

Barbara Walker: Shock and Awe, mac birmingham

When the 1914-18 war started in Europe, it began as well in other parts of the globe including Africa. Britain appealed to the colonies for various kinds of help, many African-Caribbean people joined the services, and the British West Indies Regiment and the King's African Rifles fought as units within the British Army. Yet you don't see black faces in the history books about that war, nor in the commemorative statues, nor even in the war movies and TV dramas. This hasn't been a one-off: the denial of the presence of black people in the various wars of Britain and its allies continues to this day. After the 1939-45 war, Churchill, de Gaulle and Eisenhower conspired to exclude black soldiers from the victory parades. In 2015, black ex-servicemen and women felt snubbed by the failure to include them in the D-Day celebrations.

Drawings by Barbara Walker, seen in her exhibition *Shock and Awe* at mac in Birmingham, work against this erasure. Using photographs as her source, she's created large-scale portraits of black servicemen and women who have served in various wars since 1914, in groups and as individuals, at work and at rest – remembered now at last. In *The Big Secret III* (2015), three black WW1 soldiers sit on the ground in a group, each turning to face the original photographer, each with a different demeanor. The one on the left purses his lips; the one in the middle appears young and innocent; the man on the right is older and seems more self-possessed.

Why make drawings? Why not something big in bronze to really drive the message home? Or why not simply make large-scale photographic prints from the originals? First of all, Walker's act of drawing, line-by-line and mark-by-mark, intimate and close-up, conjures up a palpable sense of human presence. It reminds me of the kind of drawing often done by teenagers: they draw from photographs with a particular intensity and care, to create images of their heroes – David Bowie, perhaps, or Prince, or Bob Marley. It's a kind of drawing that brings close a distant, and often, dead, person, bringing them into being, in order to pay homage.

In *Shock and Awe* there's also a two-metre tall depiction of some black servicewomen being drilled (*Untitled*, 2016), this time drawn directly onto the walls of the gallery. If you look closely, there are swirling, circling, spell-casting lines of conté pencil which, especially when seen from a distance, give real semblance to the khaki cloth of the women's uniforms, its drape and droop and wear. This too gives Walker's drawing a kind of conjuring, and in some ways ethereal, quality that brings a wonderful dynamism to her realist style.

In some of the drawings, a figure is seen in absence, as a white silhouette, in another, several men in a group have been scrubbed out with white paint. Another of Walker's strategies, also freighted with anger, has been to draw head-and-shoulder portraits of present-day black soldiers onto facsimiles of historic posters: 'Your King and Country Need You', 'Englishmen Do Your Duty'.

The fact that everything in *Shock and Awe* is drawing – an art form associated with trying out ideas, and less of a pronouncement than, say, a painting – adds a shade of ambivalence and inquiry. This is not a celebration of militarisation, after all. Indeed the stridency of the title, borrowed from the U.S.A.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, seems a little curious, until our gaze settles once more on the features of the individual soldiers whom Walker has portrayed. It is the 'shock' that comes at being made aware of the elimination from our consciousness of what they did in wars that form such a significant part of our identity. It's an omission that creates a pernicious self-image of Britain. And the 'awe' is what we feel to realize that ex-servicemen and women have somehow kept their psyches intact in spite of this erasure.

On the final day of the exhibition, Barbara Walker will return to mac, to rub out the two large-scale portrait drawings made directly onto the gallery walls, in what promises to be both a quiet act of personal respect and a gesture of heavy irony.

Barbara Walker: Shock and Awe, 23 April - 3 July 2016, mac birmingham,  
Cannon Hill Park, Birmingham B12 9QH [macbirmingham.co.uk](http://macbirmingham.co.uk)