

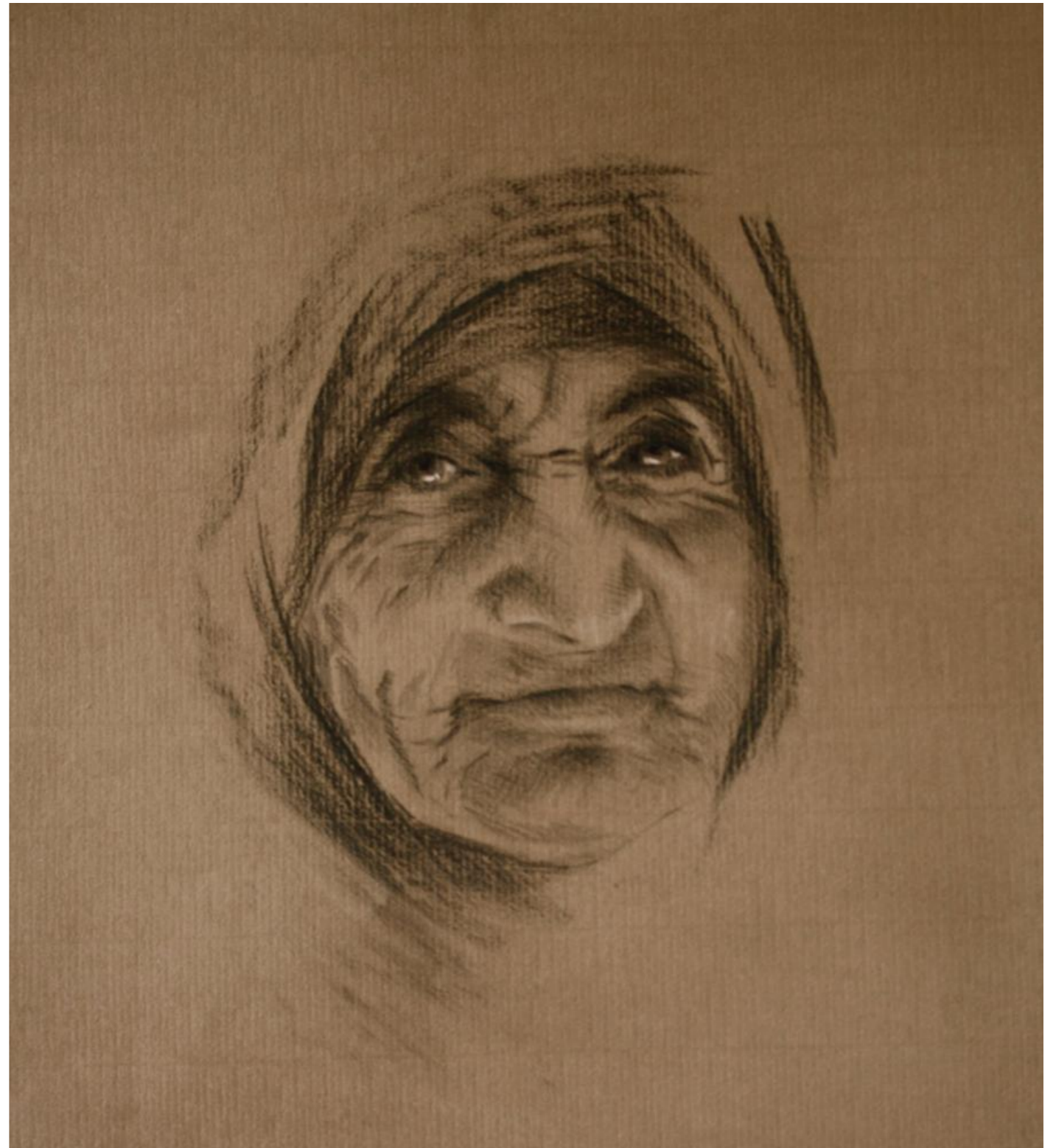
Hope that Haunts

An Artist's Journey

By

Arabella Dorman

Al Basrah, Iraq, 2006



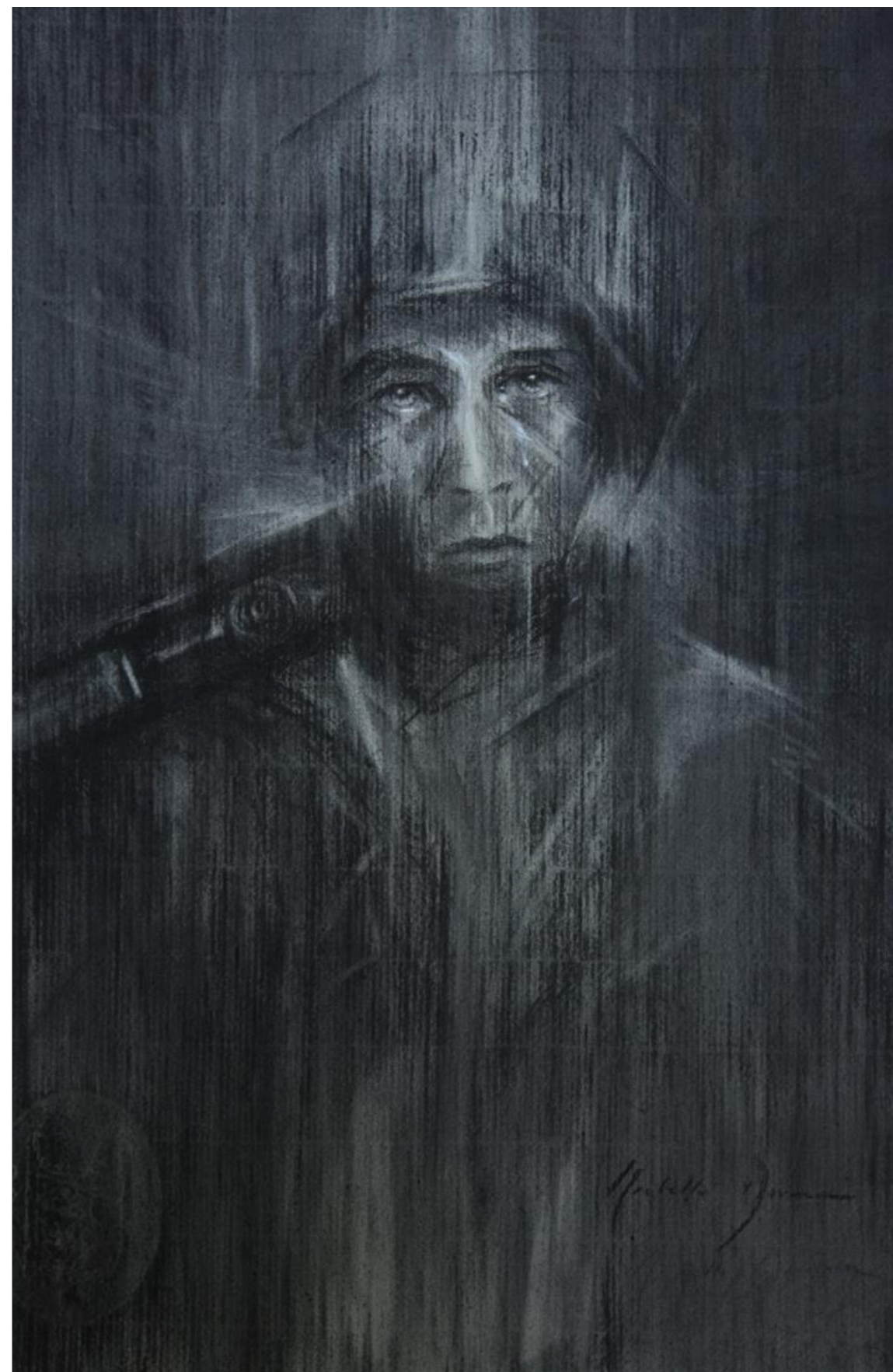
Arabella Dorman

“A work of art must be an axe that shatters the frozen seas within us.”

Since time immemorial, artists have been storytellers, offering commentary on their contemporary world, holding up a mirror to their times.

As a portrait painter and a war artist, I have always been fascinated by the ability of the arts to explore what it means to be human today.

Like an unflinching gaze into that mirror, war offers an acute distillation of the human condition, an intensification of the very bad, and the good. It exposes the brutal cruelty that humans are capable of, but, in moments of startling beauty, it also reveals our astonishing capacity for endurance, courage, resilience and love.



