

Ways of Perceiving

Imaginary Exhibition Essay

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1548 words

Human Stories - Mission Gallery Swansea

Human Stories is an exhibition highlighting the plight of ordinary people living in worn torn Syria, seen through the lenses of Syrian photographers. Using subtle activism as a curation method (Reilly & Lippard, 2021), this exhibition challenges the dominant discourses of classic conflict photography, which often concentrates on the violence and drama of war. Instead, the focus is on images depicting the experiences and everyday life of civilians living within a war zone. The focus of the exhibition is attempt to confront the 'othering' which is prevalent in contemporary western societies (Foucault et al, 2020). "Overwhelmingly, people don't 'know' those that they are Othering" (Powell, 2017).

Furthermore, the exhibition addresses often felt compassion fatigue experienced by some audiences (Sontag, 1997). Moreover, by showing images of activities they themselves carry out in their daily lives, the exhibition attempts to attract attention and curiosity from audiences. Using activism through curation, the aim is to present a tableau in which the viewer may find what Roland Barthes (1996) refers to as a punctum that reaches them on a deeper level of recognition.

To quote the song made famous by Edwin Starr, "War, huh, yeah, What is it good for? Absolutely nothing" (Whitfield and Strong, 1969). Many people would probably agree with the lyrics, nevertheless, wars do exist. The futility would not be kept in human conscience without the brave photojournalists who document war. These photographs play a vital role in showing the suffering that humans inflict upon each other. These images tug on the heartstrings, without them people would be far less likely to make a stand. A single photograph is able to open the eyes of the world.

images say: "This is what human beings are capable of doing...Don't forget"
(Sontag, 2003, p115)

However, Michelle Bogre (2012) argues that what is seen is heavily influenced by the symbiotic relationship between armed forces and photojournalists. Relying on and embedded in the forces for security, photojournalists only publish approved images at the force's discretion for fear of exclusion. Local Syrian photographers are not constrained by contracts, they can express themselves freely.

This exhibition does not set out to show guns being fired or missiles being launched. Viewers can see images of bombs exploding on daily television newscasts. Once the peace treaty has been signed, the military personnel will go home. All that is left is human suffering, damaged or destroyed infrastructure and human tragedy. The civilians and the innocent bystanders will be left without homes, hospitals and other vital infrastructure. They will be left with the task of rebuilding their lives and their surroundings.

This exhibition displays images, whilst hauntingly beautiful, demonstrate the horror and futility of conflict. "War does not determine who is right - only who is left."
(Russell, n.d.) The exhibition gives viewers a taste of life in Syria during the protracted and ongoing civil war. It could be argued that local photographers are better qualified to show the challenges than visiting photojournalists. With that in mind, the work of four Syrian photographers has been selected to highlight the situation. A photograph taken in a war situation by a photographer from an

international press agency will have far less empathy than a photographer who is based in the same area as the conflict is taking place (Vervaet, 2020).

Therefore, the overriding theme of this exhibition is living with the consequences of conflict. Images of actual conflict might seem voyeuristic. “Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of...extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it... or those who could learn from it...the rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be” (Sontag, 2003, p.35-36). Photographs of the aftermath serve a different purpose, without these images the world may not be aware of the suffering endured by ordinary civilians.

Moreover, images can be far more powerful than words. News reports offer a superficial glance on the actions of war whereas photographs create a link to the subjects. It is possible to form solidarity with the subjects making it easier to feel their pain and have empathy with them (Linfield, 2010). A photograph is able to create the link between the viewer and the victims. A single image can tell a story, which in turn ignites empathy in the viewer. When empathy arouses compassion in people, they are likely to want to assist those in need (Batson, 2011). This exhibition aims to create a link between subject and viewer.

Abood Haman



Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3

Upon entering the exhibition, viewers are presented with the work of Abood Haman. Haman began photographing the destruction of his hometown in 2017. Shocked by what had happened to the city he knew so well and had memories of every street, he collated images to document social history. This curated set of three images give an insight into daily life in war torn Syria. One depicts the ordinary activity of walking down the road pushing a pushchair however the woman walks past destroyed buildings. Shopping is an activity most Westerners take for granted. The next two images also ask the viewer to appreciate the challenges of retailing in a war zone, as an example, shop keepers trading outside their shop.

Mohamed Badra



Fig 4.



Fig 5



Fig 6

The next artist is Mohamed Badra. Badra had not intended to be a photographer, He was a student of architecture when the Syrian revolution began. Whilst he was working as a first aid responder he started taking photographs. He realised the power photographs had to capture humanity and history. He began sending images to Reuters as a freelancer before joining the European Pressphoto Agency as a staff photographer. The images continue the theme of people navigating the destruction. Images include a man riding a bicycle and children walking to school amongst the ruins. The last picture in the set has a more playful feeling, a man plays football with children in the street in between war damaged cars and buildings.

