

Seeing Red

Richard Mosse on blurring the lines between art and reportage

Richard Mosse came to international attention five years ago, barely thirty years old, with his series of large-scale photographs entitled *Infra*, detailing the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. These striking images, which depicted uniformed soldiers and lush natural landscapes, were even more compelling due to their psychedelic, almost lurid, colours. Mosse created this unexpected palette by using an obsolete infrared surveillance film, originally intended for the purpose of carrying out aerial vegetation surveys and identifying camouflaged targets within military contexts. The film renders green matter (grass, hills, plants) into hot pinks and crimson reds, making Mosse's version of a warscape unlike anything that had come before, presenting conflict with a curious, new perspective. Besides capturing the ongoing war between rebel factions and the Congolese national army in the DRC, Mosse has travelled extensively around the world to photograph the wonder and tragedy of destruction, from remote, abandoned plane wrecks, to the former palaces of Uday and Saddam Hussein. Irish-born, New York-based Mosse is the winner of the 2014 Deutsche Börse Photography Prize and in 2015 became a nominee member of Magnum Photos, the legendary international documentary photography co-operative.

When did you first start taking photos?

When I was about ten years old. I was given a simple point and click camera and graduated to the Olympus OM-1, my mother's old camera, when I was about 14.

What or who were your sources and inspirations at that time?

I grew up in a very artistically-oriented household. My folks would host artists showing at the nearby

kunsthalle in Kilkenny city, the Butler Gallery. We had some extraordinary artists passing through and staying with us. Some of the people I remember visiting back in those days are Christian Boltanski, Bill Woodrow, James Turrell, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Richard Long, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Richard Wilson, Andy Goldsworthy, David Nash, Barrie Cooke, and others.

Your parents also trained as artists, didn't they?

My father is a potter and my mother studied under Hans Haacke [a highly influential German modern artist] at Cooper Union. My grandfather was a sculptor who trained at the Slade, and was a friend of Roland Penrose and Lee Miller, as well as Henry Moore. My uncle is an abstract expressionist painter, although some of his recent paintings have become so big that they have turned into sculptures. My mother turned to gardening and we got an EU grant when I was about six years old to restore our home, which was an old Romantic-era historic garden dating back to the 1790s. That's where my mother still lives. It was a nice place to grow up. I guess all this took its toll.

After studying English at King's College London, you took a postgraduate diploma in Fine Art at Goldsmiths. Was it during this time that you started thinking about war, destruction and catastrophe as part of your practice, taking these themes as primary references in your work?

At Goldsmiths I remember making some bizarre art to do with the photos of torture victims from Abu Ghraib [a US prison in Iraq during the second Gulf war], which were leaked in the *New Yorker* around that time. I went up the Edgware Road [in West London], where London's Iraqi community live, with a choke chain around my neck, asking Iraqi shopkeepers to tug the chain and choke me. I had a friend come along to

All images courtesy of Richard Mosse and Jack Shainman Gallery

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Wrap Your Troubles In Dreams, Congo, 2012

photograph this. They all said 'no' of course, except for a teenager who was filling in for his dad behind the counter of a newsagent. He gave the chain a tug and choked me nicely. It's a very odd photograph.

But I was making art about conflict years before, having started documenting the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars around 2001. I was particularly interested in the missing persons crisis – all these people who had disappeared several years ago, who had never come home, and who were probably buried in various mass graves that had still not been uncovered or located. I found this particularly challenging as there was a basic problem of representation – you can't see someone who has disappeared, therefore you can't photograph them. So you're trying to take a photo of an absence. That got me thinking, and I turned it into my MA thesis at the London Consortium, thinking about this in relation to the sublime. It turned out that my work in the Congo operates using the very same principles, trying to document traces of something hidden. I keep bumping into this in my practice.

What did you make for your thesis show at Goldsmiths?

It included a video I made in Gaza and the West Bank, where I asked students at Bir Zeit University [a non-governmental public university in the Palestinian West bank] to tell me what the word 'intifada' means. Back then we heard the word constantly on the news, but we never stopped to ask ourselves what the word actually means. Turns out it has many meanings. Some of them are quite everyday or domestic, like 'shaking the dust out of a carpet', for example. Arabic is a very poetic language.

