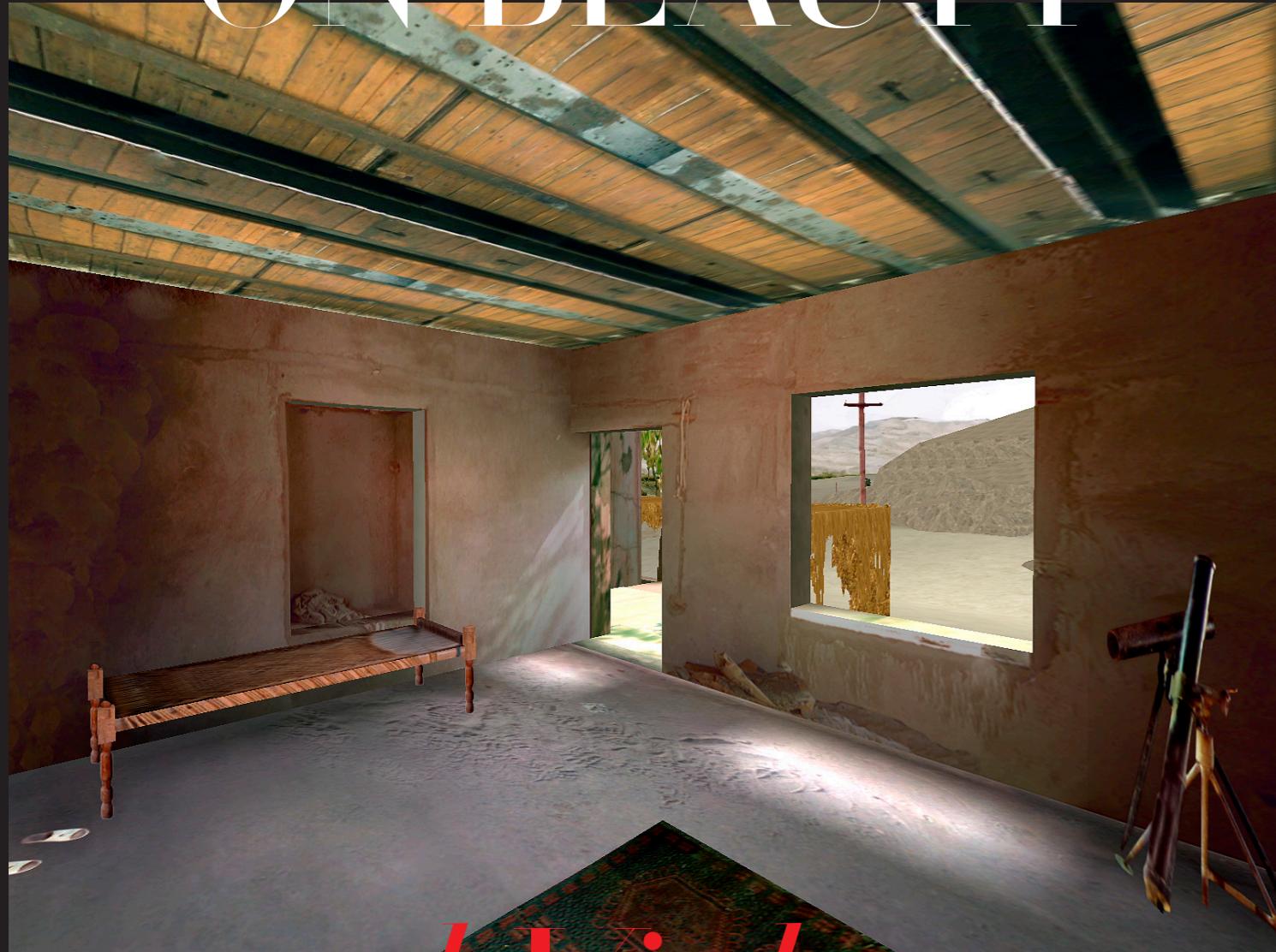


# ON BEAUTY



## *and Violence*

London artists **Ben Langlands & Nikki Bell**, who go by *Langlands & Bell*, walk us through their interactive installation *House of Osama Bin Laden*, of which they were nominated for the Turner Prize in 2004, and preview their upcoming project in Accra, Ghana. *Rebecca Anne Proctor* discusses with the duo how they reveal the beauty and the violence of some of the world's most challenging structures

