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At London's Imperial War Museum, Tim Hetherington's Unorthodox War Photography

The exhibition displays work by the late photographer—Hetherington died in Libya in 2011—that subvert our expectations of war and the role of observer.

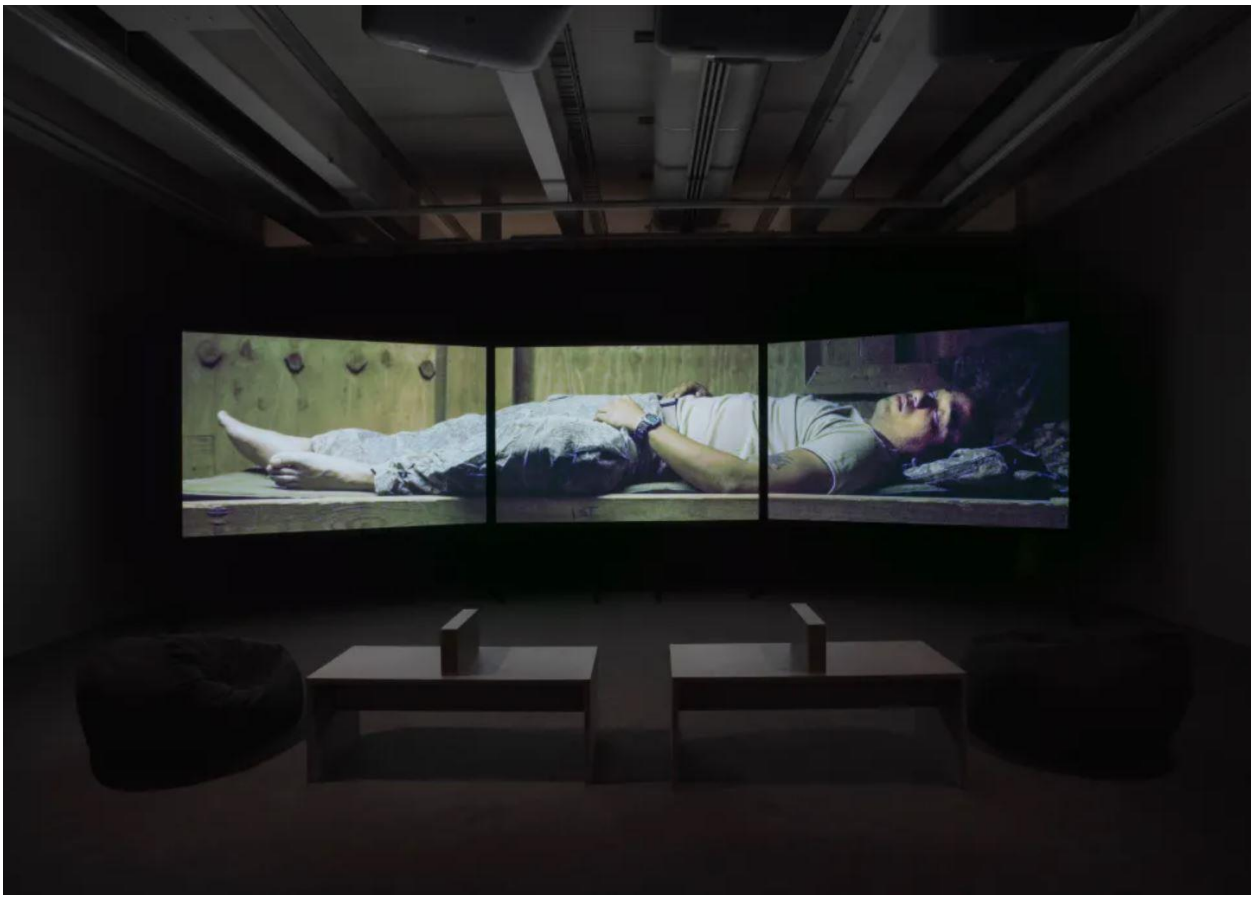
By Henry Roberts | June 6, 2024

Photograph taken by photojournalist Tim Hetherington during the Libyan Revolution in Misrata, Libya, scanned from negatives at Imperial War Museum.

