

FREYA JOBIBNS

RETURN at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery



FREYA JOBIBNS has a name for being forthright in her exploration of personal experience and trauma. She worked for the AFP including as a weapons instructor from 1986 until she retired from the army in 2002 and began her art practice. By 2014 she was exhibiting widely as, in her words, a 'plastic surgeon' – using discarded plastic toys to recreate striking representations of the human face and body. This was a response, she says, to society's obsessive consumerism and the thoughtless way in which we discard cheap mass produced plastic toys. <http://www.ozarts.net.au/images/oz-arts/2014-spring/FREYA-JOBIBNS.pdf>

Jobbins uses a combination of media. These are assemblage using complex mosaics of doll parts or photomontage and incorporating the Japanese technique of Kintsugi. She says: 'I don't do aesthetics in the sense of beauty. I don't do pretty. I like to disrupt the viewing process. I want you to look at it and have a response..' Kintsugi is the Japanese art of putting broken pottery pieces back together with gold — built on the idea that by embracing flaws and imperfections, you create an even stronger, more beautiful piece of art.

RETURN is the experience of a mother of a soldier who completed two tours in Afghanistan that has absorbed and obsessed her creatively, culminating in this collection of works. Anxiously awaiting her son's safe return and then coping with the aftermath of return caused Jobbins to examine 'the awareness, acknowledging truths, relationships, mental health issues and the secretive understanding that bonds and separates people who would kill to protect'. She says: 'My practice is focused on contemporary social commentary, all based on the human experience.... most of

A stylized signature or logo, possibly representing the artist's name or a related brand.

it mine. With this body of work RETURN, I am exploring my honest and personal response to my eldest son David going to war, twice, waiting on his return and coping with the inevitable aftermath for both of us. These works have been made over the last seven years, with eight new works especially for this show, many influenced by the German Expressionists, where art was shaped by war and embittered artists like Erich Heckel, Otto Dix and Kathe Kollwitz. All tried to express the pain of the people's inner life. This is what I wanted to achieve by finally bringing all of these works together in one show as one body of work. It puts it within the context of today with the new generation of Australian veterans and their families from the Afghanistan conflict.'

Jobbins says: 'The works address mental health issues like PTSD, depression, anxiety, guilt, self-harm, suicide, coping methods and acknowledgement. This guilt includes my own and that of other mothers, who felt guilty being glad it was their sons that came home. Addressing these important issues within my art practice brings my own relevance to these works. Not only as a mother with career experience but also as an artist who suffers from anxiety and depression due to a diagnosis of PTSD. These works are honest, raw, unsettling and realistic, touching on a taboo but relevant subject and hopefully causing more conversation within and outside our ADF community.'

'From works on paper, assemblages and installations, I acknowledge personal truths, and the silent and secretive understandings of unquestionable permanent bonds, then acceptance of choice and the release of my responsibility, and then closure.'

Below:

Please sit on the bench, rest your feet on the pavers and mindfully look through the images in the concertina.

WAIT

Installation

- 2 rugs from Afghanistan brought back by David for me
- 1 wooden bench my parents gave us as a wedding present
- 1 set of Army greens with David's surname on the shirt
- 1 pair of pants he wore on his second tour.
- 1 concertina book
- 3 pavers covered in camo

My physical triggers...

On David's second tour (June 2011-Jan 2012) three Australian soldiers were shot and killed on their base on 29 October 2011. Bryce, Ashley and Luke were killed by a member of the Afghanistan National Army. This was the one and only time the ADF had actually rung me at home to tell me David was alright. I was already in a state of anxiety and this call sent me over the edge.

The first thing as a mother I thought that they are ringing to tell me David is dead.

No. They had rung to tell me it was not David who had been killed. Simultaneously I was angry that they had called me knowing it would have frightened me into assuming it was a death call. I was so relieved. I was so glad that he was ok, thank goodness it was not my son, it was someone else's son. Then the guilt hit. I felt guilty I had even thought that. The shock and the anger and the guilt was overwhelming for me, I think I had some sort of breakdown. I went out the back to the bench I always sit on out, next to a path of pavers. Through tears I pulled up all 6 meters of pavers and laid them again only about 20cm across without wearing gloves.

