BRINGING
THE WAR
HOME

Exhibition Guide
Iranian-born Ahrarnia works both in Sheffield and Iran. He is concerned with the relationship between photography, film, and woven and embroidered textiles. He is interested in cultural histories of embroidery, such as the ‘hidden codes’ stitched into textile products by individuals as a means of personalising and perhaps subverting them.

For this series, Ahrarnia collected photographs of young American soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, mainly via the internet, which he digitally manipulated before printing onto cotton needlepoint fabric and slowly embroidering by hand.

In Farsi, the language spoken widely in Iran, as well as in Afghanistan and to some extent Iraq, the expression cheshm dookhtan (literally ‘eye sewing’) denotes the act of looking intently. Ahrarnia explores this idea in many ways, using the laborious process of sewing as a means to contemplate the subjects of the photographs, as well as to personalise and memorialize them. The brutality enacted by the needle, sometimes deliberately left buried in the canvas, ensures the violence enacted upon these young men is not forgotten.

All images courtesy of Rose Issa Projects
Alshaibi, a US citizen of Iraqi and Palestinian parentage, re-enacts the violence suffered by people in Iraq (the country of her birthplace) on her own body. In her series of performed self-portraits, she physically alters her appearance to produce scars, welts, branding, and other marks.

The series was partly inspired by traditional Iraqi practices of tribal scarification, and partly by the ploy of hoax kidnappers operating today in Iraq. These people defraud families of the deceased victims of suicide bombs, claiming to hold their missing loved ones hostage. In response, families have resorted of demanding knowledge of identifying marks before paying a ransom.

Alshaibi’s images are rich in cultural references. *Inside the Fertile Crescent*, for instance, re-imagines the original site of Iraq, settled by ancient nomadic people between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, as a brand on her cheek.

In a deliberate attempt to reject the conventional photojournalistic representations of pain, Alshaibi states that ‘rather than being sensationalistic or exploiting the suffering of my people...I use my own body... I believe it to be more just’.

All images courtesy Selma Feriani Gallery
Lisa Barnard

Blue Star Moms, 2004
Care Packages Series 1, 2004

In these two separate but related series, Barnard explores the relationship of mothers to their children, and the communicative and connecting routes between home and frontline.

Blue Star Moms (2004) examines the experiences of the San Francisco Bay members of the US nationwide organisation Blue Star Moms. Barnard’s carefully composed portraits depict the Moms with photographs of their children in military uniform, or with official Blue Star flags (decorated with a star to represent each son or daughter serving), as proud and poignant reminders of their absence.

Care Packages Series 1 (2004) documents the Moms’ initiative to insert ‘a little bit of home’ into the battle zone, via donations of consumables. Barnard’s photographs reveal these mundane and poignant items, from single-use cameras to beef jerky (an American snack), packed in self-seal plastic bags for protection during transit. One image, depicting make up remover, nail files, and pink razors, brings home the presence of women in the arena of conflict.
Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

*The Day Nobody Died*, 2008

Broomberg and Chanarin were ‘embedded’ with British troops in Afghanistan, a controversial practice in which journalists are officially attached to a particular military unit for a period of time. The term ‘embedded journalism’ was first used in connection with the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It has arguably enabled journalists to have better access to war zones, but at the expense of independent reporting.

Partly in response to this situation, and partly in an attempt to reflect ‘the impossibility of representing the pain and horror of personal tragedy’, Broomberg and Chanarin decided to abandon the camera. Instead, they made use of a large roll of photographic paper in a lightproof box, and a Snatch Land Rover (used for transporting troops) as a makeshift darkroom.

Each day, in response to events such as a suicide bomb or the repatriation of a deceased soldier, which would ordinarily be documented by a photojournalist, they opened the vehicle’s doors at the appropriate location and exposed a section of the paper to the sun for 20 seconds. An accompanying video traces the journey of the photographic paper from London to Helmand Province in Afghanistan.

The resulting abstract photographs perhaps invite the viewer to contemplate and meditate, but this serenity is disturbed by the specificity of the captions, which remind the viewer of the (often horrific) events represented.
Edmund Clark

*Letters to Omar, 2009 - 2010*

Letters to Omar forms part of a larger project by Clark examining the workings of Guantánamo Bay US naval base and detention camp, and the homes of former detainees. It reflects Clark’s ongoing interest in the hidden workings of prison systems.

Located in a 45 square mile area of Cuba leased by the US government since 1903, the Guantánamo Bay base has become internationally notorious for its treatment of prisoners-of-war from Iraq and Afghanistan. Whilst photographing there, Clark gained access to an archive of correspondence sent between 2005 and 2007 to Omar Deghayes, a Libyan refugee and UK resident accused of al-Qaeda membership and association with the Taliban. Omar was later released without charge and Clark’s work is shown with his permission and participation.

