



The Photography Annual

EXHIBITION OF THE YEAR: RICHARD MOSSE'S INCOMING

By Eliza Williams

Richard Mosse's *Incoming*, shown at the Barbican Curve from February to April this year, was a thought-provoking look at the refugee crisis happening around the world. It is Creative Review's standout photographic exhibition of the year.

Part-reportage, part conceptual art, *Incoming* challenged viewers to examine their understanding of the refugee crisis, and of how the media can affect our opinion of events. At the exhibition's centre was a 52-minute-long triple-screen film work, created by Mosse in collaboration with cinematographer Trevor Tweeten and set to a specially composed soundtrack by electronic musician Ben Frost. The footage showed the plight of refugees in different settings across the world, including Syria, Lesvos and the 'Jungle' camp in Calais.



Richard Mosse's Incoming at The Curve, Barbican Centre. Photo: Tristan Fewings

Everything featured in the film was shot from a distance, with Mosse using advanced thermographic weapon systems and border surveillance imaging technology to create the work, which can detect the heat of a human body up to 30.3km away. The effect of the tech is to give the people featured in the film a bizarre, unique tonality. They remain distinctly human, yet are also 'other': difficult to distinguish as individuals and presented as uncanny. This use of unusual technology is in keeping with a previous series by Mosse. Titled *Enclave*, it was presented at the Venice Biennale in 2013 and won the *Deutsche Börse Photography Prize* in 2014. *Enclave* showed soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo photographed using discontinued military surveillance film that registers chlorophyll in live vegetation, giving the fighters a stunning and surreal psychedelic backdrop. Like *Incoming*, this is reportage with a difference, raising questions of how successfully photography can present the reality of complex and violent situations.



Richard Mosse's Incoming at The Curve, Barbican Centre. Photo: Tristan Fewings

Incoming garnered rave reviews from critics. “To enter Mosse’s vast, triple-screen installation ... is to be transported to a world both alien and familiar; a spectral place where all that we have seen of the refugee crisis in the media – overcrowded boats, rescue teams, refugee camps, lifeless bodies washed up on tourist beaches, discarded lifejackets – is rendered more visceral but more unreal,” wrote Sean O’Hagan in the *Guardian*.

“Richard Mosse has made a certain terrible beauty his trademark,” wrote Ben Luke in the *Evening Standard*, while Chris Waywell in *Time Out* said simply: “It will make you rethink the European refugee crisis.”

Weaving narratives

It is worth noting that while *Incoming* did feature a series of still images, it is dominated by the film installation, and our choice of this as a ‘photography’ exhibition of the year might ruffle the feathers of those who see the medium primarily in stills form. Yet, at the centre of Mosse’s work is an examination of the genre of reportage. *Incoming* is a recording of events as witnessed through a camera, yet also an investigation of ‘documentary’ itself. It asks us to consider how the way a situation is presented to us changes our understanding of it.



Richard Mosse's Incoming at The Curve, Barbican Centre. Photo: Tristan Fewings

In 2015, Mosse was nominated for membership of Magnum Photos, the prestigious and world-renowned photo agency. Yet he never continued to become a full member of Magnum, in part because of his wariness around the perceived notion that documentary photography was somehow portraying the 'truth'. Significantly though, he still identifies as a photographer. "I do," he said in an interview with Tom Seymour for BJP magazine. "But I have a very ambivalent relationship to it. It's almost like self-loathing, because there's something predatory about the camera lens. I can't escape photography but, whichever way you look at, documentary photography is as constructed a way of seeing the world as anything else."

He aims to highlight this constructed element in his work. In using the thermographic camera, which has a primary use of identifying body heat from afar and is therefore classified as a weapon, he hopes to confound viewers' expectations of documentary work.



Richard Mosse's Incoming at The Curve, Barbican Centre. Photo: Tristan Fewings

“You have to remember it’s a military tool, it’s not designed for telling stories,” he explained to CR at the launch of *Incoming* at the Barbican. “It’s designed for detecting the enemy. So the fact that it has an extraordinary tonality ... [it’s] an alienation effect almost, to push the viewer into an unfamiliar place, where they can see what happens to be quite a familiar subject in a new and perhaps refreshed way.”

Extraordinary equipment

In practical terms, the camera was far from straightforward. It was large and unwieldy, plus, classified as a weapon, it required government permission to use. Mosse was also limited in where he could take it. One scene in the film, which shows a battle unfolding in Northern Syria, was in fact shot from Turkey. “There’s a lot of mortar fire and rockets, a lot of tracers,” he says. “That’s all totally visible on the camera, and once we were filming that you really realised that this is what the camera is designed for, for battlefield awareness. You could see artillery positions that were hidden, you could see the glow of people behind them.

“We were on a hill just on the Turkish border. Because we really didn’t want to risk our necks. Also, Syria’s one of the sanctioned countries that we couldn’t travel with the camera to. The camera is regarded as a weapon under the International Traffic in Arms Regulations. In other words, if you don’t get the proper export documentation, you could be locked away for weapons smuggling. It’s one more annoying thing about the camera.”



Richard Mosse's Incoming at The Curve, Barbican Centre. Photo: Tristan Fewings

The distance the camera had to be used from presented ethical dilemmas too. It is able to record scenes intimately without the subjects having any awareness that they are being filmed. The film contains scenes of people socially interacting in refugee camps but also of doctors performing an autopsy.

“The almost invasive gaze of the very powerful long range capabilities allowed us to create a very honest portrait of people who were completely unaware, they were unselfconscious,” says Mosse. “I would argue that’s not an invasion of privacy because the camera also anonymises the individual, you can’t identify anyone who is imaged by the camera because it doesn’t reveal how their face looks. It reveals how their face ‘glows’.



“There’s a lot of things going on here that we found, the longer we worked with the technology, started to really resonate and create all this tension within the work,” he continues. “That’s what I’m hoping the work will do – it will push the viewer into an uncomfortable space in which they’re not told what to think.... They don’t know what to feel and actually the score is constantly misleading the viewer and changing gears along with the edit.”

A political artwork

Even more uncomfortably, the unique visual effect can be dehumanising. “That’s the thing about the camera, it’s designed to detect the enemy,” explains Mosse. “It objectifies the human body in a way that almost strips the individual from the human figure. It turns them into a biological trace or ‘creature’. This is a form of dehumanisation. So there’s something deeply problematic about that.

“But in a way I felt that revealed something about how our governments represent and therefore regard the figure of the refugee,” he continues. “So potentially it could allow a space to think about that somehow.”



Richard Mosse's Incoming at The Curve, Barbican Centre. Photo: Tristan Fewings

There are obvious political questions raised by the work, but Mosse does not shy away from this, and in fact is keen that these ideas will reach the viewer and even potentially galvanise them, in a way a more traditional documentary film might not.

“The constant disorientation [forces] the viewer to become the author of the work on some level and to own their interpretation,” he says. “Rather than to be like, ‘oh I saw this great doc about the refugees and isn’t it horrible?’

“But what I really hope people will take away, if nothing else, is this sense of uneasy complicity as Westerners,” he concludes. “This is a technology that is designed for our governments, that is used against the refugees. And we are part of that problem, we are complicit. The whole system that is designed to deal with the crisis is completely inadequate.

“We’re increasingly seeing the slide of liberal democracy into totalitarianism in the West due to the refugee crisis. It’s being used as a trigger by people like Trump and by the Brexit politicians as a way to stoke and create fear amongst us when there was none and there is no need for any. So I think immigration and the figure of the refugee is somehow this figure that creates a crisis in our societies. It’s a very worrying thing because I think with climate change we’re only having the first taste of this crisis.”