I associate these pavers with this intense moment and when I walk on the large rug in my bedroom, touch the uniforms, sit on the bench out the back. These memories are emotional triggers for me...waiting for David.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE





DOCUMENTING URBAN LEGENDS 2019

H90 x W120cm, 3 images in suite, solvent print on cotton rag 310gsm

An ongoing suite of images documenting the urban legends we all pretended to be when we were younger. Escaping reality, changing the environment we found ourselves in, we could pretend to be someone else. We put on a mask to disguise our face and wore the cape that let us fly in and save people and the planet with special powers. Heroes become legends.

How and when are these legends created in real life? Are today's soldiers on a continuum of that childhood experience? Is it an inherent quality, predisposition, gender, age, or personality trait that is permanent and inseparable from our character? My eldest son served in Afghanistan and his grandfather did two tours in Vietnam. Genetic or environmental influences? Is it a natural need for some that has evolved where we are prepared to put our own lives on the line?



My father once said to me
"If you want to see a better
world, you need to be the best
one you can be."



At back: SOMEONE'S SON III, 2015

41 separate linocut prints, each H44 x 35cm total size variable

These 41 sons are not going home to their mothers. These mothers will never touch their sons again. I feel so sick and heavy in my heart for their loss. As a mother of a son who came home, I also feel so guilty that I am relieved, it was someone else's son. The first names and ages of the 41 soldiers who died in Afghanistan serving Australia, are cut into each individual print, because the first name is more personal, it makes them more real. They did exist. It is important to say their names so they are never forgotten, to keep them real for their mothers and their families.



FALSEFACE SERIES 2017

Solvent on cotton rag 75cm x 75cm x 6 unframed images

'This series of grotesque images of masks continues to explore notions of identity, motifs and dissimulation.

It extends to my own questioning of the faces that I use to conceal my true persona. These masks are my own human camouflage, they hide and distort my exterior emotions by using a combination of similar motifs.

My real identity is lost, distorted, even though the masks replicate my own face faithfully on the inside, the concealment of the truth is on the outside, as each face changes dramatically. They give me the security that the outside world will not see who I truly am as I don't want people to see my suffering as they don't need to know. They are false faces. We all wear them.'



EVERMORE

Installation, paste-up on a mobile gallery wall 2.4m x 2.4m

The impermanence of a paste-up on a wall: There is a strong initial impact of clean unweathered images—until they are impacted by time, weather, vandalized and forgotten and then they are replaced. Layers and layers of temporary public artworks. Paste-ups are for the moment, a contemporary commentary in the public space unlike the permanence of the walls at a cemetery that hold the ashes of the deceased in little boxes all in a row.

These collage images of the tortured soldier represent the unconfirmed death toll of veterans who have died by their own hands since returning from service in Afghanistan. It is a constant battle for all who have experienced trauma—you can cover it up quickly, the paste-up can be replaced quickly, but yet another (veteran) will appear.

For veterans it is a battle that never ends, a permanent conflict internally and externally with no time limit. They may have survived the physical battle but it's the residue that kills.

Jobbins describes how powerless she felt knowing nothing she could do would keep her son safe. 'This powerless feeling can overwhelm you if you let it. During David's tours my thoughts were dominated by David being in a war zone and my mind never rested. Distraction and denial was the only release.'

For Jobbins, 'the way David protected me during this time was his lack of detail as to what he was doing when he made contact. He brushed over things to lighten my load, never giving me full truths... which he knew was my coping mechanism as well, the less I knew the less I fretted, the less anxious I believed I would be.'

'I did not openly discuss the war in Afghanistan, I avoided news reports, I avoided people who knew my son was serving—my protection was my own external apathy.'

'I imagined the worst scenario so I could somehow prepare myself for his possible death or injury. My survival mechanism is acknowledgment, sectioning information,

THE FOUR MASKS, 2017, H75 x W75cm, 4 unframed images
Includes *David's Mask* and are part of a body of work which includes *The Four Masks*, *Falseface Series*, and later the *Domus Series*. Revolving around Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD is caused by a life-threatening trauma like war, assault and major body trauma. The masks are worn by those who have mental health issues due to PTSD, including myself.

suppressing and editing memories, avoiding triggers, and distracting myself from the subject. Then move on.

