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By Editors

CULTURE

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The truth hunters

One story has dominated the news for the past year but, from Iraq to Myanmar, reporters and photographers have not stopped covering the world's darkest conflicts. These are people dedicated to shining a light, challenging authority and taking notes to make a difference.



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Richard Mosse
In Brazil

Using infrared and multispectral cameras, the photographer has created a unique method of representing war and climate change. His latest mission: to chronicle the burning of the Amazon.

In 2009 photographer Richard Mosse, then in his late twenties, went to Iraq. By then, Western audiences had grown used to images of bombed-out towns and troops in desert-combat uniforms. What was needed was another perspective. Mosse decided to document the palaces of Saddam Hussein, many of which had been turned into operating bases by the US military. He was attracted by the clash of new and old; the gaudy kitsch of dictator-chic.

Although the project offered him a unique view on the conflict, he was still dissatisfied by his medium of choice. "I was frustrated with documentary photography," he says. "I wanted to break it apart." In the acclaimed projects that Mosse has undertaken since, he's shifted his focus away from the photographer's role as "an illustrator for a writer's text" and towards a more complex practice. "I suppose it's a hybrid of sorts, at the interstice between contemporary art and reportage photography," he says.

It's an approach that he pioneered in the jungles of the Democratic Republic of Congo for his 2010 project, *Infra*, in which he used a military-grade infrared film designed to reveal the unseen during reconnaissance. In the resulting images, lush vegetation is rendered in psychedelic pinks and purples, while combatants and victims stand starkly out against an alien landscape; it's a strikingly original view on conflict that's hard to ignore. Over the following decade he has continued to use similar technologies in a bid to "refresh" people's attitudes, such as when he photographed refugees in 2016 by using a thermographic camera capable of imaging human body heat from a distance of 30km. "The camera is designed for the battlefield, so it's actually part of a weapons system," he says. "It confronts the viewer on some level with their own complicity. At least that was my intention. One of the only things you can do is to make people feel something."

Although Mosse's experimental approach has meant that his work often adorns gallery walls rather than front pages, he does engage with the media. One organisation that he holds in high regard is London-based Forensic Architecture, which draws on expertise from fields as diverse as CGI, journalism and architecture to investigate environmental crimes and human rights abuses around the world. It's a new take on activist journalism. "I've been in dialogue with them," says Mosse. "They're a very effective group who try to bring about a kind of accountability."

For more than a year now, Mosse, who is based in New York, has been travelling the Brazilian Amazon, where state-sanctioned forest clearance has set one of the world's largest carbon sinks ablaze, as modern-day cowboys fell timber to make space for cattle. "I was intrigued by the challenge of representing climate change because it's way bigger than us, and for that reason it's hard to photograph," he says. "The scale of the burning is difficult to articulate."

It's a challenge that's suited to Mosse's mix of art and journalism. He employs advanced, multispectral cameras (used in environmental-monitoring satellites) to document the destruction from above. But his reporter's instinct has also led him to seek out stories on the ground. "I've been trying to infiltrate the groups or individuals who are burning and ranching. About 95 per cent of my job is getting access, about 4 per cent is administration and only 1 per cent is making the art," he says, laughing.

"Running in with a zoom lens, stealing the shot and running out, you'll probably get murdered. But if you can appeal to the head guy's sense of machismo, he can't say no. Once you start to hang out with these guys, you start to enjoy the company of some of them and realise they're not just environmental criminals. They're locked into a global economy. It's not so easy as pointing fingers." — AMA