

Préambule *The Home Front* image

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from 'The Home Front', © Melanie Friend



‘And now we have the very British, the very patriotic Red Arrows!’ cried the announcer over the air show tannoy. Most British viewers would immediately recognize the planes speeding away in dramatic formation above the horizon as the Royal Air Force Acrobatic Team, for many a symbol of national pride. Air shows are thrilling and extraordinary displays of power, and in many of *The Home Front* beach images holidaymakers are captivated by the sight & sound of the planes. But in other photographs, such as here at Clacton seaside resort, in South East England, the children seem to play on oblivious – perhaps they have witnessed it all before, during summers gone by. Perhaps it feels normal to have fighter jets roaring over the beach.

For me the military displays didn't feel normal. Witnessing the unnerving jets in the skies above, I felt on a visceral level the 'perennial seductiveness of war' analysed by Susan Sontagⁱ and its sickening cyclicity. There's a timeless feel to the familiar scene on the sands, as children gamely continue to play on in the chilly English summer – and a feeling of threat and drama in the dark skies. But the sight & sound of fighter jets screeching overhead evoked thoughts of civilians subjected to extensive aerial bombardment in Afghanistan, Gaza, Iraq, Pakistan, and elsewhere, where the sky has now become a fearful space, occupied not only by fighter bombers but by invisible drones directed by distant operators.

I recalled my encounter with Luarda, a 4 year old Kosova Albanian girl, several months after I had photographed her in a Macedonian refugee camp for my earlier book *No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo*ⁱⁱ. During her first summer as a newly arrived refugee in Southport, Merseyside, UK, Luarda had been petrified by the Red Arrows' display at the Southport Air Show. For her, the screech and swoop of the fighter jets was a harsh reminder of her recent Kosovo war experiences. I remembered this sharp difference in context and perception: Luarda's experience became one of the inspirations for *The Home Front*. The Red Arrows may be undiluted entertainment for many, but can re-evoked the horrors of war for others.

The Red Arrows' role is complex; their undoubtedly spectacular displays both foster patriotism and help promote recruitment for the RAF. They are often part of dramatic displays for royal events (for example the Queen's Birthday Flypast over Buckingham Palace in June 2015). Red Arrow pilots are trained for war: the Red Arrows team fly BAE Systems Hawk T1 military trainers, fighter jets which are used in advanced jet and weapons training. Hawks are valuable exports for the British Government and used by air forces across the world including Finland, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, among others.

So for me, this image feels edgy – simultaneously aesthetic and disturbing. It takes an oblique look both at the uneasy relationship between militarism and entertainment and at the representation of power. For some viewers, of course, the image may merely be aesthetic.

ⁱ Susan Sontag, *Looking at War*, The New Yorker, Dec. 9, 2002.

ⁱⁱ Midnight Editions, USA, 2001

IMAGE CAPTION

Hawk T1 military trainers (Red Arrows), Clacton Air Show, Essex, 26 August 2010.

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CREDITS

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