

Described Audio Script for *Larry Towell, Donovan Wylie: Afghanistan*
Institute for Contemporary Culture and Contact Photography Festival
May 5 to July 8, 2012

The exhibit brings together recent images by Larry Towell and Donovan Wylie, two photographers who have explored the consequences of the armed conflict in Afghanistan from very different perspectives. Both artists belong to the prestigious Magnum collective of photographers.

The exhibition creates a dialogue between the perspectives of the two photographers and their approaches to depicting parts of the Afghan conflict. Larry Towell's black and white photographs reveal the effects of war on the citizens, soldiers, and landscapes of Afghanistan. He focuses on the personal experiences of the Afghan people, and through the photographic lens interrogates military intentions in Afghanistan. Among many questions, Towell's images cause viewers to ask if the war will ever end. Why is the occupation still present? Who holds power, and what are their real objectives? How will these impact the Afghan people – now, and in generations to come?

Donovan Wylie's colour photographs document watchtowers and operating bases built by the Canadian military for surveillance and defense of the surrounding terrain. He is known from his other works and projects to capture the architecture of conflict, and states that troops use access to sight and surveillance as a means of military control. His images beg viewers to ponder how photography, one vehicle to 'seeing', is used to capture structures that control sight.

The exhibition's content is displayed on constructed walls within the Roloff Beny Gallery at the ROM. The space's grandiose white walls, soaring ceilings, and dramatic angles set the stage for a unique display of this exhibition, that is as powerful as the images contained within. The carefully designed elevation plan shows Towell's differently sized black and white images, hung closely together, salon-style, in groups of 10-20 on a given wall to create a many-sided geometric shape. This is juxtaposed against the walls of Wylie's large landscapes, which stand alone, or in groups of two or three.

The exhibit places Towell and Wylie's photographs in the historical context of the conflict in Afghanistan. The current political situation has its roots in 1978, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan after a Marxist uprising had toppled the Afghan government. Following the Soviet retreat, civil wars, political instability, and human rights abuses continued. The Taliban, an extreme fundamentalist Islamist political group, ruled from 1996-2001, imposing a strict interpretation of Sharia law.

Canadian-born Larry Towell and Donovan Wylie, born in Ireland, contextualize their work within the contemporary and historical series of occupations in Afghanistan. Towell worked with U.S. troops in Afghanistan, focusing on landmine victims, increased drug addiction, poverty, dispossession, and exile. Wylie worked with Canadian troops, and drew on his own life experience as a person of British heritage in Ireland to analyze and image the Afghan conflict. Both artists capture the impact of the war on the people and place. Their photographs can be understood as both historical record and artistic interpretation. Seen together, these dramatic images reflect the troubling social, political and environmental realities of present-day Afghanistan.

[Larry Towell, Charahi Qambar Refugee Camp, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2011; Wall P7A, image 1]

Larry Towell's image is a black and white photograph of ten-year-old Gul Juma, a Pashtun who lost her arm as well as two sisters and another relative during the ISAF bombing of her home in Helmand Province. It is a gelatin silver print, the result of an analog rather than digital approach to photographing an image. The photograph measures 40 by 60 inches and is one the largest of Towell's images represented in this exhibit. It is mounted on its own wall within the Gallery. The wall stands approximately 30 feet, and at 2 o'clock from the Gallery's entrance. It hangs directly opposite Towell's colour photograph, depicting bomb equipment and land mines in a checkerboard-like formation.

The subject in the image stands in front of a wall. Her body is in profile towards the left, with her head facing the camera. The placement of her body conceals her right shoulder and arm from view. Her eyes look directly at us, and are seemingly one of the image's focal points. The image depicts only the top half of her body, with the photograph's lower border aligned with her upper left thigh. Her body is covered in a darkly coloured thick fabric or blanket, which obscures the outline of her body's shape. The fabric's perhaps rough woolen texture is ornamented with vertical stripes of differing thicknesses and a vertical braided pattern that also creates a thick and lightly shaded stripe.

