



# Iraq | Perspectives

Photographs by Benjamin Lowy



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**DUKE PRESS PUBLISHES *IRAQ / PERSPECTIVES*, WINNER OF CDS/HONICKMAN FIRST BOOK PRIZE IN PHOTOGRAPHY**

*Judge William Eggleston Selected Benjamin Lowy's powerful color images of war-torn Iraq for prestigious prize*

DURHAM, NC—Duke University Press is proud to announce the publication of *Iraq / Perspectives*, the fifth winner of the Center for Documentary Studies/Honickman First Book Prize in Photography. Internationally renowned photographer William Eggleston judged the competition and chose Benjamin Lowy, a war and feature photographer with Reportage by Getty Images, to win the prize.

“Benjamin’s work is an opportunity to see as an American soldier sees when in Iraq—nobody’s ever shown that,” Eggleston says, “especially through night vision goggles.”

Lowy’s powerful and arresting color photographs taken through Humvee windows and military-issue night vision goggles capture the desolation of a war-ravaged Iraq as well as the tension and anxiety of both U.S. soldiers and Iraqi civilians. To photograph on the streets unprotected was impossible for Lowy, so he came up with the brilliant approach of making images that illuminate this difficulty by shooting through the windows and goggles meant to help him, and soldiers, to see. In doing so he provides us with a new way of looking at the war—an entirely different framework for regarding and thinking about the everyday activities of Iraqis in a devastated landscape and the movements of soldiers on patrol, as well as the alarm and apprehension of nighttime raids. Lowy’s career as a conflict photographer has also taken him to Libya, Haiti, Darfur, and Afghanistan, among other places.

“In July 2005 I was being driven from an assignment—an endeavor that took two cars and four heavily armed Iraqi guards. Iraq was a land of blast walls and barbed wire fences,” Lowy writes. “I made my first image of a concrete blast wall through the window of my armored car that day. . . . My only view of Iraq was through inches-thick bulletproof glass.

“The images are not intimate. Metaphorically speaking, the windows represent a barrier that impedes dialogue. The pictures show a fragment of Iraqi daily life taken by a transient passenger in a Humvee; yet they are a window to a world where work, play, tension, grief, survival, and everything in between is as familiar as the events of our own lives.”

Lowy also began to make photographs through military-issue night vision goggles (NVGs), which were “firmly attached to his camera by means of duct tape, dental floss, and occasionally, chewing gum” to reveal a more menacing nocturnal version of Iraq’s “abandoned streets, cowering civilians, and anxious soldiers.” As with the window photographs, the “Nightvision” images were made “through a barrier . . . unlike ‘Windows,’ however, the perspective is more intimate. As soldiers weave through the houses and bedrooms of civilians during nighttime military raids, they encounter the faces of their suspects as well as bystanders, many of whom are parents protecting their children.”

Lowy adds, “The urgency and anxiety among the soldiers were as palpable as the terror in the faces of the Iraqi civilians. More often than not, the rest of Iraq, like the rest of us, are left in the dark, but I hope that these images provide the viewer with momentary illumination of the fear and desperation that is war.”

Lowy received a BFA from Washington University in St. Louis in 2002 and began his career in 2003 when he joined Corbis and embedded with the U.S. Army’s 101st Airborne Division to cover the Iraq War. In 2005 *Photo District News* chose Lowy’s Iraq images as some of the most iconic of the start of the 21st century. Lowy’s photographs have appeared in such publications as the *New York Times Magazine*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Fortune*, the *New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, *Stern*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *Men’s Journal*, and *Rolling Stone*, and his work has been recognized by *American Photography*, *Foam Magazine*, POYi, *Photo District News* (PDN’s 30), World Press Photo, and Critical Mass. His work has been collected in several gallery and museum shows and has been exhibited at San Francisco MOMA, Tate Modern, Open Society Institute’s Moving Walls, Noorderlicht Photofestival, Battlespace, and the Houston Center for Photography, among others.

Lowy’s work was selected from over two hundred entries in the fifth biennial First Book Prize competition. Offered every other year, the Center for Documentary Studies/Honickman First Book Prize is open to American photographers of any age who have never published a book-length work and who use their cameras for creative exploration, whether it be of places, people, or communities; of the natural or social world; of beauty at large or the lack of it; of objective or subjective realities. The prize honors work that is visually compelling, that bears witness, and that has integrity of purpose.

