

ABC NEWS

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Richard Mosse returns to National Gallery of Victoria with Broken Spectre, filmed in the Amazon rainforest

[ABC Arts](#) / By arts editor [Dee Jefferson](#)



Broken Spectre is the third major work by Mosse to show at the NGV, following The Enclave (in 2015) and Incoming (in the 2017 Triennial). (Supplied: Richard Mosse/Jack Shainman Gallery)

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In 2018, after seven intensive years of working in the conflict zones of the Congo and at the frontline of the refugee crisis in the Europe, Irish documentary photographer Richard Mosse "hit a wall of burn out" — and retreated to the 'cloud forest' of Ecuador, a beautiful part of the Amazon rainforest where high rainfall results in constant clouds, and enormous biodiversity.

"I went there to do this personal project, taking pictures in the middle of the night with ultraviolet lights of little insects and orchids and all kinds of teeming life forms on the forest floor," he explains.

"It was really a very personal, restorative gesture, at a point where I was experiencing fatigue. [In Ecuador] I was working alone, [staying] in an eco lodge with really nice people who owned it, and they had nice dogs. It was really *nice*," he says somewhat wistfully.



Mosse studied English literature and cultural studies, followed by fine art (at London's Goldsmiths) and then photography (at Yale). (Supplied: NGV/Eugene Hyland)

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And then, in October 2018, Jair Bolsonaro [won Brazil's presidential election](#) — and the [Amazon rainforest began to burn](#).

Mosse found himself drawn inexorably back to familiar territory: finding ways to document the un-documentable and tell complex stories about urgent issues.

The resulting work, which was co-commissioned and made its [world premiere at the National Gallery of Victoria](#) (NGV) this weekend ahead of showings in New York and London, is monumental: a 74-minute video work projected onto a three-panelled, 20-metre-wide screen, with immersive 14-channel sound design.



Broken Spectre is co-commissioned by the NGV, the Westridge Foundation and VIA Art Fund, and London's Serpentine Galleries. (Supplied: NGV/Tom Ross)

Titled Broken Spectre, the groundbreaking film attempts not only to demonstrate the devastation of the Amazon rainforest and its underlying causes, but to make audiences recognise their complicity.

It is shockingly beautiful.



The film's stunning close-up images of plant life were achieved using reflected and fluorescent UV photography. (Supplied: Richard Mosse/Jack Shainman Gallery)

Beautifying disaster

Over the last decade, Mosse, now 42, has garnered an international reputation with artworks that upend photojournalistic norms, showing familiar subjects in new and startling ways.

He has [turned the jungle conflict zones of the Democratic Republic of Congo pink](#), and [presented Europe's refugee crisis via 'heat maps'](#) — in both cases, co-opting imaging technologies developed by the military.

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In *Incoming*, Mosse used thermographic imaging, originally developed by the military, to document the refugee crisis. (Supplied: Richard Mosse/Jack Shainman Gallery)

In documenting the destruction of the Amazon rainforest, he harnessed technology used by Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE): 'multispectral' sensors, which capture a vast amount of data about different 'unseen' aspects of the terrain, via satellite. (INPE has been so successful in documenting deforestation using multispectral imaging that Bolsonaro [fired its chief](#) early in his Presidency).

In 2019, as Bolsonaro gutted environmental protection agencies and greased the wheels for agribusiness and mining, deforestation [surged](#); at the same time, man-made burn-offs coincided with an abnormal dry spell, resulting in catastrophic fires.

Mosse recorded the devastation via multispectral cameras mounted on drones.

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Mosse ascribed colours to the data layers in his images, choosing tones for their effects on the brain. (Supplied: Richard Mosse/Jack Shainman Gallery)

The resulting imagery, shown in *Broken Spectre*'s sweeping aerial shots, renders the landscape in an unearthly colour palette; purple rivers snake through blood-red rainforest, while burnt and cleared landscapes are rendered in ghostly hues of cyan and grey.

These otherworldly sequences are interspersed with lush black-and-white footage of the landscape as seen from the ground, and ultraviolet timelapse photography of insects and plants in psychedelic hues — all filmed by Mosse's long-time collaborator, cinematographer Trevor Tweeten.

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Mosse has made other photographic works in the Amazon over the last three years, including the 2021 series *Tristes Tropiques*. (Supplied: *Richard Mosse/Jack Shainman Gallery*)

The soundtrack, by Iceland-based Australian composer and sound designer Ben Frost, is equally strange and ravishing, pivoting from field recordings of nature to electronic compositions that call to mind Pink Floyd or Vangelis — and hybrid soundscapes that conjure alien planets.

(Much of the soundtrack, Frost says, consists of plant and insect activity that humans cannot usually hear, recorded by means of a specially designed ultrasonic rig).

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Ben Frost first saw Mosse's work in New York; he emailed the artist and the two ended up collaborating on the *The Enclave*. (Supplied: NGV/Eugene Hyland)

The combination of sound and vision, in the gallery space, veers from the sublime into the stressful: an ancient tree felled by an eardrum-lacerating chainsaw lands with a crash that reverberates through your body; aerial landscape shots of decimated rainforest are overlaid with gnawing electronic pulses and a repetitive, siren-like bird call.

Tweeten and Frost spent months at a time on the ground with Mosse, recording on the frontlines of the ecological disaster — from the cattle-farming communities for whom burning the rainforest is a family activity, to the illegal mining industry, and the Indigenous Amazonians whose way of life and actual lives are directly under threat.

Images of farm life, shot on super-35mm film using luxe Zeiss Master Anamorphic lenses (usually the purview of major productions such as *The Lord of the Rings*),

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have the look of Italian neorealism; basic conditions are inevitably romanticised by the aesthetic — and sequences in which farmers set fire to the terrain around them have almost heroic overtones.