Through A Glass Darkly, Afghanistan, 2009



Arabella Dorman embedded with the Queen's Royal Lancers, on the Iraq / Iranian Border

My journey as an artist has taken me to Iraq (2006), Afghanistan (2009 –13) and more recently to Lesvos (2015) Palestine and Gaza (2017), Syria and Lebanon (2018).

As a portrait painter, I believe drawing, like music, to be one of the most democratic of art forms, immediately accessible and universally comprehended. Throughout my travels, I

have always relied on being able to create a quick portrait sketch as a way to break down any tension that my presence might create.

This allows me to find some stillness within the confusion of war, and to focus on the individual narratives within the collective violence.

In doing so I am able to listen to the unheard stories of the soldiers and civilians behind the frontline, and seek to depict the extraordinary bravery, sacrifice and hope that can be found hidden, in the shadows of war.

Such courage can be best summed up in the words of Corporal Sean Reeve, written to his parents in a pre-deployment letter,

“Please trust me,

No matter what the circumstances of my death,

No matter how fast, how slow,

I am Strong.

My only suffering will be the realisation that

I will not see my family and friends again.

I will not suffer for fear or pain.

Such feeling will not touch me.”

Sean was killed on the last day of his tour.



I Am Strong, 2012



He Was My Friend, Afghanistan 2009



Faces of the Fallen, 2012



Before First Light, Sangin, Afghanistan, 2009



Holding On, Afghanistan, 2009

For the Reeve family, as for every family who have lost loved ones to war, their grief is boundless; for the soldiers left behind, their lives are often haunted by memories of what they have seen, survivor's guilt, flashbacks and trauma.

Sean was killed by sniper fire in Afghanistan, then and now, one of the most dangerous places in the world. It is a country that you leave a part of yourself in, and you take a part of with you.

In its haunting beauty, it is a land as hospitable as it is hostile, as generous as it is unsparing. It is a country of war-hardened warriors and young men who have been weaned on a diet of violence, yet who bring their wounded child into a British medical post wrapped in the tenderest of embraces.

It is a country of schoolmasters who, in forty years of war, have never missed a day's teaching, of girls who daily risk their lives to walk several miles to school. In a land where the Taliban outlawed the education of girls and music, I stumbled across a sight of such poignant joy and defiance that it has become one of my defining images of hope. In the bitterly cold shadows of the soaring Hindu Kush, with portentous storm clouds gathering overhead, I came across a group of schoolgirls dancing.



