

BROOKLYN RAIL

On the Subject of War

Smack Mellon

March 2005

Curator and Smack Mellon director Kathleen Gilrain clearly wants the viewer to understand one thing about *On the Subject of War*: This is an homage to the recently deceased Susan Sontag. Thus the title, a loose combination of the titles of Sontag's two well-known books on photography, *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others*. As Katy Sigel elegantly outlined in these pages last month, Sontag's triumph was her democratization of photographic theory, and although she probably would have abhorred that description, her writing made photography accessible to those who had never heard of John Szarkowski. Sontag argued that the power of photos emanated from their ability to haunt—to stick with the viewer uncomfortably—to raise an issue and let it hang there without answering it. Naturally, this begs a crucial question: Does this thesis hold up in a shockproof culture? What photographs could possibly transcend our desensitization to images of violence, sadism, and now, torture? Ours is the era of the thirty-second blurb, an affront to Sontag's notion of “regarding,” which implies attention span. Death counts roll past on TV tickers, Humvees explode, another kid gets caught in some crossfire...cut to commercial. The bombardment of war imagery and television's treatment of war as an action movie flies in the face of regarding, perhaps even is specifically designed to defeat it.



Susan Meiselas, “Street Fighter” (1979), c-print.
Courtesy of Smack Mellon and
SusanMeiselas/Magnum Photos.

While the ghost of Sontag haunts *On the Subject of War*, the writing of artist Martha Rosler—specifically her essay “Metaphors and Wars”—remains equally pertinent to the show. In her 1981 review of *Nicaragua*, a book of photographs by Susan Meiselas (whose work appears in the show), Rosler criticizes Meiselas's images of leftist revolution as “antirealist,” too commercial-looking to be effective. Although some of Rosler's argument was bound up in the notion of Meiselas's use of color prints and their advertising connotations, she also charges the photographer with romanticizing her subjects and focusing a sexualized lens on young male fighters, ultimately firing off this zinger: “This is the liberal pipe dream of revolution, occurring on a moral plane and anointed by the blood of the innocent.” A generalized romanticization without shading, then, is Rosler's primary criticism of *Nicaragua*. Several of Meiselas's photos on view here, as well as subsequent work from El Salvador and Kurdistan, would likely be met by Rosler with the same criticism. Rosler is a tough critic, but context is essential to war photography; otherwise the interpretation of it as “the liberal pipe dream”—or propaganda—becomes close to inevitable.

Bobby Neel Adams's photos of land mine victims and amputees in Cambodia and Mozambique are executed gracefully, portraying their subjects as real people with dignified lives to live, and while his photos may be subject to charges of romanticism, their sensitive treatment of the subjects is commendable. While Adams ensures that their injuries are visible to the camera, the subjects are often portrayed smiling or holding children—essentially, carrying on. Photojournalist Ron Haviv's DVD, which depicts photos from four recent international sites of American military intervention, bounces provocatively off a harrowing group of images taken by anonymous World War II photographers. Ultimately, though, Nina Berman's photos are the most appropriate in the context of Sontag. Surrounding an abstract elegy to post-9/11 life in New York by video artist and rising art star Eve Sussman, Berman's portraits of American soldiers who have returned from Iraq with Purple Hearts are evocative, disturbing, frank, and haunting. Without a doubt, much the power of these images exists in their contemporaneity. For the most part, civilians rarely hear the soldiers' point of view. We hear the politicians, we hear the dissenters, we read the papers and watch television, but we rarely hear much from the soldiers. Berman's photos let them do the talking. Her portraits of them in their homes are flanked by quotes that apparently were generated from conversations during the photo shoots. While a few are bitter about their injuries or the lack of support they feel they have from civilians, for many the only regret is that they can't return to where the action is. For those tending toward the opinion that our culture just may be shockproof to secondhand imagery, regard these comments from Pfc. Tristan Wyatt, age 21: “I want my old job back. We blew things up. I felt my heart was in the right place over there.”

—Nick Stillman