



Richard Mosse

An Engaged Distraction

by Alexandra McIntosh



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The history of the Democratic Republic of Congo over the past 500 years encompasses everything from slavery and colonization by a megalomaniacal king to military coups, dictatorships, multi-year civil wars and a CIA assassination plot, not to mention the incessant extraction of the country's vast mineral resources by and to the benefit of foreign interests.

Irish artist Richard Mosse first travelled to the eastern Congo in 2010. Over three years of research, documentation, and travel in the region he completed two major works, the photographic series "Infra," 2011, and *The Enclave*, 2012-13, a six-channel video installation that represented Ireland at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013. The installation was shown along with a selection of photographs from "Infra" at DHC/ART, Montreal, from October 16, 2014 to February 8, 2015, and is presented at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark, from February 6 to May 25, 2015.

Since the mid-1990s, the eastern Congo has been devastated by violent conflict between factions of armed rebels. At least twenty-five paramilitary groups, of dubious and wavering allegiances, wage war against each other and innocent civilians over resources, land, or ethnic enmities. Among these, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) were among the perpetrators of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, while the national Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC) is itself "a complex web of warlords and paramilitaries."¹

Despite aid and intervention from a coalition of international forces, human rights violations including mass rape and the conscription of child soldiers are a chronic occurrence.² Since 1996, an estimated 5.4 million people have been killed or have died of war-related causes, and thousands of others displaced. And yet the conflict remains relatively unknown and sparsely covered by Western media.

According to American journalist Adam Hochschild, "the bewildering complexity of Congo's current violence is surely a major reason why the rest of the world generally ignores it. Americans, in particular, prefer foreign conflicts where there seem to be clearly identifiable heroes or villains..."³

Compelled by this lack of awareness, Mosse travelled to the



Previous page: Richard Mosse, *Love Is The Drug*, 2012, digital chromogenic print, 279 x 535 cm, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. **Left:** *Madonna and Child*, 2012, digital chromogenic print, 152 x 122 cm, image courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, Burning in Water / Free Arts NYC collection.

DRC to make "Infra," a series of large-format photographs documenting the lush landscapes, agricultural pastures, and provisional settlements of the eastern Congo. The series features portraits of rebel leaders and young conscripts in poses of defiance, as well as gatherings of soldiers and civilians, and scenes of daily life.

Mosse returned to the same region in 2012 and 2013 with cinematographer Trevor Tweeten and composer Ben Frost to shoot *The Enclave*.

Both "Infra" and *The Enclave* were made using Kodak Aerochrome, a discontinued infrared reconnaissance film. Developed for military aerial surveillance, the false-colour reversal film renders chlorophyll in vibrant reds and pinks, thus exposing camouflage in drab contrast among the natural vegetation.

Mosse's resulting images depict lush fuchsia forests, bubble-gum pink tall grasses that move languidly in the wind, and purple mist-covered mountains with flecks of turquoise. This is a world cast in a sublime beauty, yet one that belies its troubling realities.

Among the filmed sequences of *The Enclave* are rebel soldiers with guns poised over a rushing river, their muscles tense with anticipation. Others stand at attention or shout rallying cries, fearsome despite their pink and purple battle fatigues. Dead bodies dot the landscape. In a crowded town, a group of men peel back the ragged cloth that covers a body lying in the middle of the road, as if checking for signs of recognition.



Tutsi Town, North Kivu, Eastern Congo, 2010, digital chromogenic print, 71 cm x 89 cm, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

The footage is both enthralling and destabilizing. In one sequence the camera keeps in rapid step behind a soldier as he rushes through dense foliage, brushing aside the draping leaves and vines. The outcome of this route, whether made in ambush or retreat, is unclear.

Continuous film shots thread through the landscape; the work of a ceaseless, restless camera. Moving through a refugee camp, the camera weaves along narrow pathways between mud and straw huts covered with tarps. The camp's inhabitants look into the camera, move aside to allow its passage, or remain oblivious to its presence.

