

DISSENT

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

Bringing Home Iraq

Nicolaus Mills • October 30, 2007

WHEN WE think of photographs from the Second World War, we think of Robert Capa's D-Day pictures of American infantrymen struggling to get ashore at Normandy. When we think of Vietnam War photographs, we think of Larry Burrows's pictures of U. S. Marines bogged down in the mud and dense growth of the Vietnam highlands. Now comes Iraq, and this time the photographs that best capture the war are the pictures of Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, currently at the Steven Kasher Gallery in New York in a show that opened on November 15 and that will run through December 22.



Greenfield-Sanders's Iraq photographs are already well known. They were made to accompany the HBO documentary, *Alive Day Memories: Home from Iraq*, which James Gandolfini, the star of the *Sopranos*, produced. The documentary revolved around interviews that Gandolfini conducted with ten wounded soldiers, who talked about the Iraq war and their memories of "alive day," the day they narrowly escaped being killed.

In contrast to Capa and Burrows, who made their marks as combat photographers, Greenfield-Sanders owes his reputation to portrait photography. Painters, fashion models, even porn stars have been the subjects of his books, and in "Alive Day Memories," he brings his portrait skills to bear in the thirteen 16" x 20" photos that take up a room of their own at the

Steven Kasher Gallery.

When once asked who is his favorite photographer was, Greenfield-Sanders answered that it was Rembrandt. His reply was a joke, but the joke captures the spirit of his work. He is out to reveal the inner life of his subjects. For Greenfield-Sanders, this means giving his subjects the freedom to appear as who they think they are. Unlike other portrait artists, Greenfield-Sanders

STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

does not want to surprise his subjects and catch them in a moment that reveals something they would rather conceal.

INVARIABLY GREENFIELD-

Sanders's subjects stare directly into his camera and make eye contact with the viewer in a frame free from distractions. The approach is one that works particularly well with such established figures from the art world as the painters Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein, but it also works with the porn stars Greenfield-Sanders photographed for his book *XXX*. The porn stars in *XXX* are never objectified by Greenfield-Sanders's lens. In his pictures, they are vulnerable in their nakedness but neither coy nor seductive. They stare at, rather than away from, the viewer, making it, in turn, impossible to look only at their bodies.



This same preoccupation with dignity is central to Greenfield-Sanders's portraits of wounded Iraq War veterans. In a photo that Greenfield-Sanders has said is his favorite, Dawn Halfaker, a West Point graduate and star basketball player, stands before the viewer holding the prosthesis for her missing right arm. John Jones, a



decorated Marine, sits dressed in his uniform from the waist up, but from the waist down he is wearing shorts that display the two robotic legs he must now use. And in what is, in many ways, the most disturbing of all Greenfield-Sanders's portraits, Mike Jernigan, another Marine, appears in a close up that shows his left eye socket empty and his right eye socket with a plastic eye studded with the diamonds from the wedding ring his wife gave back to him when they divorced after his return from Iraq.

In none of Greenfield-Sanders's Iraq portraits—all except for John Jones's portrait done against a black background—do his subjects avoid contact with the viewer. Their relaxed postures suggest they have begun to come to terms with what has happened to them. But for the viewer the photographs are still painful. There is a before-and-after narrative implicit to

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

them. They leave no doubt about the costs of the Iraq War or why the president has gone to such lengths to avoid being pictured with the wounded.

“Alive Day Memories” is no substitute for the political analysis of the Iraq War found in George Packer’s *The Assassins’ Gate* and Thomas Ricks’s *Fiasco*, nor is it an alternative to Dan Baum’s brilliant reportage on the wounded in his 2004 *New Yorker* article, “The Casualty.” Still, when it comes to arguing that the time has come to bring the Iraq War to a close, nobody has made the case in a way more likely to convince the undecided than Greenfield-Sanders. His visual politics forecloses debate.

AT THE end of the Second World War our image of the wounded vet was epitomized by Harold Russell, a disabled vet, who played the navy double amputee Homer Parrish in William Wyler’s Academy Award-winning 1946 film, *The Best Years of Our Lives*. While in the service, Russell lost both his hands in a demolition accident, and early in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, in the role of Homer Parrish, he demonstrates that he can cope with his accident by lighting a cigarette with the hooks that substitute for his lost fingers. His worry is that others, particularly his girlfriend Wilma, will not see him as whole.

The Best Years of Our Lives ends happily. Homer marries Wilma and is able to put the Second World War behind him. In Greenfield-Sanders’s portraits, we have no such assurances about the future. His vets appear every bit as resilient as Harold Russell was more than sixty years ago, but the jury is still out on their long-term recovery from a war that has left so many who fought it, as well as the country, filled with second thoughts.

Nicolaus Mills is professor of American Studies at Sarah Lawrence College and author of the forthcoming *Winning the Peace: The Marshall Plan and America’s Coming of Age as a Superpower* (Wiley). To see more of Timothy Greenfield-Sanders’s “Alive Day Memories” photographs, click [here](#).

Timothy Greenfield-Sanders’s photographs top to bottom: Dawn Halfaker, First Lieutenant, U.S. Army; John Jones, Marine Staff Sergeant; Michael Jernigan, Marine Corporal.
Photographs©Timothy Greenfield-Sanders.