The next CDS/Honickman First Book Prize in Photography competition will be held in 2012. For more information, see the CDS website: <http://cds.aas.duke.edu/bp/index.html>.

### ***Iraq /Perspectives***

#### **Benjamin Lowy**

with a foreword by William Eggleston

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Electronic images available: <http://cdsporch.photoshelter.com/gallery/CDS-Honickman-First-Book-Prize-in-Photography-Benjamin-Lowy/G00000vBoC5.XJn0>

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## Reviews and Praise for *Iraq / Perspectives*

“Lowy’s photos are unmistakably scenes from Iraq—ruined buildings, street vendors, kids with missing limbs, billboards for newly minted cellphone services. In Lowy’s images, we see daily life returning to this country, but the children shown have known little but this forlorn landscape. Dreariness is all. The most original component of Lowy’s book is the thematic divisions. The first part consists of images captured through the windows of military Humvees, while the second part consists entirely of green night-vision images and yields the most intimate moments, including Iraqi civilians being intimidated and detained in what appear to be their own homes.”—David Fellerath, *The Independent Weekly*

“Lowy’s photographs of both daily life and the terror of warfare were taken through the windows of a Humvee and through military-issue night vision goggles. They provide a revealing perspective on what he describes as ‘the fear and desperation that is war.’”—*Shelf Unbound* (A Top Small Press Books of 2011)

“The mediation inscribed in the image - the window frame, the night vision haze - positions us in relation to the scene. By representing the act of perception, by addressing the experience of observation as much as the observation of experiences, Lowy’s subject is both what the soldier sees and how the soldier sees. The pictures contain the clues and tools that encourage the audience to consider photojournalism as practice. Lowy’s frames do what all photography does, but they do it exceptionally well: they simultaneously invite us to look, and hold us in place.”—Leo Hsu, *Foto8*

“Whether looking out of armoured car windows or through green-tinted night-vision goggles, the military has little opportunity to connect with the local people or everyday life, as Lowy’s shots make chillingly clear.”—*British Journal of Photography* (named one of their best books of 2011)

“I’m not one to shirk engaging the discussion of a book but *Iraq / Perspectives* puts me in an unusual place. It is an important, memorable and arresting photobook, and for all these reasons I’m left rather without anything to say. This book is hard for me to talk about simply because the work speaks so extraordinarily well for itself. The images that are compact and succinct, presenting at once the literal and metaphorical. It is among the best representations of the day to day realities of our soldiers and the psychological boundaries keeping us from comprehending Iraq and this war.”—Sarah Bradley, *Photo-Eye*

“Straddling the line between art and photojournalism, Lowy depicts both the US presence in Iraq as well as everyday Iraqi experience by ‘shooting’ through Humvee reinforced windows and military-issue night goggles. . . . This distanced viewing makes a subtle yet powerful comment on photojournalistic practice and embedded journalism while at the same time providing a powerful visual narrative of the horrors of war.”—*Hotshoe*





## *About Benjamin Lowy*



**Benjamin Lowy** is a freelance photographer based in Brooklyn, New York. He received a BFA from Washington University in St. Louis in 2002 and began his career in 2003 when he was embedded with the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division to cover the Iraq War. Lowy's career as a conflict photographer has also taken him to Libya, Haiti, Darfur, and Afghanistan, among other places. Lowy's photographs have appeared in such publications as the *New York Times Magazine*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Fortune*, the *New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, *Stern*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *Men's Journal*, and *Rolling Stone*, and his work has been recognized by *American Photography*, *Foam Magazine*, *POYi*, *Photo District News* (PDN's 30), *World Press Photo*, and *Critical Mass*. His work has been exhibited at San Francisco MOMA, Tate Modern, Open Society Institute's Moving Walls, Noorderlicht Photofestival, Battlespace, and the Houston Center for

Photography, among others. Lowy's photographs from Iraq were chosen from over two hundred entries as the fifth winner of the biennial CDS/Honickman First Book Prize in Photography.

Lowy lives in New York City with his wife, photographer Marvi Lacar, their sons Mateo and Kaleb, and two dogs.

Lowy is currently represented by Reportage by Getty Images.

View his web site at <http://www.benlowy.com/>.

To see galleries of Lowy's work:

Time Magazine:

[http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,2043058\\_2227707,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,2043058_2227707,00.html)

Photo District News: <http://www.pdnphotooftheday.com/tag/benjamin-lowy>

New York Times: <http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/11/painting-in-deadly-oil/>

GQ: <http://www.gq.com/news-politics/newsmakers/201106/libya-revolution-qaddafi-photos#slide=1>

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December 5, 2011



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## Ben Lowy



Ben Lowy's photojournalism has taken him to Afghanistan, Darfur and Iraq, where he began documenting the war in 2003. He received a BFA from Washington University in St. Louis and has exhibited work at SF MOMA, the Tate Modern, Arles and the Houston Center for Photography. His photographs have also appeared in GQ, The New York Times Magazine, Rolling Stone, The New Yorker and New York Magazine. Lowry has received four American Photography Awards, three World Press Photo Awards and seven Photo District News Awards; his 2011 book "Iraq | Perspectives" received the Duke University Center for Documentary Studies/Honickman First Book Prize in Photography.

### Related Links:

[Visit his website](#)

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## Benjamin Lowy

An Interview with Alexa Dilworth of the Center for Documentary Studies

March 28, 2011

*How did you get started in photography, Ben?*

Quite by accident. I was a pretty poor illustrator. I wanted to be a comic book artist, and I wasn't very good, much to my disappointment. I took a photography class to learn how to set models up so I could have something to trace, back when I thought I could still be a comic book artist. I would go to bookstores, pick out the fashion books and the Howard Schatz's naked men books, and just trace big strong burly men for super heroes. Then, I tried to do a double major in illustration and photography because I really got into it. One day, I was going to Library Limited (which was bought out by Borders in St. Louis), and I went to their photography room and was pulling out big books because all the tall, big books were all the fashion/naked men and women books that I would trace. I pulled out Nachtwey's *Inferno* because it was a big, tall book, but there were no naked people in it, just the horrors of humanity. I was stymied, looking at that work; it opened my eyes. Instantly, I was inspired to make images like that. From there, I had one goal in mind: I worked hard to get myself into the industry and to get myself into doing conflict/social issue work as soon as I got out of college.

*How did it happen that you were with Corbis and ended up embedded with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to cover the Iraq War? I mean, that happened pretty quick . . .*

I graduated from school, started freelancing in St. Louis, and went back home to D.C. Home was New York, but my mom was in D.C., so I went there. There was an agency that said they would help me, give me a shot. I started there, and I worked on the Hill a little bit. I covered the D.C. sniper story. I knew the Iraq War was coming. It was funny, because everyone was like, “Will we invade? Will we not invade?” And “Do they have weapons?” You knew that it was going to happen. Because five, six months before the war they were having meetings about journalists who wanted to embed. So they already knew it was going to happen. I knew I wanted to photograph that.

I went up to New York to meet every agency, every magazine. Nothing was happening; nothing was working. There was one agency that will remain nameless, they don’t actually exist anymore—they told me to go back to school. My last day, I was about to give up. I had \$7.35 left in my bank account in Maryland. I went into Corbis hoping to get a job. I even applied for Starbucks while I was waiting for that appointment. I knew there was an office position available at Corbis, so I was like, “Oh, if I can’t get a job as a photographer, maybe I can get the office job.” I showed David Laidler, who was the photo editor there at the time, my work, and two days later he gave me a call and said, “We’re really interested in you.” A couple of days after that, “How would you like to go to Iraq for the war and start in Kuwait?” It just went from there.

*So you’re there. Tell the story of how you started making the two bodies of work that are in Iraq | Perspectives.*

I was covering Iraq for years, 2003, 2004, 2005—I missed 2006—2007, 2008. At some point I realized all these pictures I’m making, they’re digital, appear mostly on the Internet for an hour

before they're refreshed with something new. I was trying to find a way to talk about Iraq that would get people to see it. If you look at photojournalism in the last ten years, a lot of people have been pushing the envelope to create new ways of seeing because we're all so inundated with images day in and day out. It's not like how it used to be, where a very few people had cameras. Now everyone has one, and you have to find a unique way of photographing something that's different from what other people see and expect to see. That being said, I wasn't necessarily thinking about that when I started this idea.

