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Cartographer of destruction

Sophie Ristelhueber, this year's winner of the prestigious Hasselblad Award, talks to Skye Arundhati Thomas

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One of the series 'Beirut: Photographs, 1984', 1984

Sophie Ristelhueber's pictures are characterised by reserve. She is a war photographer, but not in any traditional sense: hers is a language of abstraction. Her images are unpeopled, and their concern is with the aftermath.

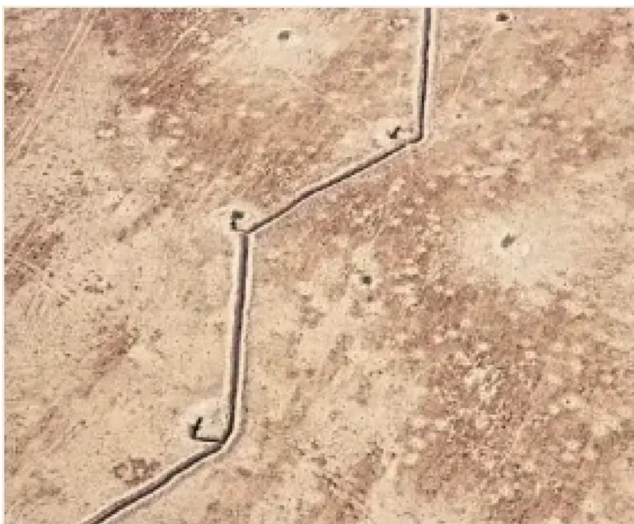
Ristelhueber photographs landscapes, mostly from above: trenches and tank tracks in the desert, ballistic craters, and oil wells caught on fire. She follows twisted trees, excavated soil and shrapnel lodged in the earth. When she turns her attention to people — rarely — it's to show their bodies as a similarly torn geography: scars and rough-hewn stitches, fresh out of surgery, as in the series Every One, taken as she stalked the wards of a Parisian hospital in 1994.

Ristelhueber is a cartographer of destruction; she displays her work as grids of epic, unlabelled photographs, sometimes inflected with sound or video. The French artist, born in Paris in 1949, went to

the Sorbonne; she studied literature, and her approach to photography is also novelistic. Her first photo book, Beirut (1984) was designed to the dimensions of a Gallimard paperback. It was light and unassuming, easy to roll up and place into a pocket.

Left: 'Blowup #1', 2006
Right : Sophie RISTELHUEBER walks with a soldier in Beirut in 1982.

I meet Ristelhueber a few days before she is to be announced as this year's winner of the Hasselblad Award — touted as the "Nobel Prize of Photography" (past laureates include Sophie Calle and Henri Cartier-Bresson). The award comes with £150,000, and an exhibition of her work will open at the Hasselblad Center in Gothenburg, Sweden, on October 11.



'FAIT #20', Kuweit, 1992

Ristelhueber's demeanour is tidy — and sometimes a little reticent. We are in her Paris studio, in Pigalle, at the foot of Montmartre. Pinned to the walls are floor plans of galleries covered in notes; the last remaining copies of her sold-out photo books are on the shelves.

Ristelhueber hands me Beirut and explains that in 1982, while poring over newspaper images of the city, she realised she was drawn to the background more than the foreground. She set off to make a new kind of war photo.

As she held up her camera, she emptied the frame of its people, shooting hollowed-out buildings with shattered windows. “I think I really broke something in the tradition of reportage,” Ristelhueber tells me, “but I didn’t feel I was a reporter.” In one picture, a cinema is flooded with daylight, and the building’s metal frame hangs low over the wooden seats. In another, we’re in a stadium, but the bleachers have turned to rubble, and the awnings have caved in.

Traditional war photography, at its simplest, uses the vulnerability of the human body to evoke empathy and outrage. But Ristelhueber isn’t interested in the sensationalist flash of the news cycle. Where war is loud, as are its images, Ristelhueber places us in a brutal quiet. “The context is violence, but I’m not showing the violence,” she says. Time slows down, and absence is unnerving; instead of single moments of brutality, we are shown the stark permanence of war’s consequence.