### Accra, Ghana

You are focusing on the slave forts, castles and dungeons originally built by Europeans in Ghana for your upcoming show at Gallery 1957 in Accra, Ghana. Why?

These buildings are the earliest surviving structures built by the Europeans in Africa south of the Sahara. Beginning with Elmina Castle in 1482, they were originally fortified trading posts for European adventurers and entrepreneurs dealing in gold, spices, and other commodi-

ties with the local African kingdoms. Then with the development of the plantation economies of the Americas and the rising demand for cheap labour they became prisons and points of embarkation for millions of captives who were sold into slavery across the Atlantic. These forbidding structures, of which more than 50 were built in Ghana and up to 20 remain, are concrete evidence of the relationships that existed between West Africa, Europe and the Americas over a period of almost four centuries. They speak volumes.

Since the late 15th century these places evolved into sites of torture and imprisonment. I remember walking inside Jamestown prison—the energy was stagnant as if those tortured were still there. How will your upcoming project address these challenging locations?

We will address them by looking at their architecture, and by exploring their place in Ghanaian and in European and American culture.

As you say, these places are powerful because they are so real. They bring the past to life because they are so unavoidably authentic. When we stand in their dark, damp, cavernous spaces, the events they have witnessed become real in our imagination and we question how and why they came to be? How we might have behaved ourselves? Would we have been a captive, or an abuser? Would we have resisted or succumbed? Could we have survived the pain, the stench, the disgusting food, the disease, the horror of torture? They remind us of the unspeakable cruelty that people are capable of in certain circumstances and the untold misery people have endured as a consequence.

Moreover these castles were brought into existence and sustained by wider systems of communication and exchange. They did not exist in isolation. They are an important part of global history because they're evidence of a global network of trade and economic and political relationships that evolved over centuries, and in many senses is still with us because it underlies so much of today's world.

For example the capital flows that underwrote the industrial revolution in Britain, and incidentally also paid for the founding collections of many of the cultural institutions that we value most today like the British Museum, the British Library, Tate, and the Natural History Museum came from the profits of the slave trade and the plantation economies of the Americas.

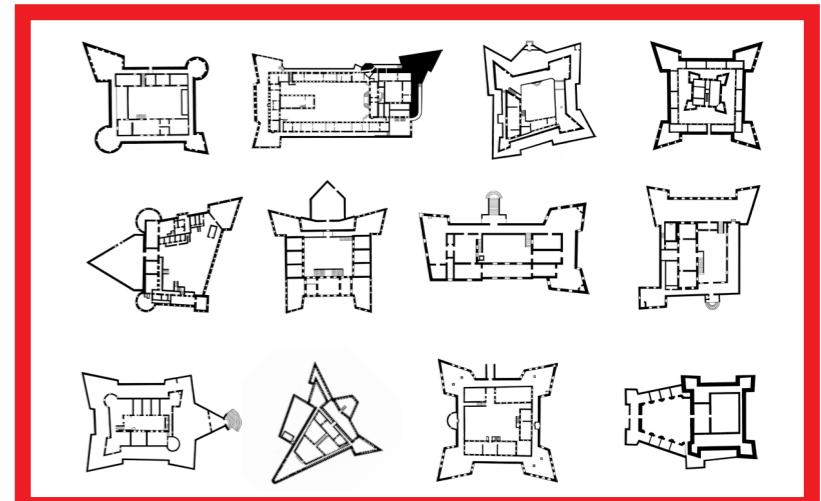
**It seems you will focus largely on the architectural structure of these forts. What is it about their presence that is unique?**

