

ARTFORUM

April 2017

Richard Mosse

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

Susan Sontag wrote that “photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks.” Richard Mosse’s unorthodox approach to recording the world—beginning especially with his photo series “*Infra*,” 2010–15, and its related six-channel video, *The Enclave*, 2012–13, and continuing with his new body of work, “*Heat Maps*,” 2016–, recently on view at Jack Shainman’s Twentieth Street space—engages with some of the central notions underlying Sontag’s well-known dictum, complicating expectations about how photography might be understood to represent and/or misrepresent, and working to mobilize both tendencies to promote the sort of ethical engagement she invokes.

For the earlier two projects, which document the human and physical landscape of the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an area where decades of war have claimed more than five million lives, Mosse used a discontinued type of film, developed by Kodak in collaboration with the US military in the 1940s, that registers

Richard Mosse, *Idomeni Camp, Greece*, 2016, digital C-print on metallic paper, 40 1/4 x 120". From the series "Heat Maps," 2016.



conventionally imperceptible infrared-light emissions in grasses and foliage, rendering the **landscape** uncanny shades of pink. For “*Heat Maps*,” Mosse has once **again** repurposed a type of military surveillance technology, namely a **thermographic** camera with extreme telephoto properties, this time training it on refugee camps and staging areas in Greece, Italy, and Germany. Classified as a defense article under international arms-trafficking regulations, the instrument has been able to detect the presence of a human at a distance of more than thirty kilometers and to identify a specific individual from more than six.

The work on view here—eight large-format photographs of these sites, as well as a handful of smaller stills from *Incoming*, 2014–17, a new video work that uses the same technology to tell more intimate stories about the refugee crisis unfolding across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East—intentionally walked a fine line between the clinical and the beautiful. The technology reads heat, so the images, assembled from hundreds of smaller frames into seamless panoramas, have the look of exceptionally fine-grained negatives, with bodies and light sources glowing white amid a world of grisaille landscape and infrastructure. Whether depicting faraway views of encampments set beneath a cliff face in Larissa, in central Greece, or tucked under a highway in Ventimiglia, a Ligurian town on the French border, or capturing more personal details—as in *Idomeni Camp, Greece*, 2016, showing people congregating around tents on muddy ground, the thermographic technology making their faces resemble eerie monochrome cartoons, or *Moria in Snow*, 2017, portraying hundreds waiting in a line that weaves through makeshift buildings in a bivouac on the island of Lesbos—Mosse’s images have a cold, austere beauty to them, but one that never tips over into romanticism. Though what he is making is indisputably art, his eye remains always that of a documentarian, one committed to finding new ways of revealing what is hidden by walls and fences, by distance and disinterest.

Questions around the pitfalls of aestheticization obviously shadow images such as these, as they should. But Mosse’s brand of aestheticization operates in the strict sense of the word: a technique that heightens rather than dampens (anesthetizes) perception, that instead of softening or euphemizing the situation instead serves to sharpen its contours precisely by estranging it from the familiar, vision-correspondent image world that most documentary photography, even at its very best, often seems to occupy. Just as Mosse’s photographic deformation of the physical character of the Congo arguably worked to help viewers better “understand” the situation there, so, too, do these new works manage the remarkable trick of intensifying the viewer’s connection to the artist’s subject matter by, in some sense, distorting it. If the images ask us to accept Mosse’s world as his cameras record it, they also refuse the normative photographic gaze. His technical intervention might seem to be, at least in a conventional sense, one founded in depersonalization, but the depictions it produces are in fact deeply humanizing, emphasizing what we all share instead of what separates us—all of us pools of heat, huddling together wherever we find ourselves.

—Jeffrey Kastner