Ristelhueber arrived in Beirut in the long wake of the Sabra and Shatila massacres (in which more than 1,000 Palestinians were killed by Israeli-backed Lebanese Christian militiamen), the Israeli invasion, and the civil war. She travelled to Kuwait in 1991, after US forces had begun their withdrawal, and then to Iraq in 2001, as the US-led coalition entered Afghanistan. She took photos in the West Bank in 2003 of Palestinian roads overwhelmed by debris, rock and felled concrete, of which she made a book entitled WB. On the cover is a photo of a four-wheel drive car; on its roof is a figure in repose: Ristelhueber, taking a nap on a special platform she had installed atop the vehicle.

When I ask why she photographs what she does, she replies: “Ask my shrink.” She pulls out a photo to show me. It’s her, hair flung in the wind, leaning against a single-engine aircraft. She appears poised and assured, camera slung on one arm. It was taken in Kuwait in 1991, and next to her is a Swiss surveillance pilot.

“I had never done aerial views before,” she says. He would swerve, she says, angling the aircraft doors against the desert, encouraging her to fling them open and take her shot. Each time, she only had a few seconds. “Now when I look at my contact sheet, it’s incredible that I’m so confident in what I’m doing.”

Ristelhueber also travelled the desert by foot, tilting her body downwards to mimic an aerial view. But it’s not always apparent in her work what has been taken from the sky; she expertly manipulates scale. The aerial views deliver a sheer expanse of damage. When she zooms in, isolating a single detail — a crater or shard of weapon — the vastness is turned intimate, precise. Ristelhueber’s abstractions, devoid of context, toe a fine line. Photographs, even those of the most horrific events, can never truly represent the reality of war. There is always a gap between image and experience. But abstracting horror, as Ristelhueber does, has consequence too. Not all stories of violence are interchangeable, and aestheticisation can create detachment.

I pick up a copy of Fait, the book of 71 photographs from Ristelhueber’s time in Kuwait. Its edges are coal-black. I stop at an image of blankets crumpled in the sand. She tells me she had sometimes walked right up to the remains of dead Iraqi soldiers, which had been left behind under the sweltering sun. She never photographed them, choosing to capture their traces instead.
“I wanted to respect those that had suffered,” she explains. The plaid pattern of the blankets reminded her of her childhood fabrics, she adds. “Fait” is French for fact, or more pointedly, for what has been done.

Ristelhueber is reluctant to discuss the context of what she photographs — even Fait's subtitle, "Kuwait 1991", was a compromise reached with her publisher. The images have no resolution when viewed like this. This seems to be the point. She keeps the viewer at a distance, withholding, sometimes even obscuring, an image's meaning. There is rarely an explanatory text. Writing appears only in fragments, as excerpts of essays or literature, in her books. Fait opens mid-sentence — from On War, Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz's dense 19th-century work, in which he applied the term "theatre" to military strategy.
I tell Ristelhueber I've been looking at updated Google Maps pictures of Gaza. The craters are enormous, and the scale is overwhelming; Israeli soldiers have left cruel messages in the dirt. In a news cycle saturated with injured and deceased Palestinian bodies — in configurations previously unimaginable, and yet normalised — such images are stunning in their immensity and stillness.

Ristelhueber nods. For her most recent show, What the Fuck! at Poggi Gallery in Paris late last year, she stacked photographs selected from her decades-long chronicling of violence, somewhat indiscriminately, against the walls. Some were flipped over, only their backs showing, and only four were mounted on the wall. Each picture showed an animal, which hung over photographs of destruction and death piled up on the ground below. It's like they're asking, Ristelhueber says, "Do you know what the fuck you're doing?"

Skye Arundhati Thomas

October 11–January 18 2026, hasselbladfoundation.org

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