The fabric drops down from its likely resting spot on Gul's left shoulder and opens slightly to reveal the scar of her amputated left arm. This is one of the image's other focal points. Her scar can be seen below the distinct point of her shoulder bone, and is a few shades darker than the skin that surrounds it. The wound signified by the scar is not fresh, and the scar appears to be textured with smooth and darker bumps that create the outline of where her upper arm would have met her back. The scar lightens slightly towards her chest. It is shaped and compares in size on her body to the two dimensional shape of her fist when closed.

Gul's head is partially covered by an ornate scarf. The scarf's dark background is decorated with a shiny pattern of metallic dots, or squares placed closely together. This pattern is interrupted by about ten thin vertical lines of the same metallic thread. The scarf is draped loosely over the top of Gul's head, revealing some of her dark and shiny hair, which is perhaps tied beneath the scarf at the back of her neck. The scarf falls untied down Gul's chest and back, which adds another, less weighty layer of fabric on top of the heavy woolen blanket that already drapes her body. A lock of Gul's hair, equivalent to the thickness of a dime, escapes her scarf in a thin wave that stops away from her face, in line with the bottom of her lip.

Gul's lips are slightly parted to reveal her upper teeth. Her right cheekbone is pronounced, and is the most the viewer can see of the right side of her face. Her left cheek and chin slowly fade into a dark shadow, which mostly obscures the left side of her face and head. This dark shadow is also positioned on the wall behind her, on the viewer's right – the result of a light source placed strategically to face Gul during the phototaking process. The wall behind her depicts hairline cracks, brushstrokes, and blemishes that are reminiscent of a rough cement or stucco texture. The ceiling above Gul is constructed from a dark tarp that covers horizontal branches or long pieces of circular wood.

Gul's powerful facial expression seems to demand an answer from the viewer. Her eyes boldly, directly, and vulnerably face us. Her intentionally displayed scar reveals the conspicuous absence of her left arm, and commands a critical response to the image. In this way, it is representative of Larry Towell's photographs in the exhibit in general, causing us to reflect and question in response to the real and human effects of the Afghan conflict.

[Larry Towell, Woman selling glamour magazines, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2010; Wall P6A, image 2]

Larry Towell's image titled "woman selling glamour magazines" is a black and white photograph of a veiled Afghan female beggar displaying photographs of North American female celebrities. It was taken in Kabul in 2010. It is a gelatin silver print, the result of an analog rather than digital approach to photographing an image. The photograph measures 30 by 40 inches and is mounted among other black and white photographs by Towell in the Gallery. Next to a particularly graphic image of a man who seems to be in the middle of a harsh interrogation, or is about to be arrested, and surrounded by images that resemble mugshots of individuals, the image described here hangs in the centre of its wall. The wall stands approximately 20 feet, and at 2 o'clock from the Gallery's entrance.

The photograph's subject is standing, facing the image's viewer in one of Kabul's streets. She does not stand in the centre of the image, but is placed close to the image's right-hand border, from the perspective of the viewer. She is adorned in a few layers of heavy and differently textured fabric in the image's greyscale spectrum of colour. She is completely veiled. She wears a flat-topped hat on her head, whose brim creates a circular outline around the circumference of her head, in line with the top of her ears. Her hat is wool, or maybe brocade, with an embossed geometric pattern that creates a lined texture throughout. The hat is attached to the more smoothly textured fabric of a similar shade that is draped over her head, completely concealing her face from view. There is a small hexagonally shaped grid cut into the fabric covering the woman's eyes, nose, and mouth, allowing air to pass freely between the

grid's small holes. The grid is vertically shorter than it is horizontally longer, and is cut perhaps from the top of her eyes to her lips.

The woman's veil, draped over her head, chest, and arms, is concealed by other pieces of fabric. These are folded over the rest of her body. Her left arm is covered with a fabric similar in shade to the earlier described veil, with a texture similar to that of a corduroy coat. This fabric conceals the outline of the lower half of the woman's body. The photograph's lower border stops at her knees.

The subject's veil continues downward from her head to conceal the contour of her upper body. Her right hand protrudes from the inside of her veil to intentionally display a magazine at 11 o'clock. The magazine features a photograph of a young North American, or Western European actress. Ten to twelve magazines rest outside her veil in her left arm, and are also displayed vertically, resting between her left arm and the left side of her chest. They contain few pages, with a few photographs in each. British actress Kate Winslet looks directly at the image's viewer at 1 o'clock, from a photograph on the back of one of the woman's magazines in this pile.

