Light in Wartime explores photography's conversation with objective truth, raising questions about the reliability of seemingly objective historical accounts, such as media images, that greatly determine how war is communicated and remembered. In Regarding the Pain of Others Susan Sontag writes that "a photograph cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude." Part of the real is always excluded in representation. What we see is not necessarily congruent with truth. Judith Butler concedes that "to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to frame, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable."

Echoing this sentiment, the photographers in Light in Wartime challenge the conventions and limitations of war photography by offering new ways to think about, look at, and represent conflict. Through experimental methods akin to the photographic process itself, they reflect on alternative ways of representing endless violence, motivating viewers to seek answers to questions that arise from the real and the imaginary spaces of representation.

In On the road to Cuito Cuanavale III, Jo Ractliffe's black and white photographs from the series Terras do Fim do Mundo present haunting serenity of barren landscapes that hint at Angola's violent past and the ghostly aftermath of war. In this series she travels the routes of the War of the Frontier alongside ex-soldiers of the South African Defense Forces on their first return to the area since the war's end. Ractliffe's images give viewers space to meditate on the sites and implications of conflict without numbing them to the gruesome horrors and bloodshed of war. To represent the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, he uses Kodak Aerochrome, a discontinued reconnaissance infrared film that was developed during the Cold War to reveal an enemy's location by reading the landscape's heat. Mosse's images are a rich topography that is bursting with electric shades of crimson and bubble gum pink, on the verge of becoming surreal warldscapes. By representing the conflict with an invisible spectrum of infrared light, he dismembers the possibility of objective representation by bringing to the fore the artifice of the photographic surface.

An-My Lê's photographs, made with a large format camera, metaphorically make an unseen conflict visible. Unlike Ractliffe's ghostly monochromatic landscapes, Mosse's landscapes are bursting with electric shades of crimson and bubble gum pink, on the verge of becoming surreal warldscapes. By representing the conflict with an invisible spectrum of infrared light, he dismembers the possibility of objective representation by bringing to the fore the artifice of the photographic surface.
challenge the neutralized reception of documentary photography that tends to homogenize conflicts, by turning the language of occupation upon itself.

Seba Kurtis approaches his work from a lived and experienced perspective as an illegal immigrant in the UK. His photographs depict the desired invisibility of immigrants undertaking border crossings vis-à-vis the mechanisms used by the state to detect their presence, such as heartbeat detectors. Portraits of migrants in detention centers undergo colorimetric manipulations to mimic the systems used at the frontiers to detect human presence. Kurtis’s work hovers close to fiction and his stance is aesthetic, not documentary.

Using the light streaming in from a small hole in a basement of an abandoned factory in Aleppo, Sebastiano Tomada Piccolomini creates haunting portraits of sheltering Syrian rebels hiding what they deem as the most essential and crucial object. Working in the midst of warfare and shelling, Piccolomini uses high-contrast side lighting to create stylized portraits in which only the faces and objects are visible against blackness, mirroring the bleakness of life during wartime.

When wars end, how does one reckon with their aftermaths? Using the snipe hole of a notorious landmark from the Lebanese Civil War, the Barakat building, also known as the Yellow House, Nilu Izadi recalls Beirut’s harrowing past. Izadi converts one of the Barakat’s rooms, known as the sniper’s nest, into a hauntingly beautiful camera obscura installation. The Barakat building, now a museum dedicated to the war, was once positioned exactly on the demarcation line that divided East and West Beirut. Due to its strategic location, it was occupied by Christian militiamen who reappropriated the interior spaces to serve their military purposes. Inverted modern skyscrapers, obivious passersby, and blue-tinted skies move silently across war-ravaged walls.

As much as war is about killing, it’s also about destroying forensic evidence, cultural heritage, and collective memory. In Quest for Identity, Ziyah Gafic sets out to build a virtual inventory of the everyday personal belongings recovered from the mass graves of Bosnians who were massacred by the Serbian Army during the Balkan Wars. Gafic photographs the items on the same forensic tables used to assemble bodies that are dug up from mass graves. He creates a living archive of the identities of those lost through their material remains, the items that the victims carried with them before plunging into oblivion. Photography is used here for the purpose of forensic evidence, which threads together various counter-narratives, identities, and histories.

