

# Forensic Traces of War

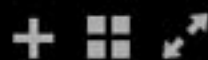
Photographs by

Simon Norfolk



Former teahouse in a park next to the Afghan Exhibition of Economic and Social Achievements in the Shah Shahid district of Kabul. Balloons were illegal under the Taliban, but now balloon-sellers are common on the streets of Kabul providing cheap treats for children. © Simon Norfolk

▶ 1 of 30



Simon Norfolk is a very talented driven young photographer who is pursuing one of life's big questions with intensity and focused intention. He is studying war, and its effects on many things: the physical shape of our cities and natural environments, social memory, the psychology of societies, and more.

He is examining genocide; imperialism; the interconnectedness of war, land and military space; and how wars are being fought at the same time with supercomputers, satellites, outdated weapons and equipment, people on the ground, intercepted communications, and manipulated and manipulating media.

Norfolk is doing this with photography that is beautiful — stunning in its clarity and detail, without the typical shock or trauma that one might expect about the subject of war. All of his work is informed by inquisitive intelligence, research, supporting facts and figures. And over time, deliberately and carefully, he is trying to connect many of the dots.

He attacks his subjects with a forensic approach, and thinks of his photographs of landscapes as “chronotopes”, layers of meaning, abandoned redundant military hardware, bombed-out ruins, mass graves, forgotten memory — all dating back to before the Roman empire and continuing through to the future, non-stop.

His personal manner and his supporting texts are as quiet as his photographs, but he has an edge about him that rivets listeners and readers. He makes bold sweeping statements that link together “designs and patterns, historical traces [of war] in landscape, architecture, language” all over the world. He speaks from direct experience: Rwanda, Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia, abandoned battlefields scattered with broken tanks, unexploded cluster bombs, depleted uranium bullets, mass graves, ruined houses, towns, villages, lives.

In this constant layering and covering up, and what remains, he believes it is his duty as an investigative photographer to make us stop and regard a seemingly benign scene with more discrimination. His job is to “lift it out of the flow,” freeze it, and make us think.

His books, which he refers to as “chapters” in the same ongoing story-telling, are perhaps the most satisfying way to comprehend the complex things he is trying to communicate. His website is state-of-the-art and packed with informed reporting and packaged in a compelling manner. If you get a chance to hear him speak, do so. And when you see his very large prints on the walls of galleries or museums, they will mean so much more to you.

We met for the first time in the summer of 2006 immediately after he delivered the keynote lecture at the Rhubarb-Rhubarb photography festival in Birmingham UK. We sat for more than an hour talking about his work and ideas. Here, you can listen to several choice bits of that conversation: