



Source: Tom Hyland, 'Battle wounds take hefty toll in Middle East', *Sun-Herald online*, 18/11/07.

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It's a perverse, closeted centrefold.

A square of black cloth covers the floor, above which are three trestle tables. The tables are also covered with thick, black cloth—blankets, I think. One table sits forward slightly. Here, the blanket is pulled up at its corners, so that it doesn't get in the way of the photograph's subject. There are two other trestle tables. The one on the right is also covered with a black blanket, which hangs loosely. This table is empty.

The scene is all held in by a long screen, itself covered in black fabric.

Four legless men sit—slump, really—on the blanket placed on the floor. And another seven men—also 'limbless'—sit in an arced line along the three tables behind. It is as if—and I can't decide, can't read the codes—they are trophies or prizefighters. They are naked; completely naked; full-frontal naked. The man second from right looks defiantly disaffected at this. He sits with his shortened thighs spread and his shoulders reaching back, his chin held firmly against his chest. With his prick squarely facing the camera, he makes an ambivalent display of his limblessness and his nakedness. The two men to his right seem more nonplussed, in their way. The second of these was a Salvation Army officer, apparently. He's the oldest of the lot: in his mid-thirties. He actually sits on his stumps. They were cut right at the top of his femurs, leaving messy scars. His hands are held behind. I guess they helped to prop up his precariously placed body. Most of the men in the row have their hands behind.

The one in this row that draws me in the most is the one second from left. He looks perplexed. He was the youngest of the group and wounded somewhere in France. He was a labourer and had a labourer's shoulders and arms. His arms are held tightly behind his back; his hands seem to be clasped. They make his shoulders protrude in this way that's both bizarre and beautiful. Thick folds of skin have been neatly pulled together at the points where his legs were removed, quite a bit above the knee. These terminals look like slits. They mirror the fold in his torso, created when his abdomen muscles came together and compressed. And when I look again at the slits of his legs they're almost perfect: perfectly mirroring his otherwise ideal wholeness.

To the left of this line of men is an ambiguous flash, created by a uniformed soldier's movement during exposure. You can hardly see him in the darkness of the room, except for the highlight of his forehead and nose,

caught by the strong lamp that washed the naked men in an undifferentiated glow. He's enigmatic, in both shape and effect. Perhaps he was there to prevent the men at the corner of the table from falling. But his movement and uniformed state contrast with the others' immobile nakedness.

The four men down below are each placed squarely against the trestles behind them. They can't use their arms properly to support themselves. They literally fall onto each other. Two of the men seem to embrace. The wounds of one of these have not yet healed; the stub of his left leg is still covered in thick patches of surgical bandage. His friend's wounds have healed completely. The thick, seamless stub of his left leg, raised as he slumps back for support is on full display. It reminds me of Manet's *Olympia*. His two stumps look as if they are flailing, in an image that seems transcendently obscene. To his left, the two remaining men come together at the head, in the way that heads do when two or more people try to squeeze into the picture frame. One of these men, a young man from Western Victoria, looks awkward and extremely truncated, with his heavily bandaged stumps and the foreshortening caused by the camera. His thick right arm—he too was a labourer—is folded over and across his body. It seems to have both stabilised his otherwise impossibly posed body and modestly protected it from view; my view.

As to why this photograph was taken I could not say. I know where: it was taken at Southall, England, probably on the ground floor of the hospital responsible for the men's care. The scenery, props, and so on, have been put together for the photograph and maybe it was just one of a number taken on that day: the day of naked, limbless men. Together, these photographs would have documented or enunciated (even if never 'publicly') a kind of 'limbless body culture'. They might have shown plainly, starkly, the ravages of war. But also the perverse discourse of personal and national vitalisation said to grow from those ravages.

You can't see this photograph. It is mostly hidden from view, no doubt because of remnant feelings of Victorian propriety. Perhaps these same feelings explain the disquiet of some of the men in the photograph. But maybe there's another reason it remains hidden. It suggests to me that the monstrous rhetoric of 'the ageless nature of sacrifice' will only stretch so far.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Shaune Lakin.*