

# The New York Times

Griffin, Jonathan, "The Terrible Beauty of Richard Mosse's Portrait of the Amazon," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2023

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

### The Terrible Beauty of Richard Mosse's Portrait of the Amazon

The artist wanted to photograph orchids but ended up making "Broken Spectre," a film about the destruction of the rainforest — his most powerful work yet.

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**By Jonathan Griffin**  
Reporting from San Francisco  
June 8, 2023



Richard Mosse's four-channel video installation, "Broken Spectre," is an epic work 70 feet across. Shown in London in 2022, it is now playing at 1201 Minnesota Street, a new exhibition space in San Francisco. Jack Hems

In 2018, the artist Richard Mosse was understandably weary. He had spent most of the last decade in places torn by conflict and civil unrest.

In the early 2010s, the Irish-born New York-based artist had worked for five years in the Democratic Republic of Congo, photographing and filming the humanitarian disaster that has claimed millions of lives and displaced millions more. That project led to another video and photographic series focusing on the European refugee crisis unfolding around the Mediterranean. Before that, he had embedded with the U.S. Army in Iraq.

“I was exhausted,” Mosse said recently, as he recounted the events that led to his latest film installation, “Broken Spectre,” filmed in the Amazon rainforest from 2018 to 2021. “I thought I’d put the superego aside, and just enjoy the simple pleasures of photography. This project essentially began with portraits of orchids.”

Mosse booked himself into a remote ecolodge in the Ecuadorean cloud forest, and began photographing plants, lichens, mycelium and insects with a macro lens. He found that many organisms phosphoresce under ultraviolet light, so he created dramatic Technicolor images of the teeming biodiversity on the forest floor.

Then in the summer of 2019, images appeared in the news media about [fires burning across the Amazon](#) Basin. Mosse called up Trevor Tweeten, the cinematographer who has contributed to Mosse’s film projects since 2008, and they flew down, Tweeten said, “to see what it was about.”

“Broken Spectre,” an epic film made from four conjoined projections that total 70 feet across, testifies to the calamitous destruction of the Amazon rainforest: the deliberate burning, the tree-felling, the industrial-scale agriculture, the mineral extraction and the displacement of Indigenous peoples that climate scientists believe is fast approaching a [tipping-point](#) from which there may be no return.

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Part photojournalism, part nature doc, part cinéma vérité, part Western, the film defies categorization. It includes close-ups of plants and vast panoramas shot from helicopters. It features farmers and their families; abattoir workers; wealthy landowners; miners; Indigenous people.

With an immersive and often thunderous soundtrack by the [experimental composer Ben Frost](#), the film is both visceral and abstract, beautiful and horrifying. “Broken Spectre” is Mosse’s most powerful and consequential work yet.



Richard Mosse at his concurrent exhibition, “Occidental,” at Altman Siegel Gallery in San Francisco. “The best we can do — the only thing we can do really — is what we’re good at, which is to communicate to as many people as we can.” Ian C. Bates for The New York Times

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Mosse, 43, had flown to San Francisco for the film's U.S. premiere at a new exhibition space, 1201 Minnesota Street, following its presentation in London and in Victoria, Australia, in 2022. (In August it will be included in Converge45, the Portland Biennial.)

The invitation to exhibit "Broken Spectre" in San Francisco came from the philanthropists Andy and Deborah Rappaport, founders of the Minnesota Street Project Foundation in the city's Dogpatch neighborhood.

A short walk away, Mosse was opening a simultaneous exhibition at [Altman Siegel](#), his San Francisco gallery: "Occidental," a group of works including "drone maps" made from tessellated aerial photographs during his time in the Amazon.

"Seventy-five percent of the entire Amazon is so degraded by processes of deforestation that we're now very close to the point where there's an automatic dieback, and the forest can't generate its own rain," Mosse explained. "So it stops being rainforest. Once that happens, it turns quite quickly to savanna."



"Broken Spectre XIII, Rondônia," 2022, a print of a still from the film. The multispectral cameras Mosse used can see environmental conditions invisible to the naked eye. Richard Mosse; via Altman Siegel, San Francisco; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The enormity of such a chain of events — and their consequences for our planet’s future — challenges comprehension. As he relayed this information, Mosse, who has boyish dimples and an affable manner, did not try to dramatize it, or impress me with its gravity. He must have recited the same facts 100 times. He knows that statistics alone are not sufficient.

“We’ve got all the reports, we have the quantitative data, but we still don’t have the adequate image, the qualitative storytelling,” he said. That’s where his art comes in.

Mosse has long been concerned with making the unseen visible. In Congo, he used Kodak Aerochrome infrared film to photograph paramilitary rebels against the lush tropical landscape, transforming green tones into alarming shades of hot pink. The culminating film installation, “Enclave,” was presented by Ireland at the Venice Biennale in 2013.

For “Incoming,” his three-channel video about the migrant crisis, first shown in 2017, he used a military-grade thermal imaging camera to photograph Syrian battlefields and European refugee camps from many miles away.

Mosse is drawn to what he calls “aggravated media” — media whose technological or social histories are entwined, problematically, with what they represent. Aerochrome film, for example, was developed to discover camouflaged soldiers in World War II. Mosse’s thermal imaging camera is internationally classified as a weapon.

The multispectral cameras that Mosse and Tweeten used for parts of “Broken Spectre” and for Mosse’s “drone maps” are able to see environmental conditions invisible to the naked eye. Lurid colors correspond to wavelengths both above and below the range of human vision. This technology helps scientists assess the damage done to the Amazon, but it is also commonly used by Brazilian farmers to identify how best to exploit their land.



