Photo London 2025: The enduring significance of Lee Miller’s war photography

Paul Mitchell
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Photo London marked its 10th anniversary on May 15-18, 2025 by “gathering the world’s leading galleries and artists to present the best of photography and explore the medium’s future possibilities.”

There were thousands of photographs on display from over 130 exhibitors and 400 artists. Many of the predominantly landscape, portrait and abstract images were beautifully presented and technically inventive, but one would hardly guess the world was in political and economic turmoil. The eruption of fascism, genocide and war and the massive opposition to these developments were barely mentioned.

Since Photo London was founded 10 years ago, photography, previously the poor relation of the art world, has become firmly entrenched in the mainstream. Photographs have become profitable assets for the auction houses and commercial galleries who compete to sell them off as investments and “conversation pieces” for the walls of the wealthy.

In 2022, Surrealist artist Man Ray’s 1924 photo “Le Violon d’Ingres” sold for a record-breaking $12.4 million. The images of Cindy Sherman, overlooked for decades and only in 2021 at the age of 67 accepted as a client by mega-gallery Hauser & Wirth, fetch millions.

At Photo London 2025 the room displaying Lee Miller’s World War II photographs, some of which have only recently been discovered, stood out as a rare example of an artist’s ability to cognise life and produce images able to stand the test of time. The bustling atmosphere in the room following on from the 2023 film *Lee*—currently the highest grossing *Sky UK* original film and a planned Tate Britain major retrospective this October—are proof of the huge interest in her work.

Miller’s images from the front lines are a singular and haunting record of the war—ranging from the London Blitz to the liberation of Paris, and later the Nazi concentration camps. She captured war’s devastation. Her work as a *Vogue* photojournalist blends raw reportage with a deeply personal visual sensibility—influenced by her earlier years as a fashion model and participant in the Surrealist movement.

Miller’s extraordinary life developed in the tumultuous years after World War I, amid Hitler’s ascension to power in Germany, the betrayal of revolutionary struggles in Spain and France, and the eruption of World War II.

Miller eventually joined the US 83rd Infantry in 1944 and was one of a handful of women accredited to accompany Allied forces, giving her frontline access rare for any photojournalist.

In August 1944 Miller found herself, illegally, as the only correspondent covering the siege of St Malo. She witnessed the terrible effects of newly introduced napalm bombing of one of the last remaining Nazi strongholds, which deprived the occupants of air and vaporised their bodies. Her photo *Fall of the Citadel*, which freezes in mid-air the huge cloud of smoke from bombers, is framed by building rooftops and a partly raised flag, emphasizing the scale of the attack. The Rolleiflex Miller used did not have a telephoto lens, so she had to get as close as it looks in the picture—700 yards away.

At the 44th Evacuation Hospital Miller produced photographs of surgeons and nurses working over wounded soldiers in tent operating rooms. “For an hour or so I watched lives and limbs being saved, by skill, devotion and endurance. Grave faces and tired feet passed up and down the tent isles. We discussed whether doubling the staff of doctors and nurses would relieve them of work—it seemed not, as everyone by his own volition would still do double his duty”, she recalled.

In *Surgeon and Anaesthetist* (1944) operating lights and intravenous drips are shown as geometric forms above two masked medics looking after an injured soldier. The composition uses the diagonal lines of the tent roof and medical apparatus to lead the eye toward the patient. Miller’s tonal choices—the glaring surgical light against deep shadows—heighten the drama and tension.

In 1945 Miller witnessed the fall of the Nazi regime. In a previously unseen photo soldiers are seen posing at a hotel in Berchtesgaden, Germany. She described how, “The left-hand smoke plume on the mountain behind them is Hitler’s house burning; the right-hand smoke plume is a forest fire or

something... At the time the SS were still about."

Miller was among the first to discover the horrors of Buchenwald and Dachau concentration camps. Her photographs are graphic. One shows emaciated inmates on bunks, the frame dominated by their gaunt, hollowed faces and protruding ribs. To accompany another image of skeletal bodies outside a crematorium, Miller pleaded to *Vogue*, "I IMPLORE YOU TO BELIEVE THIS IS TRUE," fearing readers would doubt the reality.

She wrote graphically, "Dachau had everything you'll ever hear or close your ears to about a concentration camp. The great dusty spaces that had been trampled by so many thousands of condemned feet—feet which ached and shuffled and stamped away the cold and shifted to relieve the pain and finally became useless except to walk them to the death chamber."

Soon after the war most of Miller's graphic images were locked away. The Lee Miller Archives' Kerry Negahban explains, "The British press didn't want to put those images in, because it was a victory, and it was felt the public had enough of seeing horrors. Whereas Lee's point was people are still living these horrors, and you should know this … everyone should know this."

For decades Miller's wartime work was little seen (even Miller herself was reticent to discuss it), but since the 1980s her full story has gradually been brought to light. Art historians now regard her as "among the most original and ambitious photographic artists of the 20th century," helping to blur the line between art and reportage, with an aesthetic that was at once surreal, compassionate, and unflinching.

Miller's ability to approach war and conflict, seeking not only the spectacle of battle but the human stories within it, was in contrast to the limited offerings elsewhere at London Photo 2025.

The war in Ukraine was addressed by a "Voices from the Frontline" panel brought together by Fiona Shields (The *Guardian*'s head of photography), which concluded there was a need "to go beyond clichéd war images" and show "everyday life under siege" and "the practices of resilience" amongst civilians rather than "just fronts and missiles" to "spur empathy and action in the international community."

Photographer Jesse Glazzard and creative producer Eugenia Skvarska do address the effect of the war on the military but only as it concerns LGBTQ+ Ukrainian soldiers. Skvarska says it is important to document these stories not just as "tales of queer identity," but as integral parts of Ukraine's national narrative in its fight against "Russian imperialism."

This all ends up as propaganda for the Ukrainian state. It leaves out the growing opposition to the US/NATO proxy war which has cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of young men and maimed countless others. The reactionary and crisis-ridden Zelensky regime fears this growing anti-war sentiment and responds with brutal state repression against its political opponents—including the imprisonment of Bogdan Syrotiuk of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists, who opposed the war based on internationalist socialist principles—and the banning of the *World Socialist Web Site*. Tens of thousands of men of military recruitment age have fled the country.

On the genocide in Gaza, the only images on display were Adam Rouhana's Before Freedom series, shot over several years, portraying the resilience of Palestinian life with images of the occupation—a boy cycles past the 8-metre-high separation wall—a symbol of Palestinian resistance.

Rouhana explains, "In the news media, Palestinians were often portrayed as masked and violent or as disposable and lifeless: a faceless, miserable people. But that's not what I see when I am there. Instead, what I photograph is unconditional communal love, a rootedness and sense of historical belonging in the land, and a daily generosity and collective spirit.

"Yes, we Palestinians are being slaughtered and occupied, and are actively resisting that, but that's not the entirety of our existence..."

The words of Leon Trotsky, writing in June 1938, shortly before the outbreak of World War II and his assassination on August 20, 1940, more than ever serve as a guide for artists:

"To find a solution to this impasse [the decay of capitalist society] through art itself is impossible. It is a crisis which concerns all culture, beginning at its economic base and ending in the highest spheres of ideology. Art can neither escape the crisis nor partition itself off. Art cannot save itself. It will rot away inevitably—as Grecian art rotted beneath the ruins of a culture founded on slavery—unless present-day society is able to rebuild itself. This task is essentially revolutionary in character. For these reasons the function of art in our epoch is determined by its relation to the revolution." ("Art and Politics in Our Epoch")