

Out of Hours

More than just Death in Venice:

Irish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale

We are all busy. When in our 12+ hour day is there time to read the *BJGP*, let alone an article on a contemporary art exhibition in Venice that you will never visit? But stop! This is no ordinary exhibition. We are presented with beautiful landscapes in crimson, purple, teal blue and hot pink hues. We see the end of a continuous stream of UN trucks disappearing into the distance, the militia learning how to patrol as they uncover burnt-out villages, or participating in what appear to be spiritual festivals. Shockingly, we also see bodies of the same militia, left in the middle of the road as a crowd gathers. While these visual horrors unfold, the delicate voice of a female folk singer is overlaid in stark contrast to the horrors unveiled on film in beautiful colours. Moments like this stop you in your tracks and grab your attention.

'The Enclave' is Richard Mosse's installation representing Ireland at the 55th Venice Biennale. With a fine art and photographic background, he looked for a way to portray this conflict so that it would attract attention in this media-saturated world in which we live. With his collaborators, he inserted himself as a journalist into armed rebel groups

in the east of the Democratic Republic (DR) of Congo in 2011. He chose to use a discontinued type of military reconnaissance film that registered infrared light, turning landscapes into fuchsia-infused canvases utilising technology originally designed to detect camouflage.

The DR of Congo, has been in various states of Civil war since independence in 1960. It has been estimated that 3 million people have died directly due to the conflict, or because of disease and malnutrition. In 2002 a peace deal was signed, but conflict continued in the east of the country where Mosse was filming. The honesty of the piece is what stays with you. The bravado of the soldiers as they perform for the camera, the banal patrolling, the seeming futility of the UN presence in the area, how young the fighters are and how easily they are forgotten, left on the side of the road when they die with their boots removed to be reused by another recruit. Mosse brilliantly used this film to reveal a cancerous yet largely unseen humanitarian tragedy with a disturbing psychedelic palette.

My mother died on the Thursday of our trip. As anyone who has lost a parent will know, it leaves you numb, making everything

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very grey. We found this exhibition at the end of a busy day, having already seen half a dozen shows that all seemed to me to be very frivolous. Traipsing down yet another long alleyway that appeared to lead nowhere, I was hoping the trek would be worthwhile. What I found grabbed my attention, refusing to let go, even as I write a month later after the funeral. I have never really thought about war in this way before, and it left me wanting to know more about the conflict. This is the sort of thought-provoking art that can really change your mind simply by taking your breath away when you least expect it.

The Venice Biennale runs from 1 June to 24 November 2013 and saturates the city in cutting-edge contemporary art, a perfect excuse to rediscover Venice, if one is needed. There is so much to see that you are guaranteed to find something you like, discovering hidden *palazzi* and churches not usually open to the public along the way.

There were a number of highlights this year, but the standout star was Ai Weiwei. A constant thorn in the side of the Chinese government he was never going to be in the official pavilion but he uses the language of contemporary art to make powerful, political statements about the state of society in China. Three of his works are on show; the first is in the German pavilion, where this year they are showing four international artists in place of their own. With 'Bang' he has assembled 886 antique three-legged wooden stools into a climbing, towering sculpture taking over the central hall. These stools used to be at the heart of every home, passed down for generations, but since the Cultural Revolution they have been mostly thrown out and replaced with cheap plastic furniture as everyone strives for modernity. Here, they are all connected together, a forgotten communal history.

Two further pieces form 'Disposition' a collateral event organised by the Zuecca Project Space. The minimalist sculpture 'Straight' has been made of straightened iron reinforcement rods from poorly

Richard Mosse, Platon, North Kivu, Eastern Congo, 2012. Digital c-print. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Farm near Bihambwe, Masisi Territory, North Kivu. This rich pastureland is fiercely fought over in an escalating territorial conflict.