The Dance, Afghanistan, 2010

Girls who turned to me and said,

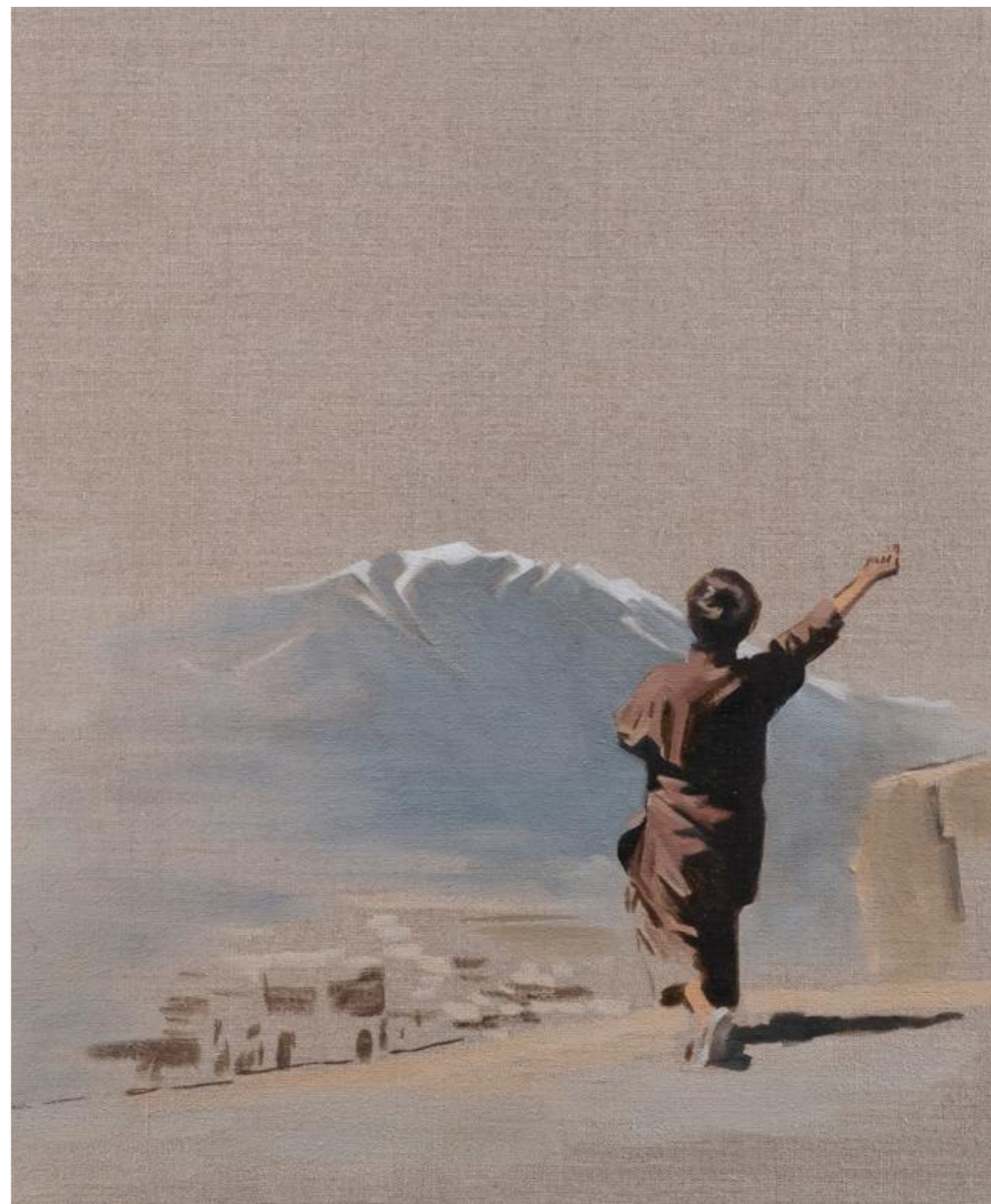
“Tell them, when you go home, that we are not just a land of men and beards and war. We are girls who love to dance and dream of wearing red lipstick”.

This scene came vividly back to life in Syria last year, where, amidst the ruins of Aleppo, I came across young men holding hands and dancing, who told me in broken English “you can hold onto your sorrow, or you can dance.” The thirteenth century Persian mystic Rumi wrote,

“Dance, when you're broken open. Dance, if you've torn the bandage off. Dance in the middle of the fighting. Dance in your blood. Dance when you're perfectly free.”

My work is about finding that spark of human courage that will let us dance, while my interest lies in the connective thread that binds humanity together, rather than the destructive forces of war which so devastatingly pull us apart.

Today, we see another force pulling our world apart. The coronavirus crisis. A crisis that is affecting us all. A crisis in which the old certainties are being shaken and we find ourselves in a permanent state of the unknown. At such a time, I find myself reflecting on the lessons we can learn from those brave dancers, or from the women I met in the devastated city of Homs, who told me...



Above the City, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2014

“ We make from destruction, construction, from death, life. This is the will of the Syrian people. We love life, we love peace.”

The voices that I heard amongst those still living in Syria were not entirely broken, they were those of defiance, of anger, of longing. Longing to heal what is shattered, mend what is broken, gather what is scattered. It was profoundly humbling to listen to a people who have lived through seven long years of war, speaking of their hope for peace.

Hope, an indescribable force that is most readily encountered in some of the most afflicted parts of the world. In the darkest times, hope is not a gift but something we earn through resisting the ease of despair, through cutting windows and opening doors, that open to new possibilities. And this, in essence, is what I try to do with my work. I try to find the light that burns brightest in the darkest corners of existence. There is an old Eastern saying

“If God is like the sun, he not only gives warmth and light, he also casts long shadows.”

