

# ARTS

## Powerful images on exhibit at Union raise questions about vital issues

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Karen Bjornland | [January 17, 2013](#)



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The sailor kissing the nurse on V-J Day, the naked girl burned by napalm running down a road in Vietnam, the man falling from the World Trade Center.

"It's the one from 9/11 that people will always remember," says Marie Costello, interim director of the Mandeville Gallery, the second-floor art space in Union College's Nott Memorial.

"These images become iconic. They become part of our historical memory. But why do they become iconic?"

Costello invites us to ponder that question and bigger questions about our humanity in "Art or Evidence: The Power of Photojournalism," a two-part exhibit of powerful images from around the globe.

Twelve of the photos, all black-and-white, are by the award-winning French photojournalist Gilles Peress and come from his portfolio, "Flashpoint," which gathers shots he took during conflicts in Northern Ireland, Iran, Rwanda and Bosnia. The portfolio was gifted to Union and is part of the college's permanent collection.

### Other images

Fifteen images by six other photographers from VII, a New York hub for some of the world's finest photojournalists, were selected by Costello, the show's curator. Both black-and-white and color, they date from 1999 to 2011 and were taken in Asia, Europe, the Mideast and the U.S.

"I chose what I thought would be an interesting collection, compelling photographs," she says. "Not just war but social commentary, health, style, fashion."

If you bring a companion to this exhibit, be prepared for debate or discussion as you confront issues of poverty, politics, war, social class and religion.

"I wanted to stop time. We're inviting people to spend more time than a glance at a newspaper," says Costello.

And how does one define photojournalism?

Peress says he is only “a witness,” that his work is not art but “gathering evidence for history.”

The images by the VII photographers are hung together on one side of the gallery.

“Afghanistan: US Marines in Marja” by Adam Ferguson is an image of contradictions, as a young American soldier guards a poppy field at harvest time.

If your politics falls to the left you could be amused by a Christopher Morris photo of George W. Bush and two sidekicks at an impromptu outdoor press conference. Wearing a casual, short-sleeve shirt and the posture of a confident cowboy ready for a shootout, the president is flanked by Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in dark suit coats.

Anastasia Taylor-Lind documents the fate of desperate Siberian girls who are plucked from their homes and transformed into London supermodels.

In her photo, the eyes of a young woman are cast heavenward as hands manipulate her hair and face. In the label text, Costello tells us that she is reminded of a 15th century image of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian.

The other side of the gallery is devoted to Peress, who has been a member of Magnum Photo, an international photographic cooperative, for more than 40 years.

In “Flashpoint,” a dozen images with titles but not labels, you see the frightened and hopeless expressions of people wounded by wars and conflicts and dictators that they cannot control.

In 1972, in Northern Ireland, Peress captured an angry mob scene a minute before British soldiers opened fire, killing 13 civilians, an event now called “Bloody Sunday.”

In another photo, Muslim women who lost their homes in the Bosnian conflict slump together, heads in their hands. While their tired faces look away from us, their bodies tell the story.

### **Getting the message**

As viewers, we try to remember all we can about these events, but even if we cannot recall those facts, a visual message is instantly transferred, and we linger before the image with our questions.

What happened to these people? What is happening now in Iran and Rwanda?

“Peress was in these places when these flashpoints occurred. He was within the conflict,” says Costello, an art historian who describes herself as “a news junkie” with a lifelong interest in photojournalism.

In a corner, visitors are invited to take a seat, don a headset and watch an interview with Peress at the University of California, Berkeley.

“My generation is very suspicious of the media,” the 66-year-old tells the interviewer.

“My primary goal is to understand what’s going on there.”

When asked if witnessing such events has changed his view of humanity as a Frenchman raised by Christian-Jewish parents, he pauses.

“I’m not quite sure man is fundamentally good,” he says. “Maybe 50/50.”

In Rwanda, he adds, “the passivity was as horrible to witness as the killing itself.”

### **Lessons for students**

For Union College students, the exhibit will be part of lessons in political science, history and photography.

“I’m hoping that students get engaged in global events when they see these pictures,” says Costello.

On Feb. 7, she also hopes to draw aspiring and experienced photojournalists to a lecture by Alison Morley, who chairs the photojournalism department at the International Center of Photography.

“She knows the people in the show personally, including Gilles Peress, of course.”