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RICHARD MOSSE DISPLACED FONDAZIONE MAST



RICHARD MOSSE DISPLACED, Fondazione MAST. Hombu, Walikale, Congo

From May 7, 2021 until September 19, 2021

I've seen this, and I want you to see it.

"A camera is a sublimation of the gun," Susan Sontag wrote in her seminal collection of essays *On Photography*, first published in 1977. However, in some of Richard Mosse's works, for example *Incoming* and *Heat Maps*, the camera is no sublimation: it's an actual weapon.

From 2014 to 2018 Mosse focused on mass migration. He traveled to refugee camps in Greece, in Lebanon, in Turkey, to the camp in the area of the former Tempelhof airport in Berlin, and to many others. For the photo series *Heat Maps*, he used a thermal imaging camera to record heat differences in the infrared range: instead of capturing light reflections, this camera records so-called 'heat maps'. It is a military technique known since the Korean War that sees human figures up to a distance of thirty kilometres, day or night. At first glance, the images are sharp, precise and rich in contrast. On closer inspection, however, no details can be discerned: people and objects are only recognisable in their movements or outlines, but not in their individuality.

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In an interview on *Incoming* (2017) with *The British Journal of Photography* Mosse said: "The camera I've used dehumanises people, their skin glows so they look alien, or monstrous and zombie-like. You can see their blood circulation, their sweat, their breath. You can't see the pupils of their eyes, but a black jelly instead. But, in fact, it allows you to capture portraiture of extraordinary tenderness."

I'm afraid to say I do not have much to report on the viewing of *Incoming* specifically because, after barely minutes, I left the room. The deafening sound of the sea together with the images of exhausted immigrants waiting to be rescued or awaiting post-mortem recognition, was more than I could handle. I am one of those privileged people who can look the other way when something is too disturbing, either leaving the room, like I did, or having other countries deal with immigration routes at an early stage, disposing of people before they reach territorial waters, like Europe does.

Between 2010 and 2015, before focusing on immigration, Mosse travelled to the eastern region of North Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Since the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, rebel groups residing in the Congo continue to engage in bouts of violence, accounting to more than 5 million victims according to the International Rescue Committee. Mosse photographed landscapes, lush vegetation, scenes with rebels, and the mobile dwellings of a population that is forever fleeing, in a region devastated by crisis and war.

For the photo series *Infra*, and for the video installation *The Enclave*, Mosse chose yet another military tool, the Kodak Aerochrome, a discontinued infrared-sensitive military reconnaissance film developed to locate camouflaged subjects. The result is the transformation of blood-drenched Congo in a surreal ballad of pink, red and bluish hues. Mosse's early works in former Yugoslavia, Kosovo and Palestine were devoid of humans, but this body of work also features portraits which, like Mosse said *are both art and indictment*: "They are criminals, with blood on their hands. And they are also people. There's a lot of tension in these images – they want to swagger, they want to pose for the camera and at the same time they don't want to be photographed."

Last week in Italy museums opened their doors after the year of Covid-19 lockdowns. Fondazione Mast in Bologna celebrates the reopening by hosting *Displaced*, Richard Mosse's first ever retrospective featuring 77 framed works and two immersive video installations (*Incoming* and *The Enclave*). Just back from Brazil, where he has been working on his more recent projects, *Ultra and Triste Tropiques* (also on show) Mosse welcomed journalists to the press preview through a video conference: "I'm fascinated by the limits of documentary photography but also by its power. Documentary photography is about saying I've seen this, and I want you to see it, and when it's done well it can change the course of history. On the other hand, contemporary art, which is the other aspect of my practice, has a different power: it can point to what exists beyond the limits of human perception." At the end of the conference, Mosse and curator Urs Stahel broke into a – virtual – pas de deux, ideally dancing away the tension of a technically and politically very complex exhibition, and also, perhaps, celebrating better times ahead.

Words by Sara Kaufman