

MARY REID KELLEY

PILAR CORRIAS - LONDON



Above and right: MARY REID KELLEY, video stills from *You Make Me Iliad*, 2010. Video stills from b&w digital video/sound. 14 mins. 49 secs. Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias, London.

It's surprising to see how the First World War compares to the Second in contemporary culture. Books and films about the ascendance of Nazism and the epic gestures of the American and British army flood the market with regular monotony, but austere public monuments notwithstanding, there's relatively little around about what happened between 1915 and 1918. This might be due to poor documentation or the absence of notable figures like Stalin and Churchill, but the first conflict has in fact every reason to claim a

more prominent place in today's perception of history. It was the first time the world was faced with a tragedy of that scale; the line between good and bad was extraordinarily blurred; and it was the last conventional war, where military casualties were much greater than civilian. This latter aspect, coupled with historians' tendency to overlook the role of women in such circumstances, is at the core of Mary Reid Kelley's *You Make Me Iliad* (2010), a film inspired by the English poet and Greek mythology translator Alexander Pope.

Shot in elegant black and white and combining stop-motion animation with poetry and live performance, the film is set in German-occupied Belgium, and revolves around two protagonists — a German soldier and a local prostitute — both played by the artist herself. The conversation between the two is full of metaphors and rhymed phrases, each revealing a far more complex subtext. The scene is highly dramatic if not lyrical, yet it's also imbued with a sense of mockery. This is in part because of the dialogue's rhythmic structure, and also because of the characters' makeup and the cartoon backdrops in which

they move, which gives the whole experience a sort of Alice-Cooper-meets-Neo-Realism feel. Entrapped in a language made of euphemisms and cliquish rhymes, the soldier is fighting a battle he knows he cannot win.

His comically sad struggle makes a clever metaphor of the limits of verbal communication, but the real power of *You Make Me Iliad* is in the representation of the small episode, and how casting a light on this is often the key that leads to the comprehension of the big picture.

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