

**Alister Hayman
Paul Smith — Artists Rifles**



The Regiment

In 1860 a "Corps of Artists" was formed by Edward Sterling, an art student at Carey's School of Art, consisting of painters, sculptors, musicians, architects and actors. The regiment was aptly titled "Artists Rifles", and amongst the distinguished "Artists" were John Millais, Lord Leighton, Holman Hunt and William Morris. In the years to follow many other memorable names were to join including Wilfred Owen and Brandon Thomas.

A total of 15,022 men passed through the Regiment during 1914—18, and 2,003 were killed. Some of these were volunteers direct from both the Royal College of Art and the Royal Academy.

In 1939 the Regiment was disbanded, re-forming in 1941 as the 21st Special Air Service Brigade, with the subheading "Artists". The regiment still wear the original Corps badge, comprising two heads : Mars — God of War, and Minerva — Goddess of Wisdom.

Rifles

Paul spent his secondary school years in Warminster, a garrison town with constant military activity. His oldest brother joined the army in 1983 and was a major influence upon Paul's deciding to follow suit. He signed up at the age of sixteen and after his initial training was posted to Germany, where he remained until 1990. After two years' service as an engineer, Paul was given the job of Regimental Photographer, mainly involving public relations work.

Both of Paul's brothers saw active service in the army and their role was acknowledged with honours. Keith was among front line troops during the Gulf war, but left in 1992, disillusioned with military life. His older brother, Steven completed service in 1990 but remains enthusiastic about the military.

Artist

After leaving the army Paul attended an arts foundation course before reading BA Hons Fine Art at Coventry University. In the first year of the course he undertook a self-initiated research project in Australia studying contemporary Aboriginal art and culture, an integral part of which required living in the outback with an Aboriginal community.

Upon completion of his second year at Coventry, Paul was awarded the Fuji/Halina bursary and spent one year as Photographer in Residence to the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. During the year Paul spent a considerable amount of time accompanying HRH Prince Philip and HRH Prince Edward travelling around the world and documenting the activities of the Award.

Paul graduated in 1995, using photography as his principle mode of expression and was subsequently offered a place at the Royal College of Art to study for an MA in photography. It was during this period that the series Artists Rifles was composed. The series was first shown in its entirety in the summer show of 1997 at the Royal College of Art. Charles Saatchi purchased the complete collection and has continued to collect Paul's work.

The Series

Paul's work is strangely familiar; it takes one off-guard with a seemingly conventional retelling of a war fantasy and the warrior hero.

The reiteration of worn archetypes becomes a foil, used to question the veracity of documentary war images, photography as a historical document, representations of wars. The inspiration comes from a working knowledge of the military and its apparent counter point in the fictional presentations of comic books, films and paintings. Paul's forte is the exploration of the lacuna between reportage and fiction.

All participants share a curious affinity — as clones their identities are subsumed within the unit. One is presented with an immortal soldier; playing hero, aggressor, villain and victor. In this role-play, Paul assumes the neutrality of an allegorical figure paying homage to the military ideal, the unquestioning individual willing to sacrifice all.

In his playful use of often familiar images, Paul's work questions the value attributed to the "Genuine", between the actual or merely accurate.

Obversely, as the connection between the visceral actuality of war and its representation becomes increasingly opaque, the fictional portrayal acquires a new resonance. In these tableaux there is no hierarchy; experience and fiction have equal status.

Working from sketches, a location and backdrop are selected. After rehearsing the shoot, camera angles adjusted and continuity taken into account, an assistant operates the camera. The more complex images employ a body double, allowing closer interaction between characters. The images are then scanned from 35mm negs and manipulated within Photoshop. Using masks, layers and cloning tools a "photo-real" image is created back onto film, then hand printed.

In game play, death leads to reincarnation

As an authorised version of events recedes, it is the personal and peculiar that emerge, encrusted with minor detail, shaped and reshaped by the creative process of memory. This is not a given fait accompli, but a continuum, or a dialectic between personal histories, fought or imagined.