

TRANSCRIPT

Themes of war and conflict permeate through the artworks of modernist artist Nora Heysen AM.

A curator, an academic and two contemporary artists explore Australia's official war artists then and now.

On Anzac Day this year, with Australia's first official female war artist Nora Heysen AM as inspiration, NGV curator Dr Angela Hesson led a conversation about the role of artists on war missions and their experiences in wartime. Hesson was joined by Dr Catherine Speck, a professor of art history at the University of Adelaide, and contemporary artists Dr Lyndell Brown and Professor Charles Green, who were Australia's official war artists deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan during 2007.

Angela Hesson: Nora Heysen was the first official female Australian war artist, receiving her appointment in 1943. We are fortunate to have with us three speakers whose diverse experiences can contribute to our understanding of Nora's work, and of war art more broadly. Catherine Speck has written extensively on war artists, and is the editor of Nora and Hans Heysen's collected letters. Charles Green and Lyndell Brown, are the only artist duo assigned as Australian war artists.

Lyndell Brown: It is a rare and special honour to be appointed as a war artist. It's not something you apply for; you get a mysterious offer and you're not sure if this offer is something that you should really accept.

Charles Green: Going into an active war zone is a little bit like going to the moon, and there's an enormous amount of preparation that goes into it. The same was true, of course, for Nora Heysen, who was sent into New Guinea after the Japanese left in 1943.

LB: She had great trouble getting close to the action. Her instructions from the

military headquarters in Melbourne were to get far forward – as far forward as possible. But she found that she was constantly blocked by the military authorities on the ground in New Guinea, as we sometimes were in our own travels. She didn't give up easily, and she did get herself to places such as Alexishafen which was in the early stages of setting up a Casualty Clearing Station. I understand Nora's frustration of not being able to determine her own movements. Being appointed official war artist is like having a travel agent from hell. They send you early, and you go to the flight line at 4 am, and then the plane won't leave until late the next day, and you wait and wait and wait.

I think about Nora's experience in comparison to ours. Because we're a couple we were entitled to share accommodation at times on certain bases. But at other times we were separated and I was placed in the women's accommodation, and Charles was in the men's accommodation. There were many women in Iraq and Afghanistan when I was there. They were extremely intelligent and highly trained women doing any number of amazing jobs, the same as men: women are pilots, armoured vehicle





drivers, intelligence analysts, psychologists, everything. It would have been very different in Nora's day.

Catherine Speck: Indeed, but she was bumping into people who were highly skilled. There's a painting from Nora's time in Cairns at the malaria research centre of Major Josephine Mackerras, a very early researcher into malaria. Nora kept bumping into people like that because she was working in Casualty Clearing Stations or dealing with people who were medically skilled. Her future husband Dr Robert Black, in fact, was an infectious diseases expert.

AH: What was Nora's brief as a war artist? What was she supposed to be painting?

CS: Nora's initial brief when Louis McCubbin recommended her to the War Artists' Advisory Committee was that she would be able to paint the portraits of the women. I think he envisaged that she may as well have stayed in Australia, and she did end up painting many portraits from Melbourne. But that changed when she was painting the portrait of Matron Annie Sage, the head of nursing in Australia and the Pacific. Annie Sage said, 'I want you in New Guinea as soon as possible to paint the work of the women'. However, [John] Treloar, the major in charge of all the war artists, said he wanted her to paint men and women. When she sent back her first

lot of work he said, 'There are too many men and not enough women'. It was never a hundred percent clear what her role was.

AH: When she did get to New Guinea, Cathy, she was obviously working under very different circumstances to those she had been accustomed to in Australia. Not only the subjects that she was painting, but also the physical conditions and materials.

CS: Yes, Nora talks about how it rained all the time, and that the conditions were very difficult for a painter. She said in the wet it is actually much better to work on paper, drawing her subjects. Once again, when she sent back her first group of work, Major Treloar was very critical. He said, 'They're all drawings. Where are the paintings?' Nora was a tough cookie and she rebutted him point by point. Sometimes she would complete the paintings back in Melbourne from the drawings she had done either in New Guinea or in North Queensland.

AH: How does that relate to your practice, Charles and Lyndell?

