

Van Proyen, Mark, "Richard Mosse: Inside the Amazonian Nightmare," *Square Cylinder*, June 2, 2023

Richard Mosse: Inside the Amazonian Nightmare

JUNE 2, 2023

by Mark Van Proyen



Richard Mosse, *Broken Spectre*, 2018–2022, four channel video installation with 12.2 surround sound, 74 minutes and 11 seconds. Produced in Brazil and Ecuador. Installation view, 180 Studios, London, 2022. Photography by Jack Hems.

For the many people who were stunned and overwhelmed by Richard Mosse's memorable presentation at the 2013 Venice Biennial, this current pair of complementary exhibitions comes as a special treat and a promise fulfilled. It also reconfirms Mosse as one of the very few contemporary artists who can engage with big geopolitical issues at a grand scale without lapsing into sanctimonious didacticism, providing a welcome deviation from the picayune banality that oversaturates the northern California art scene. Mosse's 2013 Venice exhibition at the Ireland Pavilion, *The Enclave*, consisted of six coordinated projections depicting and exaggerating the otherworldly ghastriness of the civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The current pair of presentations do something similar with the apocalyptic ecocide that has sharply accelerated in the Amazon basin during the past decade. One is a four-channel video projection titled *Broken Spectre* (2022) at Minnesota Street Project Foundation, the other a selection of 12 editioned C-prints from 2022 and 2023 collectively named *Occidental* at Altman Siegel. As was the case with *The Enclave*, the net effect of both exhibitions is horrifying, heartbreaking and grandly sublime, conjuring Edmund Burke's definition of the term as an overwhelming terror lurking at the heart of beauty. Six months

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1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

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from now, when we start assembling lists of the current year's best exhibitions, this related pairing will be at the top of the roster.

Broken Spectre (2018-2022) is the inaugural exhibition for the Minnesota Street Project Foundation, a new exhibition space that is a welcome development in a city that has lost several key arts institutions during the past year. Its west coast premiere at the MSPF is co-sponsored by Altman Siegel and SFMOMA, which now holds the piece in its permanent collection. Situated in a large, darkened room, it is a four-channel, high-resolution digital projection that runs a little over 74 minutes, complimented by an occasionally deafening soundscape. It is a kaleidoscopic (semi)cyclorama formed from hypnotic sequences jumping from elegiac passages of richly exaggerated color to anemically stark, occasionally bleached-out grayscale. In most instances, the cinematography looks impersonal, as if it were automatically generated by a scientific imaging device rather than a photographer's volition. Other sequences take on the look of Surrealist cinema, or science fiction, while still others look like conventional documentary footage harking back to Albert Frisch's photographic explorations of the region in the late 1860s.



Clearly, this throw-backing is both intentional and ironic on Mosse's part, a way of imbricating himself and the larger history of photography as instruments of a Manifest Destiny project that belatedly confronts the destructive consequences of its own mendacity. Credit goes to Trevor Tweetan who functioned as the project's chief cinematographer and editor. Sound designer Ben Frost created the sonic tapestry that mirrors the magical and the horrific aspects of Mosse's new opus. Some viewers have complained that the soundscape is too loud and overwhelming, but I have seen enough black box installations at international biennial exhibitions to not be bothered by the volume, which makes a startling point about the impending catastrophe.

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The progression of *Broken Spectre's* imagery is cyclical, with no real beginning or end, meaning that any prospective viewer can enter or exit at any point. At various junctures, the projection splits into one, two, three or four complimentary image sequences. The jumps between them are oftentimes abrupt but always coordinated with seamless, crystalline precision. At different points, it weaves in, out, and then soars above the vast equatorial wetlands of the Amazon basin in Brazil and Ecuador. These otherworldly panoramas are captured by a helicopter steadicam, exaggerating the color contrasts of the timeless natural world of Amazonia, a place that is rightly called the lungs of the world. Other shots are nocturnal examinations of bioluminescent plant and fungus forms. Like a vast coral reef, we see that the wetland rainforest is teeming with bio-diverse life energy, but it is also afflicted by a metastasizing cancer destroying large swaths of its vital tissue.

