

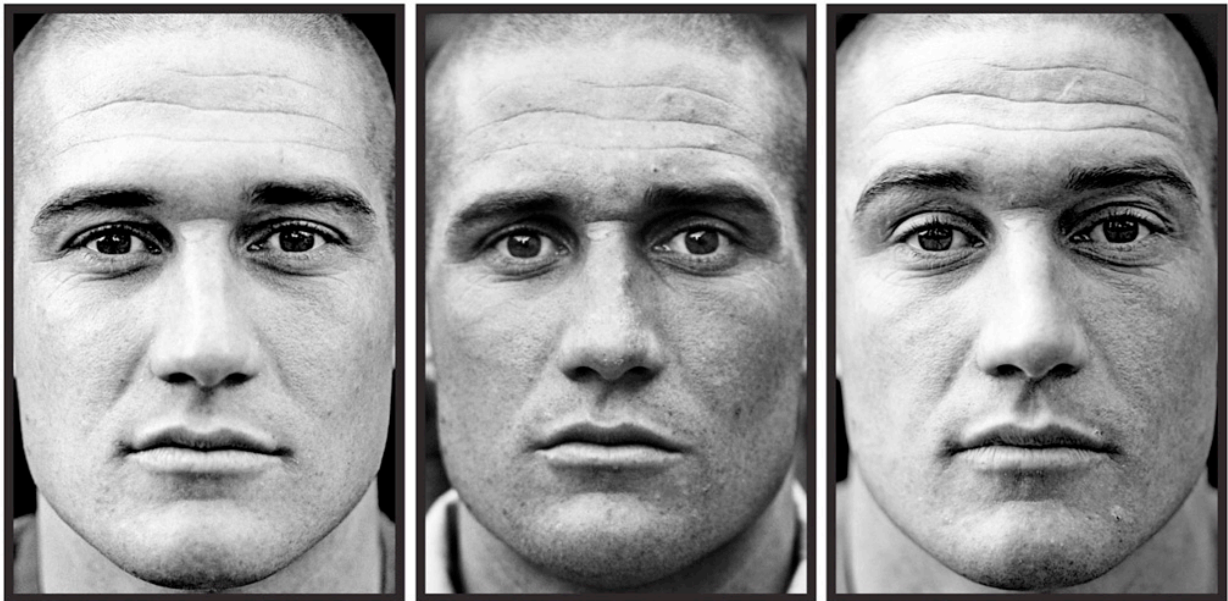
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## Notes from a Warzone: Dutch Photographer Claire Felicie Returns to (e)merge 2014

By Eric Hope  
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Claire Felicie. *Marine Emiel, age 26, before, during and after his deployment to Afghanistan.* Image courtesy of the artist.

The death of a loved one reverberates long after the initial passing. Anguish gives way to sorrow, eventually replaced with bittersweet nostalgia as we hold our memories close. It is a profound series of moments, when the intricacies of our emotions - perhaps our very souls - are laid bare. For Dutch photographer Claire Felicie, capturing these emotions on film sheds light on this complexity and seeks to document the poignancy that occurs when confronting life's challenges. The artist's photography will be on display at this year's (e)merge art fair and I recently had the chance to speak with her about her work.

The topic of death is perhaps an inauspicious way to begin an article, but death is an integral part of Felicie's biography and one that has profoundly impacted her artistic sensibilities. The artist lost part of her childhood at age four with the death of her mother and growing up, she had few memories of her mother to cling on to. Her father was an amateur photographer who created a series of photo books, a visual diary of his wedded life, covering the decade before his wife's untimely death. "To be 'with her', I turned to these books," Felicie tells me, continuing, "Through these photos I got an image of her, as if she was there at the time." Candid images of her mother soothed the grief and enabled an emotional connection that bridged the divide between life and death. Although she did not know it at time, this bridge was to have a profound impact on her later in life when she picked up her own camera. As she notes, "photography is always more than just a picture. It [is] a connection with my mother."

Felicie entered the art world somewhat obliquely. After marrying her childhood sweetheart, she moved to Amsterdam, studied history at the University of Amsterdam and gave birth to five children. All the while, photography was a passionate hobby, albeit one that took back burner to raising a large family. Yet even as a hobbyist, Felicie developed an eye towards giving life to the complex emotional tableau captured by the camera. In 2002, her series *In the Forecourt* came to the attention of several prominent figures in the Dutch art world, including Suzanne Dechart, director of the Melkweg photo gallery. These images, using her own children as models, sought to capture the naivety and innocence of the youthful mind on the cusp of adulthood and all the new emotions that transition entails. Felicie's subsequent solo exhibition at Melkweg marked her debut in the Netherlands and underscored her understanding that her images touched upon universal themes of nostalgia and loss with which a wider public could relate.

Image after image within the series forces our gaze onto the models' countenance, inviting us into their daydreaming minds. One image for example, all photos in the series are untitled, features a young girl in repose on a billowing white material that gives way to a field of clover. Through skillful manipulation of scale and framing, Felicie ensures our eye focuses immediately upon the young model. The sky, vast in scope and replete with fluffy clouds, shrinks in scale, becoming a canvas onto which the young girl projects her daydreams. The rolling, distant hills seemingly mimic the planes of her body, gently inferring future physical changes. At this moment, in this place, we too are children once again, experiencing a time of life when the cares of the adult world seem far away. The moment is in turn both magical and rueful; we thrill at the opportunity to daydream again, with the understanding that this moment is ultimately fleeting.