LB: Our works are what you could call 'slow art'. They are often finely worked, detailed realist paintings, and they take us a long time to do in the studio. We weren't keen on the idea of working like that in difficult situations. We were in the desert conditions of Iraq and Afghanistan. We felt

painting on the fly with a great amount of time pressure would not get us any results we wanted.

So, we chose to move fast and collect thousands and thousands of photographic images to work with back in the studio, and to gather key images with a high resolution that we could print very large (some of these are in the NGV Collection). In Nora Heysen's day, drawing and watercolours would often be the equivalent of a contemporary artist's photographic archive.

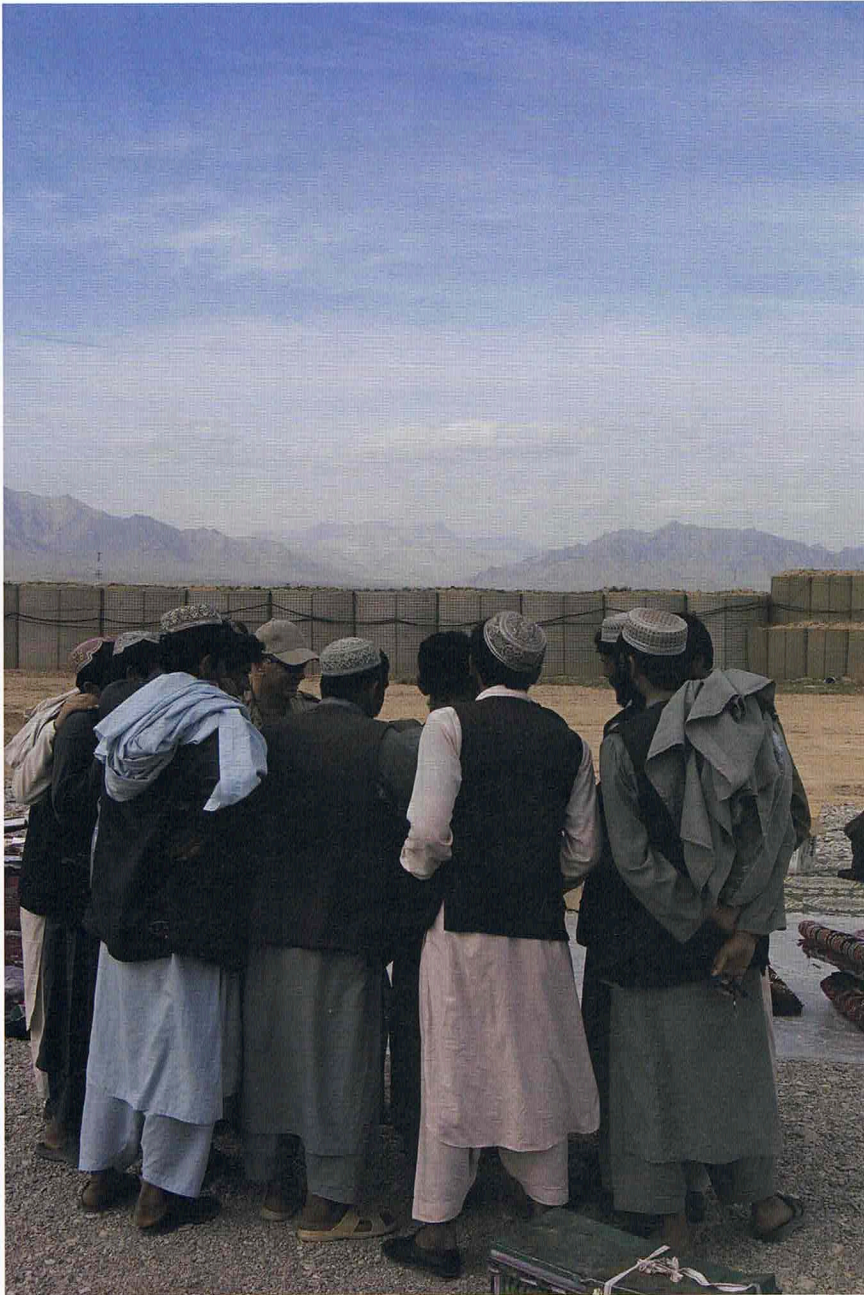
Our experience was also very similar in that Nora needed a studio to produce finely worked, detailed portraits, and onsite, in situ, she had to work much more quickly, and with the material constraints of humidity but the slow drying times of oil paint. We had a year after we got back from Iraq and Afghanistan to complete our commissioned works.

