

AIR COMMAND

If conflicts are no longer defined by two armies confronting each other on the battlefield, then how do you comprehend when you're actually at war? For Melanie Friend, something as seemingly innocuous as an air show points to the normalisation of creeping militarisation in our culture. And, finds Diane Smyth, her images of fighter jets screeching across bucolic skylines point to a more nuanced understanding of war as a perpetual state of control and alert

In May 1999, Melanie Friend photographed Luarda, a four-year-old Kosovan girl, in a refugee camp in Macedonia. Several months later, she caught up with her again in Southport, Merseyside, where she and her family had relocated. A Red Arrows display had recently flown over her new home, Luarda's mother Shqipe told Friend, and Luarda had been terrified. "She pointed up at the planes and cried out 'NATO! UÇK [the Albanian name for the Kosovo Liberation Army]!' I had to explain to the local people that we were from Kosovo," Shqipe recalled.

The story got Friend thinking about air displays in the UK – public events in which the Royal Air Force, among others, shows off its planes and its pilots' skills. Typically held along the coast or in the countryside, these events are pitched as a good day out and often feature contemporary fighter jets, iconic planes from World War II and pop-up army recruitment tents. "I was struck by how what's entertaining for one



person can evoke fear and terrifying memories in another,” says Friend. “It also struck a chord with my personal history – I spent most of my childhood holidays in the Channel Islands, where the beaches are littered with old bunkers and forts. As a child, I felt all that was ancient history, and yet our involvement in war now seems to have become permanent.”

Friend attended the Farnborough Air Show in 2008 and then photographed similar events for the next four years, creating a body of work that was published last year as *The Home Front* by Dewi Lewis, in association with Impressions Gallery, where it was first shown last autumn, and is now on tour. As the title suggests, the work considers the British fascination and involvement with military culture. “I can see how easy it is to get swept up by air show displays, how compelling they are,” she says, “but the reality and suffering under aerial bombardment is lost as we look at these planes as entertainment on a family fun day

out. They are a sign of the normalisation of the militarisation of our culture – the beaches become temporarily militarised for the duration of the show, then they go back to being holiday spaces. When I have shown the book to people from other European countries, where there isn’t such militarisation, they are shocked.”

Friend’s images include people’s reactions to jets in the sky and tanks on the ground. They show onlookers rapt, enthralled, bored or plain oblivious. The noise of the fighter jets is overwhelming, she says, and several of the images show children holding their hands over their ears. Others show lines of photographers capturing the planes armed with telephoto lenses, and Friend says she attracted some negative flak. “I was unusual in that I didn’t focus on the planes with a telephoto, and people wondered what I was doing,” she says. “I wanted to capture those photographers’ fascination with technology and acknowledge the link between photography

and militarism – the way we photographers talk about aiming, shooting and so on – and also suggest my own complicity as a photographer. I also hope that the work stimulates viewers to reflect on the nature of war photography itself.”

Friend started off as a photojournalist in the 1980s, shooting for the press and anti-nuclear movement. She still believes straight photojournalism is necessary, she says, but has decided to do something different, teaching at the University of Sussex, exhibiting her work and publishing several books, including *No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo*, which featured Luarda on the front cover.

The Home Front may also be seen as historic, she adds, because it records what is possibly the end of an era. “The advancement of the drone is having a major impact on how we fight wars,” she says. “In the future, we may not be celebrating the skill of the pilot in quite the same way.” *BJP*

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- 1 Hawk T1 military trainers (Red Arrows), Dawlish Air Show, Devon, 08 June 2012
- 2 Vapour trails from Hawk T1 military trainers (Red Arrows), Beachy Head, Eastbourne International Airshow, Sussex, 13 August 2011
- 3 Tank rides at Abingdon Air and Country Show, Dalton Barracks, Oxfordshire, 03 May 2009
- 4 RAF Chinook helicopter and Royal Navy destroyer HMS York, Bournemouth Air Festival, Dorset, 31 August 2012
- 5 Avro Lancaster bomber (part of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight), Southport beach, Merseyside, 24 July 2011
- 6 Battle of Britain 70th Anniversary at IWM Duxford, Cambridgeshire, 04 September 2010

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The Home Front is on show at the Durham Light Infantry Museum and Art Gallery, Durham, until 21 September.
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