Tim Hetherington was not a war photographer, not in the conventional sense at least. To be sure, a tour of his photographic career is a tour of war zones: the Second Liberian Civil War, Afghanistan under American occupation, the 2011 Libyan Civil War, where Hetherington was killed by Libyan forces, either by a mortar shell or an RPG. He was 40.

Why shouldn't we think of Hetherington as a war photographer then, seeing how he lived—and died—photographing violence across Africa and the Middle East, far away from his native England? Well, for one thing, he wouldn't have wanted us to think of him that way: simply as an objective chronicler

of conflict, an outside observer of other people's suffering. Instead, Hetherington's work was often about acknowledging the relationship between photographer and subject, rather than hiding it. In this way, Hetherington was far from the chaotic point-and-shoot chameleon we associate with war photography. His images slow down war and examine its quiet moments. They invite us to think about war rather than just look at it.



A view of "Storyteller: Photography by Tim Hetherington" at IWM London.

This thoughtful approach to photographing war is currently on display at London's Imperial War Museum. Running through September 29, "Storyteller: Photography by Tim Hetherington" covers the key periods of Hetherington's career and features films and artifacts from his life. But it's the photographs that give the exhibition its weight.

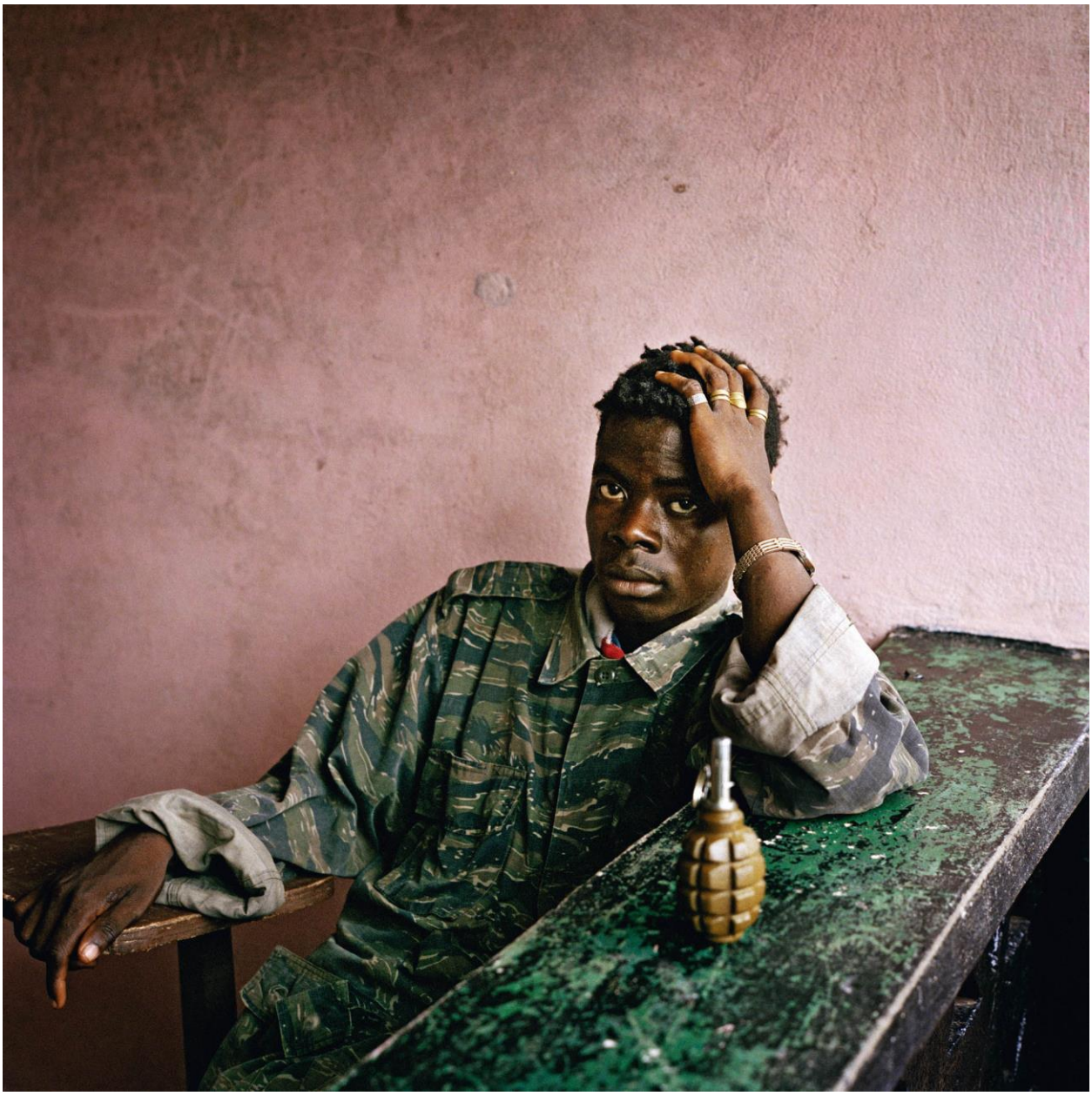
Rather than attempting to be an invisible presence, Hetherington was in dialogue with his subjects as he took their photograph. He would often return to the same locations again and again, strengthening relationships with his subjects. "I have no desire to be a kind of war firefighter flying from war zone to war zone," he once said. This slow, long-term approach was embodied in Hetherington's practice. When his colleagues were transitioning to digital cameras to keep up with the speed required for photojournalism, Hetherington often continued to shoot on film, even on the frontlines of conflict. Despite working with a digital Canon in Afghanistan, Hetherington opted for a Mamiya 7 when he returned to Libya in 2011—an old medium-format camera more suited to a portrait studio than a civil war. (He was not averse to digital advancements; one of the objects on display is

