

OLIVER CHANARIN AND ADAM BROOMBERG LOOK AT A BIGGER PICTURE

Instead of taking pictures of death and destruction, the war photographers choose a subversive path.

Los Angeles Times | February 06, 2011

By Robyn Dixon

A British soldier dozes on a military flight to Helmand province, Afghanistan, beside him an ordinary brown box, like a mail parcel.

It contains a fat roll of photographic paper belonging to two artists and photographers, Oliver Chanarin and Adam Broomberg, who are "embedded" with the British forces in 2008 — traveling with the military as a photographer, camera operator or journalist, on its terms.

"We decided the only way we could be subversive in this situation was to not take photographs," Chanarin recounts.

In a zone where people are in danger, the cardboard box is picked up by soldiers, put down, carried and treated as important, all filmed by Chanarin and Broomberg. "They [soldiers] became unwitting actors in this slightly absurdist Dadaist stunt," said Chanarin.

On day No. 1 in Helmand, an Afghan man working as a journalist and translator for the BBC named Abdul Samad Rohani is found dead after being tortured and shot. Chanarin and Broomberg are rushed to the scene. But they do not take the expected photographs. They've put a sheet of photographic paper from the brown box in a jeep, the rear blackened as a darkroom. At the scene, they open the doors of the jeep for 20 seconds and close them, recording nothing more than a moment of light.

The resulting abstract image — beautiful, haunting, obtuse — can't be decoded as a record of violence and human suffering without an explanation from Chanarin and Broomberg. It's part of a series titled "The Day Nobody Died," included in an exhibition of their work at the Goodman Gallery here that seeks to challenge the very

nature of documentary photography. The images are displayed with the film of the box and its journey, also titled "The Day Nobody Died."

"We actually carried a camera with us as a decoy but deleted the images at the end of each day. Some soldiers were concerned that we were not documenting the usual things, while others became quite intrigued by the box. Some even named it — like a character," Chanarin recounts.

Needless to say, Chanarin and Broomberg didn't last long in the war zone.

Their journey to Afghanistan was designed to subvert the idea that war photographs present a painful truth, or that photographs can ever convey the pain and horror of human suffering. Once the military realized they weren't doing what war photographers usually do — take photographs of war — they were shuffled briskly out of Helmand, according to Chanarin.

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