



Heart of Darkness in WitteVeen Installation at Brooklyn Navy Yard

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by Charles A. Riley II

Reviewers (unlike auction house cataloguers) are discouraged from using “important” inappropriately or often, but [Bettina WitteVeen’s](#) brave and brilliant “[When We Were Soldiers Once and Young](#)” in the long-abandoned hospital at the Brooklyn Navy Yard is so unquestionably important that it is a shame it closes on October 24, 2015.

The memory of its stirring unification of place and art will never fade for anyone who visits the lushly overgrown corner of the vast Navy Yard complex to wander the hauntingly decrepit corridors and consulting rooms where WitteVeen has installed her own magnificent photographs along with found images of modern warfare and its toll. She has retouched the archival images to soften specifics, choosing ambiguity over shock and awe to engage rather than enrage, an epic of redemption rather than just another anti-war editorial.



“In Memoriam” by Bettina WitteVeen. Main Floor. Image courtesy of Bettina WitteVeen.



The Brooklyn Navy Yard’s Hospital Building. Image courtesy of Bettina WitteVeen.

WitteVeen first saw the hospital seven years ago and conceived of adding it to similar installations in historically charged buildings in [Berlin](#) and [Toulouse](#). She adroitly matched more than 100 black and white and color analog photographs embracing a global range of “industrial” destruction from the American Civil War through the Crimea, World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam and, most provocatively, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Truth and beauty are art’s timeless duo, just as war and healing are the ancient pulse of human conflict. WitteVeen delivers a history lesson’s vital truth using the uncanny beauty of her own landscapes. In the opening triptych, *Body*, a ravishing band of poppies glows against the green of

the Alma battlefield in the Crimea. Her hard-won truth is a stunning retort to what Wilfred Owen referred to as “that old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*” (“it is sweet and glorious to die for one’s country”), the hollow phrase from Horace inscribed on war memorials. This great-hearted work is that statement’s truthful and timely antithesis.



“Body” by Bettina WitteVeen. Alma Battlefield, Crimea, Ukraine. Image courtesy of Bettina WitteVeen.

The tight correlation of works and site is a huge part of WitteVeen’s achievement here. The old hospital, decommissioned in the mid-1970s after the Navy Yard itself was closed a decade earlier, has gap-tooth broken windows, crumbling fireplaces and walls decayed to an exquisite craquelure of powdery pastels (greens, blues, yellows with a hoarfrost of white that reminded me of Robert Rauschenberg’s Dante series). Long drips of rusty water wend their way through gaping holes in the plaster in the treatment rooms where, to take one heart-punch of an example, WitteVeen has installed the black and white image of an amputated leg in the surgery where, beginning in 1801 and throughout the Civil War until the Vietnam era, orthopedic surgeons cut off legs.

Anatomizing pain part by body part, with an x-ray of a hand or a photo of a mangled face isolated and drenched in a spectrum of amazing vibrancy, WitteVeen’s hangs the square images in groups of four, *Crosses of Suffering*. They open the negative space of the wall to suggest a cruciform matrix. One room is as moving as the next—the choral effect is devastating. In the main corridor of the wing, hushed hospital voices murmur, while through the broken windows linnets and birds chirp. The space and art take over, and time is on leave.



“Cross of Suffering” by Bettina WitteVeen. Patient Treatment Room, Main Floor. Image courtesy of Bettina WitteVeen.



Detail of “Cross of Suffering” by Bettina WitteVeen. Blind veteran, WWII, Germany; Battlefield, Ardennes Offensive, Mezieres, Belgium. Image courtesy of Bettina WitteVeen.

In the basement, the chill and musty smell as well as the intensity of the works quicken the heart rate. The passersby and trees outside are viewed through barred narrow windows from below. This is where the long-term psychological trauma of combat was addressed, in cells that were used to confine patients.



“Calvary” by Bettina WitteVeen. Basement Exit. Image courtesy Bettina WitteVeen.

After the crepuscular dimness of the floor above, the stark brightness of white light in a tiny room featuring the smiling portrait of a pretty blonde is incongruous. The chart on a rolling table under her image tells the tale, her name and identifying characteristics appropriately redacted (although her suicide is well known to Germans of a certain generation). A rape victim, her allergy to light was so severe that she had to live in complete darkness—even the glow of a television could activate it. She shares her cell with *Anonymous*, a diptych splitting a green field and poppy with a crimson square image of a rape victim, shrouding her face, in Sudan.



