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Burke and Norfolk Show Epic Scenes of War

by Sue Steward
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Separated by almost a century and a half, John Burke and Simon Norfolk have become umbilically linked through photographs taken during two of Britain's wars in Afghanistan.

Norfolk's impeccable research into Burke's documentary of the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880) led to his own 2010 photographic project and he echoes the scenes preserved from the 19th-century pioneer's beautifully ornate photo-album.



Norfolk's work always carries political undercurrents, often depicting wars through lyrical photographs but the implications are there. Like Burke, he replaces explicit military action and consequences with lifestyles, landscapes, military encampments and preparations for battle, as well as portraits of the British military and the Afghan people.

At the Tate, most of Burke's images are hung adjacent to Norfolk's but in a second exhibition devoted to the photographer, at the Michael Hoppen Gallery, the small collection includes more epic scenes. Norfolk's prints are exquisite; the black and white matching the tones of Burke's contemporary sepianess, and contrasting with those in glorious colour. A sublime blueness dominating both galleries was attained by shooting pre-sunrise and is particularly irresistible in a large scene at Hoppen, of pink, dawn-tinted snow-covered mountains towering over Kabul.

Composition clearly fascinated both men; a line of Afghan police trainees create an arcing horizon against a blue sky, and snaking container convoys and trucks, all echo Burke's attraction to the perfect patterns created by cannons, men and camels.

In town, life-goes-on scenes are important inclusions to both men. Norfolk's startlingly bright Pizza Express and Coffee Shop dwarfed by a sculptural mountain of burnt-out buses is a shock against Burke's dusty shopping street which resembles those seen on TV. These two important collections will surely shake up our mental images - and maybe even conspire to an end to today's war.