the prime of their - these very - these golden years to a very serious job and I really kind of respected that, but I thought it's also very tough.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: War changes everyone. Some artists tap into war, and as it happens, some soldiers turn to art. But for this generation, the palette is more often than not video, digital photography and music, and in some cases, all three.

ZACH TRAVERS, AFGHANISTAN VETERAN: Deploy as one person and come back as another. That's how I took it, anyway, so. And, yeah, I just moulded music into that and hopefully I can make more good music.

(Warsong): (Rapping) Will he die at 25 or live to see a century. Paranoia gripping, fear of the unknown, the only bright side in his mind, he might be coming home.

Just thought I'd try and write about something and things I was seeing, things I was seeing happen to other blokes that were there with me, sort of took everyone's experiences and balled them into one and made it about this sorta soldier.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Zach Travers returned from deployment with two RAR last year. He's written 17 songs since he returned. Warsong is his first single, currently surging through the digital world. The Sunshine Coast is a long way from Tarin Kowt, but it's Afghanistan that drives his music.

Ed Howsen is another young veteran transformed and inspired by his battlefield experience.

ED HOWSEN, AFGHANISTAN VETERAN: I always had a bit of a passion for film, but I never really saw it going anywhere with me - I was just, "No, the Army'll do for me." And now, that's my new passion, that's where I want to go, that's my direction.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Ed Howsen comes from a military family, but he's now putting the finishing touches on a final edit of his first documentary.

ED HOWSEN DOCUMENTARY (male voiceover): I don't think she really understood where I was. I think she thought I was away on f*88ing holiday for eight months.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: His film follows his unit through their deployment and their return home.

ED HOWSEN: I film what's going on and ask the boys as soon as they get home what it was like and then they can show that to their families instead of them having to sit there and talk it through. And then after I started cutting it together I sort of went, "Well this is actually something good and it's something that people need to see."

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: For Ed Howsen, Zach Travers and many others, creative expression is also part of the healing process.

ED HOWSEN: Yeah, it's just helped me express not only my feelings, but the feelings of all my friends and that's good to be able to do that, so that they don't have to, you know, go through it all.

ZACH TRAVERS: There'll be people that are, you know, they've had their whole lives changed by this. There'll be people that'll never be the same again, there'll be families that will never be the same again, taken apart by this war.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Art is helping these vets work through their experiences. Their work is also helping to ensure the rest of us never forget.

Michael Brissenden, Lateline.

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