

## **Your friend, the enemy / Pataka 29 Nov 2015**

The 1915 Gallipoli campaign began with some marks being made on a large sheet of paper laid out on a table. In a command centre or on a naval ship, it all started with the lengthy arc of a red line being drawn, sweeping confidently up a map of the Turkish peninsula. Next, a wave of Xs and further lines denoted deployments of men and artillery. Speckled with inscriptions, place names, code words and directives, the large map I am describing was, you could say, an imaginative projection--the lines and arrows pointing into the future, confidently marking out what would surely be a swift victory. Eventually, the red arrow would reach Constantinople, at which point, accompanied by a triumphal brass band and the rattle of medals, the boys could all go cheerfully home.

The rest, as the saying goes, is history. These marks on a map led nowhere except to the deaths of thousands. The campaign map was a fantasy, an absurdist creation, an item of unbridled, catastrophic wishful thinking.

Now, a hundred years later, you could say that this exhibition returns the Gallipoli campaign to its point of origin—to a flat expanse laid out on a table top or, in this case, installed for a time on an easel. After the devastation and heroism of 1915, we are returned to the workings of human hand and mind upon a flat surface, to the map-like unfolding of forms and energies—this time on canvas or sheet of Fabriano.

Finding no foundation in the blindness and Imperialist madness of 1915, these latest offerings tread deftly and respectfully, ever mindful of the victims on both sides and alert to the place Gallipoli holds in human history and in the souls of the Turkish, Australian and New Zealand nations.

The artists in YOUR FRIEND THE ENEMY all travelled to Turkey in April last year. Their directive was to renegotiate the headland, by eye and hand, to render this history-infused place in the light of the present moment. You could think of the artistic

group as another kind of expeditionary force: Their primary task was to occupy, creatively, the Gallipoli headland--to see it for what it is, for what it once was, and possibly even for what it might yet be.

Not only is the exhibition truthful to the Gallipoli the artists encountered in 2014—it remains very much an echo-chamber of the earlier campaign. In the present instance, however, the terms of engagement have shifted. The eye of the marksman has been replaced by that of the plein air painter; the gun has been replaced with the paintbrush; the shovel has become a palette knife, clay and muck have been replaced with oil paint. Orders have been rephrased as poems or laments, battle-cry as song. The dawn offensive has been replaced by a scurrying forth, paint-box in hand, in the broad light of day. The line of fire has become a line on a sheet of paper.

I was fortunate to visit a number of the artists involved while they were preparing for this exhibition. On the day I visited Michael Shepherd in his Auckland studio, his paintings were laid flat on the floor and covered with a tarpaulin. Like the casualties of war, I couldn't help but think. For Michael, painting is a dark ritual, a summoning of cultural and historical ghosts. It is a pulling back of the shroud. Now his works have come to light, I can see the flicker of life in them. Yet there is also an inconsolable note. They offer an unflinching vision of modern day Turkey with its touristic debris. Alert to the ironies and ambiguities of a location which is at once an 'attraction' and a gravesite, Michael Shepherd's work is an incessant questioning of the place and those who stand there.

Stanley Palmer's artistic engagement with Gallipoli began in the late 1980s when he produced a series of works based upon a World War One photograph of his father, James Palmer, in uniform. In his recent paintings, Palmer presents Gallipoli as once again a verdant land, a place of rebirth: the abiding season is Springtime. Here the Gallipoli Peninsula has become a place of enduring youth rather than its bloody termination, and the battlefield has been subsumed into a land and sea-scape which is continuous with that of Stanley's beloved Northland or Coromandel.

In the work of artists such as Guy Maestri, Elisabeth Cummings and Idris Murphy, colour contains a similarly redemptive quality, at times even a radiance. We experience a kind of lyrical updraft which lifts us above the mortal firmament. If only the dead too could be uplifted by such airy fingers; if only they could stand back up.

In contrast, Euan Macleod's paintings have the weight of the world—reconstituted as pigment—upon them. With palette and brush, he digs into the skeleton-hungry headland, uncovering sepulchres, tombs, drawing us towards the sobering conclusion that the entire peninsula is now, if you look closely enough, an open grave. Like Macleod's, John Walsh's paintings are mired in earthly matter while, at the same time, gesturing towards a shifting, permeable spirit-world; John takes us back into the mythical realm of Maori tradition and, in so doing, he finds an accommodation for the story of Gallipoli there--between the nightingale of Turkey and the tui-song of Aotearoa. Like Macleod's figures, the inhabitants of his paintings exist between this life and the afterlife. They are our hope and our haunting.

Like many of the other artists, Amanda Penrose Hart focuses not so much on the Fallen as upon the ground fallen upon. 'Landscape is the great metaphor,' wrote the French painter Pierre Tal-Coat--and Amanda's work reminds us again of the great affinities that can be struck between oil paint and the earth's clay and the body's flesh. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes... Humanity is part of the natural world and its cycles. In these works, as so often elsewhere, the abiding note is one of melancholy, but the painter's eye and the light inside the eye lead us onwards.

'You visit the earth and you bless it...' So runs the 65<sup>th</sup> Psalm. The artists in YOUR FRIEND THE ENEMY visited this place—this blighted tract of land—and they blessed it with their attention. Their paintings mark the end of a pilgrimage, and the works they brought back allow us—the viewers--an unexpected intimacy with that distant landscape.

And so, with the painters, and with the soldiers of a century ago, we drop to our knees, we feel the soil

beneath us, our arms might be upraised, our eyes staring into the blazing marine light. We feel the textures and tremors of that landscape. We start to feel the questions indwelling in this place. Where have we been until now? By what powers have we been moved in the past and what forces will guide and shape our future?

*Gregory O'Brien*