

War,

Ryan Lobo's ongoing photography exhibition captures the conflict-stricken zones of Liberia, Afghanistan and Iraq. *Expresso* catches up with him

peace & photos

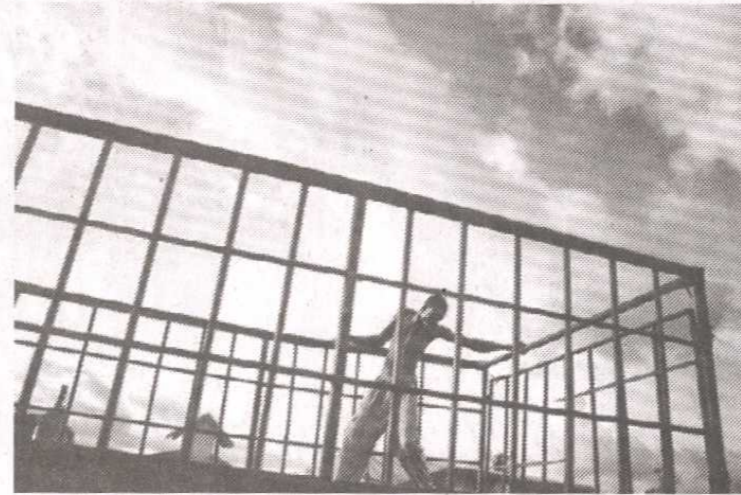
FROZEN IN TIME



Ryan Lobo

ONE should look after the vessel through which one hopes creativity and inspiration will flow through, says Ryan Lobo. And his vessel is the camera. The city-based photographer whose exhibition, *War and Forgiveness* is underway at Tasveer, has lots to say about going to the battlefields in Liberia, Afghanistan and Iraq to take pictures.

His exhibition is about the intangibles he felt in the three conflict zones. And he has expressed these through the medium of photography. "I have come away from war with a sense of guilt which for a long while I could not explain. I wondered what use it would be to exhibit photographs, of faraway wars in India until I decided that an interesting thing about working in war zones was not the fear of death. It is seeing the same thing, perhaps the seeds of the same thing within ourselves, myself, in our conversations and in the way we treat our own people," he says.



The Redemption Of General Butt Naked which won for best cinematography and was short-listed for best documentary at the recent Sundance film festival. This former mass murdering general from Liberia claims to have murdered approximately 20,000 people. I photographed the quest of this man looking for redemption and forgiveness.

■ **How did the idea of going to Liberia, Afghanistan and Iraq evolve?**

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and speak about his crimes openly. He is not a wealthy or powerful man and comes forward, often approaching his former victims and asking for forgiveness. We followed the quest of a man who is looking for redemption. Apart from making the film, I also took

know what was going on most of the time outside the little sphere of protection I was a part of. We had hired security contractors to look after us and they did their jobs well. We visited, we filmed and we left, taking with us a limited experience of these places and the

kidnap us. On another note however, I don't know exactly how dangerous or not these trips were really because there is also so much spin around the danger element, especially when you are far away and there's no way of corroborating what those people were re-

■ **Is there a moment that you would like to relive if given the chance?**

There are no moments I want to relive but I had some memorable ones. In Liberia, I saw a woman whose brother had been murdered ostensibly forgive a man (the general) who had killed him and photo-

■ **How did the idea of going to Liberia, Afghanistan and Iraq evolve?**

I went to Iraq to shoot for a film on the lives of people during conflict along with my business partner. The film, due to various difficulties on the ground was not finished during my stint there. I travelled to Afghanistan in 2007 to help shoot a film on the heroin trade there. Liberia was an independent project funded initially by the filmmakers themselves.

Eric Strauss, my long time former filmmaking partner and one of the film's directors notice a blurb about General Joshua in the book *The World's Most Dangerous Places* ten years ago. We had discussed the possibility of making an independent documentary on the man at that time. Many years later in 2005 Eric tracked him down through some pastors in West Africa and went down to meet him. Later we went down to shoot a film about him and that process continued for five years. The film, which I am one of the producers of, won for best cinematography at this year's Sundance film festival in the US.

What separates Joshua from a lot of other mass murderers is that he's willing to confess

and speak about his crimes openly. He is not a wealthy or powerful man and comes forward, often approaching his former victims and asking for forgiveness. We followed the quest of a man who is looking for redemption. Apart from making the film, I also took pictures. It comes out as an ambiguous portrait of a very

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— Ryan Lobo

complex individual and it is left up to the audience to make their own conclusions and possibly judgements about him.

■ **What was the environment in the three countries? How easy was it for you to befriend the people to be able to capture them in their element?**

I recall feeling claustrophobic in Iraq. Afghanistan was beautiful but incredibly poor. On the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan I realised that I didn't

know what was going on most of the time outside the little sphere of protection I was a part of. We had hired security contractors to look after us and they did their jobs well. We visited, we filmed and we left, taking with us a limited experience of these places and the stories we were following.

I think that our filmmaking

kidnap us. On another note however, I don't know exactly how dangerous or not these trips were really because there is also so much spin around the danger element, especially when you are far away and there's no way of corroborating what those people were really up to.

Liberia was intense in the sense that we were witness to all the drams, suffering and complexities in a post conflict scenario where much violence has taken place.

■ **Was there a person or an incident that you encountered that touched you or moved you deeply?**

I don't think this certain person "touched or moved me" but he definitely made me think and set me off down an internal philosophical journey of sorts. This photography work is about war forgiveness and a possible reconciliation of opposites.

I am fascinated with a former mass murdering African general because he represents the possibility of what we could be, for worse and maybe even for better now. Joshua Blahyi, aka General Butt Naked is the subject of a documentary film I co-produced

■ **Is there a moment that you would like to relive if given the chance?**

There are no moments I want to relive but I had some memorable ones. In Liberia, I saw a woman whose brother had been murdered ostensibly forgive a man (the general) who had killed him and photographed the moment. I recall feeling and thinking that I had witnessed something immense and larger than the context, both cultural and philosophical, that we found ourselves within at that time and I was moved by it.

It seemed strange to me, that in my experiences, that people who have suffered terribly find it easier to forgive, find personal healing in that act, and are open to peaceful resolutions than those who have ostensibly not suffered. Or maybe they are just very tired and incapable of other actions. I do not know.

■ **Apart from war photography, what kind of photography fascinates you the most?**

I enjoy taking photographs of people and events, which tell larger stories than just what's beautiful or on the outside.

Zoya Philip

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