the iPhone Hetherington took with him to Libya.) The result was a slowed-down work, a considered way of shooting—even in the rapid environment of a conflict zone.

A casualty from an ambush lies in the back of a 'technical' during the push on the capital by the rebel LURD force. Po Rover, Liberia. June 2003.

In 2008, Hetherington won the World Press Award for his photograph of an American soldier in Afghanistan. The image shows a soldier sinking against a makeshift wall of a bunker, his helmet in his hand and a haunted look on his face: is it exhaustion? Horror? Up close, we see the photographic imperfections: the frantic nature of the image matches the horror expression of the soldier's face. It's a picture more akin to traditional war photography and in contrast to the slow, deliberate and considered portraits elsewhere in the exhibition. It's no wonder this was the image that won

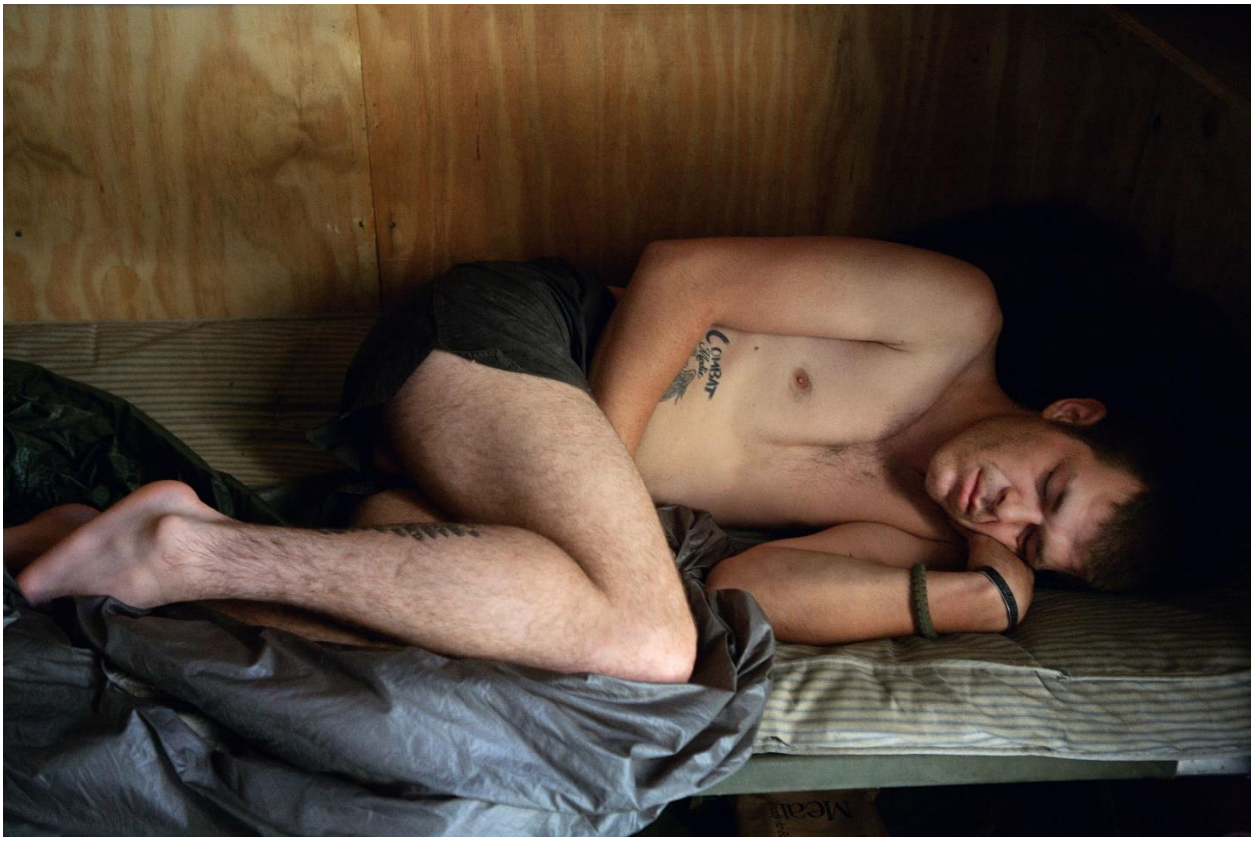
Hetherington his greatest prize, though it perhaps says more about other people's expectations of war photography than anything about Hetherington.