"I am drawn to people who have experienced sadness and grief because these people are more sensitive for other peoples' grief," she tells me, adding "I don't believe in this pessimistic idea that it [grief] destroys you. You can also grow and... be of service for other people because your heart is larger."

Viewing these images, along with portraits in subsequent photo series, I am struck by two observations. First, on the surface, her scenes exhibit elements of both documentary and fine art photography. I wonder aloud how she categorizes her work and indeed, if it is even fair to draw that distinction. Felicie is quick to dispel the notion that she must classify her work as one or the other. To her mind, documentary photography attempts to capture a situation, creating a statement of visual fact that is immutable in the eyes of future generations. Here our artist is attempting to discern emotion – a far more complex undertaking. While she at times uses elements of formal portraiture to capture the visage of her models, this formality is always in service to emotional content bubbling up under the surface.

My second observation relates to this emotional content, and the fact that there is a moodiness – almost a sense of foreboding – that reaches across images. Must nostalgia invariably engender a sense of loss? Far from it says the artist; what I identify as angst she interprets more as a sense of reverence, as if paying homage to a sitter's emotions makes their intense memories more bearable. "I am drawn to people who have experienced sadness and grief because these people are more sensitive for other peoples' grief," she tells me, adding "I don't believe in this pessimistic idea that it [grief] destroys you. You can also grow and... be of service for other people because your heart is larger." This profound comment gives me pause for a moment, as I realize that I am viewing her subjects through an emotional lens solely of my own making; where I see ruefulness, Felicie sees vibrant resiliency as her subjects tackle all that life throws their way.

Sometimes that resilience belies the fact that life's events can shake the core of your being. Felicie certainly learned that early on with her mother's death, but even at a young age, she could detect these changes in others, noting how her father's demeanor changed, and how he stopped making photo albums. This notion of emotional change – how our inner struggles are reflected in our outward appearance – is a key concern in her latest body of work, *Here are the Young Men*, featuring members of the Dutch marine corps who participated in the war in Afghanistan.

Like several of her other projects, the impetus for this series began close to home. Her oldest son is a Dutch marine, and as a mother she was obviously concerned for his safety at a time when war was waging across the Middle East. One afternoon in 2009 a friend of his – a fellow marine – stopped by the house before being deployed to Afghanistan, and she found herself wondering, how will his face reflect his battlefield experiences? The idea for a new photo series began to take shape. She contacted a local marine captain who believed in her vision and helped her gain the attention of his superiors. She initially envisioned this project as a before and after series in which she would photograph young marines on the eve of deployment and then once again when they returned to the Netherlands. That plan fell apart on the day she met her subjects for the "before" shoot. Engaging the young men, she became drawn to their stories, and when they asked her if she was going to Afghanistan with them, she decided she wanted to experience this part of this journey with them.

Convincing government officials to embed her within a military unit was not easy but the resulting images are a powerful, haunting vision of young men in psychologically

stressful situations. While an outsider to their world, she earned the marines' respect, which ultimately broke down barriers between the observer and her observed. *Here are the Young Men* is divided into three discreet subseries, and while the subseries *Committed* contains *Life* Magazine-worthy images from the battlefield, *Marked*, featuring triptychs of individual marines, packs the most powerful punch. The works are straightforward, each featuring three frames capturing an individual marine before deployment, in the theater of war, and then safely back home in the Netherlands. Felicie's compositional choices - to film these men close-up, framing just forehead to chin, focuses our attention on the subtle changes in facial characteristics. Brows furrow and lips purse as the stress of being constantly on guard takes its toll. What we notice for example in *emielare* the minute changes in the eyes - the way they look with increasing weariness at the camera. Each set is a private narrative written across each marine's face. These stories are not fairy tales with happy endings, but they are stories we need to experience as told by the men who fight in our names. For these could just as well marines from the United States, Canada, Australia or any of the other NATO country sending troops into the battle zone. In focusing on the marines' faces, the artist strategically removes nationality and ultimately politics from the equation, humanizing them before our very eyes.

Felicie readily concedes these images may not fit seamlessly onto most collectors' living room walls; they are stark reminders of events far away most of us would like to forget. Yet to have these images shown here in Washington, DC (command central for the war effort) is a powerful statement. Not in the political sense - scholars and pundits will continue to debate the justification for war for decades - but rather in personal sense. War leaves an indelible mark on those who experience it, but perhaps by sharing their burdens with us, these men will begin to come to terms with their time in a warzone.

*Claire Felicie is represented by Amsterdam's Amstel Gallery, which will feature images from the series "Here are the Young Men" at (e)merge 2014. To see more images, visit her website at [www.clairefelicie.com](http://www.clairefelicie.com)*

For more information about the (e)merge art fair including program schedules and to purchase advance tickets, visit their website at [www.emergeartfair.com](http://www.emergeartfair.com)