The bulk of the archive consists of letters and cards from well-wishers from around the globe who had never met Omar. All of these were scanned, numbered, and frequently censored by the US military.

In an echo of this bureaucratic system of selection and control, Clark scanned a portion of this material, revealing both a transnational network of communication and empathy, and an insight into popular anti-war images, such as sunsets and roses, puppies and the Yorkshire Dales.
May’s work represents her experience as a Royal Marine’s mother. In this multi-stranded project, she brings together her own photographs and diary entries made in England; texts from official Ministry of Defence newsletters and other news reports, and amateur digital photographs made at her request by her son, Freddy, during his seven months in Afghanistan. She offers an honest and intimate insight into the emotional effects of participation in war, for both those in the battle zone and those remaining at home.

May’s approach calls into question some of the basic assumptions about the definition of war photography. Here, the military world collides with the domestic; masculine pursuits with feminine; the professional photographer with amateur; and the tragic with the everyday.

The title *The Hawthorn Tree* comes from a poem written by Siegfried Sassoon in 1917 in which he adopts the viewpoint of a mother awaiting the safe return of her son during the First World War. May’s images of expectant, unpeopled interiors were largely made in the home of her son’s great-grandfather (himself a fellow officer of Sassoon’s) where Freddy spent much of his childhood. In doing so, she draws attention to the often militaristic nature of boys’ toys and games, and places contemporary conflict in Afghanistan within a larger history of warfare, perhaps suggesting that accusations of flawed military strategies in World War I may be also applied to today’s conflict.
“The US has made my life even harder. They have failed to fulfill their promises, and now they’ve appointed new warlords, the Northern Alliance, who are worse than the Taliban. The current situation is almost as if Taliban were still running the country. Afghan woman have always faced security risks and I face danger every day but I’m not giving up on my job.”

Asef Ali Mohammad
*Stories from Kabul, 2009*

Asef Ali Mohammad was born and raised in Pakistan by his Afghan parents, and has lived in the UK since 2002. Travelling to his ancestral homeland of Afghanistan for the first time, Mohammad met and photographed Kabul residents from a range of professions and backgrounds: beauticians and police officers, newscasters and security guards.

Responding to the context of the American presence in Afghanistan, he invited them to answer the simple question ‘how has America influenced your life’. The resulting portraits are shown alongside their complex and contradictory responses, demonstrating that conflict can engender personal opportunity and economic consequences as well as devastation.
Christopher Sims


Sims is concerned with how conflict is performed and imagined, and its relocation from ‘over there’ to ‘over here’. Theater of War depicts fake settlements constructed by the US military in California and the Deep South to serve as training grounds for soldiers prior to deployment.

Taking the viewer backstage on the ‘war on terror’, Sims reveals how it is reframed in the American imagination as a dramatic entertainment with actors and audience. In these fictitious lands of ‘Talatha’ and ‘Braggistan’, scriptwriters dramatise training scenarios such as a suicide bomber detonating herself outside a mosque, or villagers confronting a tank.

In contrast to conventional war photographs, the only blood spilled here is fake. Participants wear electronic sensors that monitor hits, transforming combat into a paintball-type game without consequences. Sims himself is sometimes obliged to play a part, acting as a photojournalist for the fictitious ‘International News Network’, whilst recent immigrants from Iraq and Afghanistan are employed to play a ‘version’ of the lives they left behind.
Peter van Agtmael

*Untitled Series (Graffiti) from 2nd Tour Hope I Don’t Die*, 2006

Visitors may find the language and views expressed in these images offensive and disturbing. The authors of the graffiti do not reflect the views of the photographer or Impressions Gallery.

Taken as part of a wider series of photographs produced in Iraq, van Agtmael’s deadpan photographs record graffiti made by and for US soldiers in the toilets of an army airstrip in Kuwait, one of the transit points for Iraq. This private dialogue is by turns crude, philosophical, and darkly humorous, revealing the religious, political, and sexual preoccupations and bigotry of its anonymous authors.

Van Agtmael is affiliated with Magnum, the influential photojournalism agency formed in 1947. Magnum is historically associated with both the notion of ‘the decisive moment’ and with heroic combat photography, exemplified by the approaches of two of its famous co-founders, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa respectively. Van Agtmael deliberately denies these two principles in his decision to photograph the static and distinctly unheroic environment of an army toilet block.

As a potential Magnum member, his rejection of conventional approaches is all the more surprising, demonstrating the changing nature of conflict photography, even within the sector of professional photojournalism.

All images courtesy of Magnum