Young rebel fighter and hand grenade. Tubmanberg, Liberia.

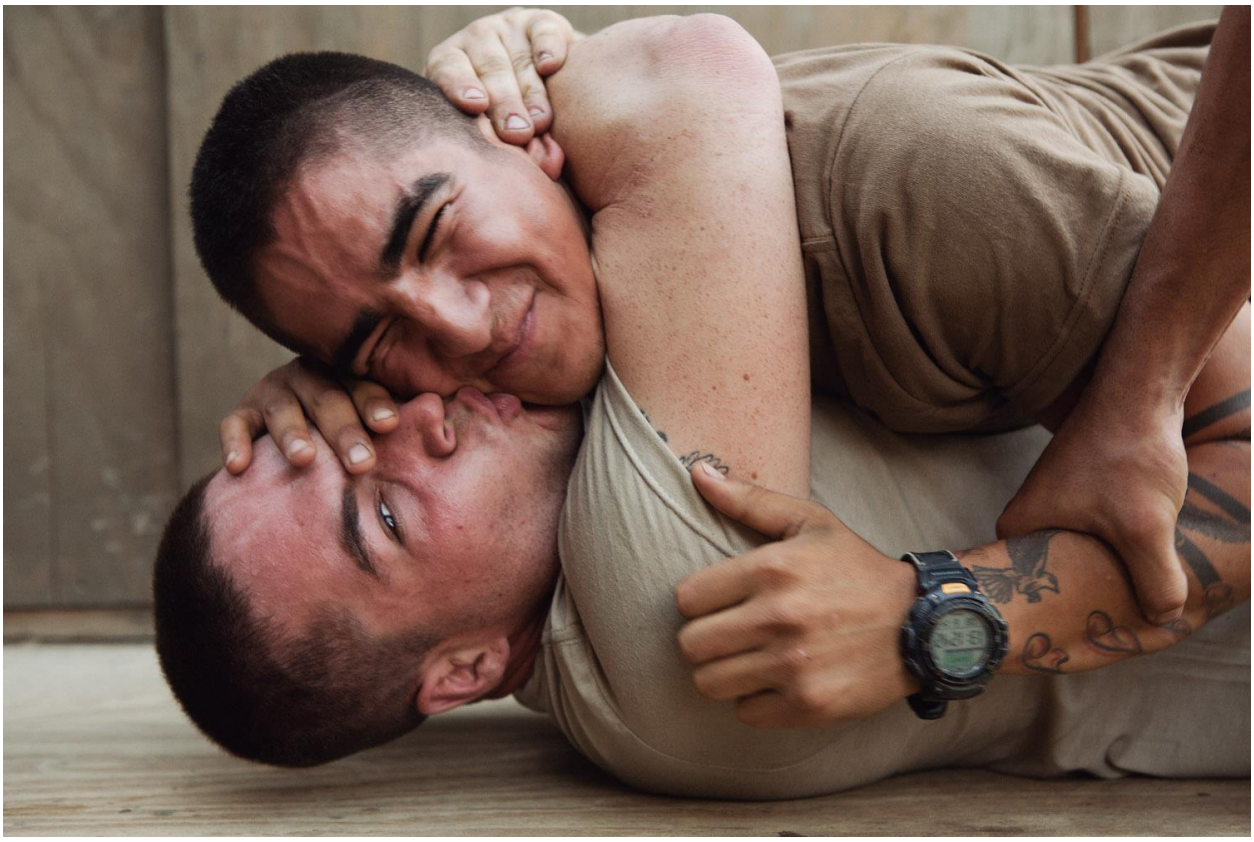
Yet Hetherington is best known for a collection of photographs rather than a single image. *Sleeping Soldiers* depicts American servicemen in slumber. The series reminds us why Hetherington wasn't a war photographer as we think of them: "I didn't want to pretend this was about the war in Afghanistan," he said of the work. "It was a conscious decision. [It] comments on the experience of the soldier. It's brotherhood." The photographs provoke an uncomfortable feeling in the viewer; the sleeping soldiers look like babies or dead bodies. They challenge our notion of what a soldier is and how a soldier feels. Again, Hetherington's relational interests in photography are on display. He said

