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Bravo, Tony, “Broken Spectre’ is the climate change epic we need,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 13, 2023

BAY AREA

‘Broken Spectre’ is the climate change epic we need



Michaela Vatcheva/Special to The Chronicle



TONY BRAVO May 13, 2023 | Updated: May 13, 2023 8:18 a.m.



There were times watching Richard Mosse’s 74-minute, multiscreen film “Broken Spectre” when I wanted to abandon my chair in the Minnesota

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Street Project Foundation's new media venue and position myself directly on the floor.

Being closer to the ground felt like a safer option as I was both emotionally and physically affected viewing the North American debut of Mosse's acclaimed four-channel video installation addressing the destruction of the Amazon and threat of climate change.

Many of the images in the film are hard to see for sustained periods, among them slash-and-burn clearing of the rainforest, flayed corpses of cattle in industrial meat facilities and the smoldering, stripped remains of the once-bountiful land.

The footage is so in-your-face on the glorious new screens — whether it's the microscopic images showing the interdependent life of the forest or the vivid monochrome infrared aerial photography — that the idea of distancing oneself a few feet further away on the floor felt like it might offer some sensory relief. The surround audio quality in the room (designed by MSP founder Andy Rappaport with help from Meyer Sound) is so enveloping that at times, composer Ben Frost's experimental, David Lynchian score seemed to destabilize my center of gravity as the subwoofers intensified every grumble, gust and note of music.

That was just my physical destabilization: Mentally, after sitting through the work on Wednesday, May 10, I was also rocked. The work addresses one of the major crises of our time, and seeing it presented across the four connected screens was both epic and intimate.

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Richard Mosse stands in front of "Repose" on May 3 at Altman Siegel in San Francisco.
Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

“A lot of the imagery we see of deforestation in the Amazon is oversaturated, we become inundated with it and stop seeing it,” said Mosse, a few days before the first San Francisco screening. “I’m trying to resuscitate that, find a new way of saying these things.”

The work not only marks its North American premiere after attracting blockbuster crowds at presentations in London and Melbourne, it’s also opening the MSP Foundation’s new, state-of-the-art media room in a recently converted warehouse space at 1201 Minnesota St.

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The presentation is a partnership between the MSP Foundation and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which presented Mosse's immigration-themed video "Incoming" in 2019.

Mosse's gallery Altman Siegel is concurrently presenting the show "Occidental" a block away at MSP's 25th Street campus. The show features photographs by Mosse documenting oil spills and pipeline seepage in the Rio Tigre in northeastern Peru, using the same imaging techniques and multispectral camera sensor technology employed in "Broken Spectre." Captured by Geographic Information Systems, the technology heightens and distorts the colors of the photographs in a gorgeous, nightmarish way.

"Mosse's long-standing interest in using military and surveillance tools such as infrared-vision, heat-sensitive or geo-located multispectral and microscopic imaging technologies allows him to offer not only a critique of dehumanizing technologies, but also to compose a rich sensorial, visual and aural experience," explained Rudolf Frieling, SFMOMA's curator of media arts. "Mosse searches for cinematic sensations that make us feel, rather than intellectually understand, how the climate crisis in other parts of the world will invariably impact us at home."

"Broken Spectre" can feel assaulting to the senses. The span of screens sometimes unites into a single image; other times the four screens show separate channels that fight for your attention.

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“Broken Spectre” by Richard Mosse on its opening night, Wednesday, May 10, in San Francisco.
Michaela Vatcheva/Special to The Chronicle

The way Mosse mixes his microscopic, aerial and human-scaled narratives can lead to some frenzied watching before the images change. While the more scientific photography can feel abstract and dreamlike, the high-contrast, black-and-white scenes showing workers in the midst of rainforest destruction intentionally evoke a spaghetti-western style.

As an American, seeing the cowboy-like way these laborers dress, and the Sergio Leone-inspired cinematography Mosse uses to photograph them, I felt forced to re-examine my own country’s role in the global climate catastrophe, as well as the government displacement of our own Indigenous people, the way the Yanomami and Munduruku have been removed from parts of their ancestral lands in Brazil.

While imagery and music do most of the storytelling in “Broken Spectre,” there is a sustained section in which a young Indigenous woman faces the camera and gives an impassioned (subtitled) speech, angrily pointing out the injustice that logging, oil drilling and cattle farming in the Amazon are creating for her people. Her plea functions in some ways as a uniting agent for the different threads of the film, bringing together the natural and human worlds.

More Information

“Broken Spectre”: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Through June 30. Free. 1201 Minnesota St., S.F. <https://minnesotastreetproject.org>

“Occidental”: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday. 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. Through June 30. Free. Altman Siegel, 1150 25th St., Building B, S.F. <https://altmansiegel.com>

COLLAPSE ^

The new MSP Foundation media venue isn’t just the right space to feature “Broken Spectre,” with its ability to project four-channel work and immersive audio system. It’s likely the *only* space that could present it in San Francisco according to the artist’s specifications.

Some best-practice advice for viewing: Try to sit as center and as far back from the screens as you can for maximum range of vision. And speaking from experience, don’t be afraid to physically brace yourself against your chair (the walls are fabric, so that’s a no-go) during the more intense moments in the soundtrack.

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Ultimately, “Broken Spectre” is a work that is able to present a crisis of global magnitude in a way that allows you to be swept up, then jolted back to harsh reality. For all the awe its technical mastery inspires, you also never lose sight of the terrible truth the film reveals.

“As an artist, we have the power to seduce people through aesthetics, and that can be unsettling to people,” said Mosse. “That’s quite all right — you can be unsettled by this work, that’s the point.”



Guests watch “Broken Spectre” at the Minnesota Street Project Foundation.
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