CG: We were possibly the first Australian official war artists to resist the idea of painting and drawing on the spot. It's an immensely complicated process to get artists into those zones and a place where they can work. The closest analogy for us is with journalists sent out to cover these wars, but they're never allowed access to the sort of places that the official war artists can go, if we are lucky.

We told them we would go in with cameras. We took four or five cameras, carting around all our gear wherever we went, plus 25 kilos of body armour! I often thought, 'Why am I doing this?' And, 'Where am I? God, do I want to be here?' Yes, I do because this is history unfolding'. I'm sure Nora Heysen felt the same thing.

There's one painting that we're very proud of. It is of a market scene in the mountains of Afghanistan. When you look closely, you realise it is, in fact, a market scene, but it's a staged market scene. Once a week in Oruzgan, when the Australians were there in the vast Dutch and American base, a few carefully vetted Afghans were invited in with handicrafts to sell war rugs and chess pieces. The market operated for two or three hours, and then they were escorted out. There was extraordinarily tight security even inside this outmost perimeter.

The subject ended up reminding us of Édouard Manet's *The execution of*



Emperor Maximilian, 1868–69, Kunsthalle Mannheim, Germany, a famous painting of an execution scene, which produces the apparent sensation that you think you are looking at something simple, and then you realise that there are more and more and more layers of meaning. Painting is really perfect for this, enabling us to suggest the multiple meanings of an apparently simple subject.

CS: Before Nora Heysen was a war artist, she had spent time overseas, from 1934 to 1937, in London, and so had acquainted herself with tradition after

tradition of painting. So she was aware, when she was coming to subjects, of the history. For example, for her painting of *Matron Annie*, she says in her letters:

'At the moment, I'm working on *Matron Sage*. I'm painting her in a white cap and red cape. She has a fine head and the whole thing is like a Flemish Old Master. Van Eyck would have loved her. The white head-dress is such a lovely setting for the face, and with the simple red cape it makes a good design.'¹¹

AH: It's fascinating reading Nora's accounts of this period. There's a strong sense of personal evolution alongside that broader responsibility of recording something.

CS: Hans Heysen, Nora's father, replied in a letter that he would have welcomed the different situations that Nora was exposed to, but he added, 'I couldn't work under the conditions you're working in'.

AH: It's an incredible kind of strength that is required. The other thing that I was thinking about is the sense of transformation these experiences have on the artist. Charles and Lyndell, could you talk a little bit about that, perhaps about framing conflict?

CG: We didn't expect to be as profoundly moved and affected by the Iraq and Afghanistan commission as we were. We volunteered to be pushed into those zones for a longer period than other official war artists. The experience of history unfolding in such a, not simply gruesome, but absolutely remorseless way shocked us to our core.

AH: Cathy, Nora did go back to New Guinea after her posting. Could you talk about the effect that her work as a war artist had, and the afterlife of those influences?

CS: Nora was enormously taken by the Papuans, and post-war she had three more trips back to the Pacific and has produced a whole body of work, paintings and drawings. The drawings are beautiful. The paintings are amazing too.

Nora had time in New Guinea, the Trobriand Islands and the Solomon Islands; much of Polynesia and Melanesia. A number of modern artists in the late 40s and the 50s, like [William] Dobell, like Margaret Olley, were also turning to the Pacific, and Nora Heysen was doing that too.

THIS IS AN EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF A PROGRAM THAT TOOK PLACE AT THE NGV ON 25 APRIL 2019. DR ANGELA HESSON IS NGV CURATOR, AUSTRALIAN PAINTING, SCULPTURE AND DECORATIVE ARTS. DR LYNDELL BROWN IS AN ARTIST AND HONORARY RESEARCH FELLOW IN THE SCHOOL OF CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE. PROFESSOR CHARLES GREEN IS AN ARTIST AND PROFESSOR OF CONTEMPORARY ART AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE. DR CATHERINE SPECK IS A PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE.