

ArtSeen

Richard Mosse: *Ultra*

By Hannah Maier-Katkin

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Richard Mosse, *Katydid with Nepenthes*, 2019. Digital C-print mounted to Dibond, 72 x 96 inches. Courtesy Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

Richard Mosse has recently garnered a sort of perverse accolade from a hyper-capitalist art market that values speculative worth over subversive potential. The Kilkenny-born photographer set an auction record earlier this year for the sale of a single print by an artist under the age of 45.¹ The work, *Nowhere to Run* (2010), which sold in London for £37,500 is, admittedly, strikingly

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beautiful—regardless of whether you think it should be, given its content. The image is from Mosse’s body of work featuring people and landscapes in the war-torn, seldom documented Democratic Republic of the Congo on 16mm infrared film. The 2010 collection is simply titled *Infra*.

It is Mosse’s preoccupation with landscapes and how they can be observed by unconventional kinds of film that characterizes his contributions to photography. Some historical context: infrared film, called Aerochrome, was developed by Kodak as a surveillance technology for the U.S. military in the 1940s because of its usefulness in camouflage detection, discerning—often from an aerial perspective—where the *enemy* is hiding through heat mapping. The greens of a landscape are rendered a surprisingly satisfying and rich (read: *not* cute) array of pinks.² Removed from its military circumstances, the film, which captures an interplay of light otherwise imperceptible to the human eye, was later greeted with fascination for its psychedelic properties by the counterculture of the 1960s, documented in the album covers of rock musicians including Frank Zappa and Jimi Hendrix.

Mosse’s growing oeuvre carries this varied and contradictory history as he turns the lens of his camera a decade later to the rainforest for his most recent exhibition, aptly and succinctly named *Ultra*. Beyond violet, the title also implies a certain expansiveness worthy of its source text. The photographer examines the ultraviolet fluorescence of a biome in peril. Although the objects photographed are small and unassuming in their natural habitat—spiders, orchids, venus flytraps, etc.—the scale of the framed prints is large and imposing. One portrait of a mantis for example, *Dionaea muscipula with Mantodea* (2019), measures 64 × 48 inches, which is not even the largest of the collection. The insect, blown out to house-pet proportion seems—I anthropomorphize—to be gazing beyond the camera, caught unawares while minding its own business, resenting the intrusion of the human eye to which it remains otherwise blissfully ignorant.

Shot this time with the assistance of an ultraviolet (UV) torch, hues of pink do not adorn Mosse’s account of the rainforest’s endangered flora and fauna. Rather, his addition of UV light captures the greenery in royal purples and a gold so reflective it looks as if the flowers have been spray-painted. There’s a distancing effect here as the plants appear almost fake, plastic, painted, too perfect. However strange and unfamiliar these tones seem to an ill-equipped human eye, the insects depicted in the frame do in fact possess what is for them the ordinary ability to perceive these higher frequencies of light.



Richard Mosse, *Drosera tokaiensis*, 2019. Digital C-print mounted to Dibond, 40 x 50 inches. Courtesy Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

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Thematic currents of conflict and crisis re-observed through unfamiliar (but not unnatural) light run through Mosse's commercially and critically successful projects. In the gallery room adjacent to *Ultra*, prints from his 2016 *Heat Maps* hang in conjunction with the upcoming *Incoming* exhibit at SFMoMA about mass migration and human displacement. Mosse took these portraits of refugees in encampments along routes that lead from the Persian Gulf and Northern Africa into Europe³ by repurposing the surveillance technology of a military-grade border enforcement camera⁴ that gives its subjects a dehumanized, spectral presence. By refusing to rely upon just one unorthodox technique, Mosse resists his observations becoming mere gimmicks.

What Mosse's experiments in film and playfulness in color capture is not a fantastical rendering of an imaginary world, but rather the existence of natural properties that exceed our own sensory knowledge. He images colors that are invisible to us in plain sight, not hiding, but ungraspable without technological assistance. This augmented perception displaces the human eye as the subject who gazes, presenting a window into a new material dimension. Rather than offering the audience of his most recent venture a feeling of mastery over the rainforest, Mosse reveals to us the limits of our knowledge. He signals toward an imaginal world that exceeds and mystifies our ultimately slight and inadequate fashioning of reality. That these works have become so highly appraised, speaks perhaps to a larger cultural narrative about how subcultures are subsumed into the everyday.

1. Pavel Barter, "Gathering Richard Mosse works proves costliest for art lives," *Times*, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/gathering-richard-mosse-works-proves-costliest-for-art-lovers-3swjblqb7>.
2. Jessica Schreiberstein, "Kodak's Retired Infrared Film Creates A Hot Pink Congo," *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2011/12/02/143052646/kodaks-retired-infrared-film-creates-a-hot-pink-congo>
3. Max Campbell, "Richard Mosse's *Heat Maps*," *New Yorker*, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/richard-mosses-heat-maps-a-military-grade-camera-repurposed-on-the-migrant-trail>.
4. Altman Siegel Gallery, "Richard Mosse: *Ultra*," Press Release, 12 Sept. 2019, https://altmansiegel.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/RM_Ultra_PR_1.4-Mosse-final.pdf.

Contributor

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