Recollecting the same war and its fabricated rendering in the media, David Levinthal depicts contemporary news imagery of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars through the playful use of toy soldiers in desert fatigues toting machine guns, figurines of civilians, and miniature armored humvees seen at close range in sandswept battlefields. Seen in soft focus through the eerie green glow of night-vision cameras, these convincing facsimiles of real war scenes add to the discussion about war, and its broadcast in real time to an outside audience. By shifting the focus away from the soldiers and onto the language of presentation (the green lighting, the soft focus, the street-level views), Levinthal reimagines a scene much like war photography, that tells us what we’re looking at. Levinthal’s _I.E.D._ series examines the way in which society looks at war by using an altered vocabulary of what war looks like to question our unquestioned assumptions.

Delving into the lived experience of war and conflict, Rula Halawani, a native of occupied East Jerusalem, employs one apparatus of war as a tool in the making of her photographs. Her series _The Bride is Beautiful, But She is Married to Another Man_ sets out to build a virtual inventory of the everyday personal belongings recovered from the mass graves of Bosnians who were massacred by the Serbian Army during the Balkan Wars. Gafic photographs the items on the same forensic tables used to assemble bodies that are dug up from mass graves. He creates a living archive of the identities of those lost through their material remains, the items that the victims carried with them before plunging into oblivion. Photography is used here for the purpose of forensic evidence, which threads together various counter-narratives, identities, and histories.

Vartan Avakian’s work _Suspended Silver_ proposes a new understanding of memory as a physical trace composed of material ciphers waiting to be decoded and reinscribed. In this series, silver particles—recovered from an abandoned photo studio once located in the aforementioned Barakat building—beers a material trace, an artifact of a photograph, as much as they symbolize the expiry of the photographic content. The light-sensitive particles of film debris that once revealed memories, become inscriptions in their own right and are composed into clusters that make up individual photographs. The work proposes the act of memorial- or monument-making, as an act of representing the space of remains. Monumentality, in that sense, exists not in scale of the structure, but in the historical and material weight that has accumulated and settled over time.

David Levinthal. Unlithed from the series _I.E.D._, 2008. Archival pigment print, 22 x 17 in

Seba Kurtis. _The Great Escape_. 2016. Archival pigment print on fine art paper, 32.7 x 24.8 in

Vartan Avakian. _Dispersion_ 037 from the series _Suspended Silver_. 2015. Archival prints on fine art paper, 37.1 x 24.4 in

Allan deSouza’s work _Cluster_ is based on the idea of phosphenes, the experience of seeing a ring or spot of light, without light actually entering the eye, also known as “the prisoner’s cinema.” Each image within Cluster is composed of a melding of the same four images: below the earth, a bomb explosion, and the retina. In his work, deSouza draws a connection between the micro (internal worlds) and the macro (external worlds). His work evokes an excerpt from the Syrian poet Adonis’s “Candlelight,” which reads, “This darkness, this secret light, can wrench you even from your shadow and can toss you into a focal point of luminous explosion […] This is when it becomes possible to speak of the light of darkness as it would be possible to speak of the darkness of light.”

Vartan Avakian, Dispersion 037 from the series Suspended Silver, 2015. Archival prints on fine art paper, 32.1 x 24.6 in

Rula Halawani. Unlithed from the series The Bride is Beautiful, But She is Married to Another Man. 2016. Photographic digital print on archival paper, 70.9 x 26.4 in

An-My Lê. _29 Palms: Night Operations IV_. 2003-04, Gelatin silver print, 26.5 x 38 in

David Levinthal. Unlithed from the series _I.E.D._, 2008. Archival pigment print, 22 x 17 in

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FOOTNOTES:

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