The forts are a record of early relations between West Africa and Europe so today they are a touchstone of our shared history. A history that is relatively little known in Europe despite the huge role played by the Atlantic slave trade in shaping today's world. This is largely because of the wilful amnesia adopted towards this history by much of Europe. When we were at school we were taught nothing at all about the slave trade. The history of the slave trade should be taught in every school in Britain. Only by learning about it will we be able to begin the process of acknowledging the damaging effect it had in Africa, and the pain it inflicted on millions of innocent people in the pursuit of wealth, to recognise some of the privileges we enjoy as a result, and to begin the process of overcoming racism.

The architectural language of the forts is also very condensed and consistent throughout, which makes it instantly recognisable. The striking plans are a very graphic language of power relations and ruthless commercial exploitation. Whether one is Ghanaian, European or American the forts have the power to connect each of us with our own past, our own cultural history. This makes the forts very symbolic—of Ghanaian identity, but also a shared history. Today many African Americans visit the forts while exploring their heritage and identity. They leave deeply affecting memorials to their ancestors in the dungeons and by the Doors of No Return.

**Why is the "Past Never Dead, It's Not Even Past?" I'm referring to your working title for your upcoming show in Accra, Ghana. Do you refute the idea of "the past?" Does the past perhaps always live in the presence through these "built environments" and/or architectural structures?**

Yes the past is always with us. This is a quote from *Requiem for a Nun* by William Faulkner meaning that actions have enduring consequences that we cannot escape. We must live with them and deal with them, no matter how much we might try to ignore or forget them.



Facing page: The House of Osama bin Laden, 2003  
The South Room Interactive animation still.

This page: (Top) NGO 2003  
Digital animation still.  
(bottom) Plans of Slave Forts, Ghana, 2019

**Generally speaking, why are you preoccupied with the nature of built environments? How do physical structures affect the emotional and physical wellbeing of a given populace?**

We see architecture as some of the most tangible evidence of our existence as people. Architecture demonstrates the human will to plan events. With buildings we have always expressed our ambitions, our basic intentions, and our hopes for the future.

The quality of architectural design can definitely affect our mood and our health. Buildings can be designed to raise our spirits, and to impress, like the Colosseum, the Eiffel Tower or the Burj Dubai, or they can be built to cower and intimidate us, like the Bastille, the Tower of London, or Elmina Castle.

All of our art is about human relationships from the individual and personal to the social and political. We explore these relationships as they are evidenced in our surroundings, in our art.

**In this exhibition you will reflect on man's inhumanity to man and the enduring human capacity for resilience against all the odds. How so? What is the resilience against all the odds in your opinion? What keeps an individual going and how do you relay this through your work?**

Art keeps us going. Art shows us what it means to be human. Through art we express ourselves, we make our world complete and share our inner experience of life with others.

**What do you hope the audience in Accra will take away from this exhibition?**

Ghana is the custodian of a unique artistic and architectural heritage that speaks to us all about an important part of our history. It's a history with different implications for each of us, but it's a history we all share and from which we can all learn.

**Africa is of great interest to the art world today. There is much to explore, discover and document. Do you both intend to work more on the continent, particularly in relation to its diverse architectural structures?**

We would love to work more on the continent, we're very interested in the art and architecture of Africa because there is so much to explore. Africa is embarked on a dynamic new stage of growth, development and cultural renewal. This creative energy is redefining Africa's view of itself, reshaping its identity and its place in the world. There are huge challenges, as there are all over the world, but it's an exciting time for African culture because its global influence is expanding massively.