“Anonymous” by Bettina WitteVeen. Battlefield Chemin des Dames, Aisne, France; Rape victim, Sudan. Image courtesy of Bettina WitteVeen.

WitteVeen’s professional skill as curator is on display in another room surrounded in a seamless frieze of golden squares, a soft-focus panorama of the wisteria and roses in a Yalta garden. It takes a moment prior to stunned recognition to recognize the horizontal element running like the legato of a musical melody through *Memories of the Heart* as a blurred close-up of barbed wire.



“Memories of the Heart” by Bettina WitteVeen. Landscape: Yalta, Crimea, Ukraine; British soldier in barbed wire, WWI, France. Image courtesy of Bettina WitteVeen.

Enduring art about war, from Goya to Picasso, does not hold itself down to the level of politics. It uses ambiguity to generate resonant, multiple meanings from permanently significant material.

Born in Germany, educated in the liberal arts at Wellesley, WitteVeen (who summers in Sagaponack) deploys the red poppies, for example, across a semantic field that includes the usual connotations, blood and remembrance, as well as their use for opiates and, more subtly, the way they particularly thrive in “disturbed” soil.

A helicopter can be an ambulance or a gunship, because there are heroes who heal or attack. She takes risks with the cross and the drones. The latter relies on the transformation of iconography (straight-up Christian meaning) into iconology, putting meaning into motion as the crossroads between opposed points of view recur throughout the exhibition. A room filled with images of drones, mechanized body armor, remote-controlled tanks and the robotic “hand of god” ventures through the minefield of referenda on the explicit policies of a Nobel Peace Prize winning president.



“War Invisible” by Bettina WitteVeen. Main Floor. Image courtesy Bettina WitteVeen.



“War Invisible” by Bettina WitteVeen. Big Dog Robot (Boston Dynamics), Robotic Hand.

A black square, mirroring the room, abstractly (and thankfully) shifts the mode into interrogative from imperative, but it is easy to predict heated debates will occur in that corner of the first floor. Addressing the press, the artist made her mission clear: “It is art. It is not a documentary experience.”

In the basement, the coup de grace is delivered in a chapel-like, dark space with an arched alcove before which a cruciform sculpture, *Altar of Redemption and Resurrection*, stands. It is in part an homage to the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, created by Matthias Grünewald for the hospital chapel at Saint Anthony’s Monastery in Alsace. Jasper Johns has also drawn inspiration from this masterpiece of agony.



“Altar of Redemption and Resurrection” by Bettina WitteVeen. Windows Gedächtniskirche, Berlin, Germany; Face Injury, X-Ray, WWI, Germany. Image courtesy of Bettina WitteVeen.

At the top of WitteVeen's *summum* is the blurred image of a moon seen from Fort Greene Park, above an x-ray of the mangled face of a World War I soldier and a distant view of two soldiers closing the eyes of a comrade after a battle. The arms of the cross are glorious, angled views from outside of the illumined stained glass windows of the Gedächtniskirche in Berlin. The gridded windows over the door and to the path outside match the cathedral windows. Like a cross, architecture weaves verticals and horizontals, bricks or steel and glass in a tectonic (from the Greek *techne*, the source of technique and of text) visual unity.

The long corridors of the hospital, intersected by the passages into consulting rooms, are set at 90 degree angles. The grids of four images and crosses as sculpture make perfect sense.

Music weaves vertical and horizontal elements, harmony and melody. I generally deplore the intrusion of audio in these contexts, but WitteVeen deftly slips Bach's Cantata 68 into that sublime altar room, its volume set so low that many struggled to hear. The choice is inspired, because Bach, pioneer of *Gemutsbewegung* (the use of dynamics to stir the emotions) writes a double fugue for the chorus. It mirrors the inescapable recursive element in the exhibition, a family resemblance among images of fallen soldiers impaled on barbed wire, or women as victims, that miserably regressive *mise en abyme*—an infinite reproduction of destruction spiraling infinitely into more war.



Detail of "The Battle" by Bettina WitteVeen. Schoolgirls at Hue, Vietnam, Site of Japanese Garrison, WWII, Yap Island, Micronesia. Image courtesy Bettina WitteVeen.

BASIC FACTS: "When We Were Soldiers Once and Young," installation by Bettina WitteVeen at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, September 19 to October 24, 2015. www.bettinawitteveen.com or #wearenotwiredforwar.

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