Vaqueiro Son, Amazonas, 2021 by Richard Mosse. (Supplied: Richard Mosse/Jack Shainman Gallery)

Similarly, scenes depicting the cowboy culture of cattle-farming communities, captured in black-and-white wide-screen, call to mind early American Westerns — an impression compounded by Frost's soundtrack, which deliberately echoes the Spaghetti Western scores of Ennio Morricone.

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Still from Broken Spectre. (Supplied: Richard Mosse/Jack Shainman Gallery)

Mosse has often been questioned (and occasionally criticised) over the way he deploys 'beautifying' aesthetics to depict tragedy.

Far from ducking the charge, he cops to it:

"There is a terrible beauty in war, or in environmental catastrophe — in the end of the world. And I think, as a storyteller, we can use that — to disarm the viewer; to make the viewer look and feel something. It's about communicating," Mosse says.

"Beauty is the sharpest tool in the box."

[Speaking to ABC RN in 2014](#) about his video work *The Enclave*, which was shot amongst the soldiers of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mosse elaborated on his strategy:

"When you strike the viewer, through beauty, and you get them to feel aesthetic pleasure regarding a place where there's lots of people dying, and where there's a lot of sexual violence — suddenly, they're put into this very problematic place, morally speaking. And initially they feel angry with the photographer — but then the next step, which is really the most important part, is they feel angry with themselves. And that's great, because they've stepped out of themselves, in the act of perception.

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[This means] A) they can begin to understand how the imagery is manipulating them; and B) they can also get smart and ... construct meaning for themselves rather than have it spoon fed [to them]. And a lot of war photography, and documentary photography, is about spoon feeding and about [being] didactic to people and telling them what to think."



The Enclave was shot using 16-millimetre colour infrared film developed by Kodak in the 40s for US military use. (Supplied: NGV/Richard Mosse)

Implicating the audience

In perhaps the most breathtaking sequence of *Broken Spectre*, a young woman from the Indigenous Yanomami people confronts the camera:

"I'm going to speak.
My name is Adneia. I am a woman.
Bolsonaro, I'm not here to talk to you for nothing.
Why do you allow these people into our lands?
This is not your land.
So why do you keep coming here?
You make us angry.
Why are you always disturbing our children's sleep?
This is awful.
Unacceptable.
This land doesn't belong to you.
These rivers are not yours."

Adneia proceeds, in an unbroken rhetorical tour de force, to take the government to task — for opening up Indigenous territory to miners, who not only displace the Yanomami and ruin their ancestral lands, but bring disease and violence.

She then rounds on the people filming her ("If you're just here to film us for nothing, that's bad," she says) and, finally, the (imagined) viewer:

"You white people, see our reality.
Open your minds.
Don't let us talk so gallantly
and do nothing.
White people!
Tell your fathers and mothers.
Explain to them. Support us."

She exhorts the viewer to "use your money to put up a barrier against the miners, like a wire across the river".

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For the person sitting on a beanbag, in the darkened gallery of NGV's air-conditioned art palace, it makes for appropriately uncomfortable viewing.



"She had had to flee in the middle of the night — grab her little children and run," Mosse says of Adneia (pictured). (Supplied: Richard Mosse/Jack Shainman Gallery)

Mosse flew into Adneia's aldeia (village) after hearing about her community's plight, which they had shared via videos on Instagram, and meeting with one of their leaders. When he arrived, the villagers lined up and made speeches to the camera — speeches that Mosse and his cameraman couldn't understand at the time (it took six to eight months to find a translator).

"I had an idea [what they were saying] because they were really angry," Mosse recalls.

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Just days before he arrived, tensions between the Yanomami and miners had erupted in violence, with gunmen strafing village huts with bullets in the middle of the night.

As a result, the village's two health workers — sorely needed to treat outbreaks of malaria and diarrhoea — had fled. (The Brazilian police didn't arrive until two weeks later.)

"That's the sort of reality that Adneia had experienced only days prior. And that's the kind of reality that we would never hear about. But I think it's really very important to communicate — to help them to communicate. And that's why they [the villagers] did those speeches," says Mosse.

He hopes Adneia's message to the audience also hits home.

"A really important part of what's happened in the Amazon is our complicity ... in the international investment that is creating this extraordinary amount of destruction," Mosse says.

"Something like 80 per cent of the rainforest is [destroyed] for the cattle industry, who produce cheap beef ... [and] the infrastructure being built right through the heart of Indigenous territories is directly funded by the same banks and wealth funds where many of us have squirrelled away our savings for pensions."

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Still from Broken Spectre 2022 by Richard Mosse. (Supplied: Richard Mosse/Jack Shainman Gallery)

In presenting the cowboy culture of Brazil's farmers in the format of the Western, Mosse not only provides a familiar cultural reference point for a scenario that might otherwise seem foreign or remote, but he shifts the blame to the larger forces at work in the destruction of the Amazon.

"[The Western] glorifies a kind of colonial spirit of 'manifest destiny' in which Indigenous peoples are murdered en masse, and this [idea] is at the very heart of the United States' national identity," Mosse explains.

"And you know, a lot of the processes that built up a nation like America are currently unfolding across Brazil: this same spirit of manifest destiny, the same cowboy culture, the same pioneer pilgrims, who are very religious people ... And [ultimately] this is a spirit that began in Europe — these are European ideas.

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"Hopefully they [viewers] start to think, 'Well, actually, we did this 250 years ago in my country — and it's some of the same principles that are behind it. And if [the artwork] is really successful, that creates a kind of discomfoting effect; an uneasy sense of our own complicity in this process."

[Broken Spectre](#) runs until April 23, 2023 at the National Gallery of Victoria.