In *Broken Spectre*, that cancer takes the form of slash-and-burn clear-cutting in advance of creating pasture lands for industrially scaled beef production, culminating in shots of a massive slaughterhouse in merciless operation. At one point, the camera lingers on the face of a cowboy who seems sadly ambivalent about the role he plays in the situation. On one hand, he mourns the destruction to which he is a party, on the other he recognizes that his ability to feed his own family depends on his reluctant participation in the ongoing destruction. Only a small leap of imagination is required for us to realize that the cowboy is the implied surrogate for those of us who behold Mosse's new opus.

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The central Madonna of Mosse's apocalyptic altarpiece is a young woman clad in tribal regalia named Adneia, centrally captured as a full face in grayscale. She launches into an impassioned tirade about the corruption of Jair Bolsonaro's government, and a minute later, the ineffectuality and outright negligence of the international aid agencies that fail to help. While the viewer reads the subtitled translation from her Yanomami language, he or she cannot help but feel implicated in her invective about the industrial befoulment of her ancestral home, especially when she blames it for her children's illnesses. This sequence is followed by another that documents a large protest gathering of indigenous people in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil. The stark contrast between the protestors and the sterile, futuristic government buildings looks like something from the cover of a 1950s science fiction novel.

Broken Spectre compares favorably with Bruce Conner's 1976 film *Crossroads*, featuring a succession of hydrogen bomb detonations viewed from multiple camera angles. In the case of both works, the camera is dispassionate and semi-scientific, letting its subject say all that needs to be said with minimal recourse to editorial embellishment. Another useful comparison can be made with Godfrey Reggio's 1982 film *Koyaanisqatsi*, another non-narrative exploration of a world in the grips of an ecological death spiral.

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Herbalist's Stall, Ver-o-Peso, Belem, Pará, 2023, C-print, 37 1/2 x 50 inches

If we think of *Broken Spectre* as a kind of apocalyptic altarpiece, thematically akin to Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, we can better wrap our minds around what it represents. The high-altitude and close-in images of the rainforest wetlands are the evocations of a timeless paradise unbothered by any triumphalist notion of history. Adneia's castigating soliloquy occupies the central position, pressed into service as a Madonna figure who reluctantly presides over a circus of corruption. Obviously, the deforestation and slaughterhouse sequences are a hellscape, fully revealed in their inhumane disdain for anything and everything that cannot be transformed into hard coin.

Extending the Altarpiece association, we might regard the related series of 12 editioned photographs titled *Occidental* at Altman Siegel as predella images, visual sub-plots that support and elaborate upon the thematic material revealed in *Broken Spectre*. These

works fall into three subcategories. Five of them are interior still lifes taken in Belem, located in the Brazilian state of Pará. These feature a singular plant prominently positioned in the domestic spaces of people with whom Mosse was acquainted, implying that the plants are household deities. This is not as far-fetched as it sounds, especially if we consider that Amazonian shamans submit themselves to long and arduous diets focused on specific plants for the sake of gaining the esoteric knowledge necessary for their practices. Seen in this context, these plant displays might be understood as urbanized vestiges of something deeper than what appearances reveal. For example, in *Plant in the Home of Elaine Arrudo, Artist*, we see a singular plant with bright red leaves artfully positioned on the floor next to a door in a dynamic composition of diagonal forms and extravagantly "spicy" Latin American colors. An outdoor shot, *Herbalist's Stall, Ver-o-Peso, Belem, Pará*, peeks at a display of exotic plant medicines at a shaman's market, a common sight in many Latin American cities.

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Two other groups of photographs are more directly focused on ecocidal themes. In *Oil Spill on Kichwa Territory III, Block 192, Rio Tigre, Loreto*, Mosse's location shifts to northeastern Peru. There, near the Rio Tigre tributary of the Amazon, he finds a village community called Octubre 12, ironically referencing the day that Christopher Columbus "discovered" the Americas, hence the titling of the exhibition as *Occidental*.



Oil Spill on Kichwa Territory III, Block 192, Rio Tigre, Loreto, 2023, C-print, 48 x 64 inches

Near there, his camera discovers a massive oil spill that has been abandoned, capturing it at night with phantasmal lighting effects dramatizing the contrast between unspoiled vegetation and polluted wasteland. This is the largest of the photographs in *Occidental*, but all are printed at a scale sufficient to remind their viewers of the sublime esthetics of Romantic paintings from the 19th century. The key point is how the work simultaneously elaborates upon and undercuts that tradition.