How did your work develop afterwards at Yale, where you studied photography?

At Yale I worked tirelessly. I think I must have cranked out about twelve projects in two years. One of them was about photographing the traces of illegal immigrants coming across the US-Mexico border. Some of the things I photographed were concrete evidence of illegal

crossings, but a lot of what I photographed was just bric-a-brac that got my imagination fired up. That seemed to tell the story better, so I guess this was an important step for me into fiction, as well as the powerful blurry area between fiction and documentary.

You gained representation from the respected New York gallery Jack Shainman in the same year that you received your MFA. How did you manage this very quick transition?

I was completely surprised to get Jack's attention. I was incredibly lucky to get into one of the city's top galleries right out of college, especially considering how interesting the other artists in Jack's stable are. A lot of those premium galleries are rather sterilised and lifeless but Jack Shainman Gallery is a living organism and I feel like all of his artists are still growing in very interesting ways.

One of the earliest exhibitions you presented was *The Fall* (2008-9), which featured photographs of extremely remote aeroplane crash sites, with often partially disintegrated wrecks disappearing into an uninhabited landscape. What was it that drew you to investigating such terrains?

This body of work evolved from a previous series that I had made at Yale called *Airside* – photographs of air disaster simulators in various disaster training sites around the world. In *Airside* I was interested in the imaginary spectacle and simulation of the air disaster, while in *The Fall* I wanted to look at the final resting places of antique aircraft, long forgotten. I suppose they are both aspects of the same project, and are quite sci-fi in their own way. *The Fall* is really about the landscape, about a return to the wilderness, a kind of post-apocalyptic sublime. It was a great journey locating these wrecks. There is a whole community of air wreck hunters online.

In early 2009 you visited Iraq and photographed the palaces of Saddam Hussein, which were at that point being used as temporary housing by the US military. What were your expectations, assuming that you had already seen images of the palaces?

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747 Schiphol, 2007



727 San Bernardino, 2007

I hadn't actually seen the palaces comprehensively photographed. I may be wrong, but I don't believe that any photographer had really done the story justice at that stage. I had read about these palaces in an article by Jon Lee Anderson in the *New Yorker* and we met up after he gave a lecture in Ireland, which provided me with a little more info. *Breach* (2009) documents Saddam Hussein's palace architecture under US military occupation. Iraq's former dictator had around 84 imperial palace compounds throughout Iraq, many of which he never visited, but which were seen by Iraqis as expressions of his immanence and proximity. They were designed to instil fear. Because of their strategic location, they were attractive to the US army as bases to garrison troops, especially in densely populated urban centres where they featured multiple layers of defensive walls, sentry towers, and sometimes even moats. The inner palace architecture was usually vast and grandiose, featuring ballrooms and ceremonial halls designed to impress, yet was often poorly built, with salinated foundations, for example, or cement painted to look like marble. Occupying US forces brought their own forms of provisional architecture into these spaces, such as office partition walls, air conditioning units, gym equipment and sandbags. The resulting imagery is an incongruent blend of architectural forms, a sort of palimpsest of power and occupation.

In making this work, I wanted to evoke older, even mythic themes of bygone empires. There's a fairly well known poem by PB Shelley called *Ozymandias*,



Foyer at Uday's Palace, Iraq, 2009

*I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies..."*

I think that poem gets at what attracted me to this story. My work in Iraq was very much a snapshot of recent history but it was also layered with the thing that attracted the Romantics to ancient ruins:



Gym at Al Faw Palace, Iraq, 2009

how they foretell our own decline. My approach as a photographer was to try to portray my subject prosaically, to allow the subject's poetry to emerge in its own right, through juxtaposition and detail.

The *Infra* series from 2010–11 introduced your usage of Kodak Aerochrome, which made colour such a central part of the image. Did this series change the way you approach taking photos and did aesthetics begin to play a more significant role?

