

Angling for the truth

At the deCordova in Lincoln, exhibit urges viewers to ask questions about the news they consume

By Chris Bergeron
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LINCOLN Donald Trump might say “I told you so” after visiting “Truthiness and the News” at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum.

But does the timely new exhibit of eight decades of news photos prove our embattled president is right about a biased media?

See for yourself by viewing more than 50 photos – some familiar, some forgotten – of cops, criminals and corpses, a smiling Richard Nixon campaigning in a minority neighborhood and front page headlines about weapons of mass destruction.

Organized by curatorial fellow Sam Adams, this thoughtful exhibit invites visitors to become discerning viewers.

“Truthiness” is one component of a suite of three ongoing photo exhibits, collectively titled “Photosynthesis.” Many images in all three shows are from the museum’s permanent collection.

Displayed in the second floor Dewey Family Gallery,

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the exhibit encourages visitors to view the images in rough chronological order, moving from the newsprint era of the 1940s to the digital age when news and photos appear with dizzying speed online and cellphones and tablets.

At the first section, “The Printed News,” wall text reminds visitors that since photos first appeared in newspapers in the late 1800s, “news pictures have flirted with the limits of truth, both unifying readers and dividing them.”

Adams agreed, “The whole concept of ‘fake news’ goes way back.”

“Photos are supposed to be objective,” he said. “But, of course, people have to look at them and think carefully and try to decide what’s being manipulated.”

Adams described the images on display as representing “flash points” in the history of newspaper photos, suggesting key moments in their evolving role.

Wall text by one of the exhibit’s early photos by Newton photographer Jules Aarons, showing a woman in a house dress clutching her newspaper, observes “the paper is a tangible, widely accessible docu-

ment that informs the day’s conversations ... (to) share or return to throughout the day.”

For the show’s second section, “Bearing Witness,” Adams selected dramatic images of conflicts in the Middle East or the 9/11 terrorist attacks in which photojournalists or artists must exercise “the power to shape the reception of the events for others ... (and) must make personal decisions about how to approach, frame and potentially intervene in sensitive situations.”

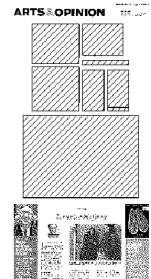
A powerful 2006 photo by Rania Mater shows a curly-haired little girl playing in the rubble of damaged buildings in Beirut, But the Brookline artist of Palestinian/Lebanese descent remains objective and does not identify or blame a specific nation or organization for the child’s precarious situation.

However, in the same section, Justin Kimball acknowledges taking “liberties” with objects in his photographs in abandoned homes “to create a kind of tableau or story about what may or may not have happened in that place.”

What then should viewers make of his 2013 photo of a pile of newspapers in an abandoned house with a headline “Arab shoots diplomat?” Is Kimball suggesting the attack on a diplomat is just another forgotten moment in the ash heap of history?

In the third section, “Charles ‘Teenie’ Harris and the Pittsburgh Courier,” Adams includes 15 striking black-and-white photos by the paper’s first staff photographer who documented more than 40 years of life in a minority community with exemplary humanity.

Throughout a prolific career that produced more than 80,000 images, the African American photographer consis-



tently displayed sympathy for his working class subjects while portraying police and politicians with the cautious respect necessary to maintain access to crime scenes and rallies.

The exhibit includes several examples of Harris' photos of a shooting victim, a public protest and speech by Martin Luther King that show how the cropping necessary to fit in a newspaper page and grainy quality of the image diminished its emotional impact and historical authenticity.

In the section "Journalistic Ethics in the Balance," Adams cites several examples of the growing frankness about manipulating images for artistic but more likely political effect.

In a 1976 Rolling Stone magazine cover story about America's political leadership, celebrity photographer Richard Avedon concedes that despite its appearance of neutrality "the camera lies all the time."

"It's all it does is lie because when you choose this moment instead of that moment, you've made a choice," he said. "You're lying about something larger."

The unabashed cynicism about manipulating public opinion through the news and accompanying images was confirmed by President George Bush's adviser, Karl Rove, who bluntly stated: "We're an empire now, and when we act we create our own reality."

In one of the exhibit's most

striking images taken a year later, a prominent Boston newspaper ran a full page color photo of Secretary of State Colin Powell - under the headline "A Case for War" - holding a vial which he erroneously claimed proved Iraq had "weapons of mass destruction."

Adams believes new photography despite its potential for neutrality has "always been a suspect medium" that appears to have "evolved away from objectivity" over time.

Yet he believes "people have the power" to challenge the implied truth of new media images by understanding the potential motivation, including race, gender and social status, of the photographer who took the photo and the editor who ran it.