The street behind her and to the viewer's right seems to be lined with shops, and perhaps homes. The top of the woman's head begins a bit higher than half the vertical length of the image. The image therefore illustrates some of the background architecture. Immediately behind the woman is a partially visible staircase, leading to a structure with a slatted wood awning. A shawl hangs from this awning, providing shade for this shawl shop. Another shawl hangs near the building's window, in line with the woman's head. A sign can be seen over the building directly next door, showing a few unclear images and scripts. The adjacent buildings, away from the image's foreground, contain large cylindrical structures approximately 15 feet from the ground. These likely display signs for the shops within. A taller building stands on the left side of the street, from the perspective of the viewer. It stands at 11 o'clock, in the background behind the woman's displayed magazine. It is constructed from brick, with each storey containing its own street-facing windows, similar to an apartment building. The photograph does not display its full width and height. Next to this building, further away from the image's subject, lies a shorter structure, that seems to be in the midst of construction or perhaps deconstruction. Its roof is perhaps 10 feet, and its inside can be seen as the skeletal bones of a building in the form of support beams. Approximately six 10-foot-tall lattice structures stand atop of the building's roof, decorated with a criss-cross of poles and beams.

The image's street is not depicted as particularly busy or bustling at the moment of the photograph. Two men can be seen in the background behind the woman, perhaps 10-15 feet away. One is standing, or walking, and the other is sitting. The details of this scene are obscured by the image's main subject. Perhaps one can hear the shops' doors opening and closing, some construction in the distance, and the chatter of a few people populating the area. The street's ground is constructed from cement or concrete, and a hole or gutter is shown where the photograph's woman stands. Garbage and other street debris litter the gutter. The image features a large hill, or mountain in the distance.

This photograph again demands reflection from its viewer. What are the effects of war on Afghanistan's women? How is this woman depicted, in comparison to those in the magazines that she is selling? For whom are the magazines intended?

[Larry Towell, Village elder and daughter at "jirga", Kabul, Afghanistan, 2010; Wall P4B, image 4]

Larry Towell's image titled "village elder and daughter at 'jirga'" is a black and white photograph of an elderly man and young girl. The image's striking feature is that the girl is captured looking directly at the image's viewer, in the space created between two armed soldiers on her right and another man on her left. It was taken in Kabul in 2010. It is a gelatin silver print, the result of an analog rather than digital approach to photographing an image. The photograph measures 40 by 30 inches and is mounted among other black and white photographs by Towell in the Gallery. Next to images of soldiers, wounded children, and other in-the-moment shots, the image described here hangs in the centre of its wall. The wall stands approximately 10 feet, and at 2 o'clock from the Gallery's entrance. It is adjacent to the wall that displays the exhibit's overview text.

The viewer is confronted in this image with a particularly arresting scene that demonstrates Larry Towell's skill in the medium of photography. Close-ups of the men in the image's foreground create a frame for the focal point of the image – the young girl. The soldier on the viewer's left side of the young girl's frame faces the viewer. He wears dark camouflage printed overalls. A black pack is strapped around his chest, displaying leather and canvas pockets and holsters for various forms of equipment and armament. His left arm is raised in the air, but the photograph's top border cuts at the tip of his left shoulder, obscuring his face from view. He faces another soldier, the close-up of whose back and hip create the image's left border. The close-up is rather blurred, however, the viewer is shown the soldier's machine gun, pointing down towards 5 o'clock, in a holster at the soldier's right hip. Next to this soldier and his gun stands a differently clad man, who creates the viewer's right side of the young girl's frame. He wears a light-coloured tunic, beneath a waist-length dark vest. Although we are not shown more than the bottom half of his back, he is here not depicted as a soldier, but perhaps an Afghan man wearing Afghan clothing. His left arm is held behind his back, with his open hand resting on his lower back at 2 o'clock.