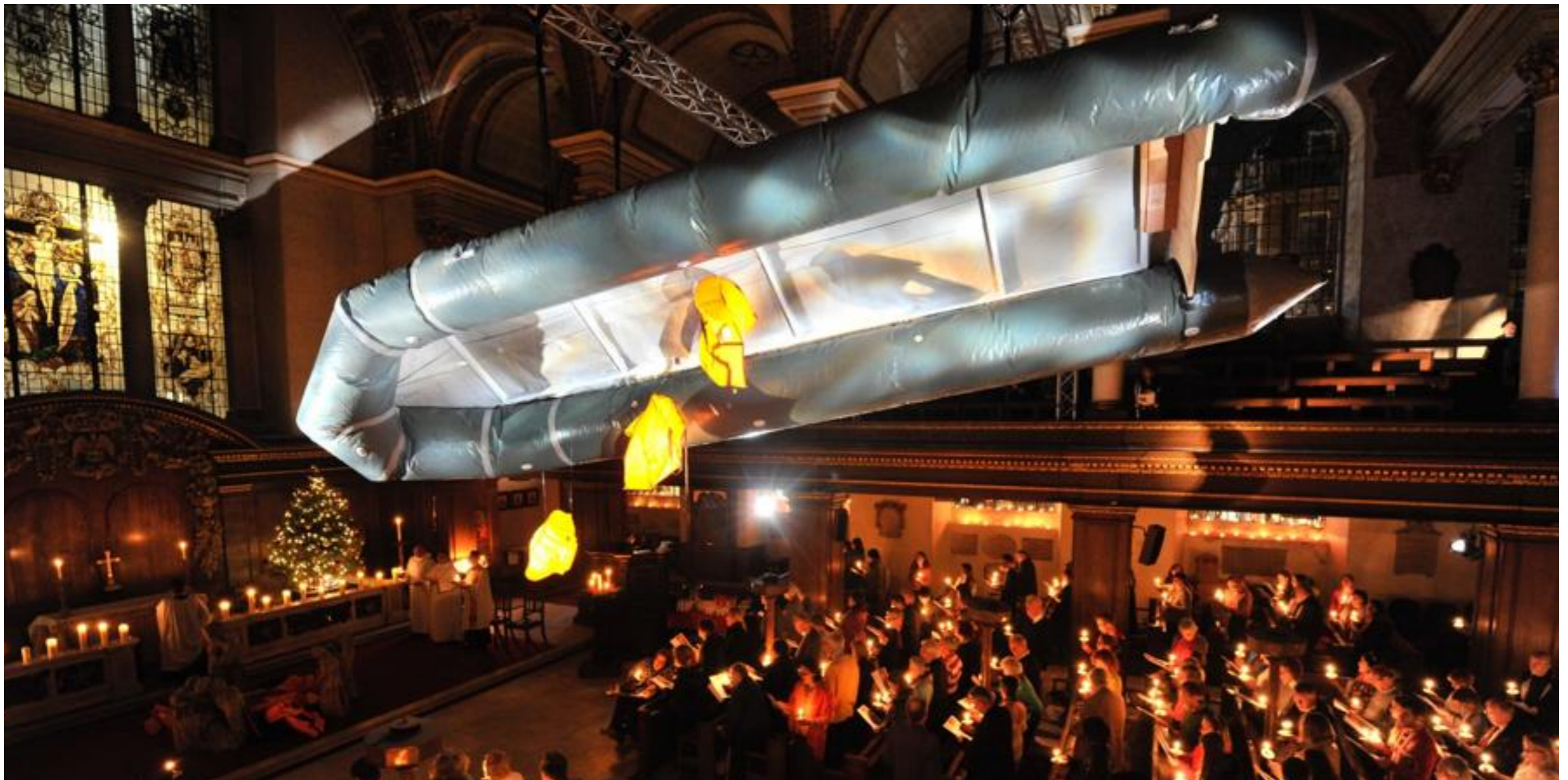
War lies low in those shadows, but it is through the unseen everyday examples of resilience, courage and compassion that those shadows start to recede.

I first went to Lesbos in 2015 at the height of the European refugee crisis. Having worked in Afghanistan and Iraq, I felt a personal connection to the people fleeing those ravaged countries, refugees who had lost everything they had ever known or worked for; men, women and children who told me,

”I come here for new life, I come here for hope, education and peace.”

I did not go to Lesbos thinking I could change anything, nor to find solutions. I did however go in the hope that I might be able create something that would lay down some sort of matrix that would inspire people to change things, and that would make that urge intelligible.

Nothing however prepared me for the level of human tragedy and chaos that I witnessed unfolding on the beaches of that small island. The thousands of people arriving every day, the devastating number of deaths at sea and the perils of their onward journey demanded an urgent response.



