

Toy Soldiers by Simon Brann Thorpe review – a powerful meditation on war

These images in which troops pose as their model counterparts show the absurdity of military conflict – and the plight of individuals locked in it

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Sunday 28 June 2015 10.00 BST

War photography might seem the least inappropriate genre to lend itself to a conceptual treatment, but artists as diverse as Sophie Ristelhueber and Broomberg and Chanarin have ruptured the traditional narrative of reportage in surprising ways. Ristelhueber's series *Fait*, made in 1991, presents monochrome images of the scarred surface of the Kuwaiti desert seven months after the first Gulf war. Craters, tyre marks and pieces of machinery and uniforms are photographed alongside high aerial shots of roads and abandoned military posts, giving the impression of an alien planet denuded of life after an apocalyptic endgame.

British duo Broomberg and Chanarin opted for an even more conceptual response by exposing a long roll of film to sunlight each time someone died in Afghanistan while they were embedded there with British troops in 2008. Their bright abstractions of light on paper are perhaps the most absurdist response to both the horrors of war and the clichés of a certain kind of macho photojournalism.

Now comes Simon Brann Thorpe's book *Toy Soldiers*, in which real soldiers pose in the exaggerated or static manner of their miniature model counterparts. That the conceit is not as daft in its execution as it sounds is down, to a great degree, to Thorpe's meticulous approach – in which the distance between the real and the staged is blurred to surreal, slightly ominous effect. There is something deathlike in his portraits: one young soldier stands, eyes closed, as if asleep or hypnotised; another poses with his hands – and rifle – raised as if shot by a sniper. Throughout, the sand and sky provide a natural backdrop that amplifies the unrealness.

The context for *Toy Soldiers* is a long-running, overlooked conflict in Western Sahara, where nationalists have been fighting for independence from Morocco – which took control of the region from Spain in 1875 – for 40 years. What makes this liberation struggle unique in modern times is its relative decency. As academic and Middle East historian Jacob Mundy writes in his illuminating essay for the book: “Unlike other armed liberation movements in Africa and the Middle East, the Western Saharan nationalists... have denounced terrorism in all its forms and never engaged in it; their constitution calls for the creation of a secular, democratic, multi-party, free market republic after independence.”

For the project, Thorpe somehow convinced a military commander to allow his men to

be the subjects of a conceptual experiment that has, at its heart, a critique of western post-colonial strategies - the UN security council backs Morocco and both America and France view the region as, in Mundy's words, "a key vehicle for north Atlantic interests". The soldiers, then, are caught in a struggle that has become a long stalemate and, as such, has lost the interest of global news media drawn to bigger, more potentially cataclysmic conflicts. In Thorpe's photographs, they often look like small, lost figures in a vast, barren landscape, sometimes seen from a distance as kneeling, aiming silhouettes and sometimes arranged in long lines close to what look like miniature model buildings. Always, their feet are standing on flat, round bases just like toy soldiers, though these ones are made from compressed metal barrels. Their static poses, too, symbolise the bigger stasis, political and historical, in which they are caught.

The result is a series of images that show the absurdity of war, but also the plight of the individual soldier locked into a conflict that must seem endless. "It is difficult to look at Simon Brann Thorpe's *Toy Soldiers*," writes Mundy, "and not dwell on the powerful metaphor these photographs literally play with. Fighters in the Western Saharan liberation movement have become playthings. But whose toys are they, and what is the game being played?" These are the kinds of questions that echo through this odd, and oddly powerful, conceptual meditation on war - and war photography.

Toy Soldiers is published by Dewi Lewis (£35). [Click here to buy it for £28](#)

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