The soldier on the viewer's left, and man on the viewer's right create a frame that almost resembles a candlestick and flame. Using this analogy, the candlestick begins at the photograph's bottom border, and the tip of its flame reaches the photograph's top border. The top of the young girl's head reaches the top of the candlestick, where its wick would begin. She stands just off centre, towards the right side of the photograph on some sort of sidewalk. Her face, body, and feet face 7 o'clock, while her eyes directly face us. She wears a dark dress, pleated from the waist to its hem, over lightly coloured loose pants. Her feet are bare. Her hair is partially covered by a loose scarf, tied with her hair behind her at nape of her neck. Wisps of hair fall out of her scarf and loosely frame her face.

Behind the young girl stands a village elder, almost double her height. His body faces the viewer, but he does not look at us. Rather, he looks towards 7 o'clock, perhaps at the soldiers that frame the image. He wears a light coloured tunic, over similarly coloured loose pants. His arms are covered with a dark jacket or sweater. A darker piece of fabric diagonally drapes over his chest, from his right hip to his left shoulder. He has a white beard, and wears a loose hat, that covers his head and the top of his ears. His eyes are squinted as he looks on to what is unfolding in front of him.

The other subjects in the photograph's scene are only partially visible. Their full bodies and faces are obscured from view, but we see feet, legs, and an arm belonging to other people standing near the young girl, village elder, and soldiers in the image's foreground. It is a seemingly crowded space. It is likely quite noisy, filled with a diverse soundscape of bodies jostling as people move past one another, shoes scraping the ground, and the soldiers' military equipment moving around as they walk about.

The image's scene, and Towell's momentary snapshot of this scene, immediately command our attention. Towell asks again through the photographic lens – what is the toll of the Afghan conflict on its people? Are the girl and the elder feeling threatened or protected at this moment? And more importantly, what will the toll of the conflict be on its future generations?

[Donovan Wylie, Forward Operating Base, Masum Ghar, Kandahar Province, 2010; Wall P1B, images 10-12]

Donovan Wylie's images titled "Forward Operating Base" are three representative photographs of many with the same title in the exhibit. The three images discussed here hang next to each other on the same wall, at eye level. There are approximately 20 inches of wall space between each photograph. The wall itself stands approximately 10 feet, and at 9 o'clock from the Gallery's entrance. All three images on the wall measure 138 by 111 inches, and are giclée prints – high quality prints of digital photographs. They depict military bases positioned on hilltops, perhaps used to survey their surrounding areas.

Many of Donovan Wylie's photographs of military installations in this exhibition are taken from planes and helicopters, with a few taken from the heights of the bases themselves. They present a distant 'God's eye' view on an evenly lit, mostly deserted grey and brown landscape with a pale whitish sky. Although they are in colour, they are almost

monochromatic in tone, which marks one similarity with Larry Towell's black and white photographs. They are very sharply focussed, and small details can be observed even at a great distance. Some viewers describe Donovan Wylie's photographs to be almost ominous in feeling.

[IMAGE #12 (furthest left on wall P1B)]

The first of the three, and furthest left on the exhibit's wall, illustrates a rocky hilltop in the image's foreground. Its apex is located just higher than the midpoint between the photograph's upper and lower borders. It is more or less the midpoint between its right and left borders. The photograph is taken during daylight. The part of the hill that is visible in the photograph is a dark beige colour, consisting of dry packed and loose dirt, which coats many rocks of differing sizes and textures towards the hill's tip. It is steeper as it nears the floor of the image on the viewer's right side, and declines relatively gradually on the viewer's left. Thin poles and sticks made from wood, wire, and perhaps metal sparsely populate the hill near the image's lower border, on the left side of the image. While the image depicts the hill as made from homogeneous light brown dirt, the larger rocks and stones towards the hill's apex create shadows in the light of the day. This causes a spotted effect, in which the hill is dotted with blemishes of dark grey, dark brown, and light brown.

A military surveillance base is perched on the hilltop, forming the image's focal point. It is small in relation to the vast hills and mountainous terrain in its immediate surroundings. Its shape is cubic, and its sides measure approximately half a finger's length in the context of the size of the image. Its skeletal structure is constructed from wooden boards and poles. Its floor is presumably also wooden, but is concealed by a fabric tarp or metal sheet that covers the circumference of the base, reaching just below one quarter of the structure's total height. The sheet itself is similar in colour to that of the described hill. Flat steely grey rocks lie in a few layers on top of this base.