Flight, St James's Piccadilly, 2015

Hung above the nave of St James's Church Piccadilly over Christmas 2015, *Flight* was my attempt to highlight the urgency of the situation. This was a dinghy on which 62 refugees had been found drifting in the middle of the Aegean. Had the coastguard not spotted them, the seabed would have been the end to all their dreams. With three life jackets falling from its depths, the boat's bow plunges down towards the

altar. *Flight* asks us to consider our humanitarian response to one of the defining issues of our time, reminding us that Jesus himself was born to refugee parents at a time fraught with violence and political instability. What I witnessed in Lesbos felt like a biblical catastrophe; I saw the story of the Holy Family's Flight to Egypt played out every day, it was humanity laid bare.



I Lift my Lamp, The Jungle, Calais 2016

Faced with a crisis of this scale, whether it is war or a pandemic, it is hard to know how to respond or find one's place, morally and ethically in today's world. So overwhelmed are we by a continuous newsreel of over-information and noise, that the temptation is to turn away in despair. In doing so however, I believe we deceive ourselves into thinking we can do nothing and allow compassion fatigue to settle over us. In the words of Pope Francis this "globalisation of indifference" obliterates the urgent need for change.

I believe instead that we can see the state of things today as a profound wake up call, urging us to look at who we are in relation to one another, individually and collectively. The current pandemic could and should be seen as an opportunity for re-assessment, as a challenge to re-learn ourselves and in doing so, to re-find the common thread that binds the mosaic of life together.

It is interesting to note that 'emerge' hides inside the word 'emergency'. From an emergency, new things can and will come forth, while old certainties crumble. In times of enlightenment, as in times of war, danger and possibility are close sisters. When huge issues such as war or climate change seem insurmountable and far beyond our control, we would do well to reimagine our world and to try to engage with it in new ways.



Suspended, St James's Piccadilly, 2017

Long after the plight of refugees had disappeared from the media spotlight, and as a continuation of Flight, I created Suspended, an artwork composed of clothes that were discarded by the thousands of people landing on the shores of Lesvos.

“As it brightens it represents the light of hope....”

I hung the clothes above the nave of St James’s Piccadilly, suspended, like their wearers, between a past to which they cannot return, and a future to which they are not allowed forward. The installation is lit by a central orb that changes in density. As it brightens, it represents the light of hope by which a refugee travels, whilst asking us to consider the light within ourselves that will validate that hope. As it darkens, it serves to remind us of the darkness in which we leave our fellow human beings, should we ignore their plight.

Like a collection of intimate portraits or hidden stories, each item holds an inner life, evoking the presence of those who arrived in them. Collectively, this installation asks us to see ourselves in the Other, to stand in their shoes and to be ‘clothed in compassion’. It is my plea that instead of walls, we build bridges, and in doing so we recognize the human connection that this seeks to elicit.



My First Christmas, Suspended , Canterbury cathedral, 2018



The Struggle to Survive, Afghanistan, 2014

Perhaps art cannot effect meaningful change in the world, nor can it halt the course of war, but I like to think it can transform people. Creating a work of art requires a faith in humanity, and a belief that there will be some who will care when your work reaches them, and then act in ways that may affect the course of events.

What I am asking for is compassion. And compassion is hard, because it asks of us the inner disposition to go with people to where they are broken, lonely and suffering.

I hope to open up a space in all of us in which we can make ourselves vulnerable enough to unlearn the world and see it anew, in short, *“to axe the frozen seas within us.”*



Displaced, 2014

It is of note that the etymology of the word ‘vulnerable’ comes from ‘vulnerare,’ to wound. To be vulnerable is to be open to being wounded; to love is to open ourselves, to expose ourselves to being hurt. Likewise, I believe that art must start from a place of vulnerability, perhaps even a place of wounds. To quote Rumi, “The wound is the place where the light enters you.” And this, in essence, is what my work is about. It is as much about that spark of divinity within the human spirit, as it is about the tragedy of war.

It is about exile and despair, but it is also about the courage and hope that can be born out of the darkness. Rather than turn away from the wretched wounds of our world, it is about learning to live without fear, to have the courage to find what is broken and to mend it, in the Japanese practice of kintsugi, with gold. Now, more than ever, is the time to hold on to what is good and to recognise in one another, the urgent need to act with compassion, understanding and love for our fellow human beings.