'To this day we have not discussed much in detail about David's time in Afghanistan, and we won't, we have both moved on. We acknowledge the residue of this war on both of us. I can channel a lot of it into my artwork and David has totally transformed his environment by leaving the Army and moving to Norway, getting married and becoming a father. He has taken himself out of the trigger environment which I am grateful for. And, he is happy. David has the ability to readily adapt and the understanding between us is of mutual respect and silent acknowledgement. He has always been aware of my mental health issues and has always accepted that as my normal and he accepts that readily, as normal, in himself and his army mates.'

For many people, Jobbins' story and this exhibition will raise as many questions as it answers, but RETURN is her story and it is the story of a mother's unconditional love. Mother and son both experienced PTSD and have come through and as an artist Jobbins has the gift to describe her experience as a military mother.

RETURN was at Wagga Wagga
Art Gallery 2020

Photographs courtesy Wagga Wagga Art Gallery.





TIME

30cm x 30cm Collage and acrylic on 3 boards

Layered self portraits, time worn with experience. I am still in there, the original me. The culmination of so many emotional and physical events, just add another layer, sanded down with time. Recovery is never total and absolute, memories cannot be wiped totally but they can be intergrated, accepted, forgiven, addressed and filed away. Not only is it the self but your offspring challenge you even when they themselves are adults. Just continue to add as there will always be more.

THREAD Series #1, 2018

Digital print collage on 200gsm copy paper and golden thread H120 x W220cm

Self portrait triptych collage work sewn with stitches of golden thread, referencing traditional Japanese Kintsugi, a

philosophy treating breakage and repair as part of the history of the object, rather than something to disguise. A metaphor for me, and others, where breakage and repair of the physical and mental self is not always visible; still disguised but becoming more openly accepted and acknowledged in society.



Untitled (Nothing has changed Ian Howard) 2019

Plastic assemblage on vintage mannequin, water-based bitumen, H75cm x W37cm x D28cm

Response to Ian Howard's work (untitled) (no.41) dated 1992 in the collection of Wollongong Art Gallery. Professor Ian Howard, UNSW, previously Dean of COFA and Provost & Director of Qld College of Art Griffith University, Brisbane.

'War is a human constant. We are always killing each other somewhere in the world. War affects not just the individual soldier but his entire family, friends and associates, it creeps into the lives of thousands. War is in ALL of our histories. In my family history I am the only generation not directly impacted by a war. My grandfather was born just after WWI, was involved in WW2 and was a POW in Siberia for two and a half years. My own father was born 3 years before WW2 and was a starving child of the depression. And my eldest son served in Afghanistan. It is such a permanence in today's society worldwide, it's become a norm. A mother loses a child nearly every single day every single month every single year.

'This work is Man V Man all over. The conflict continues over land, religion, power, control and egos. The fight is also on the exterior and the interior. The face is a major conflict, the biggest fight where the rest of the body represents the wars over the centuries; our history of death is the way we study our own history. I am sorry Ian, nothing has changed since you demonstrated in the era of the Vietnam War.'



Left: DAVID'S MASK 2017

Pigment print on cotton rag 140cm x 108cm



'David's Mask is the original image of this series, the first of the four masks that became the work The Four Masks 2017, part of a body of work which includes The Falseface Series, and later the Domus Series, revolving around Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD is caused by a life-threatening trauma like war, assault and major body trauma. Coping mechanisms of this disorder for me and other sufferers is silence, seclusion, avoidance, distraction and to camouflage our inner turmoil.

'Symbolically a mask represents physical protection and status. It protects your identity and hides your emotions, except for the eyes. But that is where it starts, the darkness, in your mind. These assemblage works are a symbolic narrative made from children's toys which are generic and mass produced playthings. Like foot soldiers worldwide, they are Universal. Toys link us all, just as suffering does.'

Right: GLENN'S MASK 2017

Plastic assemblage, plastic mask
H33cm x W23cm x D14cm

