

Stuart Griffiths, *The Myth of the Airborne Warrior*, Photoworks, 2011, pp64, price £15.00, ISBN 978-1-903796-45-0

© Maria Fusco

Published in *Art Monthly*, No 352, Dec-Jan 2011-12

Photographer Stuart Griffiths was a paratrooper in Northern Ireland from the late 1980s to early 1990s. Born in 1972, this reckons Griffiths would have been only sixteen or seventeen when he began service, *The Myth of the Airborne Warrior* then is the sure-shot memory of someone who was acting at being an adult.

In her novel *Berg* Ann Quin writes, “Threading experience through imaginative material, acting out fictitious parts, or choosing a stale-mate for compromise ... But remember society owes you nothing, therefore, doing yourself in isn’t the answer, no reward for the resentment, and how would I know if it had proved freedom?” Griffiths’ book is in some personal way a “reward for the resentment” of time spent in the military, his photographs embody the hasty timbre of vocational opportunism, the macho jollity of a stag party, the acrid tang of adolescence, and yet, they endure to be recuperated into a document capturing Griffiths’ frustration, regret and desire to remember *properly*.

Paratroopers were the most feared soldiers in Northern Ireland during the late Troubles. Working-class Catholic communities — such as the one I grew up in, in North Belfast — were both viciously atavistic to and awfully cowered by the regiment, whose presence was branded by their distinctive maroon berets and ferocious bellicosity; *The Myth of the Airborne Warrior* operates to puncture presuppositions of such military professionalism.

Led by a series of obviously amateur photographs of Griffiths’ fellow squaddies on Northern Irish streets and inside the barracks, together with a memoiristic, evenly-delivered prose text and five facsimilies of political ephemera from the era, the book is not the only of its kind to

have been produced recently, *People in trouble laughing pushed to the ground* by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, published by MACK in Belfast earlier this year, extracted and cropped images from the Belfast Exposed community photographic archive. Interesting to note both books focus on the act of editing as their primary creative methodology, and that in a time when many Northern and Southern Irish artists are not working in a direct way with the Troubles, these UK-based artists are.

As in warfare itself the grotesque is worked well in this book, in one extraordinary photograph, two young soldiers stand shoulder to shoulder in a field at dusk or dawn. It's been raining. One's too pretty to wear a uniform, the other too handsome to get killed. They seem to be awaiting orders off-frame from the right. Clenched between them, tight in one of their fists, is a giant white puffball mushroom, bigger than their berets, picturesque as a parasol, illuminated by a strong flash in the rural half-light. On the facing page, the humiliation of a gay soldier is described, "... 'respirator squad' would visit him, (senior members of the platoon who would wear respirators and green army towels) and attack him with bed block sticks, shoving the stick up his arse and giving him a heavy beating. They set alight to his hair ... "

Whilst it's not at all unsurprising that the level of brutalization necessary to train a soldier may also be meted out on a regular basis to maintain him, Griffiths' recollection does much to point out who is allowed to do what: "senior members" have agency, junior members — especially those who are considered weak or 'abnormal' — do not. "And so it goes" as Kurt Vonnegut might sigh.

The book's editor Gordon MacDonald worked collaboratively with Griffiths to shape the confessional prose with a strong visual method of self-acknowledged censorship, printing thick black marker pen lines across substantial portions of the text with, as MacDonald puts it, "the innocuous deleted and the violent, unpleasant and disturbing left untouched." I find this aspect of the publication somewhat disappointing. I can of course appreciate the rightful desire to reverse cliché, to procedurally address the potential failure of textual representation, but if as Griffiths himself writes, "We all felt, like blowing our brains out. In war it's 95% boredom and 5% mayhem", I would have been (perhaps perversely) interested to read more of the nauseating state which primes restless young men to violence.

Just as prize fighters are deprived of visual stimuli, trained in beige quarters to sharpen their force, so too the soldiers' tedium, the mundanity of their day to day life, must have strategically readied them to get stuck in all the more enthusiastically when the time came, and even to devise scenarios where tension could be released. Griffiths notes this, "Bobby Sands paintings and other murals, and some of the guys would go with paint bombs and deface these murals just to provoke a reaction..." Whilst this — from my own memory — is a sanitized version what the paratroopers *actually* did to "provoke a reaction" from Nationalist communities, Griffiths is genuinely attempting to outline the complex causal processes and procedures of boredom and fear, and how they are institutionally fashioned into acts of aggression.

After finishing reading this book I realized I had accepted the whole of Griffiths' fractured memoir as true. Perhaps this is because there is photographic evidence, or because the stereotype of the brutalized squaddie is present, or most importantly, because of the double-bind of the reformed narrator, a soldier who has questioned with conscience what he did and why, as Patrick Kavanagh writes "Posterity has no use / For anything but the soul." On reflection, I do believe the words in *The Myth of the Airborne Warrior*, I'm just not sure I believe in them.