Anas Alkharboutli



Fig 7

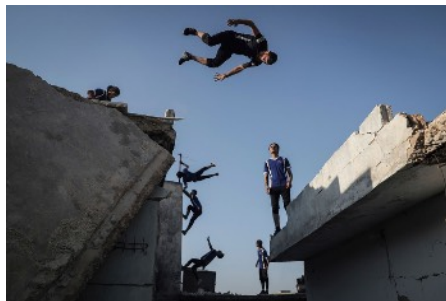


Fig 8



Fig 9



Fig 10

Next, viewers see the work of Anas Alkharboutli. Alkharboutli began working as a photojournalist in 2015, making a name for himself for his sensitive images of the Syrian civil war. He was honoured with an Award of Excellence in the Daily Life category at the Pictures of the Year International. Alkharboutli was working for the Deutsche Presse-Agentur, when he lost his life at the age of 32 in an airstrike in Morek. His images show how life goes on despite the conflict. The first image is of a man looking at the destruction while another person using crutches walks by. There are two images of children playing, some performing parkour using bombed buildings and another of children being entertained by a makeshift puppet show, sitting on the rubble. Finally, a heart wrenching image of a young girl walking to school using crutches having lost her leg.

Sameer Al-Doumy



Fig 11



Fig 12



Fig 13

Al-Doumy is a self-taught photographer who started out as an activist, documenting how Syrian civil war was affecting his hometown. He later began working as a freelance photographer for Agency French-Press and has won several international press awards. A quote from the artist himself sums up the essence of the exhibition.

“Syria is not just "black or white" to me. There are civilians caught in the middle, silently suffering from the effects of this horrific war, but nonetheless doing their best to resist its bitterness.” (Al-Doumy, 2021)

An image of a game of hopscotch with bombed ruins in the background shows the resilience of children despite their situation. The next two images show the most ordinary of daily activities, preparing food and drinking tea. The images show the contrast between how Westerners usually see these activities compared to how they happen in a conflict zone.

Bassam Khabieh



Fig 14



Fig 15



Fig16



Fig 17

As a student Khabieh Began taking photographs after enduring bombings and chemical attacks. His objective was to record the war crimes perpetrated on his

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family and friends, resulting in a book called, 'Witnesses of War: The children of Syria in 2021. This book highlights the impact of conflict on daily life and those trying to maintain a semblance of normality.

"Obliged to be embedded in the forces I want you, the viewer, to see the war through the eyes of children. We could not keep Syrian children safe, but maybe my photographs can make a difference to ensure that no one ever forgets." (Khabieh, 2021, back cover)

This section starts with an image of children attempting to continue their education in a classroom where the ceiling has been destroyed by a bomb. Next, we see a group of children playing on a bouncy castle which has been placed amongst the rubble. Once playtime is over it is mealtime. In this image we see children sitting with adults having a meal with rubble all around them. As the viewer leaves, they are faced with a large, lonely image of a young boy sitting in a tyre; The wall behind the tyre is riddled with bullet holes.

This exhibition aims to connect with Western viewers, asking them to feel empathy by showing situations they can identify with.

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Fig 2

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Fig 3

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Fig 4

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Fig 5

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Fig 6

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Fig 7

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Fig 8

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Fig 9

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Fig 10

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Fig 11

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Fig12

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Fig 13

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Fig 14

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Fig 15

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Fig 16

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Fig 17

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Fig 17 printed
100cm x 120cm



Fig 17

Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3



Fig 4



Fig 5



Fig 6



Fig 7

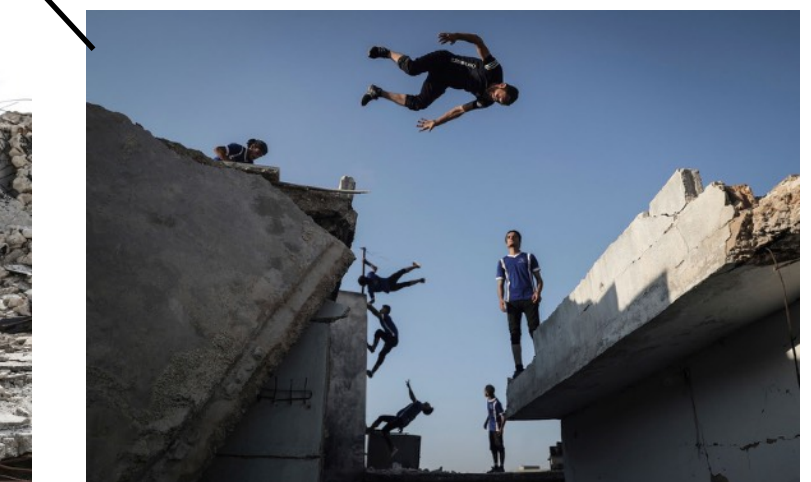


Fig 8



Fig 16



Fig 15



Fig 14



Fig 13



Fig 12



Fig 11



Fig 10



Fig 9

Images fig 1 to Fig 16
Printed 50cm x 60cm

