

## BRIGHTON PHOTO BIENNIAL



Ever since James Fenton first lugged his plate camera through the Crimean mud a century and a half ago, taking pictures of war has been a fraught affair. There is the obvious danger of being in combat zones, and the images of conflict themselves have at times generated almost as much heat as the hostilities they portray. Today when we remember Vietnam we probably think of Huynh Cong Ut's 1972 image of a naked girl accidentally napalmed by South Vietnamese planes, or Eddie Adams's 1968 photograph of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong prisoner: a testament not just to the power of those pictures but also to the fact that for most of us wars exist only through the reports we receive of them.

The power of photography to shape not just our perception of war but war itself was the theme of last year's Brighton Photo Biennial, *Memory of Fire: The War of Images and Images of War*. Focusing both on current conflicts and on a wider history of engaged photojournalism, the festival's ten exhibitions—presented at venues across seven towns—asked what sort of impact such work can have nowadays.

*Iraq Through the Lens of Vietnam*, the centerpiece of the biennial, was a two-part show that read almost as a lament for that final flowering of the golden age of war photojournalism, Vietnam. In the first gallery dozens of iconic black-and-white images by luminaries such as Don McCullin, Larry Burrows, and Philip Jones Griffiths reminded us how their work once helped shift U.S. public opinion against a war. In the next gallery, we fast-forwarded thirty years to a world where such determined humanist responses no longer apply. Modern-day Babylon is Babel once more, a place where embedded photojournalists, U.S. Army photographers,

websites such as [albasrah.net](http://albasrah.net) (devoted to gathering information on the occupation of Iraq: pictures of dead and wounded children abound), jihadi martyr videos, and “unilateral” photojournalists all clamor for attention.

Julian Stallabrass, the festival's curator, puts the current “powerlessness of photojournalism” down to the weakening and corruption of the press. But, as his polyglot exhibition also suggested, the proliferation of image-making and the rise of the Internet has meant that the medium of photography—whose capacity to overcome space and time make it such a ready adjutant to the faraway spectacle of war—has reached an apotheosis, drawing so close to its object that it has finally overtaken the reality it is describing. With so many images now ceaselessly circulating, only a short-circuit of the system will allow something to register again. This of course is what happened with the pictures of Abu Ghraib, taken with mobile phones and cheap cameras by American soldiers and then disseminated virally to become the defining images of the Iraq war. They, too, were in the exhibition, a whole wall of them. Stallabrass says that he hoped the show might encourage “a more sustained way of looking at images than on the Internet.” But while we may have dallied a little longer in the University of Brighton Gallery than we might in front of a screen, it does not alter the fact that, apart from a few hooded, naked detainees, Iraq for us has become a blur.

This near-blindness to images of suffering is doubtless what led the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn to create *The Incommensurable Banner* (2007), a furious attempt (though a futile one, as the title of the piece concedes) to restore meaning

to images, to give the representation of atrocity some traction. Visitors to Brighton's Fabrica Gallery were first confronted with a translucent screen, a warning that beyond it lay an installation that might yet burn our eyes. Hirschhorn describes the work as “a collage of the worst things I could find about war.” Weeks after seeing them, the afterimages of ripped-open heads, of pink and putrid human entrails, of bodies made unrecognizable by modern munitions were still with me. Shown in a gallery, this multitude of images downloaded from the Internet led only to speechless disbelief, as if the camera were revealing things that, on the deepest level, viewers simply could not assimilate.

Hirschhorn's unflinching, de-aestheticized attempt to represent the unrepresentable is self-evidently driven by moral outrage. Less clear is what motivates the photographers whose “aftermath” pictures were featured in *The Sublime Image of Destruction* at the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea. Their contemplative large-scale work seems an attempt to return “aura” to the depiction of conflict. Paul Seawright's pared-down landscapes of Afghanistan recall Fenton's distanced approach; their understated palette and minimal composition evoke the bleakness of war without tipping over into dead-end aestheticism.

Vietnamese-born American artist An-My Lê takes an even longer view of conflict by documenting U.S. battle preparations. In her 2005 film *29 Palms* we see puffs of smoke go off and little vehicles scurry across a vast desert landscape. Lê's detached study of the 29 Palms army-training ground in California lowers the temperature sufficiently to make such frantic endeavor seem pointless. Her cerebral take on the depiction of military action is typical of the other work in *On the Subject of War*, one of two shows that were recently presented at London's Barbican Art Gallery. Charting four contemporary artists' nuanced, sometimes fractured responses to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, it suggested that even while the Brighton Photo Biennial agitated for what Stallabrass terms a “rehabilitation of photojournalism,” straightforward documentary photography is no longer up to the task of representing technological warfare. Upstairs at the Barbican, *This Is War! Robert Capa at Work* celebrated a time when portraying conflict was a relatively uncomplicated affair. Capa famously insisted that the only way to get a good picture was to be part of the fray. Nowadays we know no matter how close we are, another image will always get in the way. ●

—Jason Oddy

*The Brighton Photo Festival was presented October 3–November 16, 2008.*