A wooden wall stands vertically on the viewer's left, from the floor of the surveillance base. It is approximately a third of the length of the base's floor, and supports the base's ceiling. The base's ceiling is also wooden, although its circumference is concealed behind the same tarp that covers the circumference of the base's floor. It rests on the supporting wall on a slight incline, such that it points in a downward angle in the direction of the hill's left-hand slope. The ceiling's left and right sides are not aligned with the left and right sides of the base's floor. Rather, the downward-pointing left side juts out to the left, further than its alignment with the imaginary vertical line created by the base's floor. It sits on its supporting wooden wall almost like a hat. The structure itself slightly resembles a spool of thread, in which its centre is rather off-centre, and its top is angularly placed.

The base itself is photographed in profile. Part of what may be a surveillance apparatus, or long automatic gun, pokes out from the space to the right of wooden wall that supports the base's roof, from the perspective of the viewer. This space is about as thick as the supporting wall to the viewer's left, and covers a third of the length of the base's floor. It is an open space, its outline constructed with wooden slats, boxes, and boards. The surveillance apparatus or black automatic gun protrudes from this space. It points to 3 o'clock. Its right-hand tip is aligned with the right edge of the base's floor, from the viewer's perspective.

The left side of the hilltop, more gradually sloped than that on the viewer's right, is sparsely adorned with tall metal poles. They are connected in a cobweb-like configuration of wires. They stop at some sort of station, just over halfway down the part of the hill captured in the image. This station is created from what seems to be an organized mess of materials used to construct the central surveillance base, containing rocks, tarp, wooden poles, and boards. A small rectangular white speaker, fan, or radio sits among this pile of materials.

The image's background is coloured with light grey rocky mountains, dotted with dark grey and white crevices and lines. Their peaks begin just below the midpoint between the photograph's upper and lower borders. The mountains and the foreground's hilltop are placed against the backdrop of the image's pale and cloudless sky.

[IMAGE #11 (middle on wall P1B)]

The second of the three images hangs in the centre of the exhibit's wall. It illustrates a portion of what resembles a hiker's trail within a set of mountains. A military base lies in the centre of the image, embedded in the image's dry rocky mountains. The photograph is again taken at some point during the day, and the sun shines onto the mountains from 8 o'clock, since light and shadows are cast towards 2 o'clock. The mountains are themselves an earthy mix of light and dark grey, light and dark brown, beige, and white tones, created from the dry dust, dirt and rocks that compose their terrain. The rocks vary in size and texture, from the extremely large and immovable pieces that make up the mountains, to the loose pebbles and stones that litter their intertwining paths. They are smooth, jagged, and some are decorated with lines and crevices that resemble the roots of a tree trunk. Small tufts of dry grass dot the dirt trails, and sprout from underneath the layers of mountainous rock.

The image's focal point is the military base in the centre of the photograph. It is constructed from 18 rectangular, perhaps metal boxes or sheets that are placed in a horizontal line. They resemble burlap sacks, and are approximately a quarter of a finger's length tall, in the context of the image. They are placed at the same height, much shorter in length than the length of its row. They are lined with a thin wire grid fence, facing the viewer. A pile of relatively small rocks, in the context of the image, are gathered in front of this base, on the viewer's side of the photograph. A cave-like opening into the mountain sits above this horizontal line of metal sheets, just off-centre on the viewer's left. It opens into the mountain behind the base, away from the viewer. Its side walls are constructed from wooden boards, and a rock or dirt roof sits atop these wooden boards to create a mouth-like opening. A barely visible black surveillance apparatus or long automatic gun points outwards from this opening towards 8 o'clock.

Although the photograph's mountainous foreground takes up most of the image's surface area, one can make out other peaks in the background. A strip of pale blue and cloudless sky can be seen at the top of the photograph, and takes up about one third of the image's total space. The peaks of the mountains in the foreground and background resemble teeth against the sky, and drop in height from the viewer's left to right. There are a total of five prominent peaks in the image. Two surveillance apparatuses sit atop the peak just before 12 o'clock in the image's background. They are different in shape than the one already here described, and rather resemble cameras placed on two tripods. They stand next to each other on this rocky hilltop.