I had lost a bunch of my clothes in a bag that was destroyed, and I had . . . I don't know why I called my mom and not my wife, maybe that says something about me . . . either way . . . I lost my clothes and my mom was going to FedEx me clothes. She said, "Ben, why don't you go to the mall." This makes my mom look bad because most people are saying, "A mall. In Iraq." But she's like, "Ben, I have no idea where Iraqis go shopping, how they go shopping. Are there clothing stores there? Is it the third world; is it the first world? Are there streets; are they paved? I don't know because the photographs you send are always of raids or of hospitals after bombings or of blood or victims or soldiers. I don't see a lot of regular, everyday life." And I was like, "You know what? You're right! And it's because I can't walk out on the street. It is too dangerous."

Conflict photography is a lot like the street photography of Garry Winogrand, except we do it in weird-ass places. I walk around with my camera and take pictures of daily life happening; it just happens to be in a war zone and not in New York. But you couldn't do that in Iraq. It was just too dangerous. And besides, I'm a 6'1" bald white guy. I don't blend. I tried to show my mom that most of Baghdad at the time was covered in blast walls; it still is, and neighborhoods are separated. "How do I photograph this? How do I show her that it's impossible?" I took a picture out a car window as I was driving, and I was like, "This is what it looks like." I kept on taking pictures out of car windows, out of Humvee windows. All of a sudden I started creating this body of work, but that began to mean something else. Not only was I

showing my mother what I saw, I was also showing her how I saw it and how most of us saw the country at the time—just speeding by in a car from point A to point B to complete an assignment or go with soldiers somewhere. All of a sudden the project was, “Oh, this is also how soldiers see it.” Then, it was a metaphor, “Oh, this is how ‘we’—the West and the East—interact.” We’re not talking; we’re not interacting. There’s a barrier between us; it’s a barrier of war. The Humvee, it’s the ultimate manifestation of that, this battle car. It’s almost out of GI Joe. This is how we see the street, and it became this very big project that I started working on when I was there, any opportunity I had.

*How did you start taking the first night vision photos?*

Well, night vision began in 2003, even before the war, when I went to Kuwait. They did training at night, and I was like, “Oooh, that’s a night vision goggle! I wonder if that’ll work on my camera.” I just fooled around with it. There were certain operations I went on in 2003, 2005, and 2007 where I had the opportunity to use night vision again, and I did. When I started putting together the “Windows” work, my wife, Marvi, started going through all my photographs, my archive, to look for more windows. She kept on coming across this night vision stuff. She told me, “You have a Chapter 2 here, another project.” She pulled all these images together. I never shot the night vision to be a project. At all. The windows I was specifically working on, and the night vision came together because my wife found it and found the string that pulled it all together. They became two chapters of the same aesthetic story that I spoke about originally: just wanting to find a unique way to show the Iraq War, a different visual technique to get people to look, to understand, to question. Journalism is supposed to communicate and answer questions, but really good art is supposed to ask questions. I think I’m trying to straddle the border by communicating an idea that makes you question.

*Tell me about why you saw it as a book. Why were you interested in entering the First Book Prize competition?*

Well, it's been published, it's been in galleries, but many of the pictures haven't been seen because I have made so many images over the years. I felt like a really good presentation was to make a book, to have something tangible that people can hold in their hands and look through over and over again. It's repetitive; they can sit down and consume it. It's not a throwaway like a magazine or a newspaper. Intrinsicly, you realize when you have a magazine that it's going to be thrown away, that it's going to be padding in the mail, or put in the bottom of a gerbil cage. That it doesn't last. That's why they're called periodicals. A book lasts. It becomes something more. I wanted to, obviously for ego, leave a legacy of my own work, and a book, for photographers, is the ultimate legacy. Especially in the era of books being much harder to make. It also gives this work the final stamp of approval, saying, "This work means something. This is good enough, and it will leave an impact because other people have judged, as well as I, that it is was worthwhile."

*Speaking of, what did you think when you heard William Eggleston had picked you to win?*

I was really happy. You had me going for a while. I actually thought you were just pulling my leg. I was pretty ecstatic. You broke it to me with no fanfare. You just wrote, "Ben, I might as well tell you. You won." I was sitting in Afghanistan when you told me. Or, uh, Dubai, I was in Dubai. Or, no, I was in Afghanistan.