## Afghanistan

**In October 2002, you spent two weeks in Afghanistan as 'war artists' researching the aftermath of September 11th and the war in Afghanistan for the Imperial War Museum, London. What were your findings?**

Before going to Afghanistan we had a fairly superficial understanding of the conflict and its history. We had read news reports from Afghanistan ever since the Soviet invasion in 1979, and always found them very disturbing, but nothing prepared us for the shock of finding ourselves in a conflict zone with the heart-breaking devastation and appalling trauma and deprivation people were suffering.

**What sites did you visit and why?**

The coalition military closed Afghan airspace to civilian air traffic the day we arrived so we couldn't get lifts on local UN flights while we were there. This meant we had to travel everywhere overland. Which was very difficult at times. We were based in Kabul and we visited Bagram, the main US air base, Camp Souter the main British base, Paghman province, Bamyan, where the giant Buddhas were destroyed by the Taliban, and Sairobi a town on the road to Jalalabad.

We also visited the Supreme Court and the Governor's Palace in Kabul where we surreptitiously videoed the first capital trial following the fall of the Taliban.

**You also visited the former home of Osama Bin Laden at Darun-tah. Given your work with the nature of built environments, how was the viewing of Osama's home significant?**

However basic or impressive they are, all architectural structures have powerful symbolic potential. This is the reality that al Qaeda understood very well when they attacked the twin towers. It was a devastatingly theatrical gesture that shocked the world—striking at the heart of the way the United States is seen by others, and at its own sense of invincibility. It was a global media event beamed around the world on TV.

When we saw bin Laden's modest farmhouse, and associated buildings constructed out of earth, stone, and randomly salvaged materials in the mountains of Eastern Afghanistan we realised it was a striking counterpoint to the monumental glass and steel towers of the World Trade Center in New York.

The house is on a rocky promontory projecting into a lake about five miles west of Jalabad. It is likely that bin Laden was at the early stages of devising his plan to attack the WTC when he lived in the house, where he had also constructed a small mosque out of local stone, and a bomb shelter out of ex-Soviet ammunition boxes filled with rocks and



**"HOWEVER BASIC OR IMPRESSIVE THEY ARE, ALL ARCHITECTURAL STRUCTURES HAVE POWERFUL SYMBOLIC POTENTIAL"**

Above: Portrait of Langlands & Bell in their studio with "Sign of the Times" 2012. Photo: Bran Symondson.

dirt. The contrast between the two locations could hardly have been greater.

In February 2004, *The House of Osama Bin Laden* received the BAFTA award for Interactive Arts Installation for the 'best installation by artists working with interactive digital media.' Explain how you relayed the house through digital media and why this platform is the best way to make such subject matter available to a wider audience?

Although the house was being used as a base at the time by the Hizb-i-Islami—a local armed militia—the fighters allowed us access after we explained that we were researching for a museum in London. Then they lost interest in us for a while so we spent three hours taking hundreds of photos, pacing out the dimensions of the structures, and recording everything in a notebook. After we returned to London we worked with an engineer to build a virtual model of the whole terrain

and the structures on it "in the white" before "texturing" the model using the photos we had taken, and then incorporating the Quake games engine to allow "visitors" virtual access to it using a joystick.

When we visited the house it was only 10 months after the fall of the Taliban and no one knew where bin Laden was or whether he was alive or dead. In the global media he had attained a kind of quasi-mythical scarlet pimpernel-like status: they sought him here, they sought there, they sought him everywhere! So his vacant house seemed to us to convey the kind of omnipresent absence he had obtained in the public imagination.

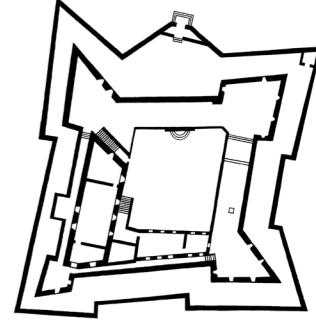
It also had not escaped our notice that the military uses the same kind of digital technologies for training and remote targeting purposes. So it seemed an appropriate medium to work with in this context—although we removed the adrenaline and allowed space for contemplation.