As digital technology grows more complex, Adams suspects younger viewers might have more technical "savvy" than their elders, still bogged in the print era, to understand how digital images can be easily altered.

"You don't need a college degree to know what images might be manipulated," he said. "I hope this exhibit reminds people they have the power to see how others are trying to sway their viewpoint."

Asked how he hopes visitors with opposing political agendas will respond "Truthiness," Adams said, "My dream is that a staunch Republican or Democrat can both enjoy it."

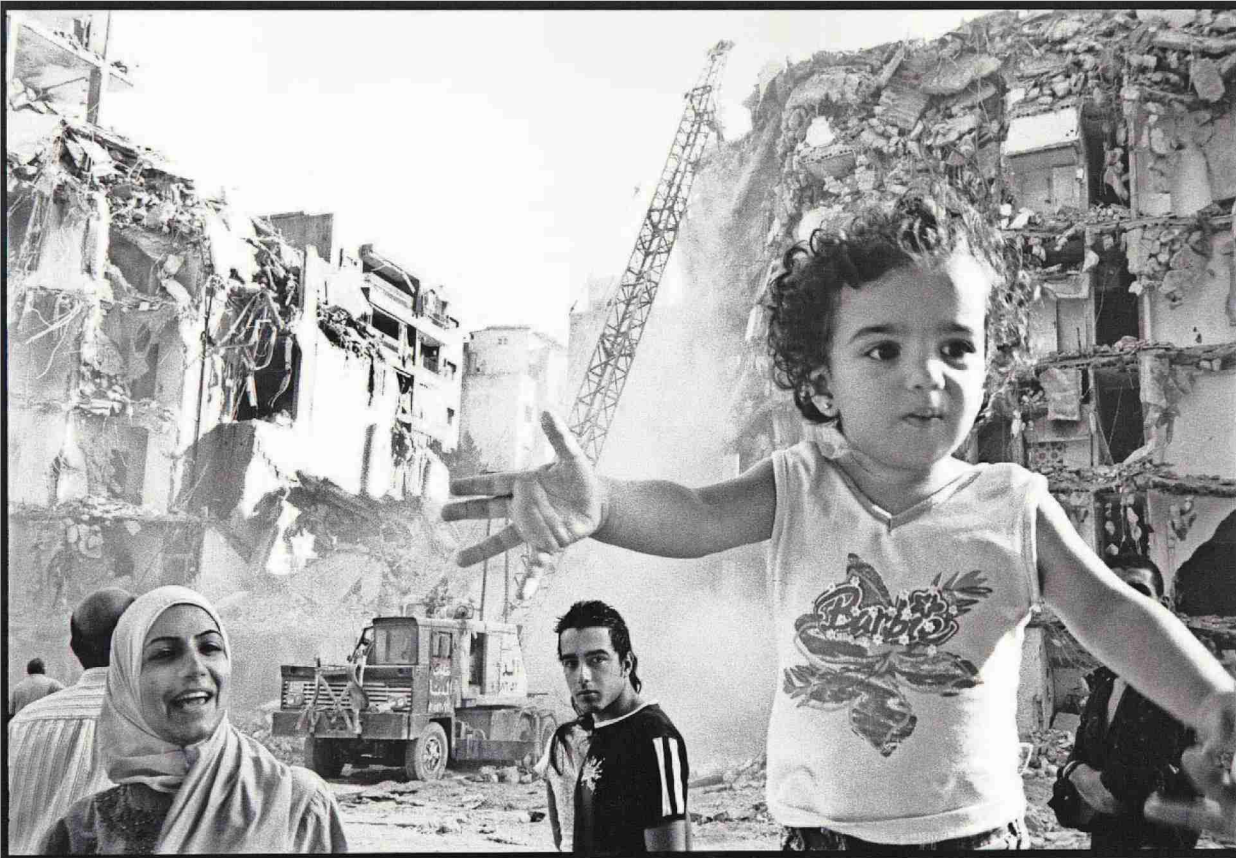
That means you, Donald Trump, and you, Adam Schiff.



Justin Kimball, "5th Street, Attic," 2013. [COURTESY/DECORDOVA SCULPTURE PARK AND MUSEUM]



Charles "Teenie" Harris, "Girl reading on stacks of Pittsburgh Courier newspapers," c. 1940. [CLEMENTS PHOTOGRAPHY AND DESIGN, BOSTON]



Rania Matar, "Barbie Girl, Haret Hreik, Beirut," 2006. [COURTESY/DECORDOVA SCULPTURE PARK AND MUSEUM]