[IMAGE #10 (furthest right on wall P1B)]

The third image titled "Forward Operating Base" hangs to the farthest right on this wall. It shows a rocky hilltop in the foreground, upon which sits a military base. The military base is the focal point of the image, and the photograph itself is taken during daylight. It is unclear from which direction the sun shines, since shadows and patterns of light are not as easily distinguishable in this image. The hill in the image's foreground slopes downward on relatively the same gradual incline to the viewer's right and left. It is composed of loose rocks and dirt, in contrast to the large grey and immovable rock depicted in the other images described here. Its colours range from white, to light and dark beige.

The hill itself resembles somewhat of a construction site, upon which rocks, sandbags, and other materials are placed to create barriers and paths. The floor of the image partially depicts a paved road. A narrow path branches from this road at 4 o'clock, winding upward to the military base perched on top of the hill. It is lined on both sides with lightly coloured rocks, piled for this purpose in a line that points diagonally to 2 o'clock. The rocks create a length of about two finger lengths, in the context of the image's size. Seven or eight crates of dirt and sand sit at the end of the rock pile, on the uphill path. They are placed in two configurations of two or three each placed either beside each other in a small row, or stacked vertically. The path turns 90 degrees to the viewer's left at this point, leading directly to the hill's apex, towards the military base. Approximately ten similar crates lie at 2 o'clock on the hill, in the distance behind the crates, away from the viewer.

The image's bottom left corner shows similar crates, or perhaps metal barriers, filled with dirt and sand. There are three horizontal rows of ten to fifteen barriers, placed behind one another in raised layers. They lie midway between 8 and 9 o'clock, and extend from the photograph's left border to approximately the image's centre. A small black and

red bench sits in front of these layers, resting on a pile of dirt and sand that lies loosely along the front of the first barrier. Approximately a finger's length away sits a large rocky boulder, which blocks the entrance to a small shack. It is barely the height of two of the described crate's layers, and is narrow with a house-like triangular roof. Other piles of dirt, and debris made from various metal, rock, and other materials collect along the horizontal bottom of the image's floor.

The military base atop the foreground's hill is approximately a finger's length long, and half a finger's length tall in the context of the size of the image. Its composite materials are relatively indistinguishable. It is a dark brown, and perhaps black in some places. It appears to be a hollow space to into which one can enter, since a horizontal line of broken windows, or perhaps empty spaces line the perimeter of the structure, centred in the length of the structure's height. A roughly textured material lines the perimeters both above and below the open spaces, similar to the texture of embossed metal. A silver and black surveillance apparatus stands on top of the base, resembling a tripod with two laterally horizontal arms pointed outwards in a line, to create a five-pointed structure. The base is bordered in front with six or seven layers of beige rocks – the colour of the hill upon which they rest. The rows of rocks are approximately the width of the base, and lie on the viewer's side of the base.

The objects described in the image's foreground lie against a backdrop of sky and mountains. There are several peaks in the distance at 10 and 1 o'clock, of varying colours and heights. The mountains at 10 o'clock begin as short charcoal grey formations, fading into dark and light brown, and finally light grey that fades like mist into the sky. At 1 o'clock the mountains fade in the reverse, from light brown to a darker brown towards the image's right border. The sky is again light blue and cloudless.

Donovan Wylie's images described here are representative of the many landscape views of Afghanistan's mountain ranges and broad plains in the exhibit. They present to the viewer a sweeping bird's eye view of the land's varying terrains. Most importantly, they show military and surveillance sites that have been constructed during the current Afghan conflict and embedded into the land.

How do these sites represent and depict conflict? How do they make functional use of their surrounding natural territory? For whom are these sites built, and whom do they survey? As many of these watch towers are built on previous lookouts or fortifications built by previous powers in control of Afghanistan, how is the turbulent history of the country implied in the photographs? In the context of the exhibition, how do Donovan Wylie's images converse with those of Larry Towell's?

Larry Towell, Donovan Wylie: Afghanistan is a collaboration between the Institute for Contemporary Cultures (ICC) and the Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival. Its curatorial objective is to place the photographs of Larry Towell and Donovan Wylie in dialogue, to encourage critical reflection on the contemporary conflict in Afghanistan just a few months before the withdrawal of the NATO-led international troops that have been trying to stabilize the country since late 2001. It will be on display at the ROM from May 5 to July 8, 2012.