

Hudson, Mark, "Deutsche Börse Photography Prize, review: 'four strong contenders,'" *The Telegraph*, April 10, 2014

Deutsche Börse Photography Prize, review: 'four strong contenders'

The annual exhibition at the Photographer's Gallery, London, is a stunner, says Mark Hudson



Safe From Harm, North Kivu, Eastern Congo, 2012 Photo: Richard Mosse



By **Mark Hudson** 5:32PM BST 10 Apr 2014

Celebrating a significant contribution to photography in Europe, the £30,000 Deutsche Börse prize for become notorious for favouring conceptual experimentation over traditional virtues such as beauty, storytelling and technical skill. Take Richard Mosse's large format images of the ongoing conflict in eastern Congo. Rather than soldiers, jeeps and blasted bodies he gives us hilly landscapes, tinted eye-popping shades of magenta and turquoise that bring to mind psychedelic album covers rather than conventional reportage.

Yet these peaceful-looking vistas, that might pass at a glance for parts of the Peak District, have gained their current appearance through forest clearance by cattle-rearing incomers displacing local farmers; just one of the causes of a conflict involving a mind-boggling array of ethnic militias, Rwandan refugee groups, the Congolese army and the UN that has cost 5.4 million lives since 1998. The combination of this information with the apparent bucolic innocence of the images and the queasily alarming colour – and the fact that the rest of the world has barely looked at the situation let alone done anything about it – creates a sense of silent, yet sinister accusation.

Among four strong contenders, American photographer Lorna Simpson hasn't, at first sight, even taken her own photographs, but presents a series of Fifties archive images of an African-American couple, the woman in an array of cheerily innocent poses recalling the advertising of the period. Among them, Simpson has inserted pictures of herself in similar postures. We are, it seems, being asked to question why it tends to be the woman who is looked at by the man, the passage of time and the provenance of the images. Who are these people and what is their relationship to Simpson herself?

Alberto García-Alix's is at first sight the most conventional of the contending displays: an essay on the dissipated life of a Spanish poet and photographer over four decades. We see this sad-eyed, tattooed Al Pacino-lookalike urinating, injecting morphine and staring wistfully into the camera against the blearily bohemian backdrop of an unnamed Spanish city. The twist is that the subject is the photographer himself, and like many narcissists he is all too willing to tell us about his condition.

German photographer Jochen Lempert creates contrasts between textures and processes that are so fugitive you could easily fail to notice them or even bother to look at his work at all. Sand placed directly onto the photographic paper creates a sense of random quasi-atomic diffusion that is echoed in a grainy image of rain falling on water. A deadly nightshade berry appears beside a squirrel's eye that appears near identical. A series of images of four swimming swans chronicles Lempert's attempts to capture them in a perfect square formation.

Lempert trained as a biologist and there is an air of eccentric quasi-scientific experimentation to these deceptively modest works, each of which is a unique object, taped to the wall rather than framed. If Mosse's are the most immediately striking images here, I veered finally towards Lempert's monk-like minimalism which for all its apparent avant gardism harks back to the early days of photography and a sense of innocent curiosity about what the medium can do.

11 April – 22 June. thephotographersgallery.org.uk