ABOVE
Honiara Harbour
Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, 2009

BELOW
Tetara Patrol Camp
Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, 2009

JACQUI DURRANT
BUSINESS AS USUAL ARTIST EX DE MEDICI

GUNS AND HELMETS ARE TYPICAL FODDER FOR EX DE MEDICI, BUT AS OFFICIAL ARTIST FOR THE SOLOMON ISLANDS PEACEKEEPING MISSION SHE GOT CLOSER TO HER SOURCE THAN EVER BEFORE.
In the Solomons, de Medici found herself working in monsoonal downpours and resorted to using a waterproof Olympus camera to capture images intended to inform later studio work. However, photography has always been integral to de Medici’s practice and it is unsurprising that a photographic series also emerged, culled from the more than 2000 images she brought back to Australia. This series both documents the complexity of issues in the Solomons, and also raises serious questions as to the broader implications of the RAMSI intervention.

de Medici’s approach to photography is low-tech: “I’m interested in what’s being said rather than how it’s being said,” she says. Abhorring the notion that the Solomon Islands images should fit any artistic paradigm, she was more concerned with their accessibility: “Because the work is going to the AWM, it’s got to be open to people who don’t ‘get’ art.” Her only creative concession was to set the camera on an automatic panorama mode that allowed three shots to be roughly knitted together.

“The camera likes to read left to right for this particular function (it would often choke when I tried to force it to read right to left),” she says. “The lens is at 28mm wide angle, and thus reads the first shot as the closest compositional point. Framing the image is always selected, but the camera also has something of a random anarchy in its methods of seeing what I roughly frame. Sometimes the camera exhibits great disobedience and reads whatever it wants and frames however it wants. It is a little bastard of a camera.”

de Medici has contentiously located the RAMSI mission within a wider socio-political and economic picture. The Solomon Islands is a country comprising an archipelago of nearly one thousand islands, located to the East of Papua New Guinea. The various islands have endured successive colonial and post-colonial incursions. By the 1990s, powerful international companies were exploiting the country’s primary resources of timber, fisheries and gold; also pressing fertile land into

In March 2009 ex de Medici was stationed for two weeks on the island of Guadalcanal, serving as official artist assigned by the Australian War Memorial (AWM) to the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). de Medici was officially a guest of the Australian Defence Force’s Peacekeeping Mission Operation Anode, and was stationed in the Solomon Islands between 10-22 March, 2009. The artist was well suited to the task, not least because of her long-standing aesthetic engagement with military hardware: guns and helmets are two of the iconic forms around which she has based uncompromising critiques of state-sanctioned violence, including Australia’s increasing involvement in the Solomon Islands, and yet they consciously risked that the works produced might challenge the political rhetoric of the RAMSI Peacekeeping Mission, and yet they eschewed thematic constraints.
In 1942 Guadalcanal was the site of one of the most brutal military campaigns of WWII, and De Medici's image of decaying tanks illustrates what is still a commonplace sight in Guadalcanal - the detritus of battle. While Americans continue to celebrate their historic victory (their pilgrimages offer some tourist revenue), scant attention is paid to the costs of the Japanese and American.
service for palm oil plantations. This ‘economic development’ saw an increasing dislocation of rural subsistence economies, disputes over customary land tenure, massive deforestation, a river-polluting cyanide spill at the Gold Ridge mine in 1998, and the most fractional economic returns to communities.

In late 1997, violence broke out between the indigenous people of Guadalcanal and those from the neighbouring island of Malaita. The conflict is often described as ‘ethnic’, which belies tensions arising from the uneven distribution of benefits derived from the export of primary commodities. Guadalcanal is resource rich, while densely populated Malaita is comparatively poor. This caused thousands of Malaitans to relocate to Guadalcanal, where they became a source of cheap labour. There is also economic inequality on Guadalcanal itself, with the Weather Coast being historically ‘underdeveloped.’

The conflict was largely confined to the national capital of Honiara and other parts of Guadalcanal. It brought widespread human suffering, including the violent eviction and displacement of more than 20,000 Malaitans. The provision of basic services ground to a halt, and the primary commodity-dependent economy almost collapsed. The government issued a call for international assistance, and in 2003, Australia deployed RAMSI - comprising Australian Federal Police and Australian Defense Force personnel, as well as civilian advisers - served with the immediate task of restoring law and order. Personnel from other Pacific Forum nations joined the Australian contingent. RAMSI was unanimously endorsed by the Solomon Islands Parliament, and has since enjoyed high levels of support among Islanders. The higher level of security also saw a return of foreign businesses.

