

The Day Nobody Died, 2008

Unique C-type, 600×76,2 cm c/u.

Video 6 min 39 s.

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In June 2008, Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin travelled to Afghanistan to be embedded with British Army units on the front line in Helmand Province. Embedding is a system invented by the army to control the way journalists report from the theatre of war and has led to a far more sanitised reporting than in earlier conflicts such as Vietnam. In an attempt to resist the embedding process, Broomberg & Chanarin took a roll of photographic paper instead of a camera. The roll was 50 metres long and 76.2 centimetres wide and was contained in a simple, lightproof cardboard box.

They arrived during the deadliest month of the war. On the first day of their visit, a BBC fixer was dragged from his car and executed and nine Afghan soldiers were killed in a suicide attack. The following day, three British soldiers died, pushing the number of British combat fatalities to 100. Casualties continued until the fifth day when nobody died. In response to each of these events, and also to a series of more mundane moments, such as a visit to the troops by the Duke of York and a press conference, all events a photographer would record, Broomberg & Chanarin instead unrolled a six-metre section of the paper and exposed it to the sun for 20 seconds. The results seen here deny the viewer the cathartic effect offered up by the conventional language of photographic responses to conflict and suffering.

Working in tandem with this deliberate evacuation of content, are the circumstances of the works' production, which amount to an absurd performance in which the British Army, unsuspectingly, played the lead role. Co-opted by the artists into transporting the box of photographic paper from London to Helmand, these soldiers helped in transporting the box from one military base to another, on Hercules and Chinooks, on buses, tanks and jeeps. In this performance, presented as a film, the box becomes an absurd, subversive object, its non-functionality sitting in quietly amused contrast to the functionality of the system that for a time served as its host. Like a barium test, the journey of the box became, when viewed from the right perspective, an analytical process, revealing the dynamics of the machine in its quotidian details, from the logistics of war to the collusion between the media and the military. *The Day Nobody Died* comprises a series of radically non-figurative, unique, action-photographs, offering a profound critique of conflict photography in the age of embedded journalism and the current crisis in the concept of the engaged, professional witness

Chicago, 2006

C-type print, variable dimensions.

● Everything that happened, happened here first, in rehearsal: the invasion of Beirut, the first and second intifada, the Gaza withdrawal, the Battle of Falluja. Almost every one of Israel's major military tactics in the Middle East over the past three decades was performed in advance here in Chicago, an artificial but realistic Arab town built by the Israeli Defence Force for urban combat training. It took a year and a half of preparation and bureaucracy for the artists to gain access to the Chicago facility, after which they were granted just 45 minutes on the site.

Red House, 2006

Portfolio.

● Broomberg & Chanarin photographed marks and drawings made on the walls of a fading pink building now known as the Red House. Situated on the slope of a hill in the town of Sulaymaniyah in Kurdish northern Iraq, it was originally the headquarters of Saddam's Ba'ath Party. It was also a place of incarceration, torture and often death for many of the oppressed Kurds, for whom the cell walls were the most immediate outlet for expression.

As David Company said: "There are echoes of Brassai's surrealist images of scratched graffiti from 1930s Paris and daubs and tears that pay homage to the abstract expressionism in Aaron Siskind's photographs from the 1950s, yet Broomberg & Chanarin's images evoke a context both more pressing and fraught. These images are not traces of some bygone era: these photographs capture the scars of a recent war."

American Landscapes, 2009

Portfolio.

● *American Landscapes* takes the interiors of commercial photography studios across the United States as its ostensible subject. The artists reject the foreground and highlight instead the space in which images are literally 'made'. In these occasionally abstract photographs the surfaces of walls, floors and ceilings junction along straight lines and parabolic curves to create the unspoiled white space known in the photography industry as Cycloramas. Broomberg & Chanarin refer to these spaces as 'scenography for a free market economy' or simply 'landscapes'. For just as the American West came to represent unbound possibility in the minds of early pioneers, so these studio walls act as a blank screen on which any sort of fantasy may be projected.

Dodo, 2014

Prints.

● Almost nothing in recorded history happened in San Carlos until May 1968. Back then, the coastline of the Sea of Cortez closely resembled Pianosa, the diminutive Sicilian island where Joseph Heller set his satirical Second World War novel *Catch-22*. It was therefore the perfect location to film the Hollywood version and that single event has come to define the town of San Carlos and its surrounding landscape forever.

At the time, this isolated site was only reachable by boat. But after wrapping up production and returning to Los Angeles, the film crew left behind a road, control towers, derelict villas and a fully operational runway, large enough to accommodate the largest fleet of B-25 aeroplanes assembled since 1945. One of these bomber planes was also buried on set. Along with a team of archaeologists, Broomberg & Chanarin travelled to San Carlos to exhume the so-called 'Mexican plane'. In the intervening years, much had changed. The desert had entirely reclaimed the terrain and the artists found only fragments: thousands of aluminium shards, rusty nails and rabbit droppings. The plane's disappearance recalls that of the dodo, the first species on Earth to be made extinct as a result of human activity. Four centuries after its last sighting, not a single intact skeleton or trustworthy image remains. Only one egg survives.

Bandage the Knife Not the Wound, 2018

UV print on cardboard.

● Over one trillion images were produced in the world during 2018, mostly distributed on social media, mostly tools of self-promotion and self-flagellation.

For *Bandage the Knife Not the Wound*, the artists reflect on their precarious sense of place and belonging to their homeland (South Africa), to photography and to each other by turning to the handful of images that remain meaningful to them – images that refuse to be deleted and that resurface again and again in their exchanges. Turning to their own archives, and embracing accidents and mishaps, Broomberg & Chanarin have produced a series of montages, playing a game of visual ping-pong that recalls the surrealist method, exquisite corpse, where one image responds to the next. They have reproduced the results in incremental layers on the backs of unfolded cardboard boxes used for packaging photographic paper. Dissecting their images along industrial folds and perforations on this cheap, readily available material suggests something frightening about the life of images in the digital age: algorithmic, disposable and further than ever from the original.