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Art review: Simon Norfolk at Luisotti

By Leah Ollman
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"Burke + Norfolk: Photographs From the War in Afghanistan" is a fascinating conversation across time between 19th-century Irish photographer John Burke and contemporary British artist Simon Norfolk. During the 1878-80 Second Anglo-Afghan war, Burke made pictures (albumen prints represented here by present-day copies) melding Victorian traditions of expeditionary and ethnographic documentation. Norfolk, returning to Afghanistan in 2010-11, "moved in Burke's shadow," as he puts it, tracking down similar locales and subjects: dwelling-encrusted mountainsides, groups of military officers and local types.



Burke's personal politics are little-known. His pictures, while vaguely sympathetic to the natives, pose no challenge to the imperialist agenda. Norfolk, a photographer of conflict and its repercussions over time, operates from a position of grave disappointment and anger at the muddled mission and destructive path of the current invasion. His chronicle is steeped in ruin and loss, hypocrisy made palpable. A photograph of heaps of scrap metal gleaned from hospital beds and school desks, for instance, is offset by images of the sturdy infrastructure of U.S. military bases. Bamboo ladders and poles used in local construction are stacked at the base of a mountain whose peak is spiked with similar, higher-tech forms identified as "American-controlled electronic eavesdropping equipment."

A bitter beauty prevails in Norfolk's large color pictures, their bluntness and toughness sheathed in the seductive hues of dusk and dawn. Norfolk conducts a dialogue with Burke in this series, but as in all of his work, he is fundamentally sparring with time itself and the untapped forces of memory.