

Carrie MacLeod

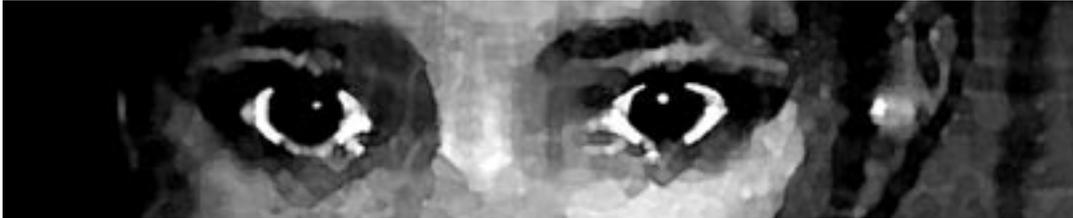
At the turn of the millennium, the United Nations had declared Sierra Leone, West Africa, the “worst place on earth.” Unthinkable atrocities of enslavement, exploitation and torture invaded media headlines and the world was finally summoned as an audience after ten years of civil war. The Canadian government began to offer support in the form of post-war rehabilitation and reconciliation programs for the widespread population of amputees, war-wounded casualties and former child soldiers. The scope of these initiatives led me to confront a central question that has been at the forefront of my awareness for years: How can an artistic process be of service to humanity in a country ravaged by war and oppression? My journey to Sierra Leone led me to the place inside of myself that prompted this question again and again. I did not find the answers I was looking for.

The Pulse of Humanity

It is late in the afternoon and the penetrating African heat is sizzling within the barbed wire fences of an overpopulated refugee and war-wounded camp. This place feels like the symbolic waiting room for all of humanity. On some level everyone here is waiting for death, waiting for life, waiting to go home, and waiting for peace. A blanket of sickening memory from ten years of civil war reaches out to the perimeters of this temporal space. The fatigue that comes from being whisked away from a world of comfort and transported into this constrained humanity on the edge of survival has made its way into the marrow of my bones. In the depths of my being I am wondering what my place is here. I don't feel like I can trust any of my natural instincts in approaching an arts-based project. How can healing through creative expression be welcomed in the wake of a human massacre where hands are dismembered and mutilated to ensure a physical silencing of the voting public?

The familiar media phrasing “Ethnic Cleansing,” “Genocide” and “Blood Diamonds” all become synthesized into a living reality when I look into

the eyes of a former child soldier. He was abducted at the age of eight into the rebel army and can't remember his name or where he is from. The symbol "RUF" for Rebel United Front is engraved for life on his chest. War has been waged on all levels of body, mind and spirit here and his broken skin shows how he has been branded with terror. While standing in the presence of this scared little human being, I can feel the weight of my own aloneness in the breakdown of our shared humanity, along with an acute magnetic pull towards an inner knowing that this nameless child somehow belongs to all of us. I remember why I have come.



I am working side by side with a local playwright who has firsthand insight into the severity of the trauma and the intricate dynamics resulting from a society recovering from war. Our collaboration ensures the creation of a culturally appropriate process and also assists in the sustainability of the project. He is hesitant to plan too much in advance, and his ability to cultivate a flexible creativity that can adapt to change and complexity is both a gift for the youth and a vital ongoing lesson for me. With the innate ability to trust in the absurdity of our surroundings, ambiguity is welcomed as a guiding creative force in this transitional holding tank of humanity.

The challenge for us in the camp is to create a creative space where youth can feel safe to express and reconcile disturbing memories from the past, envision new playgrounds of possibility in the present and prepare for their future immersion into a post-war society. Encouraging the inclusion of a variety of community members and elders in this process also becomes a priority to ensure a collective understanding of the social ostracism faced by the youth. The lingering stigmas associat-

ed with the labels “child soldier,” “victim” and “perpetrator” follow every person like a dark shadow, and the old stories from these stigmas still threaten the stability of the displaced communities. Creating an expansive space of exploration within the limitations of clashing perspectives feels like an insurmountable task.

The former child soldiers face abandonment, humiliation, agitation, and flashbacks from being forced to kill and engage in a war that is not their own. They have never had permission to move past the boundaries of old identities and invent new stories for themselves. It is difficult for them to imagine other possibilities outside of the dangerous borders, military checkpoints and guarded compounds that have encircled their immediate realities. The children have a curious willingness to participate in the creative space we are offering, but only with certain conditions. They express a reluctance to articulate their stories and deeply held secrets, or even disclose their names. Pairs of eyes struggle to meet ours and find more safety in gazing down towards the ground. From the demonstrated resistance to dialogue, I start to look for visual and non-verbal cues or any other subtle nuances in the environment for hints on how to proceed. I feel vulnerable in this unknown silence. This is the kind of silence that does not have a definite beginning or end, but is carried over from years of being immersed in the centre of unspeakable suffering. In the legacy of warfare sometimes there is nothing left to say, but this does not mean that all has been expressed. I do not understand the layers of meaning behind how the silence is being held here, but need to somehow trust that this emptiness will be a key ingredient in understanding the enormity of what these youth have experienced.

In working with the notion of their conditional participation, we decide that grappling with issues of identity and belonging will be the entry place to start creative exploration. It takes days for them to remember that playing can be a safe activity. For years mere survival had become their only task. Scrambling for creative ideas is an extreme contrast to the learned patterns of scrambling from rebel commands. I can feel my own body sink into relief as laughter finally emanates from the group