

ArtReview

Richard Mosse: Incoming

Military surveillance technology is used against itself, but what emerges is troubling spectacle

By Ben Eastham



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Richard Mosse's exhibition opens with a sweeping video survey of the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos. This makeshift settlement was shot at several kilometres' distance from a raised vantage point using a thermal imaging camera of the type used by the military for long-range target acquisition. Exhibited on a suspended bank of 16 monitors, each of which intermittently flickers and swivels before the composite image resolves into a whole, *Grid (Moria)* (2017) combines the spectral look of a photographic negative with the aesthetics of surveillance implied by its mode of display.

Its search through the shanty streets comes to rest on a snaking line of wraithlike bobble-hatted migrants shaking out their legs for warmth, then skims over the curls of razor wire atop chain-link fences and lands on a small child at play. Mosse shares with artists including John Gerrard and Trevor Paglen the mission to make visible the concealed infrastructures and phenomena of twenty-first-century life. His previous project, *The Enclave* (2013), documented the ongoing civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a conflict largely ignored by an international community for whom the country carries little strategic importance. His innovation then, as now, was to use military surveillance film that captures radiation – in that case infrared light – outside the visible spectrum (a very literal interpretation of what it means to bring the hidden to light). Congolese child-soldiers and jungle landscapes were rendered in a shocking pink hue that lent the images a hallucinogenic unreality; in order to challenge documentary photography's failure to communicate the horror of war, Mosse rendered it even more strange.

The Irish-born artist employs his heat-sensitive camera to similarly defamiliarising effect in these works that explore the migrant crisis. The thermographic triptych *Skaramaghas* (2016) renders the Greek refugee-camp as if it were a scene from a Bruegel painting realised as a pin-sharp Man Ray photogram, its featureless 'margizens' picked out against the prevailing grey by their ghostly luminescence. A sprawling industrial landscape that would seem mundane through the lens of a conventional camera – kids playing football on ad hoc football pitches amidst shipping containers – is transformed into something altogether more otherworldly.

The danger of these estranging techniques is that they dehumanise the subjects they depict in much the same way as the bureaucracy of statehood reduces them to statistics. This alienating effect is exaggerated by the fact that Mosse's bulky equipment requires him to record his subjects – none of whom have consented to his gaze – from a considerable distance. This extends, in the immersive three-channel video *Incoming* (2014–17), to recording scenes from the Syrian conflict from across the Turkish border. On the two occasions I visited, a large audience sat rapt before its three vast, curved screens. They watched children scramble from boats and jet planes pour fire down on the landscape overlaid by the noise of war and snatches of dialogue, including an attempt to resuscitate a drowned body. The effect is powerful, yet I found its ambiguity troubling. Against the artist's stated intention to use military technology against itself to 'create an immersive, humanist art form', the work serves better to illustrate the asymmetrical relationship between citizens – including the artist and audience – and the refugees depicted. It reproduces in its audience the exhilaration of power and, if we are being generous, the guilt of recognising one's own susceptibility to that thrill.

The depiction of refugees from a literally remote viewpoint, in foreign locations, in an exotic visual register risks reinforcing the attitudes that this unquestionably compelling work seeks ostensibly to critique. Installed in London, its arm's-length empathy chimes uncomfortably with our government's policy of making substantial financial donations to humanitarian camps in the countries bordering Syria at the expense of settling anything more than the barest number of refugees within its own borders. Mosse's gaze turns inward only once, when he sets his camera up in the stands of a Greek athletics stadium, the central playing surface of which has been repurposed as a camp (*Hellinikon Olympic Arena, Athens, 2016*). Floodlights loom over serried rows of tents surrounded, like a theatre in the round, by thousands of empty seats. The crisis has moved onto the heart of the polis, but nobody is looking for it there.

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