*Think you were on your way to Afghanistan, which is why I wrote. I had called Marvi. . . .*

I was pretty happy, but I was also really relieved; I felt it was my last chance to get it published. I hit the wall with trying to get an Iraq book published. It's very hard to get a photo book published, and on top of it, something out of Iraq or Afghanistan is very difficult. I'm really, really humbled by the idea that I won and that I was able to get this work out there finally.

*What did you think about William Eggleston being the judge? . . . when he picked your work?*

My agent, when she found out I was a finalist, thought I was a shoe-in because Eggleston would love my work. I didn't necessarily feel that. Would Mary Ellen Mark have picked it? I've been a juror in a contest once, and you bring your own preconceived ideas and your own notions of composition, of what is important to the judging. William Eggleston's work, especially his early color work, impacted me a lot in terms of my appreciation of color. Maybe for a little while, I shot black and white. I go back and forth, but color is such a driving force. The thing is, with the windows work, it's so random because I don't control what I photograph: it comes in front of my window based on where the car is going. The composition is based on what's presented in front of me, which is very different from my other work. Most people know my normal photojournalism is highly composed. I am really strict about my composition. I line everything up. This comes from my art background, from doing illustrations, from my mom dragging me to art museums when I was a kid.

I have a real sense of composition that does not come through in the "Windows" work, except, obviously, something made me take the picture and edit these pictures and put them in. Some pictures are composed, but I didn't get to choose. I didn't get to move within the frame. I had to react to what came within the frame and hopefully, photograph it while it was in a good compositional moment. Maybe I was just a little pessimistic because this book was holding on for dear life trying to be a book. I was really about to give up hope on it.

*This whole thing about graphic novels is really interesting. I mean, it's frames.*

I think so much of my photography is like a comic book in a way, in terms of the way I compose. The way I frame everything in that heightened moment is carefully choreographed. I make all my photos, and that's different from taking them. Obviously, the night vision is different from the windows because I did, literally, get to make those. All of those are carefully composed. In general, with my photography, I make the images. I don't take them.

*One last thing . . . what are you working on now?*

I have several projects going on right now; some of them are in limbo and some of them are nearing their end. I spent three years photographing cage fighting in America, which is a very literal, straightforward, documentary approach, no bells and whistles. It's black and white actually. It's nearing its end, but ready to take off into something new. I'm trying to see if I can move that into a more global document about fighting. I've been photographing for quite a while with the iPhone because I find it to be such an interesting tool in this new world of "everyone has a camera." Can you make viable photojournalism or art using an iPhone? I've been photographing for months in Afghanistan with just the iPhone. For the last three years, everywhere I go I make a picture at least once a day which I post on a live blog called "Vidi," Latin for "I see." I tried to make the name as arrogant as possible. I was like, "What do I call my blog? 'I See on the iPhone?'" I thought, "No, no, no. It has to be smarter than that." My wife, Marvi, gave me the name "Vidi." Those are two projects.

I have several other ideas I want to work on. A lot of it has to do with the idea that I've been toying with most—with night vision, with the windows, and what I did with the oil spill this year—of creating the essay, the photo-essay as the visual narrative. There is a narrative just to the visual presentation, not just to the content. The way you present the work itself is something

that links it together. I think the more I grow as a photographer, the more I find myself growing in that direction because it's a way to create—I call it an “aesthetic bridge.” What I want to do is bridge the river of apathy with people. How do you present important stories to people? I'll say Americans because I'm in America; we just don't care about a lot of things outside our sphere. In 2003 the baseball season started while we were at war. People were sitting in the stadium watching the Yankees play, and they weren't thinking, “There's a war in Iraq.” Every day people die in Afghanistan, and we go about our lives. Marvi's phrase is “relative realities.” You can't make people care about something halfway around the world. If you're presented with something, you don't have to turn away, but people do because they don't want to care. You want your coffee, and you don't care where it comes from. . . . I don't want to force it on people, but I want to create something where it's interesting enough visually that people are like, “Oh, what's that?” Then, they're *there* and the content is delivered. They can choose to be impacted; they can choose to take that information that I've communicated with them, take it to heart, and do something or just start caring about the world, looking at news more. Either way, if I've connected with them, my idea of creating this visual aesthetic, this bridge, is successful. More and more, as there's such a large amount of photography out there, real meaning will get lost in the mix. This is my way of trying to combat that.