



Trench art tells a story of survival and resilience

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'Universal Soldier', 2014. Tony Albert, Australia, born 1981, Gurramay/Kuku Yalanji people, Queensland, courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney, photo by Greg Piper

For many Australians, our perceptions of the first world war and the foreign lands on which that war was fought have been shaped by our family's war mementos: medals, uniforms, cigar cases, and other souvenirs brought home by our ancestors and brought out on family occasions to be viewed by the children. The war was "over there", and it was through the trinkets they brought home that a younger generation could comprehend the material conditions in which Australian soldiers fought.

In the case of Sapper Stanley Keith Pearl, whose collection of trench art objects forms the heart of the Art Gallery of South Australia's latest exhibition, *Sappers & Shrapnel*, the trinkets and mementos had already been transformed into new and useful objects, which are now held in the Australian War Memorial collection.

In Sapper Pearl's hands, a German 155mm howitzer shell and buttons removed from dead enemy soldiers are transformed into a rose bowl; a Rising Sun badge decorates an alarm clock; and a propeller from a Vickers plane provides the bowl of an inkstand. Pearl painstakingly documented the materials that went into the making of his objects, and how they were obtained.



'Alarm clock', 1918. Sapper Stanley Keith Pearl, 5 Field Company Engineers, AIF, Australia, 1893-1986, Australian War Memorial, Canberra

The term "trench art" was coined during WWI to describe the widespread practice of transforming souvenir war materials into useful and decorative objects, yet few people have encountered this fascinating category of war art.

Lisa Slade, the exhibition's curator, sees trench art as an under-acknowledged branch of war art. According to Nicholas J. Saunders in his catalogue essay, trench art is the name given to a wide array of objects made by servicemen and women, prisoners of war and civilians, during and after conflict, from the waste of mechanized war. Sensuous and tactile, these objects evoke and embody the visceral experiences of their creators.

Objects by Pearl are seen alongside trench art made by other servicemen, some anonymous, possibly prisoners of war. The rose bowl, alarm clock and inkstand are not the most elaborate objects displayed in this exhibition. Next to the domestic and functional objects that Pearl favored are beautifully engraved shell cases that stand as objet d'art. A poppy motif adorns a pair of brass artillery shells.

The impetus behind *Sappers & Shrapnel* is to explore the concept of trench art, and "to recognize the 'art' in trench art", as Nick Mitzevich writes in his director's foreword to the exhibition catalogue. The exhibition is set out so that the contemporary artists' responses act as our guide to interpreting and understanding the trench art objects, and practices of trench art during WWI.

As you descend the stairs into the exhibition area, you might be forgiven for overlooking the first contemporary work featured in the exhibition, Sera Waters' *The Beginning*, due to its unobtrusive placement.



'All the King's Men', 2014-15. © Fiona Hall, images courtesy Rosalyn Oxley9, Sydney, photo by Clayton Glen

A small souvenir-like wooden map of Australia frames a cotton embroidery in colours that evoke David Horton's map of Aboriginal languages; emblazoned are the words *YOU ARE HERE*. It hangs opposite *All the King's Men*, Fiona Hall's ghoulish collection of misshapen knitted figures.

Suspended from the ceiling, they cast their sinister shadows against the gallery wall. The juxtaposition with Waters' work is unsettling. The figures grin and grimace in turn, their faces and bodies punctured by an array of shrapnel; bones, broken bottles, and a billiard ball. Where are we, exactly? Where is here?

We move from Hall's grotesque army and wind our way through the delicate and ornate *Dresses for Soula* by Ben Quilty, and made with the assistance of Raghda Alrawi, a young Syrian refugee in Lebanon who survives by making clothing out of second-hand material. Quilty's work was created in collaboration with refugees and humanitarian workers he and Richard Flanagan (who has provided the catalogue essay) met when traveling as guests of World Vision through Lebanon, Lesbos and Serbia.

Further embodiments of war feature with Tony Albert's *Universal Soldier*, a bricolage "everyman" made up of kitsch Australianana, or "Aboriginaliana", as Albert terms it. The figure is both confronting and familiar in its incorporation of the 1950s-era ephemera featuring images of Aboriginal people. Two figures give shape to this work – one soldier carrying another.

A teaspoon rack in the shape of Australia forms the carried soldier's face, his torso made out of a placemat depicting a picturesque scene of Aboriginal people standing and sitting by a river. The universal humanity that is evoked in the figures is contrasted with the ubiquitous racism that generated the "Aboriginalia". Albert's work quietly prompts us to reflect on the unacknowledged role of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait men and women who fought for Australia.

Objects by Olga Gironis and the Tjanpi Desert Weavers bring another perspective to the practice of trench art – the woman's perspective. Gironis in particular engages directly the power of war mementos. Echo works to unsettle our sense of war as alien by delicately weaving hair around a war medal from the second world war. Does the weaving of hair obscure the medal or protect? The Tjapani Desert Weavers, collaborating with Fiona Hall, have woven what Lisa Slade calls a "cavalcade of vehicles", pushers, scooters, and wheelbarrows that are empty, an absence evoking the anxieties and suffering caused by the stolen generations of Aboriginal children.



Tjituru-tjituru, 2015. Tjanpi Desert Weavers and Fiona Hall, © Tjanpi Desert Weavers, NPY Women's Council, photo by Rhett Hammetton

At the center of the exhibition, housed amongst the contemporary works, is the collection of trench art objects. Napkin holders, a hat pin stand, a lamp in the shade of a lighthouse, and a paper knife reveal a longing for the domestic that shaped the soldier's creations. The objects made in the trenches connected the servicemen to home, and evoke a strong sense of resilience in the men who created these objects.

Are these objects still relevant to today? The contemporary artists featured in this exhibition answer with a resounding yes.

My only qualification with the exhibition is probably an "art historical" concern – the exhibition seems to suggest that there is no native tradition of trench art following on from WWI, and so exaggerates the vast distance between the original trench war objects and the objects and practices of the contemporary artists (a shell case vase made in c.1942-45 by Private John Charles Arney is featured in the exhibition, however this object was made in Europe).



The importance of trench art to Australians in the years that followed the first world war still needs to be explored. Australians continued to practice trench art in Australia during WWII, importing a practice from the trenches of Europe to the coast of Queensland, where Australian soldiers were posted to counter the threat of a Japanese invasion of Australia.

In Lennie Wallace's memoir of life as a mining warden's daughter, she provides a glimpse into a native tradition of trench art around the time of the Battle of the Coral Sea (4-8 May 1942), and a particular Australian soldier's problem-solving approach to limited resources during rations:

I collected old toothbrushes for Paddy ... Paddy made rings using scrap, silver-coloured metal from pieces of airplane wings. Set into the rings were the regimental colours of the different companies of men. This was where the brightly coloured toothbrush handles came in. They provided the material for the colour patches. Paddy wanted black for a red and black colour patch but that was one I wasn't able to provide. Some soldiers used the toothbrush handles as carving material. Three-oh-three rifles were a favourite and were carved in amazing detail from the old handle.

In many ways Paddy's trench artistry is closer to the various approaches of the contemporary artists featured in the exhibition than to those outlined by Saunders in his catalogue essay on Stanley Keith Pearl.

Little is known about Pearl, but we are able to get some sense of his experiences of World War One through engaging with the objects he created out of the destruction and waste that lay about him.

Sappers & Shrapnel is an ambitious exhibition that has done much to bridge the gap across the one hundred years that divide us from Sapper Pearl. It tells a story of hope, survival and regeneration.