

# The scars of war: how good is photography at capturing conflict?

Conflict, Time, Photography, a new show at London's Tate Modern, explores the horror of war by looking at the traces it leaves on the landscape



Aftermath ... a bullet-scarred apartment block in Kabul (detail) by Simon Norfolk. Photograph: Simon Norfolk

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**P**eople aren't supposed to look back," wrote Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse 5*, his absurdist anti-war novel written in 1969. "I'm certainly not going to do it any more. I've finished my war book now. This one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt."

It is Vonnegut's novel, rather than an image, that is the starting point for *Conflict, Time, Photography*. A notice next to the exhibition entrance describes how the book came to be written (Vonnegut was an American POW who witnessed the firebombing of Dresden on 13 February 1945) and how the structure of the show echoes Vonnegut's use of narrative time shifts to move freely through the history of photography and conflict. It is left to the viewer to decide whether photography can look back any more successfully than fiction at events that often, as Vonnegut concluded, defy description or rational understanding.



Don McCullin's Shell-Shocked US Marine, Vietnam, Hue, 1968

The first thing to make clear about *Time, Conflict, Photography* is what it doesn't show. There is no photojournalism and little reportage, no scenes of carnage or heroism. Anyone expecting an exhibition of traditional war photography will be disappointed. The Tate's curator of photography, Simon Baker, describes it, instead, as "a conceptual reading of how war is remembered". The passing of time is the governing principle, allowing Baker to show the ways in which photographers from the mid-19th century to the present have responded to war from different standpoints. These range from the almost immediate (*Moments Later*) to the historical (*100 Years Later*).

This approach makes for surprising juxtapositions. In the first room, *Moments Later*, Luc Delahaye's *Ambush, Ramadi, 2006*, and *US Bombing on Taliban Positions, 2001*, hang alongside Don McCullin's now classic portrait of a shellshocked US marine in Vietnam in 1968, as well as a recent work by the artists Broomberg and Chanarin. It was made by exposing a roll of film to light just after a soldier was killed in Afghanistan in 2008 - an absurdist response to both the clichéd excesses of photojournalism and the constrictions of being embedded with the British army. One suspects Vonnegut would have approved.



US Bombing on Taliban Positions, 2001, Luc Delahaye.  
Courtesy Luc Delahaye and Galerie Nathalie Obadia.

Interestingly, though, it is McCullin's shellshocked soldier, one of the few portraits in the show, that is the most apt metaphor for what follows: an exhibition full of traces and suggestions, scars and memories, hauntings and evocations. Though familiar now, the portrait, taken minutes after the marine was engaged in combat, remains utterly arresting, even more so printed big and given the breathing space it deserves. You can see the marine's eyes clearly, but they are staring beyond the camera into nowhere, leaving us to guess what horrors he has seen, what trauma he has undergone.



Kuwait's desert after the Gulf war ... Fait # 43, 1992, by  
Sophie Ristelhueber. Photograph: Sophie  
Ristelhueber/National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

A few rooms on, it is the Earth itself that carries the scars of war in Sophie Ristelhueber's 1991 series *Fait*, which translates as both "fact" and "what has been done". Made seven months after the end of the first Gulf war in 1991, it is presented in its entirety: four walls of gridded images of the Kuwait desert. Shifting between up-close shots of the scorched, scarred sand and aerial photographs of great swathes of desert, Ristelhueber has created a typology of the landscape of modern warfare: craters, tank tracks, discarded objects, abandoned clothes, many of which seem to be merging into the sand. The result is almost claustrophobic, but fascinating, a conceptual counterpoint to a previous series of images, made just weeks or months after the first world war, which detail the damage done to the great buildings of Reims. It turns out that they were made for the *Illustrated Michelin Guide to the Battlefields*, published in 1919.

Perhaps the show's most haunting images were made in Japan between the 1950s and the 1970s, when documentary photographers attempted to come to grips with the





Pierre Antony-Thoure from Reims after the war. The mutilated cathedral. The devastated city. Photograph: Tate

aftermath of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The photobook, rather than the gallery, was the main medium for this psychic exploration and it is good to see Kikuji Kawada's extraordinary undertaking, *The Map* - perhaps the most intricately designed and powerfully evocative Japanese photobook ever - on display alongside his prints. Published 20 years after Hiroshima, it is an intricately designed book in which one series of images show the remaining scars of the bombing on the city, while another is devoted to sites of memory created by the families of Japanese kamikaze pilots. By turns impressionistic and surreal, the book demands a degree of patient, silent contemplation that echoes the act of remembering.

Nagasaki, Shomei Tomatsu's book made 21 years after the event, is also here, its images of the scarred faces of survivors contrasted with objects that survived the blast and were housed in a museum of memory, most dramatically a Coca-Cola

bottle warped by white heat to resemble a skinned animal. The most quietly powerful image in the whole exhibition, though, is nothing more than a shadow. Three weeks after the bombing of Nagasaki, Eiichi Matsumoto photographed the imprint of a Japanese guard on the wall of a building: the outline of his body, his sword and the ladder he stood beside were the only remaining traces of his presence. It is an image that lingers in the head, impossible yet real, as powerfully affecting as anything written about the unreal horrors of war.

There are formal surprises aplenty, too: a series by Stephen Shore on Ukrainian holocaust survivors and their surroundings possesses a warmth and tenderness absent in the more detached work he is best known for. And since 2010, Nobuyoshi Araki, known for his intimate and edgy sexual images, has photographed the sky from the balcony of his apartment from 6 to 15 August. The two dates mark the anniversaries of dropping of the first atomic bomb and the end of the war. The results, which include the treetops and telegraph wires against grey skies, as well as the digital date codes of each picture, are empty, austere and curiously moving. They echo Toshio Fukada's tumultuous skyscapes, taken 20 minutes after the mushroom cloud bloomed over Hiroshima.



Toshio Fukada, The Mushroom Cloud - Less Than Twenty Minutes After the Explosion. Photograph courtesy Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography Photograph: okyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography

Elsewhere, the exhibition relies heavily on the landscape of war and its aftermath. Harry Shunk and János Kender's darkly atmospheric images were made in and around the Berlin wall in the 1960s. Julian Rosefeldt's *Hidden City* from 1994, meanwhile, shows how the former Munich residences of the Nazis have been put to use since the second world war: Hitler's office is now used as a practice room and a stage by students at the University of Music and Performing Arts.

One of the earliest images is Roger Fenton's famous - and contested - photograph of cannonballs littering a road, taken two months after the Crimean war. One of the last is Chloe Dewe Mathews's series of almost ordinary landscapes, made 99 years after the first world war, in the exact places where soldiers found guilty of desertion were executed. As our attitudes to war change over time, so, too, does its representation, but landscape remains the one constant.

In this context, Agata Madejska's 2010 white-on-white study of a Canadian war memorial is striking, but in a different way. It approaches abstraction, but possesses an opaque, shroud-like presence and - in its minimalism and ghostly aura - really does seem like the last word on war and memory. As you leave, though, a forlorn landscape looms large on the wall opposite the exit: a McCullin photograph of the Somme, taken in 1990. It is an eerily empty and starkly beautiful image of a long dark road tapering off into the horizon below a brooding sky. It has a sombre power, a sense of place so intense it barely needs a caption. It is a fitting coda to an exhibition about looking - closely, deeply, slowly - as much as looking back.



Shomei Tomatsu, Steel Helmet with Skull Bone Fused by Atomic Bomb, Nagasaki 1963. Courtesy Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo Photograph: Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo

Conflict, Time, Photography is at Tate Modern, London SE1, 26 November 2014 - 15 March 2015.

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