Arriving in Honiara, de Medici found the signs of renewed business interest in the Solomons both arresting and unsettling: “The trade presences - the next group of colonisers - were very obvious in Honiara Harbour, with its city of lurking ships anchored half a kilometre off-shore, Chinese and Taiwanese concrete buildings and funded ‘community’ projects, Christian education compounds, trucks with logs lumbering through to the harbour,” she observes. “It’s all going on, and the Solomon people remain without sewerage, clean water, and good health services.”
Although Honiara was “pretty much barred [to her and official photographer Glen Campbell], except from the inside of a troop carrier,” a number of photographs bare witness to the nature of these trade relations and the attendant environmental degradation.

In *Honiara Harbour. Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands* (2009), the predatory presence of colossal purse seiner ships anchored in the bay is coupled with a vista of an ad hoc shipping container terminal on the foreshore. The implication is that the foreign-owned factory ‘motherships’ are capable of processing tens of thousands of tonnes of slip-jack tuna, *Bonito* (a fish traditionally of great spiritual significance to many Islanders) in one voyage, rendering Honiara’s lack of port infrastructure irrelevant. The image also alludes to the underlying politics of the situation: that, for example, the Taiwan Tuna Association holds substantial fishing agreements with Solomon Islands government to fish in their exclusive economic zone, agreements no doubt smoothed by Taiwan’s substantial donations to ‘Constituency Development Funds’ given directly to politicians to be spent at their discretion.¹

In *Honiara Harbour. Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands* (2009), giant clamshells harvested for export as garden ornaments lie scattered around a rusty shipping container, “just lying around like rubbish... all hidden up the back of an industrial estate,” explains de Medici. The story encapsulated in the image is grotesque, particularly in the extravagant ends being served. Meanwhile, the shipping container signifies the Solomons’ ever-increasing reliance on imported consumables, exchanged for the most fragile natural resources.

If these photographs aren’t memorial enough to the destruction of life, another foreshore scene of a front-end loader amid piles of rainforest logs, testifies to the deforestation that is taking place across the country. As with the hollowed-out clamshells, the depth of sadness in this image lies in its sense of so much lost for so little. Logging contracts have been subject to downwards market pressure and systemic corruption at both provincial and the highest levels of government, and the forests on Guadalcanal are so dangerously over-exploited (mainly by south-east Asian multinationals) that the current Prime Minister, Derek Sikua, believes they will be virtually depleted within the next few years.²

Once stationed at RAMSI headquarters situated in the former

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THE SCENE OFFERS AN UNCOMFORTABLE DUALITY: THE WARM PARTICIPATION OF ARMY PERSONNEL IN A VILLAGE SOCCER GAME; WHOSE PRESENCE SIMULTANEOUSLY IMPOSES UPON VILLAGE LIFE THE PRESSURES OF ARMED OCCUPATION AND SURVEILLANCE. WHAT DO THE CHILDREN WATCHING THE MATCH FROM THE SIDELINES MAKE OF RAMSI?

BELOW
Tetare community vs ADF soccer game. Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, 2009
SITUATED WITHIN THIS DELIBERATELY WIDE-ANGLED VIEW OF LIFE IN THE SOLOMONS ARE SCENES WHICH OFFER AN INSIGHT INTO THE DAILY LIVES OF RAMSI PERSONNEL. IMAGES OF FRESH-FACED SOLDIERS UNDERTAKING EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES – LINING UP IN THE MESS TENT OR UNDERTAKING VEHICLE MAINTENANCE – ARE MADE VIVID BY THE NARRATIVE QUALITY OF THE COMPOSITIONS, WITH THEIR FREQUENTLY ODD REPETITIONS AND DISJUNCTIONS. MANY JUXTAPOSE A POINT OF ACTION (SUCH AS SOMEONE GETTING A CREW CUT) WITH A CROWD OF ON-LookERS, SUGGESTING THE INORDINATE AMOUNT OF ‘STANDING AROUND’ THAT IS FREQUENTLY THE LOT OF SOLDIERS ENGAGED IN OCCUPATION RATHER THAN BATTLE.
Guadalcanal Beach Resort, de Medici joined a series of community visits, during which she gained her first impressions of the daily lives of ordinary people living with RAMSI: “a co-presence of 15 foreign countries... all insinuated into this small Pacific country, and all armed.” In Tetare community vs ADF soccer game (2009) we see the basic living conditions of village life, now subjected to “the presence of camo-ed soldiers.” The scene offers an uncomfortable duality: the warm participation of army personnel in a village soccer game; whose presence simultaneously imposes upon village life the pressures of armed occupation and surveillance. What do the children watching the match from the sidelines make of RAMSI? These ideas are echoed with great subtlety in Community Liaison (2009), in which soldiers observe a local church service from the rear pews.

