

Photography exhibits link two U.S. wars, their atrocities

By LISA KURZNER

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"History is written by the victors" takes a new twist in two photography exhibitions at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center: Harrell Fletcher's "The American War" and Nubar Alexanian's "S.O.P."

Documentary style enters the art equation as photography, straight and unadorned.



Harrell Fletcher's 'The American War' installation in the main gallery is dominated by an oversize photographic billboard.



Nubar Alexanian's 'Hooded Man on the Box (Re-enactment)'

The two shows play point-counterpoint by linking two episodes of American military involvement, the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. War is hell, these photos say, seen from any perspective.

Fletcher's installation in the main gallery has a spare, street-like atmosphere dominated by an oversize, photographic billboard, an outdoor element from an earlier exhibition. Piles of book spines, slender and tome-sized, of Vietnam War literature ascend the gallery wall. The personal library writ large extends to a second wall, a wooden bookshelf displaying mock volumes, including Frances Fitzgerald's "Fire in the Lake" and Michael Herr's "Dispatches," both landmark publications of that era.

The crux of the piece lies in the gruesome photographs of victims from The War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, arranged like science-fair entries on the two last walls.

Fletcher photographed the entire museum display, including typewritten labels in English, all dedicated to recounting the war and its aftermath to the local Vietnamese population.

Replete with gritty flash bounce and reflection, the photos include Life magazine stories and straight-on color images of bombing and chemical warfare victims. It's difficult to say which is more horrifying to an American viewer in 2007: the disfigured children or the snapshots of American soldiers enacting brutalities in Vietnam, which chillingly echo more recent events in Baghdad.

Alexanian's black and white photographs were shot on the film set of director Errol Morris' latest documentary project, "Standard Operating Procedure," which follows American military atrocities of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison. Many of these images are recognizable to any news-conscious citizen, as they restage incidents of torture and depravity originally photographed by the soldiers themselves.

A portrait appears of Lyndie England looking pensive on the set. The "man on the [box](#)" image, the hooded prisoner with arms outstretched in a Christ-like pose, is a contemporary icon. The portrait is shockingly

effective, but this second image seems as much an apotheosis as the bearing witness to a crime.

Alexanian, a documentary photographer, has worked often with Morris. His skillful eye for dramatic lighting and composition render these images of torture — including the [infamous](#) episodes of waterboarding and prisoner bondage — almost too handsome to incite guilt and outrage in a gallery setting. This does not undermine their potency.

With these two shows, the Contemporary lives up to its mission of challenging the gallery public to consider the passions and motivations of art wherever it is found.