

Here are the young men – Claire Felicie

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Here are the Young men (where have they been)* newly published book by Claire Felicie.

I just received this stunning book and I wanted to share some thoughts ! First, I have to explain that I have been educated in photography with the names of Robert Capa, Don Mc Cullin, or Gilles Caron, in mind. They were representants of war photographers, two of them died on the battlefield and the third was nearly driven mad. At the end of XXth century, America almost lost a war in Vietnam because of photography. Citizens of a country can't stand anymore seeing dead corpses and injuries. A war has to be clean if it has to be done ! In XXIst century, wars continue on in different places of the world... but photographers are not allowed anymore to witness. They have to be « Embedded », which fairly mean « stay behind and close your eyes ».

The purpose of Claire Felicie is to witness the damages of war on young people/soldiers involved in the Afghanistan conflict. We won't see any dead bodies in this book, except in the eyes of the soldiers.

First about the formal aspect, the book is hardcover, completely white cover with the title outlined and a small picture at the bottom right corner. The picture is hard to understand at a first look, showing a hand on a riffle, but we can also understand it as an indication to the way to follow : open this book for a full story. The white may also have to deal with a kind lost of virginity or, to better say, the lost of the innocence. The book has been designed by reknown Dutch designer Sybren Kuiper aka SYB.

The book is divided in three parts. The first is titled « Committed », some very dark color shots that appear to be shot at night, but in fact, it is just underexposed photos which don't show anything except some soldiers seen as shadows. We don't recognize anyone, these soldiers are anonymous persons on duty. The second part is called « armoured », but don't expect to see any sophisticated material. This part has to deal with mentally support and shows those little objects that are preciousy kept in the pocket, or on the skin, a medal, a ring, a necklace or a clothe. Probably what keep them in touch with humanity, and help them to remain a human being in the hell !

The third part, « Marked », can be considered as the main project. Claire Felicie started this project after her son entered the Marine Corps,

discovering the mother's anguish about what could be the impact of a war on a young person. The third section is made of full pages, close up portraits of young soldiers. Each one in a series of three. The first one on the Dutch base before departure to Afghanistan, the second, during their mission in Afghanistan, and the third, back in the Netherlands after their time on battlefield. The faces are reproduced on scale 1 and we look at those persons face to face. The question asked is not about the legitimacy of war, but more about, what a face could show. What is shown is the change in the mind of the young people. First picture make you discover their eyes smiling, faces enlightened by the innocence of the youth, always ready for a good joke. The second show them very concentrated on duty with traces of dust and sweat, no time for kidding anymore. Finally, in the third view, the eyes are darken, no joy anymore, just a sort of never ending sadness that will probably not disappear for long. They are now « veterans » and will probably spend the rest of their life facing what they saw and can never talk about nor get rid of. They have entered adulthood very seriously ! This part is really powerful. If you look at the pictures fastly, you may miss the differences, it all works in subtility. At a first glance the portraits may look the same, and you go back, then forward, then back again to check those differences, not being sure of what you see. The reader must assume that he also put a part of him in these pictures, looking for some kind of recognition or empathy. These young men will probably haunt you for awhile !

It is a very compelling work and everybody will find some intimacy with the portraited, and everyone will decide about his own statement in these photos, one against the wars, one to acclaim the art of portrait, and everything between ! With this piece of work, as already did some other Dutch photographers (Geert van Kesteren...), Claire Felicie renews the kind of, what we can call, « concerned photography » and/or « war photography » in XXIst century.

*The title of the book comes from the first lyrics of the song « Decades » by Joy Division.

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