

Two exhibitions at the DLI.....

Zed Nelson and Henry Tonks,

Opposite bodies.

Once more, the DLI museum and gallery curate exhibitions that are both thought-provoking and artistically stimulating. Anyone who has a love of British Art of the first half of the 20th Century will know of the legendary Henry Tonks. It was Tonks who taught the generation of British artists who dominated that period: William Clausen; Spencer Gore; Augustus and Gwen John; Stanley Spencer; Rex Whistler; Mark Gertler; Dora Carrington; David Bomberg; William Coldstream; Isaac Rosenberg and both John and Paul Nash. What is less known is that he was, by “trade”, a surgeon and had been the house surgeon for Frederick Treves (of Elephant Man fame). It was to the Royal Army Medical Corp that he returned during the 1914-1918 war. As a surgeon he worked with Dr Gillies at the Sidcup hospital during the revolutionary period that Gillies and his team were able to perform such minor miracles of reconstructive surgery. In 1919, Tonks was once more an official war artist attached to the British Expeditionary Force in Archangel (Russia) during the early days of the Russian Civil War.

Zed Nelson, on the other hand, is young and skilled and is very much at the cutting edge of contemporary photography. His latest work... *Hackney, A Tale of Two Cities*... is currently exhibiting at the London Festival of Photography whilst his *South Sudan, Birth of a Nation* has only recently been published. The key work that brought him recognition was the 2010 book *Gun Nation*; a critical analysis of the American gun culture.

Zed has won several prestigious awards including France's *Visa d'Or*; the *Alfred Eisenstaedt Award* (USA) and a first prize in the World Press Photographic Competition.

What of the two exhibits? They could hardly be seen as mirror images. Nelson photographs the unreal in-so-much-as each of his subjects is dissatisfied with themselves and wish to change what they have been “given”, whilst Tonks sketches those who are trying to return to some sort of normality. Gillies employed lengthy processes often stretching and making a Swiss-Roll of skin next to the damaged area so that later he could graft and model. This constructive work is in direct opposition to the pot of excised fat and the patient

waiting, complete with marking on the skin preparatory to removal, of Nelson's subjects. One man, photographed in his surgical gown sitting on the edge of the operating table needs a few nips and tucks he claims, because his competition are all twenty years younger and he needs an edge! The woman in the blue gown waiting breast augmentation and a face lift seems impervious to the blood stains on her gown. Nine year old Katie from Texas looks out of the frame straight into our own reality with empty eyes; the mascara and eye-shadow immaculate, hair blond and well-ordered; all the associated beauty accoutrements in place. She's won her Pageant and you know the future is mapped out for her.

It's an uncomfortable pairing these two exhibitions but one that works well. The counterpoint may seem a little too obvious and some may think it's using the proverbial hammer to crack a nut but what other accompaniment could there have been for Nelson's images? The "Love Me" exhibition is the dominant one and the first one to be seen. To reach Tonks and his About Face you must immerse yourself in self-immolation. Surely, it would be crass to have a second exhibition of any other subject. Who else but a soldier saved from total rejection by society for his shattered looks could accompany a woman who has her toes cut off so she can wear Jimmy Choo shoes.....?

John Cogan June 2012

'Love Me' by Zed Nelson and 'About Face' by Henry Tonks are at the DLI Museum Art Gallery until 24th June 2012