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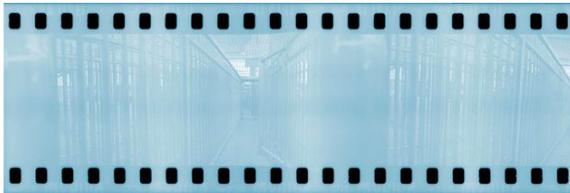
Light in Wartime
organized by Rola Khayyat
June 7 - July 28, 2018

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Light in Wartime, apexart, New York

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Didier Morelli



Capturing the intricacies of contemporary war and armed conflict through a camera lens is a practice with considerable historical precedent, not to mention profound moral consequences. To photograph war with particular aesthetic and/or documentary objectives also comes with its own set of ethical issues. While the importance of photojournalism in communicating to broad audiences the intimacies of violence and destruction continues to be questioned in an era of social media, artists and cultural workers alike struggle with generating new means of conceiving, looking at, and representing conflict.

Curated by Rola Khayyat at apexart, New York, *Light in Wartime* presents a selection of photographic works by artists who distort the conventions and limitations of war photography through choice of content, compositional structure, and technique. Regrouping eleven artists and their works dating after 2003, following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by U.S.-led coalitions, the exhibition seeks to unsettle the objectivity of historical accounts of war by foregrounding experimental means of representation in photography. While effective in its mandate to expand the potential for manipulations of light to offer insight into contemporary conflict, tendencies to beautify and/or abstract wartime realities at times make it difficult to bridge the emotional and visceral gap between the work and its viewer.

From the outset of the show, hues of pink and dark shadows mask the portraits of migrants in Seba Kurtis' *Untitled 9* and *Untitled 5* from the series *Heartbeat* (2012). Capturing the experience of illegal immigrants undertaking border crossings, while drawing attention to the systems used to record their presence (such as heartbeat detectors), the artist convincingly blurs reality and fiction by using colorimetric manipulation to produce a mist that blends together physical bodies with what could be the inner chambers of a beating heart. The presence of ghosted, almost imperceptible figures is repeated in Rula Halawani's series *The Bride is Beautiful, But She is Married to Another Man* (2016). Taken while traversing militarized Israeli checkpoints, the film's over-exposed aesthetic is a consequence of the damaging effects of X-rays used to screen Palestinians trying to move between occupied territories. Kurtis and Halawani both employ a critical approach to playing with colour, light, and darkness in capturing, editing, and developing their photographic series. In doing so, they present the mechanical realities of border crossings and the violence and intrusion they inflict upon the "foreign bodies" who attempt to navigate them.

Across the room, Richard Mosse's "electric" pink and red prints representing the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo lack the conceptual depth of other works in the exhibition. The Kodak Aerochrome film used to produce the images, a discontinued reconnaissance infrared technology developed during the Cold War, beautifies strife in a photojournalistic style that does not contend with its own colonial gaze. As visually striking as *Safe from Harm* (2012) may be—a photograph of a youthful soldier bearing his weapon and wearing a crown of vegetation—it further exoticizes the image of the rebel without critically reevaluating its symbolic value when reproduced as a work of art in a white-walled gallery space.

On the other hand, An-My Lê's *29 Palms: Night Operations IV* (2003–04) which depicts military re-enactments in the desert base near Palm Springs, California, approaches the subject of war with productive distance by addressing inherently constructed, rehearsed, and subsequently sanitized depictions of combat. Using the physical grounds where U.S. Marines train before deployment to the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan, Lê's active battlefields reconsider the artificial veneer with which war is intentionally relayed by the media. Similarly shifting the prism employed to document these two wars, David Levinthal's series *I.E.D.* (2008) reconstructs battle scenes with miniature scenery. Plastic toy soldiers, armored Humvees, and civilians seem eerily real under the green glow of night-vision, thus provoking a reassessment of the narratives fed through the "objective" lens of the camera. It is in these instances that *Light in Wartime* is most compelling, bringing attention to twenty-first-century war and conflict, and the technical means with which contemporary photographers have devised tactics to challenge conventions of representation.

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