

whitehot | December 2009, In Conversation with Richard Mosse



*Richard Mosse, Curtiss Commando Manitoba, 2009
Digital c-print facemounted to plexi; 71 1/2 x 95 1/2 inches
Courtesy Richard Mosse and Jack Shainman Gallery*

Richard Mosse: The Fall
Jack Shainman Gallery
513 West 20th Street
New York, NY
19 November through 23 December, 2009

What, I asked myself while surrounded by Richard Mosse's photographs, is he after? I kept seeing these pieces of man-made machines of transport and war as alone, isolated, abandoned, alienated and forgotten. They were cast-offs, cast-aways, not swept up into the dustbin of history but truly unseen by most, unimagined and unknown. Was Mr. Mosse attempting a kind of rescue of these relics? Or was he placing himself in a similar situation to these artifacts? Did he posit himself, tracking down these things, as similarly disregarded? It's a question that puzzled and fascinated me. The images themselves are preposterously beautiful.

In addition to the previous question, I had another. I was reminded of myself as a young boy, taken to long explorations of the vast area behind my grandmother's property. Exploring this neck of the woods, this unknown expanse, at one point I came across the ruins of a World War II radio tower. It froze me then, much like these photographs freeze me now. They encompass within their boundaries the drive towards not only exploration and discovery but also the notion and great possibility of getting lost. What would it be to get lost in some of the areas Richard Mosse has explored? It would mean death, in no uncertain terms. And death as a signifier is crystal-clear: it is the place where any and all decisions, including the decisions to traipse around the globe in search of disappeared and forgotten relics, are rendered moot, a realm where choice is nonexistent; hence, all confusion, anxiety and despair is silenced. I wondered, then, if Richard Mosse's exploration into these far-away territories, these polar-bear-infested wilds, these war-zones, and the resulting images, are records of an attempt to peer into an inner landscape of peace, or rest.

Ultimately, I was asking myself if Mr. Mosse was after the images themselves, or if the resulting photographs are records of his process of hunting down that psychic area where choice and confusion have been whittled down to unimportant, noninvasive nubs.

Hans Michaud: *Could you describe the original impetus for capturing these images?*

Richard Mosse: Contemporary art's greatest strength is its potential to make visible what cannot be seen, pointing to the limits of experience and representation. Photography, meanwhile, is firmly rooted in the world of things as it carries a trace, an actual physical memory of the world at a specific time and place. Between these poles, then, I discern, photography's unique potential to represent human suffering which is, after all, something that cannot be represented. I cannot feel your pain. You cannot adequately express your pain. It is an essentially private affair, yet it is something experienced by all of us. Starting from these basic ideas, I'm hoping to find a better way to describe the catastrophe, which I feel is something that defines our era.

HM: *Why airplanes?*

RM: I feel there's no finer, more violent, more succinct, more international, and more culturally loaded expression of the catastrophe than the air disaster. However, a plane crash is a very difficult thing to photograph. You can stand under the flight path of JFK with your camera each morning for years and you won't get anything that resembles an air disaster. Or you can reenact Chris Burden's piece 747 and stand under the flight path of LAX for ten minutes, fire off a pistol at a jumbo jet, and take a photo of that. The documentary photographer has a terribly difficult life compared with the conceptual artist. But like Prometheus and Loki, we're both tied to the same rock.

Why airplanes? The air disaster holds tremendous traumatic power. An airliner in vertical descent is a spectacle of modernity's failure. It is horrifying but also aesthetically powerful and depicts unstoppable globalization. It's for these reasons that terrorists covet the air disaster. Terrorism is not an act of warfare. It's a form of advertising, and its aim is not primarily to kill, but to capture the popular imagination through killing. Artists, particularly those working in photography, with its relation to advertising, have every right to enter the terrorist's symbolic order and violate the same taboos



*Richard Mosse, C-47 Alberta, 2009
Digital c-print facemounted to plexi; 89 1/2 x 71 1/2
Courtesy Richard Mosse and Jack Shainman Gallery*

HM: *The current show also portrays images of shredded four-wheeled vehicles, in the desert. What was the drive to capture these, in contrast to the capturing of airplanes and jets?*

RM: I couldn't resist photographing these ciphers in the Iraqi dust storm. The dust storm is the battlefield's ultimate palette, caking the eyes and lips of the artist, and confusing the camera with its unworldly colour spectrum. Even the sound of the landscape is affected by this environmental assault. I felt breathless and paranoid, rather like I'd found myself plunged deep underwater. Yet there was something fabulous about the wreckage and the missing horizon. These are American and Japanese vehicles in the Iraqi landscape, a family-size Chrysler minivan blown apart like a Giacometti sculpture.

HM: *Is there something about the remoteness of these relics that is appealing to you? The process of discovery and hunting down these objects?*

RM: The plane crash photos are the result of months of online research, skimming forums, Youtube videos,

flickr, etc., searching for forgotten relics which are so remote to civilization that they only really exist in the virtual imagination of transient and anonymous online communities. What I'm doing here is engaging with my own imagination. I'm searching for the real in the simulacrum. The web is a sort of mirror that allows me to dream. I then make that dream my own through genuine intrepid experience, by striking out into the world and hiring a helicopter or an all-terrain vehicle, and negotiating the natural wilderness, sometimes very far indeed from human infrastructure.

Like 19th century survey photography, it's a process of charting the unknown. But it's also a kind of picaresque quest narrative. The epic, univocal, and highly-produced nature of my imagery is undermined by the surrounding online mass of highly compressed snapshot images from which the work has been derived. This is nothing more than a project of re-photographing existing imagery, a kind of parody of photography's epic impulse. The work has echoes of the poète maudit, the immoral artist figure who will go to any extreme, transgressing any boundaries in pursuit of the ultimate aesthetic experience.

HM: *Do downed planes signify anything to you other than enticing, strange and beautiful objects/images in and of themselves?*

RM: I am drawn to a crystallization of themes surrounding the air disaster. Control. Remoteness. Hiddenness. Archeology. Time. Environment. Form. Scale. Quest. Taboo. In making the image, I'm aiming towards something aligned in spirit with Caspar David Friedrich's painting, *Das Eismeer* (1823-24). Spatial remoteness becomes temporal remoteness, and the forgotten plane wreck is swallowed by the primeval landscape.

HM: *Remote, left-for-trash, downed airplanes seem extraordinarily vulnerable. Care to comment?*

RM: Yes, they're also incredibly rare. But where they exist, they're irresistible not just to humans, but also to animals. I helicoptered into a very remote swamp in the Yukon Territories to photograph an old C-47 wreck and found an animal, perhaps an otter or mink or even a beaver, had built a nest out of reeds in the shelter of the belly of the wreck. And birds had propped their nests in holes in the tail of the fin.

HM: *Did you start out as a photographer? Please describe your artistic development.*

RM: My artist parents forbade me to go to art school, under threat of being disowned. So I studied English literature instead. When I graduated I realised that I was totally unemployable. So I went back to school to take a Masters in Cultural Studies. When I graduated I realised that I was even less employable. So I cut my losses and went to art school, much to my family's chagrin.

HM: *What is/are your current project(s)?*

RM: I'm hoping to take a long boat ride up the Congo with my wooden camera, shooting the landscape with colour infrared film so that the green jungle foliage turns red.



*Richard Mosse, The Fall, Installation View, Jack Shainman Gallery 2009
Courtesy Richard Mosse and Jack Shainman Gallery*