Aesthetics, yes. But I guess a more overtly conceptual approach becomes more integrated too. In other words, it wasn't just an attempt to create beautiful or sublime photographs, but to use them

as part of a larger strategy, folding aesthetics along with the history of photography and an investigation into the medium as a way of finding a more powerful way of expressing difficult narratives. It was in order to tell a deeper, more complex story. So it's not aesthetics for its own sake. It's aesthetics that becomes a means to an end.

What tends to be your immediate response when you get to the site you are photographing? Is there a particular routine that you follow or, given the locations you travel to, does a lot of it depend on what you are allowed to do, or what is safe?

If there is any risk involved, that is certainly a factor in how I would respond. For example, if there's an angry mob, that can be a very dangerous thing. Crowds can get out of hand very quickly. I always err on the side of caution. Portraits often require a certain level of human civility – a handshake or an introduction. The same goes for contested sites. It usually pays to make sure you have permission. When you can't get it, that's when you have to steal a photograph by hook or by crook. In tense places, it pays to move fairly quickly, as you tend to stick out like a sore thumb. So it is often a good idea to get the shot and keep moving. However, many of my photographs are not taken in such tense situations, and I have a little time to walk around the subject and to feel it out. Sometimes I return weeks later after dreaming about it for a little. I often miss shots, which makes me kick myself, but over time you learn to let things go. It's part of the game.

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Tutsi Town, Congo, 2010



Everything Merges with the Night, 2015

Your recent show at The School, in Kinderhook, New York, offered a short survey of your work to date. How did you go about compiling the images for this display, and what does it signify to you?

I wanted to show a selection of works that I had made prior to my series in the Congo, in order to make it clear where the work had come out of. My work in Iraq, made in 2009, had a very interesting subject – the US Army's occupation of Saddam Hussein's palaces – which was quite clear. I felt the subject required a more prosaic approach. Yet while I travelled through Iraq, it happened to be the season for dust storms. These dust storms had a very peculiar effect on the quality of light in the Iraqi desert. As a photographer, you become sensitive to the white balance of different qualities of light. Daylight is actually rather blue. Lamplight is really rather red. Fluorescent bulbs are quite green. During a dust storm these rules go out of the window. The sunlight has to penetrate thick layers of dust carried in the atmosphere, filtering it from bluish light to blood red. The resulting imagery, shot with daylight balanced film, seemed completely otherworldly. I found these photographs haunting and expressive. It felt like working in a whole new register.

After Iraq, I became quite lost as an artist, which is always a good place to be. It was a confusing time. I had grown tired of my chosen genre, tired of myself really. I wished documentary photography could be more expressive. The world, I thought to myself, doesn't need another large format photograph of an abandoned place.

These ideas took some time to gather momentum, but they evolved into a very incongruous and eccentric approach to war photography in my Congo project, which began in 2010. In spite of the difference between these two bodies of work – from hyperfocal to expressive, from prosaic to romantic – they are both concerned with conflict's trace on the landscape and on the built environment. In selecting works for my show at The School, I wanted to give the viewer a chance to see this trajectory, my journey as an artist from here to there.

Would you say that this exhibition is also a kind of full stop in relation to the Congo project?

I saw it as a chance to try to make a final conclusive statement in my work on the Congo. Since so many of my landscape photos in Congo map sites of massacres or human rights abuses, I wanted to end the journey on a positive note, to say something optimistic about this beautiful country. So for my last photograph, *Everything Merges with the Night*, I travelled to a peaceful place, a serenely beautiful valley that was once dangerous prior to 2004, but which, in recent memory, has been safe and secure. I wanted to show the country's extraordinary beauty and its future potential for tourism, if and when the conflict ends. To give the viewer space to reflect on that emphasis, I installed this piece at an extraordinary scale, 14 x 24 feet. At that scale, the image seems monumental, of course, but right for the space in which it is installed, and there's a wealth of detail that almost seems to become abstracted when enlarged to this level. You can literally get lost in the undergrowth.

– By Allie Biswas



Space Wagon Mosul, Iraq, 2009