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Living Arts

Witnesses to a chaotic world ; Photographs tell stories of conflict, change

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MEDFORD - Ten days after 9/11, I interviewed John Szarkowski. The occasion was a lecture the longtime head of photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art would be giving soon at the Museum of Fine Arts. We sat on the porch of Szarkowski's house, overlooking an apple orchard in the Berkshires. He spoke of Eugene Atget and Ansel Adams, the subjects of his lecture, and, inevitably, the terrorist attacks.

"You know," Szarkowski said, "no matter how many times they show those planes going into those buildings, the images are never an answer. They're always a question."

Seeing may or may not be believing. Always, whether we know it or not, seeing is asking. This principle of interrogative viewing underlies "Questions Without Answers: A Photographic Prism of World Events, 1985-2010 - Photographs by VII." The exhibition consists of 125 photographs, both color and black and white, by 16 photographers connected to the well-known photo agency. The show runs at the **Tufts University Art Gallery** through April 4.

Among events the photographs show are the fall of the Berlin Wall, war in the former Yugoslavia, the Rwandan genocide, fighting in Chechnya, 9/11, the Iraq war, famine in Darfur, the 2004 Asian tsunami, and the war in Afghanistan. There are also images of conflict and disaster more broadly construed, such as environmental depredation and endemic poverty.

The show has been organized with considerable thought. The images are divided into four thematic groups: Endless War, Never Again, Displays of Power, and Lives in the Balance. Useful notebook-size guides are available, with each page reproducing one of the photographs along with explanatory information about it. There's also an extensive audio component, accessible on viewers' cellphones, with commentary from members of VII and individuals affiliated with Tufts's Institute for Global Leadership. The exhibition honors the institute's 25th anniversary.

The commentary can leave something to be desired. Hurricane Katrina took place in 2005, not 2006. Statements like "the rolling thunder of blowback is muted" and "On these walls the aphorisms of war fail to shroud its wounds" don't exactly add much. The general tone demonstrates a sad axiom: The shortest distance between good intentions and inaction is moral superiority.

The images are what matter. They're unframed and hung at varied heights. The resulting sense of visual jumble is intentional. The justification, and it's a logical one, is that onlookers' experience of such dire events is chaotic and overwhelming. So the wall space is meant to echo how a spectator might feel in the real-life situations shown in the photographs.

In practice, though, such an arrangement misrepresents what photographers accomplish and does a disservice to the images on display. What a good photojournalist does in such situations, and "Questions Without Answers" consists of the work of extremely good photojournalists, is to extract information from such chaos in a way that discerns (or at least imposes) some kind of order.

As for the images, the manner of presentation makes it harder to take in and appreciate them individually. More specifically, not framing the photographs ignores the fact that when viewers see them in their published state, whether in print or online, they're framed by such explicit devices as borders and rules or the implicit demarcation afforded by the dimensions of page or screen. Seeing the photographs without frame or glass gives them an immediacy yet, however paradoxically, drains away at least some measure of their power.

A corner of the exhibition is devoted to the work of VII's most famous member, James Nachtwey. It consists of 25 black-and-white images hung in a grid. The arrangement has a coherence and density that come as a visual relief. It feels odd speaking of "relief," since so many of the individual images - of Rwanda, the Balkans, Sudan - are horrific. Yet Nachtwey is such a remarkable photographer - truly, as many have said, our era's Robert Capa - his work often achieves a transcendent quality. He documents, yes. He also bears a higher witness.

Nachtwey has no monopoly on quality here. The simplicity of Antonin Kratochvil's photograph of tank tracks outside Basra in March 2003 lends the image a startling, terse eloquence. It's almost eerie how much Christopher Morris's pictures of Chechnya can resemble images from the Eastern Front in World War II.

Nothing in the show is scarier, though, than another Morris photograph. No violence, no destruction, no suffering: It shows an airport lounge in Pyongyang. What's so terrifying is how next-door familiar it looks. We see characterless chairs, a potted palm, and the sort of sleek, bland emptiness that keeps George Clooney's character in "Up in the Air" going. Apparently, Kim Jong-il goes for it, too?

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PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS: A Photographic Prism of World Events, 1985-2010 -

Photographs by VII

Is at the **Tufts University Art Gallery**, 40 Talbot Ave.,

Medford, through April 4.

Call 617-627-3518 or go to ase.tufts.edu/gallery.

Caption: Christopher Morris's image of a Chechen fighter fleeing the presidential palace is on exhibit at the **Tufts University Art Gallery**. CHRISTOPHER MORRIS/VII

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