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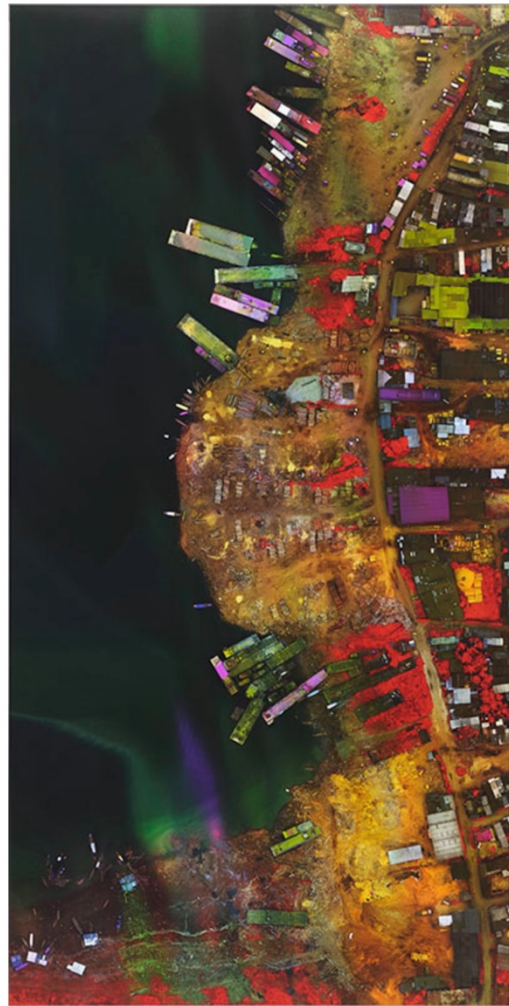
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The airborne steadicam that played such an important role in *Broken Spectre* was also pressed into service for two of the photographs included in *Occidental*. One is a large, panoramically composed image titled *Abandoned Oil Plant Infrastructure, San Jacinto Block 192, Iquitos, Loreto*; it looks down on a scene of industrial blight with no visible mitigation taking place, appearing as if it were taken from a high-altitude reconnaissance platform. Such scenes of resource extraction and collateral spoilage are all too ubiquitous along the major waterways of the Amazon basin, where Iquitos figures prominently as the major point of embarkation on the western end of the river. Another high-altitude image, *Coke Barges, Iquitos*, shows the infrastructure of a mining operation, the river water looking brackish enough to have been piped in from Robert Smithson's New Jersey.

In both *Broken Spectre* and *Occidental*, the Amazon basin is cast as the ultimate canary in the coal mine of climate catastrophe. No doubt, the two exhibitions will provoke controversy. I am reminded of a 1991 [New Yorker](#) essay by Ingrid Sischy, examining the work of a Brazil-born, Paris-based photographer who also spent a lot of time in the Amazonian wilderness. That photographer is Sebastião Salgado, and the subject of Sischy's essay was the SFMOMA's 1990 retrospective of his work titled *An Uncertain Grace*. Sischy was not a fan, the gist of her essay proclaiming that Salgado's images were and still are too beautiful, so much so that they invited the viewer to rationalize environmental depredation and the cruel exploitation of tribal people as the bearable cost of doing "god's work;" that is, estheticizing and thereby rationalizing things that should be regarded as crimes against humanity. In other words, she thought Salgado's images represented a kind of "misery porn," calling special attention to Salgado's horrifying images of the Sierra Pelada goldmine. Fair enough, but not everyone saw it that way. For my part, I was moved to a state of empathy and expanded awareness when I viewed that exhibition over three decades ago. I was also impressed by the way that Salgado ruptured the barrier between fine art and journalistic photographic practices, a barrier that was still upheld in those bygone pre-photoshop years. Mosse's new work shows a similar disregard for externally imposed categories of representation, absorbing them as influences while also rising above and beyond them.



Coke Barges, Iquitos, 2022, C-print, 79 1/2 x 40 inches

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Richard Mosse: "Broken Spectre" @ [Minnesota Street Project Foundation](#) through June 30, 2023.

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About the author: Mark Van Proyen's visual work and written commentaries emphasize the tragic consequences of blind faith in economies of narcissistic reward. Since 2003, he has been a corresponding editor for Art in America. His recent publications include Facing Innocence: The Art of Gottfried Helnwein (2011) and Cirian Logic and the Painting of Preconstruction (2010). To learn more about Mark Van Proyen, read Alex Mak's interview on Broke-Ass Stuart's website.