Clearly, this interactive video installation of Osama Bin Laden's home was a disturbing one and yet, it opened viewers up to another reality, albeit an eerie one. Osama is no longer there but his ghost still haunts western consciousness. Is this what you wished the work to portray?

Yes, his ghost still haunts our consciousness. We search for him but he's nowhere to be found.

Right: Plan of Fort Good Hope, Senya Beraku. 2019

Below: Zardad's Dog 2003, Witness for the prosecution. Digital film still



Below: The House of Osama bin Laden, 2003, Rocket Launcher, Interactive animation still.





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## How would you define a “war artist”?

The Imperial War Museum, London, does not advocate use of the term “war artist” for this commission—which has a long history in the UK—because they consider it sensationalises a serious endeavour. It’s a term invented by the British media, but it has become a kind of shorthand because everyone in Britain knows what it refers to.

The term “war artist” originated during the First World War when British artists who had either enlisted voluntarily or been conscripted into the UK armed forces began to make art works vocationally that recorded their experiences of the conflict. It was only later when the IWM was established to conserve objects associated with the conflict, that these artworks were sought out and collected. Subsequently this was followed by the Museum’s formal inauguration of the commission as a regular way of recording events each time British troops were involved in a conflict. The Imperial War Museum, London, has the largest collection of British painting in the world after Tate.

As is well documented, at the outset of WWI some of the artists had romantic notions of war, however their naive and idealised views were soon replaced by horror and scathingly critical perspectives as they experienced the dreadful human and environmental cost of the conflict. Ever since this time the art produced in the context of this commission has ranged from reflecting the status quo in a fairly conventional way, to being radically critical. When we were commissioned we sought to incorporate a geo-political as well as the local perspective into our response to the commission and we were described in the UK media as “the first conceptual war artists.”

## What makes a war artist different from a journalist or cameraman documenting a place of violence for regional and international news?

Journalists and cameramen are often under pressure from their editors and the time and production constraints imposed by the global news agenda. They often have to respond rapidly to events and they might be obliged to go where they are directed to go which sometimes means only superficial engagement with critical issues. Although artists may have certain constraints of their own to contend with, like inexperience of working in a conflict zone, to name just one, their agenda is their art and art allows more time for reflection in both the making and the consumption. When we were in Afghanistan we weren’t aligned with the army. We were on our own and could choose where we went and what we focussed on. Also, art can often tackle a complex subject in a more subtle and nuanced way than regular journalism can. Having said this however, there have been many great war correspondents and photo journalists.

I personally believe it is incredibly important that art is used in conflict resolution practices for I believe that the empathy resulted in two warring parties working together through an arts project can bring about, in the long-term, peace. What are your thoughts about this?

We agree art has an important role to play because it’s a more universal language that’s conducive to personal experience, empathy and emotion, also because it is a more neutral zone where people from different backgrounds with varied experiences can share emotions and develop ideas it is a less confrontational forum for communication.

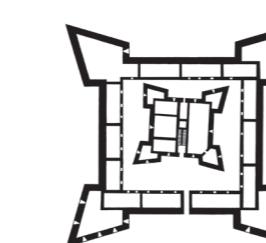
## Having worked as war artists on a number of projects, what do you believe to be the relationship between beauty and violence?

Beauty engages one’s interest straight away and helps one get close to a subject. Beauty is truth and truth is beauty.

## Do you believe that art can be used to bring about peace?

We believe that art can break down barriers and that art can give voice to the voiceless. We also believe that great art, by impressing specific events indelibly in the culture, places them unforgettably in the narrative of human history. ■

*Langlands & Bell will be exhibiting at Sir John Soane’s Museum, London, from 26 March - 25 May 2020*



Clockwise from top right:  
The Door of No Return, Elmina Castle, Ghana;  
The House of Osama bin Laden, view of installation,  
Turner Prize, Tate Britain, London, 2004; Plan of English Fort, Komenda, 2019