

LAST CHANCE

'The American War': Harrell Fletcher's Vietnam Photographs at White Columns

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A year ago, the artist Harrell Fletcher saw the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, a memorial to what the Vietnamese call the American War. He was so struck by it that he went back with a digital camera to photograph on the sly everything there.

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White Columns, New York

A photograph from "The American War" showing three children who were affected by Agent Orange.

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White Columns, New York

A 73-year-old victim of the massacre at Thanh Phong in a photograph from Harrell Fletcher's exhibition "The American War."

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This meant mostly magazine and newspaper photographs, and snapshots of Agent Orange victims, captioned. He shot the photographs and the captions separately, at an angle, to cut down on reflections, and in such a way that his pictures make clear that he was there, standing in the museum, taking photographs of photographs that are themselves copies. They look a little like the pictures you find on eBay.

His bootlegged museum, partly reassembled, has been traveling the United States. It is at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at M.I.T. in Cambridge, Mass., through Friday. Its run at White Columns, the Manhattan art gallery, ends Saturday. It is an ingenious little show; heartbreaking, too. It would be a pity to miss.

As a boy, with my father on a trip to Hanoi in late 1973, I happened to have been taken to a museum that was just like the War Remnants Museum. It had the same sort of photographs as Mr. Fletcher's: the same captions, the same homely, ramshackle feel. It was like other propaganda museums I had seen, in the Soviet Union, about Lenin and Stalingrad and the Cold War, but it was put together in the middle of this blitzed city for who knows whom — as nobody, or almost nobody, was visiting Hanoi. And the people who lived there didn't need a museum to show them what had been happening around them — and to them — or to tell them how to feel.

I nearly forgot my visit to the Hanoi museum until Mr. Fletcher's show. He has included in it a photograph of a big crater made by an American bomb dropped on a neighborhood in Hanoi on Dec. 21, 1972, exactly a year before I went there and saw a similar hole in the ground filled with rainwater. Maybe it was the same hole, although there were many holes, and they were not easy to tell apart or to distinguish from the holes dug along some streets for people to jump into when the bombs fell. The streets looked like egg cartons.

In Mr. Fletcher's show, there is also a photograph of an American soldier dangling what's left of a Vietnamese man, whom the caption identifies as a "liberation soldier," blown up by a grenade. "The American soldier laughed satisfactorily while carrying a part of the body," the caption adds.

It's not clear to me that he's laughing. In another picture, a G.I. pins down a prisoner with a cloth wrapped around his head while a second American pours water on the cloth, to suffocate the man.

Allegations that American troops have murdered Iraqi civilians make the front pages every day now along with charges of a coverup, and the connection between Mr. Fletcher's "American War" and the war in Iraq is almost too obvious, but his show does more than make that comparison. In a nearly invisible way, it raises a general question about looking at photographs: about what it means to see something from someone else's point of view (Mr. Fletcher's camera angle being the operative metaphor), and also about how strangely, even alarmingly compelling war pictures can be.

"There is something appalling about photographing people," Cartier-Bresson once said. "It is certainly some sort of violation; so if sensitivity is lacking, there can be something barbaric about it." Recently, the Swiss installation artist Thomas Hirschhorn culled some of the most shocking photographs he could find from the Middle East, mostly off the Internet, for a show at Barbara Gladstone's gallery, which mixed the pictures up with mannequins and floats. The show, boasting about its inclusion of pictures that the American mass media generally find too gruesome to disseminate, was in retrospect infuriating. It is difficult to make art out of war but easy to exploit violence and congratulate oneself for looking at pictures that other people can't or don't or won't. Piety is an abuse often heaped on top of the bloodletting.

Mr. Fletcher's work puts me more in mind of the German artist Thomas Struth's pristine photographs of people looking at art in churches and museums: cool but oddly loving meditations on the inevitable contingencies of seeing, which are always private and particular. To see well, Mr. Struth's work implies, is to be aware of oneself in the act of looking, just as Mr. Fletcher makes himself, and by implication us, present in his photographs of photographs, which are, in their way, also strangely loving of their subjects and their setting.

They caused me to find myself, as I did in that picture of the bomb crater, which was shot by someone as a kind of remembrance, a memorial. It is not coincidental that much of the power of Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial in Washington comes from the fact that people find their reflection in the shiny walls engraved with the names of the dead.

I now realize that many of the deformed children and teenagers, heirs of Agent Orange, whose pictures are in the War Remnants Museum belong to a later generation than the children I played with and visited in their schools and to whom I gave letters from my schoolmates back home, prospective pen pals.

The philosopher Walter Benjamin has pointed out how we're always searching for the "here and now" in old photographs, for the spot where "in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it."

The photographs of the children are unspeakably sad, some smiling hopefully at the camera, inheritors of an American war that they were told ended before they were born. A Vietnamese woman, eyes closed, clutches a baby to her cheek. The woman's back is half turned to the camera so that we can see her napalm scars.

The photograph is dated 1996.

"The American War" is at White Columns, 320 West 13th Street, West Village, (212) 924-4212, through Saturday.