

Susie MacMurray, *Cloud*, 2015

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## CLOUD

### Susie MacMurray

The Great Hall, Winchester 5 February – 19 April 2015

SUSIE MACMURRAY IS AN artist who is fascinated by different materials. She explores both their structural possibilities and inherent meanings, building up dramatic sculptures out of unexpected materials such as household gloves (*A Mixture of Frailties*), sheet music (*Resonance*), mussels (*Shell*) or garden hose pipes (*Flood*). For her newest work, *Cloud*, a site-specific installation created for Winchester's medieval Great Hall, she turns her attention to barbed wire and military identity tags.

Created as part of Hampshire Cultural Trust's Big Theme 1914 programme, *Cloud* is a meditation on war and both its direct effects on combatants and the more nebulous effects on the civilian population. MacMurray represents this fallout as a giant storm cloud made from a tangle of butterfly netting and rusty barbed wire suspended claustrophobically low over the hall. From a distance, the sculpture – roughly seven metres in diameter and weighing just over one tonne – seems deceptively delicate, with the strands of wire looking like fragile tendrils in a giant

dried flower arrangement. But as you get closer you can see the rust and ugly spikes in the wire – a transformation perhaps echoing the way the illusions the young soldiers felt when they first signed up crumbled as they experienced the grim reality of trench warfare.

Given that materials and their meanings are so important to MacMurray, it is no surprise to find that the wire was carefully sourced from the military base at Aldershot. 'It was very important that it was from a military source and had been used in preparation for real conflict', she says. The butterfly netting used to support it is equally significant and MacMurray uses it as a metaphor for the way fragile human lives can be trapped by the all-engulfing net of war.

The second part of the installation is a mass of 40,000 circular identity tags laid out in a giant wave across the floor. The tags are made of red and green paper and reference the original First World War' army tags: the red tags would have been sent to the dead soldiers' relations and the green ones would have stayed on the

body. MacMurray has hand written the names of all the 10,244 Royal Hampshire regiment personnel who died in action during the years between 1914 and 1992 on the individual tags, and the public are encouraged to add names significant to their families to the remainder.

Although the tags lack the visual drama of the suspended sculpture, their volume is shocking (the 40,000 represents the total number who served in the Hampshire Regiment during 1914-1918) and the act of reading some of the names is quietly moving. The handful I happened to pick up produced two members of one family – Arthur Henry Rose (d 1917) and Harold Walter Rose (d 1916) – the two tags acting as a terrible shorthand for what must have been a heart-breaking double family tragedy. The fact that I was forced to spend five minutes on my knees contemplating the lives of this one unknown family underlines the extraordinary power of MacMurray's installation.

*Diana Woolf*