eX de Medici:  
The jungle ... it just came alive

Diana Warnes

2. Interview with eX de Medici, conducted by Diana Warnes, 13 May 2009, AWM S04671
3. Interview with eX de Medici, conducted by Kris Kerchona and Diana Warnes, 7 May 2010, AWM PASU0292

eX de Medici has been coming to the Australian War Memorial since she was a child. When interstate relatives came to visit, it was inevitable that family excursions to Canberra's string of public institutions would take in the Memorial. With her siblings she would explore the galleries, where they were attracted to displays of taxidermy, uniforms, and medals, and the dioramas. The building itself also had appeal: “I think the Hall of Memory is one of the most spectacular rooms in the country and have done since early childhood.” The association with the Memorial continued throughout her life, from seeing a “fairly significant Hiroshima exhibition which attracted me when I was teenager and engaged in anti-nuclearism”, to photographing memorial marches along ANZAC Parade.

De Medici still visits the Memorial, in part lured by its “quietude”.1

Themes of war have pervaded her career as an artist and as a tattooist. She has tattooed military personnel for more than 20 years, marking countless bodies with personal motifs. Other clients request specific tattoos that tie them to a military event or group within the armed forces. The skill, technique, and patience involved in tattooing, from hand-drawn studies on paper to completing a polished, fine-edged permanent image on skin has fed into her work as an artist. Before tattooing, “I thought skill was craft and therefore to be mocked”.3 In the late 1990s, she started drawing on massive sheets of paper with watercolour, or pencil, interspersing delicate images of flora and fauna with emblems of conflict: weapons, helmets, skulls, bullets, and swastikas. Her intention was subversive, but straightforward. By making beautiful pictures of recognisable objects, complex messages are conveyed simply to the viewer. Through visual metaphors, her work is a sophisticated exploration about human desire for power and the capacity for violence and corruption.

It was de Medici’s combination of skill and an interest in conflict that lay behind the Memorial's
F88C Steyr (Bullpup) + Cordited (MS.WWII)
Handgrenades (Pineapples) Solomon Islands/
Guadalcanal, Gifu + Hell's Point

AWM ART94157
decision to appoint her as an official artist to the Solomon Islands. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) has been present in the Solomon Islands since 2003, when the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), commenced. However, this peacekeeping mission was not yet represented in the Memorial’s art collection. De Medici recalled of the appointment: “I just thought it was great, and I thought it was amazing that they would trust me enough to do it, because I have been known to be a troublemaker in the past.”

She was deployed to the Solomon Islands in March 2009, during the wettest weeks of the year. Continual drenching rain meant there was no chance of completing paintings or sketches out-of-doors. On a trip up to the Forward Operating Base at Rove Prison, a couple of soldiers set up a tarp for her to work under, but “the more it rained, the more my picture just washed away. The tarp grew heavy with water and sagged just inches above my head.” She did not mind the intense humidity and was struck by the jungle vegetation. A passage in her journal records her delight and frustration: “Lots of strangler figs, strangling everything around them - supporting elk & staghorns high above. There are hundreds of different types of ferns & spotted trees - species I have never seen before. Damn that I don’t have any field guides!!”

Patrol visits were often brief, so she had very limited time to complete any work on the spot. Forced to adapt to the conditions, de Medici took hundreds of photographs across Guadalcanal. In her personal journal, she also wrote of her observations, her experiences, and the stories from the people she met.

The ADF were entirely responsible for looking after de Medici while she was deployed. She was dependent on personnel to provide her with access to their daily activities and to locations around Guadalcanal. She was taken on community liaison visits to attend church services, and to see a soccer match and a temporary medical clinic. One patrol visit went to a village located downstream from Gold Ridge, a foreign-owned gold-mining operation. De Medici recalled the experience in her journal:

"It was a lovely place, lots of houses, clean neat gardens, flowers planted and food growing, pigs in pens. The children looked healthy. What looked like a lovely fast flowing river below the village, was in fact poisoning everybody. The head man showed me the cyanide burns on his legs, asking if I had any medicine for him.”

The incident later appeared in a brush and ink drawing of an Australian soldier, Downstream/Gold Ridge gold mine. His twisted form seems to represent the frustration and helplessness of his liaison role between an international corporation and a Solomon Islands elder.

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4. For a discussion about the social and political events leading up to the arrival of RAMSI and the work conducted in the first 12 months of the operation, see Philip Adams, "Late Night Live in the Solomon Islands", Radio National, ABC Radio, six-part series, 13 May - 17 June 2004, produced by Chris Bullock http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/lnl/specials/solomons/ (accessed 28 July 2010)
5. Interview with eX de Medici, 7 May 2010, AWM PASU0292
6. eX de Medici, Journal entry, 13 March 2009, AWM PRO4638, p. 45
7. eX de Medici, Journal entry, 11 March 2009, AWM PRO4638, p. 33
8. eX de Medici, Journal entry, 21 March 2009, AWM PRO4638, p. 69
Other visits went to “outdoor museums”, places to which Solomon Islanders had dragged wreckage left behind after the Second World War. Locals would charge a small entrance fee to see rusting aircraft and amtraks and artillery. De Medici was also taken to Hell’s Point, the site of the battle of the Tenaru in 1942 and now the decommissioning site for unexploded ordnance (UXO). Years after the war ended, leftover UXOs are still regularly found. ADF personnel train Solomon Islands police to safely decommission them. This is represented in the watercolour F88C Steyr (Bulpup) + Cordited (MS.WWII) Handgrenades (Pineapples) Solomon Islands/ Guadacanal, Gifu + Hell’s Point. An F88 Steyr, the rifle used by the ADF, lies on a bed of grenades that have had the cordite removed. This layering of weapons and locations merges past and present military actions in the Solomon Islands into a unified story.