Mosse's "Oil Spill on Kichwa Territory I, Block 192, Rio Tigre, Loreto," 2023, C-print. Richard Mosse; via Altman Siegel, San Francisco; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The Amazon can be a dangerous place — and was especially so during the administration of the former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, when regulations safeguarding the environment were loosened, or not enforced. [One recent study](#) estimated that 99 percent of deforestation in the Amazon is illegal, much of it connected to organized crime. The remote settlements that have sprung up near gold mines are lawless, violent places, inhabited mainly by young miners who are paid in gold and supplied with drugs by cartels.

One day, in June 2021, Mosse read reports of a skirmish between Indigenous [Yanomami](#) villagers and *garimpeiros*, or illegal gold miners. The miners brought with them diseases, including malaria, which was sickening the villagers' children. Young Yanomami women were coerced into prostitution, bringing more disease. The gold mining process involves the use of mercury, traces of which get washed into the river, harming the wildlife and entering the villagers' food supply.

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“They used to live in paradise,” Mosse said. “All of a sudden they’re living in hell.”

Mosse read about how the villagers fastened a wire across the river, blocking a boat loaded with valuable diesel on its way to the *garimpeiro* settlement. They seized the diesel and burned it. The *garimpeiros* fired back, and several villagers were killed. That night and many nights later, *garimpeiros* (or the cartels protecting them) fired automatic weapons into the villagers’ huts.

Mosse hurriedly booked flights to Boa Vista, in northern Brazil. From there, he chartered a Cessna aircraft to take him to the village. Traveling with him were his “fixer-translator,” Alessandro Falco, and the Yanomami’s regional leader, Júnior Hekurari Yanomami.

In the most memorable and impactful scene of the film, one of the villagers, a woman named Adneia, directly addresses the camera. At first, her fury is aimed at the Brazilian president: “Bolsonaro, you parasite. You keep sending the gold miners to our land. It’s sickening. It’s disgusting, you foul man.”



Adneia, a member of the Yanomami community, in a still from “Broken Spectre.” Richard Mosse; via Altman Siegel, San Francisco; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

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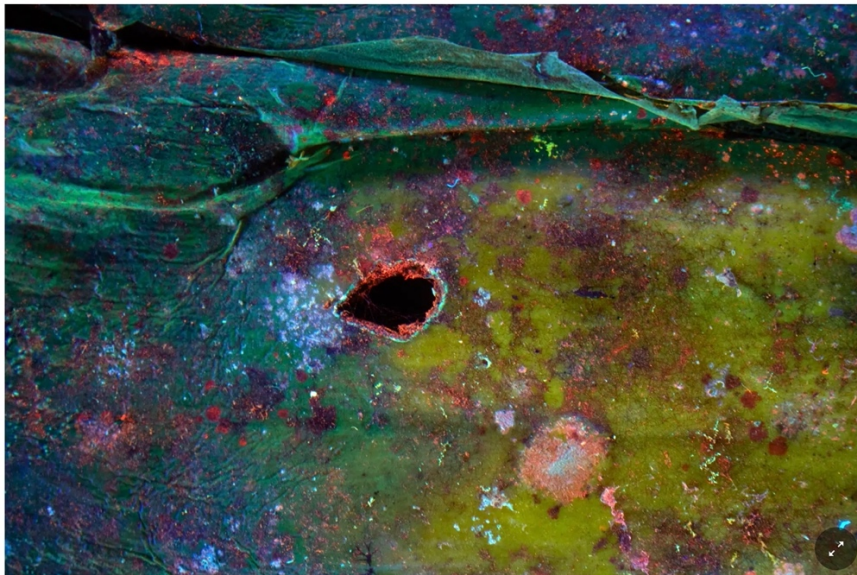
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Her subtitled diatribe continues for more than five minutes. (Tweeten's 35 mm film camera had to be reloaded twice, so the film intermittently cuts to black.) As her voice cracks with emotion, it becomes clear that Adneia's entreaties are no longer meant for Bolsonaro, but for the white filmmakers before her — and by extension, us, the viewers.

"You say you're here to support us," she chides. "Don't say that for nothing."

For a long time, Mosse said he struggled with Adneia's mandate. "We're just artists!" he said. "The best we can do — the only thing we can do really — is what we're good at, which is to communicate to as many people as we can."

Mosse now describes "Broken Spectre" as his first activist film.



"Broken Spectre" (still), 2018 - 2022. Mosse photographed this leaf, colonized by mold, by using probe lenses and ultraviolet lights. Richard Mosse; via Altman Siegel, San Francisco; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



When “Broken Spectre” was shown in London, Mosse recalls, John Kerry, President Biden’s climate envoy, saw the film, and soon after Mosse received an email from Kerry’s office requesting an online screening link. The next day, Kerry was to meet with Brazil’s new president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and the minister of environment and climate change, Marina Silva, and he wanted to share the film with them.

Mosse says he has no idea if “Broken Spectre” was in any way responsible, but soon after, the Brazilian military began stopping the *garimpeiros* mining in the area. “That’s what Adneia was asking for!” Mosse says. “She was asking us to tell the senior level of U.S. government which we’ve somehow managed to do. For me, that’s just the power of art.”

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## **Broken Spectre**

Through June 30 at 1201 Minnesota Street, San Francisco, [minnesotastreetproject.org](http://minnesotastreetproject.org).

## **Richard Mosse: Occidental**

Through June 30 at [Altman Siegel](http://Altman Siegel), 1150 25th Street, San Francisco, [altmansiegel.com](http://altmansiegel.com).

*A correction was made on June 8, 2023: An earlier version of this article misspelled the Portuguese term for wildcat gold miners. It is *garimpeiros*, not *garimperos*.*

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When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at [nytnews@nytimes.com](mailto:nytnews@nytimes.com). [Learn more](#)