

## Telegraph

## Uncovering layers of truth

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## VISUAL ARTS

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A photograph often represents a half-truth. Images, at times, embody the ideas and opinions of the photographer rather than project the reality of the world that he tries to capture on film. This capacity to subtly alter, or even invert, reality not only bears testimony to the power of photography but also raises ethical questions concerning the medium.

It is thus a pleasure to come across a body of work by a photographer who has resisted the temptation to use the camera to express his own ideas of people and places. Ryan Lobo's exhibition (*War and Forgiveness*, The Seagull Arts and Media Resource Centre, July 21-31) — a collection of black-and-white photographs taken during his travels in Iraq, Afghanistan and Liberia — capture these theatres of conflict

in their truest form: as brutal, bare, places but, inexplicably, not without hope.

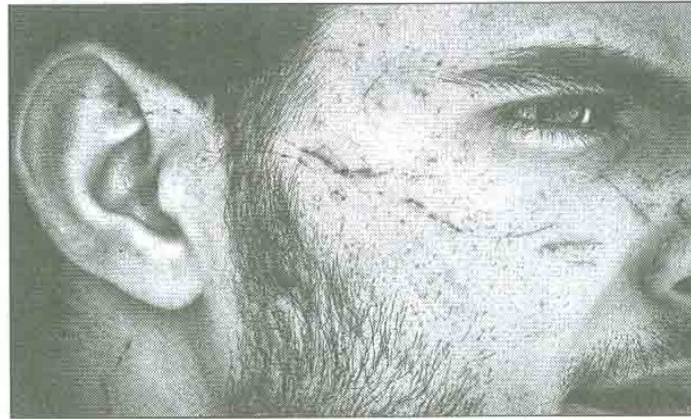
In the visual story-telling tradition, photographs of war occupy a central place. But they often end up showing nothing more than charging soldiers, bombed out buildings, the dead and the injured, and so on. Lobo is different. In this exhibition, the idea behind each image is as important as the image itself. Here photographs of real-time violence — military operations, the killing and destruction — remain absent. Yet each image is intense, conveying the fear and tension that have become part of people's lives. In *Children of Poppy Farmers*, we see

the faces of two Afghan boys who stare at the camera. They seem to be slightly cut off from a gun-toting soldier and farmers by a slender stick slanting across the foreground. Fear, hate and an infinite sadness linger on the two young faces, transforming them into child-

men. There is another photograph of the majestic, yet despondent, Hindu Kush looming over the mangled remains of what were once war machines. There cannot be a more accurate depiction of the land's broken spirit. And there is the Iraqi insurgent, whose face is as

scarred as his land, reminding us again that during wars, battles are also fought inside the mind (picture).

There is also an economy in Lobo's style and technique that is refreshing. There is nothing dramatic about the settings, subject, or light, yet the photographs reveal a complex and layered reality with remarkable



precision. What is also significant is that the photographs here convey Lobo's philosophical engagement with ideas of war and redemption.

This is evident, most tellingly, in *Forgiveness*, where the Liberian-warlord-turned-Christian-evangelist is seen asking a woman — whose brother he had first killed, eating his heart afterwards — to pardon him for his unspeakable acts. The demand to be forgiven, the photograph seems to suggest, comes easily at times. But the image also makes us wonder whether an act of forgiveness can be allowed to replace the idea of justice.

What *War and Forgiveness* does most effectively is bridge the distance between these distant, bloodied lands and the viewer. One does not find it difficult to trace the patterns that bind the children, soldiers and landscapes of Iraq, Afghanistan and Liberia with those of Kashmir, Chhattisgarh or the Northeast.