

Lifeworks

## Documents of disconnection

The collection of 77 photographs recently on view at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography in *Larry Towell: Projects 1985–2000* are uniformly beautiful. Unremarkable in size and unassumingly framed, they seize the viewer with their powerful content and perfect execution. Towell is one of this country's premier photo-journalists and the only Canadian member of the prestigious Magnum photo agency, founded by the legendary photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. His work has appeared in over 200 publications, including eight of his own books.

This 15-year retrospective of Towell's work consists of three long-term projects on war zones in Central America (primarily El Salvador) and Palestine, and on impoverished Mennonite colonies in Mexico and Southwestern Ontario. Although the locations vary, the images are closely linked thematically and stylistically.

Towell focuses his camera on people caught in extraordinarily harsh circumstances but continuing to cling to the familiar routines of daily life. In El Salvador, a mother nurses her infant in the maternity ward of a civilian hospital, apparently oblivious to the armed, camouflage-clad soldier beside her, and a



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Larry Towell, *Ojo de la Yegua Colony, Chihuahua, Mexico, 1992*. Silver gelatin print.

young boy delights in the antics of three chicks in the rubble in front of his home, a shack in the dump. In Palestine, youths appear to play with slingshots against a background of burning tanks, black smoke and hurrying figures. In Mexico, a little girl holds a puppy up to the sun, as if introducing a newborn to the world, behind her hangs the mutilated carcass of a slaughtered hog. Towell's subjects engage in

an endless cycle of birthing and burial. Children live the austere, segregated lives, and fight the endless battles, of their parents and grandparents. They live in the confines of belief systems so entrenched that they accept their struggles as normal. In Towell's pictures, the cycle of life constantly repeats itself to the point where his subjects' lives seem to unfurl independently from their environment.

Towell's artistic sensibility reinforces the disconnections in the lives of his subjects. There is an unsettling disorder in his work — both in his choice of subject matter and execution. *Ojo de la Yegua Colony, Chibuabua, Mexico* (1992) is a luminously beautiful photograph of a Mennonite husband and wife. They are simultaneously pictured together and apart. Their old-fashioned clothes and the roughness of the room they occupy initially recall a 19th-century daguerreotype. But Towell creates separation between them by photographing the wife in the foreground, her face in profile, a Mona Lisa smile on her lips, her head turning away from the viewer. Her husband appears in the background, seated frontally on a chair, arms crossed, feet apart, leaning against a dark, clapboard wall and staring directly at the viewer. His head, haloed in light, endows him with divine authority. His wife's shadow appears in a ray of sunlight bathing the wall next to him, a silent, subservient figure. In a photograph from the Palestine series, *Children holding toy guns, Gaza City, Gaza Strip*, from March 1993, a boy raises a toy pistol in the air, his hand bisecting the left third of the image, his face partly obscured by another pistol-clutching hand, and another one, in a repeated diagonal line of dismembered hands.

All of Towell's work is characterized by disconnection. He is naturally attracted to subjects that are ironic, or inherently contradictory — their different elements mirroring the ironies of human life. He reinforces his subject matter through aesthetic devices — skewed points of view, internal divisions of the image with architectural elements and rays of light, truncated body parts, absence of eye contact between individuals. These devices create a disequilibrium within the photographs, a sense of dislocation, a feeling of rootlessness — which in essence is Towell's intent.

Towell has stated that his work is about landlessness, what happens to people who have lost their land, or on a



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**Larry Towell**, *Children holding toy guns, Gaza City, Gaza Strip, March 1993*. Silver gelatin print.

psychological level, their sense of being anchored to their surroundings. The brilliance of his work is that he manages to capture both the story and the emotion. His photographs speak of misery, tragedy, irony, the entire range of emotions — but primarily about humanity — in all its tenacity and its imperfection. While he obviously sympathizes with the underclasses, Towell neither idealizes nor judges them. He watches and records — then filters his observations through his understanding that human experience includes human folly.

Towell's own shadow appears in the foreground of a 1994 photograph from the Mennonite series, *La Batea Colony, Zacatecas, Mexico*. For once unpeopled, it is an agricultural scene of a barn, a towering haystack, a whirring flock of crows suspended momentarily, and for all time, in the sky overhead. In this photograph, Towell stakes his own claim on this harsh, dry landscape, but he also claims it in homage to the people he documents. This is picture-making of the highest order.

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