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Graphic medicine: humanity in cartoon rats



Richard Mosse, Wrap Your Troubles In Dreams, 2012. Digital c-print. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

A young girl wraps her arms in her clothes to keep warm in the early dawn at Busurungi, Walikale, North Kivu. This girl's family and neighbours lost hundreds to massacres carried out by the FDLR (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda) in 2006 and 2009.

constructed schools that collapsed during the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 killing 5335 children. The rods are laid out meticulously to create an iron landscape, portraying a great sense of calm, in contrast to the tragedy that they were witness to. In 2011 Weiwei was imprisoned for 81 days. He is prevented from talking about this time, but has recreated key moments in his everyday life within tomb-like casks in a consecrated church. With 'S.A.C.R.E.D' we become the observers, watching him being constantly watched by his guards, 24 hours a day. A few days in Venice can really allow you the opportunity to explore and be confronted with current and important issues in the most unexpected ways.

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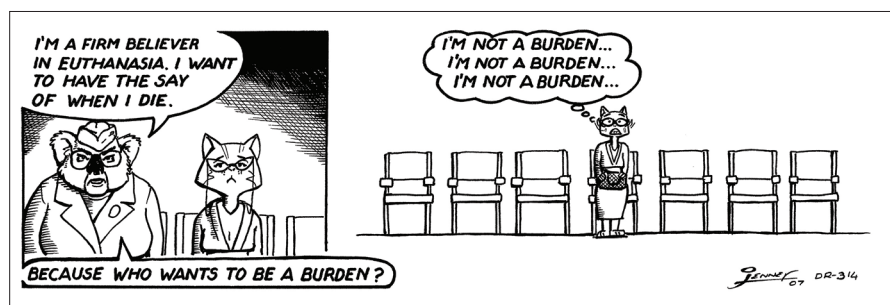
If your view of cartoons and comics doesn't extend beyond the *The Beano*, *The Dandy*, and *2000AD* then you may not have realised the potential for a cartoon rat to change how you feel about medicine. Comics have their own unique qualities and can portray a revealing medical narrative that is just as valid as any other literature or artwork. They are accessible, engaging, and the best examples offer rare insight into the human condition.

The main character in the *Doc Rat* strips is Dr Benjamin Rat, a hard-pressed Australian GP working long hours, fighting the red tape in which general practice is swathed, while trying to be the best doctor he can. Not too outlandish a scenario many will feel. There is a cast of anthropomorphic animals that includes Gizelle Thompson, a fiercely loyal gazelle receptionist, and Mary Scamper, the rabbit nurse. The strips are drawn by Jenner, the pen name for Craig Hilton, himself a GP in Melbourne, and a Fellow of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners.

While some of the cartoons created by Jenner use simple puns for humour many of the strips form part of a wider narrative arc. Graphic medicine is a term coined by Ian Williams, a GP and comics artist, who produces his own work under the pseudonym, Thom Ferrier. There has been an annual Graphic Medicine conference since 2010 and their aim is to 'explore the interaction between the medium of comics and the discourse of health care'. There are over 60 graphic novels relevant to healthcare studies listed at the Graphic Medicine website (www.graphicmedicine.org). Williams has highlighted how some comics will use infographics set alongside the medical narrative and they blur the traditional distinctions between textbook, novel, and autobiography.¹

One example, currently freely available online (<http://blog.e2w-illustration.com>)

Doc Rat, by Jenner. <http://www.docrat.com.au/>



is *Look Straight Ahead*, a graphic novel about a teenage boy and his struggle with bipolar disorder. It details the experiences and delusions of Jeremy as he despairs and unravels. Similarly, the comic strips of Matilda Tristram as she coped, aged 31, with colon cancer while pregnant, are revealing and humorous in a way that few articles could achieve. Ian Williams draws attention to a pair of books that exemplify the potential of graphic medicine. *Mom's Cancer* by Brian Fies documents with great sensitivity the author's mother's experience of metastatic lung cancer and *Monsters* by Ken Dahl, takes on the unpromising subject of herpes, and is described by Williams as a first-rate tragicomic graphic novel. Both are remarkable resources for patients and doctors alike.

At their simplest, cartoons can provide a wry look at our work and offer a moment of respite in a busy day. Yet when considered in the field of medical humanities, graphic medicine has much more to offer than a cheap gag. Comics have something of the anarchic about them; a healthy disrespect for political correctness in their own counter-culture. They can be rude, occasionally filthy, and explicit in forms that simply don't translate to prose. They can also be educational and deeply moving. Unsurprisingly, given those qualities, they seem to be particularly effective when portraying the subjective experiences of the authors and their illnesses.

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