

Silence and Memory

Jane Alden Stevens photographs the legacy of WWI veterans

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In a current exhibit in the Johnson Museum, photographer Jane Alden Stevens delivers contradicting images of pain and peace, physical rest and emotional unrest, death and persistence. The collection displays remnants of World War I: the monuments, the graves, and the devastated landscape.

For Stevens, the project was about collecting images that represented "the impulse for undertaking acts of remembrance to lost loved ones." The initial focus was to collect human constructions of grief and re-visualize the physical abstraction of the recollection of war. She places the memorials we have built for our lost soldiers under the critical, detached and static observation of the camera lens, evoking momentarily forgotten loss, stirring up unrest. There are the formal, nationalistic and uniform expressions: the monuments and cemeteries. And then there are the personal: the mementos, the letters, poems, flowers, and wreaths. Stevens's memorial of the war is not a mere bookkeeping of the now faceless young soldiers; more so, the collection organizes what is left behind and after.

There is a desire to give coherence to the human experience of loss. Stevens's photographs however, resist intellectual lucidity despite the flat, depthless medium. Her image of Menin Gate, the British Memorial to the Missing in Belgium, looms awe-inspiringly above the viewer. The lines cut sharply into the sky; the names etched on the walls are barely recognizable, lost on the surface of the edifice like the soldiers' lives that have been embedded into a mass historical narrative.

The photographs place emphasis on the manner in which people mourn. Spatially dominant in Stevens's photographs are tokens (letters, poems, and photographs) left behind by mourners. As a result, we see images both of distance and intimacy.

There is a respectful and elegant detachment in the photography yet an inescapable involvement. Viewers are kept at a safe distance from the uniform, institutional interment of the lost and at the same time, they are reminded of their own loss, that the

anonymous, random juxtaposition of letters on the memorials are one's own family.

Stevens relies only on ambient light. The photographs display little contrast; there are only hazy shades of gray. The visible grains of the photographs have their own dynamics, each stirring and positioning itself into objects of stark immobility and solidification: statues, monuments, and tombstones. The results are images that express the same ambiguity and perplexity of its content. The images, like the war memorials they represent and the viewers that witness, have not quite settled.

All the images are evacuated of human life but not of spirit. They have an elegiac respectability yet palpable sensation. It is cold and clammy. The soil is wet. The air is frigid.

And as one is inclined to find another warm body when chill creeps in, so do the disturbed visitors of the exhibit. Lingering among the sharp, monumental lines and bare branches of trees is not the spirit of the lost soldiers but rather one's own conscience.

In lieu of a guestbook, the exhibit provides small note cards upon which visitors may express their own memorial. The cards, left on a molding below the photographs — alongside others written from previous exhibitions — proves to be an exhibition of its own. Despite the concentrated subject matter of this particular exhibit on the European memory of the first world war, people wrote to and on behalf of their grandfathers and uncles from different wars, reassuring them of their immortality. Some seek peace; others bestow it. And then there are those that seek answers: why it happened, why is it happening, and how we can let it happen. There are a few that call to mind the recent election and its anticipated consequences.

Stevens initially intended to "explore the persistence of human memory." But the collection and, accordingly, its exhibition evoke not only the pain of history but also present-day anxieties.

As the bare landscapes of Stevens's photographs are haunted by the loss of World War I, today's war haunts the museum space.

Jane Alden Stevens's *Tears of Stone: WWI Remembered* will run through January 2, 2005 in the Johnson Museum.