de Medici was also taken on patrols to palm oil plantations. Palm oil has become the Solomons’ major export crop, with deforestation facilitating the spread of plantations. While some are small and locally owned, most belong to multinational companies, such as the Malaysian-backed Guadalcanal Plains Palm Oil Ltd (GPPO). GPPO pays rents and royalties to the customary landholders, but it has come under repeated attacks; their mill sabotaged during the tensions, their head offices burnt down. (Their offices were burned down for the second time on 25 July 2009, after de Medici’s visit). While this information goes some way to explaining the cluster of army ‘hoochies’ camouflaged among the palms in Tetare Patrol Camp (2009), the image also asks who the AFD is serving by guarding what is principally a foreign-owned asset.

Following another line of discussion, Amtracks and Stranglers. Tetare Beach (2009) reflects on the Solomons’ historical experience of military force. In 1942 Guadalcanal was the site of one of the most brutal military campaigns of WWII, and de Medici’s image of decaying tanks illustrates what is still a commonplace sight in Guadalcanal - the detritus of battle. While Americans continue to celebrate their historic victory (their pilgrimages offer some tourist revenue), scant attention is paid to the costs of the Japanese and American occupations incurred by the Solomons people. Amtracks and Stranglers breaks the historical silence.

“The Pacific War was thrust upon these people and their land, without consultation nor explanation,” de Medici says. “Suddenly their island home was strafed by bombs, bullets, machines and armies. Then they left, and left behind all their brokenness; ships sunk, tanks, guns, cannons, aeroplanes, thousands of tons of unexploded munitions including mustard gas cannisters, and mass burials of foreign armies (some 30,000 dead Japanese, English, Americans, Australians and the collaterally damaged Solomons people)."

While the wreckage of the tanks speak of the Solomons’ long history of being ‘junked’ by foreign powers (a recurrent theme in this series), in its latent historicism and inherent picturesque - the rusty patina of the tanks overgrown with vines - Amtracks and Stranglers is also a metaphor for the rhetoric of war as seen the glorifying lens of history.

Situated within this deliberately wide-angled view of life in the Solomons are scenes which offer an insight into the daily lives of RAMSI personnel. Images of fresh-faced soldiers undertaking everyday activities
lining up in the mess tent or undertaking vehicle maintenance - are made vivid by the narrative quality of the compositions, with their frequently odd repetitions and disjunctions. Many juxtapose a point of action (such as someone getting a crew cut) with a crowd of onlookers, suggesting the inordinate amount of 'standing around' that is frequently the lot of soldiers engaged in occupation rather than battle.

De Medici speaks admiringly of those she met, and this sensibility is clearly mirrored in her photographs. "It is important to note that most of the soldiers we travelled with were very young (early to mid 20s), with a few older, more experienced men. Their conduct was gentlemanly and diplomatic at all times." She describes the Royal Tongan Marines in whose quarters she was stationed during her stay, as "respectful", adding, "They made the trip worth it."

Throughout the series there is some distinction between the individuals of the RAMSI contingent who are doing creditable jobs as peacekeepers, and RAMSI as the apparatchik of an Australian government bent on 'policing' the Pacific region. This contrast is a major source of tension within the series. De Medici usually reserves her most cutting criticism for political and economic systems in which power is maintained through violence (or its threat). In this series, her portraits of RAMSI personnel greatly problematise the role of the individual within the system.

When asked of her personal feelings in serving the RAMSI mission, de Medici says, 'I was existentially challenged... because I've worked with violence and weapons for so long [and] it's revolting to me. Going to the Solomons caused a crisis in my mind... It made it a bit easier for me that this is a "peacekeeping" mission, but anywhere there's a foreign armed force, there's a question mark that hangs over it.'

RAMSI has helped restore security and stability to the Solomon Islands, but this has come at its own cost. The sharpest edge of de Medici's photo essay is one that has us question the complicity of RAMSI in creating the conditions by which foreign multinationals, including those based in Australia, can return to business as usual in the Solomons - maximising profits and leaving environmental degradation and poverty in their wake. Seven years on, and the Solomon Islands, in de Medici's observation, is a country where 'everyone is still on their knees.' Her images of the RAMSI contingent coupled with the commercial activities of foreign companies and the physical reminders past military presences, asks a crushing question: Who will really benefit from the intervention?

"My head spins at the goings on in the world," de Medici says. "Good intentions/duty, bad intentions/privateers, sovereignty, golden resources and hungry exploitation, the state, strategies known and unknown."

De Medici remains surprised that the AWM - an institution for whom she has great respect - gave her the opportunity to produce this work. How it reacts to this particular 'memorialisation' of RAMSI remains to be seen.

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