

Awaiting the barbarians on the road to Baghdad

In 1991, as the international alliance led by the US debated the destruction of Iraq, CNN's novel coverage of *live war* led Paul Virilio to ask: 'How can we fail to recognize, after a month of standoff, that the true *intervention force* in the Gulf is television?'¹ Virilio's pithy observation reflected a long history. Ever since the first European photographers ventured there, the Middle East has been an object of fascination, and the camera has been a frontline weapon shaping Western perceptions of the other. Recognizing the attractions of a virtual 'grand tour', Francis Frith toted a 16x20 inch plate camera up the Nile in 1856. A few years later he parlayed the profits from his journeys into founding what soon became the world's largest publisher of postcards. Today Frith would probably launch a satellite news network, providing real time images from the global front.

Over the last two decades Iraq and its border territories have repeatedly lit up the world's screens. Yet, the resulting picture remains uneven and incomplete, riven by force-lines of politics and commerce. Certain stage-managed events— like the 'missile-cam' images of the 1991 conflict, or the toppling of Saddam's statue in Baghdad in 2003— are all too visible, repeated time and again to reinforce the official narrative of just warfare, whether in the name of liberation, democracy, or simply 'the war on terror'. Other scenes, such as the mass civilian deaths inflicted by so-called 'smart bombs', the wholesale displacement of refugees into surrounding territories, or the vicious guerrilla warfare still waged daily across many Iraqi cities, pass virtually unsighted. Even the scandal of Abu Ghraib—which for a moment cut through the political complacency content to assign hierarchies of civilization according to geographical boundaries—quickly became another passing sign in the high-speed mediascape.

In *Edge of Empire*, Phillip George asks us to reconsider these conditions of visibility and invisibility. The exhibition has two major components. The first room continues George's longstanding interest in the political and emotional resonances of physical terrain. But where his photographs in earlier series such as *Tranzlution* (2001) were digitally manipulated to create an oneiric landscape, in which Byzantine icons and architecture found new homes amidst the rock pools of Sydney's Little Bay, George has felt no need to remix these landscapes. It is as if the layers and disjunctions etched by history and culture are material enough. Working with the sort of large-scale prints he has previously used to create a panorama of Bondi's South Head (*Lost Stories*, 2003-2004), George immerses viewers in an apparent 'no-man's land', somewhere in Syria on the road to Baghdad. Looking south, we face a Frith-like shot of mountains and monumental desert plain stretching to the horizon, a scene of dramatic emptiness sheltering under a canopy of sun-split cloud. History punctuates this terrain in the form of a series of archaeological ruins from the ancient city of Palmyra, once renowned as the 'bride of the desert'. Amidst these surreal and crumbling towers, the present registers more tenuously, signalled only by a slender road curving sinuously around a hillside in the foreground. Looking the other way, we stand more firmly in the 21st century, surveying the outer suburbs of a contemporary township abutted by a military camp, the topography bisected by a modern roadway. Yet, despite signs of inhabitation, the scene also seems pervaded by emptiness. The camera's overarching perspective (it was shot from above, on a hillside near a border

observation tower) lends the image an air of implacable distance, of suspension and abandonment rather than renewal.

In the space between these matched panoramas stands a reconstructed Predator Drone. Part *Star Wars*, part contemporary military tool, the Drone constitutes a mute and obdurate testament to the reliance of 21st century warfare on ‘real time’ information dominance. George has embellished his model with the Arabic script for ‘boomerang’ (which translates literally as ‘rebounding arrow’), underlining the close relation he perceives between the extremism of high-tech warfare that converts capacity to see into capacity to kill, and the emergence of other extremisms which regard suicide bombing as a legitimate mode of political struggle.

The second room provides a complete visual counterpoint to the first. In place of wide panoramic scenes are detailed close-ups; the muted palette of desert landscapes gives way to the lush colours of heavy-petalled rose blooms; and the documentary image is replaced by the trademark precision digital detailing that George aptly terms ‘hand-made images’. For George, digital layering is both a practical technique and a guiding metaphor to his method for probing over-determined sites of history and culture. Perhaps belying Gertrude Stein’s assertion, roses form a particularly complex node of cultural associations. In the West, their symbology spans Greek and Roman mythology, the birth of Christianity, and medieval alchemy. In the Middle East, the network of references is equally vast. Iran, which is the most likely birthplace of the ancient rose, also gave the world suicide bomber. If George’s roses, with their deliberate formal qualities of carefully balanced composition and subtle colouring recall Georgia O’Keefe’s celebrated flower paintings, they are also redolent with newer significations, most notably the appropriation of the rose as the contemporary symbol for Iranian ‘martyrs’.

Crossing borders inevitably reminds us just how much history and power lingers in names. Common descriptors such as Near, Middle and Far East are themselves a legacy of empire, signifying geographical position in relation to the unspoken centrality of ‘Europe’. Similarly, the choice between terms such as martyr and terrorist—or, rather, the fact that the two terms are so often polarized leaving no space for deeper discussion of complex historical and political questions—marks the present gulf between supposedly monolithic ‘Western’ and ‘Arabic’ points of view. In ‘The Paradise Suite’ George deploys the intricate patterning drawn from traditional and modern variants of Islamic decorative art to dislodge these familiar certitudes. These carefully embellished images stand as a counterpoint to his celebrated surfboards (*Borderland*, 2008), asking us to reconsider not only where we stand in the world, but who ‘we’ might be.

George has long been fascinated by Cavafy’s insistence on the *functionality* of the ‘barbarians’. If they didn’t exist, we would have to invent them: as Cavafy wrote, “they were, those people, a kind of a solution”. By mobilizing distinct aesthetic traditions in a context deliberately framed by the logistics of militarised perception, George asks us to re-examine the ambivalent place of the Arabic other in the contemporary political imaginary. To move beyond the confines of polarized logics based on fear and the myths of essentialist identity, George suggests we need to imagine a world without ‘barbarians’, and instead map the complex, conflictual and overlapping affiliations that constitute contemporary global culture.

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¹ Virilio, P. (2002) *Desert screen: war at the speed of light*. (trans. M. Degener) London; Continuum, p20.