The body is inherently present in this movement: I, you, the viewer, keep pace with the soldier; I attend to the death rites.

The Enclave installation comprises four screens suspended in the centre of a room at opposing angles, with two placed on the surrounding walls. The individual screens alternate between distinct images, at times doubled or depicting the same scene filmed from different perspectives. They sometimes show nothing at all, or in rare instances, the same image on all six screens. As a result there is a sense of impossibility at seeing everything at once. As the scenes shift and change from one screen to the next, the viewer also feels continually in the way, blocking the story as it unfolds.

The soundtrack, composed by Ben Frost, layers natural sounds of bird song, insects and rustling wind with human voices; at times rising in conflict or gently singing. The high-pitched wine of radio static drones in and out, along with the sound of trucks clattering along dirt roads. A single audio channel accompanies each screen, contributing

to the sensory immersion and disorientation of the installation. At what feels like the climax of the film, all screens go black and the sound rises to an overwhelming intensity. Explosions, gunshots, and human cries ring out from all sides in the darkness.

Interspersed amidst the chaos, however, are moments of seeming normality; reminders that daily life continues despite the desperate circumstances. Women gather at water's edge to wash their clothes. One continuous sequence depicts a celebration in a crowded church hall. Multiple performers come on stage to sing or out-dance each other in a jubilant rush of bodies. Towards the end of the film, a community is shown coming together to move a small wooden house, gripping the bottom of the structure and stumbling over rocky terrain, while on a parallel screen, a baby is born by Caesarean. Two signs of hope as

the film draws to a close.

The Enclave offers a complete sensory immersion in the landscape and conflicts of the Congo. The gorgeous chemically treated palette of both "Infra" and *The Enclave*, with popping colours of magenta, yellow, purple and teal, stands in contrast to the violence done to the country and its people.

In the Breach

Mosse's earlier photographic series "Breach," 2009, was made while the artist was embedded with the US military in Iraq. The images depict the luxury architecture of Saddam Hussein in various states of preserve or ruin. Hussein built over eighty extravagant palaces across Iraq following the end of the first Gulf War in 1991 (including the Victory over America palace commemorating that conflict). At once extravagant follies and opulent symbols of power, they served to convey a sense of the dictator's all-pervading presence throughout the country.

During the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the US military took possession of many of these palaces, turning them into headquarters for the coalition forces, operational bases, or accommodations for soldiers. In the latter, Mosse's images show grandiose ballrooms turned into makeshift barracks with plywood and fabric divisions.

Mosse has noted the irony of a situation where the (arguably self-declared) liberators of a country occupy the same seat of power proclaimed by the deposed despot.⁴ This is perhaps his inspiration

behind the title “Breach,” which refers to breaking through a wall or barricade, as well as a failure to observe a law.

Many of the images in the series are striking for their depictions of decadence and kitsch: Cavernous entrance halls in marble, mosaic, and gold, vast colonnades, and glittering chandeliers. They also serve as stark indicators of the vast discrepancies between Hussein and the average Iraqi citizen.

Yet most intriguing of all are the images of US soldiers within the architecture: Lifting weights in a grand courtyard turned open-air gym, in seemingly endless anticipation of some call to action, or smoking a cigarette and gazing out over a spectacular vista. Here Mosse captures some of the human dynamics within the united military force, as well as the peculiar contradictions of warfare—the lulls in intensity, the boredom, the provisional solution. These images go some way to depicting the ineffable: That which exceeds our typical understanding of organized warfare.

The Ethics of “Aftermath” Photography

Mosse has travelled extensively in zones of conflict familiar to the Western world, including Gaza and the West Bank, as well as Iraq. Like many photographers working in the documentary tradition, to which Mosse admits a certain if conflicted allegiance,⁵ the complexity and gravity of such volatile situations provides rich fodder for exploration. Many photographers who venture to war-zones do so with socially motivated goals. Yet the ethics of representing conflict are rather murky, particularly when the formal qualities of an image are emphasized.

A visually compelling photograph of a conflict or atrocity has a stronger likelihood of circulation and dissemination in the media. Indeed, numerous iconic images have come to represent specific wars and catastrophes in the West’s collective memory, from the 1930s Farm Security Administration photographs by Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans (among others), and Huynh Cong Ut’s Vietnam War image from 1972 of a naked girl fleeing a village that has been drenched with napalm, to the green-tinged night vision footage of Iraqi anti-aircraft guns firing over Baghdad during the first Gulf War, and the abhorrent images of prisoner torture at Abu-Ghraib in 2003.

There is no shortage of enthralling images of war that have mobilized external parties into action, served as instruments of propaganda or, in the case of the Vietnam War, swayed public opinion against the US government’s military strategy. Yet contained within such images is an inherent danger of reducing a complex situation to an icon, and in the process, constructing a dominant historical narrative of a world event.⁶ “Photographs of the victims of war,” writes Susan Sontag, “are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create

Pool at Uday’s Palace from the “Breach” series, 2009, digital chromogenic print mounted to dibond, Dimensions variable, ©Richard Mosse, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.







Cigarette at Al Faw Palace, 2009, digital chromogenic print face-mounted to plexiglass, 102 x 127 cm. ©Richard Mosse, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

the illusion of consensus.”⁷

At the heart of such work is a moral ambiguity: In the act of capturing and seeing a visually striking image of atrocity we may draw much needed attention, but risk distancing ourselves from the trauma and reducing it to a spectacle. Such images are especially problematic when, Sontag notes, they “focus on the powerless, reduced to their powerlessness,” and where the powerless are not named in the captions.⁸ This beautification of misery and suffering may serve to placate the viewer, as if merely witnessing and abhorring a horrific image is sufficient in condoning its source.

Revealing the Unseen

To render the conflicts of the Congo as Mosse does in such glorious imagery, then, is surely an aestheticization of another country’s tragedy.

Mosse’s approach to photographing and filming in the Congo goes some way to counter this criticism. Foremost are the sheer physical constraints of working with large format view cameras in a rural setting, and of lugging coolers through the equatorial jungle in order to preserve the highly heat-sensitive infrared film.

More significant is the time Mosse spent negotiating contact and gaining the trust of nomadic rebel factions and detachments of the national army in order to capture them on film. His approach reveals a sustained commitment to the region, its history and fractured communities. But this alone does not distinguish Mosse’s work from social documentary, where an implied narrative within a photographic series is sought to reveal underlying aspects of a situation.⁹

Mosse writes, “while my work is in the documentary spirit, I

have struggled with the idea that documentary photography, regardless of the photographer’s concerns, arrives pre-loaded with an implicit assumption of advocacy. My work is not a performance of the ethical. I’m concerned less with conscience than with consciousness.”¹⁰ Broadening awareness, his own and possibly that of others, was a goal when he set out to photograph the Congo, over a stated critical engagement or sense of ethical responsibility.

He also describes the “unseen, the hidden, the invisible”¹¹ as integral aspects of the Congo’s war. In “Breach,” the US soldiers in combat fatigues, the bullet-ridden vehicles, and the rubble of destroyed buildings are the recognizable signs of orchestrated armed conflict. The Congo’s war leaves fewer obvious traces on the landscape, due in part to the temporary nature of its rural architecture, and the forms of violence waged on its population,¹² and on women’s bodies in particular.

If there is a narrative to be gleaned from Mosse’s work, it is evocative rather than prescriptive. Mosse does not show the “powerless reduced to their powerlessness” but multiple aspects of the situation: The community gatherings, death rites, and celebrations, as well as the sheer brutality and violence of warfare. In many cases his subjects are named (for example, *General Février or Colonel Soleil’s Boys*, 2010). They are real people rather than iconic representatives of a tragic situation.

Following the completion of “Infra,” Mosse wrote “my photography [in the Congo] was a personal struggle with the disparity between my own limited powers of representation and the unspeakable world that confronted me.”¹³ Infrared photography becomes Mosse’s transformative filter; a tool to render the invisible visible. Ultimately, art becomes a way to attempt to understand

a situation of human-wrought suffering that defies comprehension.

Mosse's work seduces through gorgeous and surreal imagery yet engages at the moment when we might otherwise turn away. The physical configuration of the installation and the unpredictability of its changing images frustrate the desire to obtain a comprehensive view, just as we, as outsiders, struggle to grasp the complexity of the Congo's conflict. Similarly, as the viewer is obliged to shift his or her position within the room, there arises a feeling of not just involvement, but complicity in the action.

The sequences engulf the viewer, eliciting a feeling of being among the rebels, of taking part in the training, and examining the corpses for signs of recognition. *The Enclave* renders the conflict thoroughly real and tangible.

While his depictions of soldiers in "Breach" and "Infra" go some way to represent the ineffable in armed conflict, *The Enclave* goes further. The immersive nature of *The Enclave* pushes Mosse's work beyond the acknowledged boundaries of social documentary and the dangers of aestheticizing war. It reveals the multiple factions and complexity of the conflict just as infrared exposes the camouflaged amongst the foliage. The installation provides a shock to the system and revealingly recasts what would otherwise go unnoticed.

The viewer is thus left not with an indelible image—a reduction of Congolese conflict to an iconic image—but a feeling of immersion, indeed saturation, like the infrared landscapes, in the brutality and complexity of the country's multiple conflicts.

The Enclave *simultaneously seduces and interrupts, distracts and engages, serving not to anaesthetize but to awaken our awareness.*

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Notes

1. Cheryl Sim, *Richard Mosse The Enclave*. Curatorial essay for the exhibition at DHC/ART, Montreal, 16 October 2014 to 8 February 2015.
2. While there have been small victories in the United Nations and partners' mission, the ongoing conflict shows few signs of abating. On 2 January 2015 the FDLR failed to meet a six-month grace period imposed by MONUSCO (United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DR Congo) in which to voluntarily surrender. Instead they used this time "to continue to commit human rights abuses against innocent people in Eastern DRC, recruit combatants, and champion its illegitimate political agenda." On January 5, MONUSCO announced preparations for military intervention. <http://monusco.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=11476&ctl=Details&mid=14931&ItemID=20840&language=en-US> http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=49733#.VLq2IWTF_38
3. <http://monusco.unmissions.org/>, 125.
4. Aoife Rosenmeyer, "Points of Conflict: An Artist Goes to War," in *Modern Painters*, vol 22, no 8 (November 2010): 39.
5. Adam Hochschild and Richard Mosse, *Infra* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2012): 130.
6. Manon Slome and Joshua Simon, *The Aesthetics of Terror* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2009): 13.
7. Susan Sontag, "Looking at War: Photography's View of Devastation and Death," in *The New Yorker* (December 9, 2002): I.
8. Sontag, "Looking at War," IV.
9. For more on the history of documentary photography see Brett Abbott, *Engaged Observers: Documentary Photography Since the Sixties* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2010): 1-31.
10. *Infra*: 130.
11. *Infra*: 131.
12. *Infra*: 131.
13. *Infra*: 133.



MOVING FORWARD NEVER FORGETTING

FEBRUARY 28 - APRIL 19, 2015

Moving Forward, Never Forgetting creates a space for intercultural dialogue and storytelling. The exhibition and related events encourage sharing, empathy, and deeper understanding of what it means for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to co-reside in these territories. Newly commissioned works and performances, as well as significant pieces from the MacKenzie's permanent collection, are accompanied by living speakers—Story Keepers—a new initiative at the Gallery.

Artist Residencies

Peter Morin: February 23 - February 27

Cheryl L'Hirondelle: March 11 - March 25

Adrian Stimson: March 16 - March 20



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Michael Belmore, *Smoulder*, 2010-2011 (detail), carved stone, gilded copper. MacKenzie Art Gallery, University of Regina Collection, 2013. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

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