of the series that it was “as much a journey about my own identity as it is about those young soldiers.” He saw himself in the young men, some barely out of school, and we see ourselves in the images as a result. “I became much more interested in the interrelationships between the soldiers and my own relationship to the soldiers than I was in the fighting,” he said. We see an intimate side of war away from the chaos; it’s possible to sleep and dream amidst the bombs. They are not images of conflict, yet we come away feeling like we understand a less-portrayed aspect of war. It could be our sons in the pictures. It could be us.



‘Doc’ Kelso sleeping. Korengal Valley, Kunar Province, Afghanistan. July 2008.

Hetherington didn’t believe in the objective recording role of the photojournalist. He described his film *Diary* as “an attempt to locate myself after ten years of reporting.” He went on, “It’s a kaleidoscope of images that link our Western reality to the seemingly distant worlds we see in the media.” Hetherington himself was of course a Westerner, an outsider. The difference is that he did not refute his role in making the image and shaping its discourse. By planting himself in his imagery – through active participation of subjects and deliberate style—Hetherington created images that transcended the usual cold distance embedded in much photojournalism. In doing so, Hetherington offered a bridge between *us* and *them*, refusing to reproduce Orientalist notions of otherness through his pictures by continually reminding his audience of his own role in their creation. But the images lose none of their storytelling power by their relative nature. Far from it: we feel closer to the battlefields of Afghanistan and Libya through these photographs. We just feel Hetherington holding our hands as we go there.



Bobby kisses Cortez udring a play fight at the barracks of Second Platoon at the Korengal Outpost. Korengal Valley, Kunar Province, Afghanistan. June 2008.

There is a discomfort looking at the photographs knowing that Hetherington was to die in pursuit of his craft. This knowledge is especially prescient today: as of May this year, at least 107 journalists and media workers have been killed in Gaza. Many others have been killed elsewhere, but the violence in Gaza and the West Bank since October 7 made the last year the deadliest year for journalists in memory. Had he lived, there's no doubt Hetherington would have provided a sobering perspective on the human toll of the violence that has continued to ravage the Middle East since his death in 2011. Hetherington would have also provided a sober voice on the role of the photographer in situations of power asymmetry—a public debate that has grown in prominence over the last few years. The best we can do in his absence is look and reflect. Hetherington wanted to eschew stereotypes and focus on the lives behind the photographed faces. It's an example many photojournalists today should follow.

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