The headquarters for the Combined Task Force is at Guadalcanal Beach Resort (GBR), a former military base for the Americans from the Second World War. De Medici was housed there with the Royal Tongan Marines. She formed a strong bond with the group, talking with them into the night and giving drawing classes. Good-natured, respectful, professional and supremely fit, the young men were cheekily aware of their physical presence, as one marine told de Medici, “our god loves us, look at how he made the Tongan”. She completed a number of brush and ink portraits of the marines. They give an indication of the men’s casual nature, as they relax with a cigarette, or sit around playing the guitar and reading, as in Royal Tongan Marines GBR Quick Response Group.

To gain an understanding of the history and recent events in the Solomon Islands, de Medici read widely throughout the commission. This included the national paper, the Solomon Star, British protectorate diaries, and histories and the Second World War memoirs of former US Marines. While deployed, she observed not just the activities of the current military presence, but also a socially and politically fragile state.

When departing the Solomon Islands, de Medici wrote of “stunning rainforest hardwoods, great fish, gold. It has been clear on this trip that the extraction of these resources will leave (are leaving) the landscape listing like the rotting machines left behind by wars & scalpers all over this island - smashing the deepest felt values of islander culture.” The culmination of personal experience and extensive research prompted de Medici to create a series designed to explore the histories of intervention in the Solomon Islands.

Back in her Canberra studio, de Medici worked from photographs displayed on a computer screen. Drawing from photographs is not her preferred style, but it was a working method born from necessity. The resulting watercolours and brush, pen and ink drawings are often a “crush” of several photographs - a ploy that merges numerous sites and events into a unified image.
Cpl Bob Revermann and Solomon Islanders integrates about ten photographs. The drawing features the exchange of a ration pack on a beach littered with decaying machines from the war. In the background are foreign-owned fishing vessels. The triptych Vilu Military Museum also combines multiple images, including the open air museum north-west of Honiara and the Gold Ridge gold mine. Both works compile images that show RAMSI, but also the effects of the war, overseas investment, and the export of natural resources.

Colonisation is a central theme in this series, and de Medici perceives several distinct layers of intervention: from the era when the Solomon Islands was a British protectorate to when invading forces arrived during the Second World War, from foreign investment in the islands’ natural resources to the arrival of RAMSI. Tetanus, a composite work of over 25 photographs, depicts just this complex history. Barefoot children play among UXOs and clamber over rusting American aircraft and amtraks. Through this scene wanders an ADF patrol. In this setting the soldiers appear as nothing but mere tourists, fleeting passers-by that represent yet another layer in the tumultuous and continuing re-colonisation of the country. In the background a logging operation is underway. The dense jungle has been clear-felled, the timber now stacked in massive piles. Climbing among them is a young Solomon Islands man, who brandishes a bush knife. Tetanus reveals the destruction caused by colonisation and the exploitation of land that continues to this day.

De Medici has been painting weapons for over a decade and distinguishes rifles as a type of “species”. By overlaying a weapon with the microscopic structure of a moth, de Medici creates an evolutionary parallel between the natural world and rifles. In Bullpup, a large scale watercolour of an F88 Steyr, the scope of the rifle features the pelt of a moth found only in the Solomon Islands. In her journal, de Medici explains: “The Sol. moth is a relatively plain little thing, a pest species, a borer of nut trees. I thought a pest species relevant. The moth “pelt” on the scope serves as part [of] the dialogue around the art of camouflage, something Nature operates with as part evolution, part survival.” The rest of the rifle has been rendered with three different types of ADF camouflage, including the jungle pattern that will soon be phased out. By painting the sling of Bullpup with the flags and emblems of countries and organisations involved in RAMSI, de Medici reinforces a history of intervention in the Solomon Islands.

De Medici does not usually work with the human figure. Aside from completing a portrait commission in 2000 of Midnight Oil for the National Portrait Gallery: “I haven’t worked with the human figure for 25 years since art school and doing life drawing is compulsory. I ditched it as soon as it wasn't compulsory.” Drawing the figure was a challenge, but it is clear de Medici wanted to represent particular individuals she had met while in the Solomon Islands. On patrols she observed of the Australian peacekeepers:

13. eX de Medici, Journal entry, 10 October 2009, AWM PR04698, p. 160
14. Interview with eX de Medici, 7 May 2010, AWM PASU0292
“I felt as though they were unobtrusive, they weren’t threatening, they were very good at diplomacy, they allowed the Solomon Islanders to speak, they didn’t sort of push their way around, they were accommodating and competent young fellows.” They were also incredibly fit men. The portraits double as an exploration of youth and masculinity, as in *Maritime facility* where two soldiers are pictured playing with a puppy, or *Rove crew* -2.

*Malaria Central* is composite group portrait of a patrol at Tetere, a Forward Operating Base east of Honiara. Portraits of soldiers are grouped together to demonstrate camp life and daily activities of patrols. On one level the work is an endorsement of the professionalism of the ADF within RAMSI. Yet in an unsettling, layered composition, the backdrop is a foreign-owned palm oil plantation. Visible through the tree trunks, the stark reds, yellows, and whites of the flags of China, the United States, and Japan dominate the scene. These symbols of foreign powers seem to present a controlling influence over RAMSI.16

De Medici’s finely rendered watercolours and pen, brush and ink drawings critically merge history with landscape, military technology, and human interaction. By bringing together objects and locations, this series offers a visual history of the events that inform the current fragile state of the Solomon Islands, the complex nature of peacekeeping, and the legacy of colonisation.