

SFWEEKLY

Richard Mosse Uses Heat to Tell Migrant Stories

Two overlapping S.F. exhibits showcase plight of refugees and the Amazon.

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Richard Mosse, *Acineta superba II*. Courtesy of Altman Siegel gallery.

For more than three years, photographer Richard Mosse followed migrants from North Africa, East Africa, the Middle East, and other regions as they sought refuge in other countries and moved dangerously across waterways and land channels.

Mosse used special heat-sensitive cameras — the kind militaries employ to track people at night and note their exact movements. While the military employs these techniques to

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spot (and sometimes kill) people, Mosse used them to humanize migrant life — which led to *Incoming*, an immersive, three-channel film that shows how migrants risk their lives for an uncertain future. Mosse's work also led to "Heat Maps," a photo project that shows how migrants have settled, temporarily and perhaps for years, in unforgiving refugee camps.

Images from both black-and-white projects are on display at San Francisco's Altman Siegel gallery through Nov. 2 and on Oct. 26, SFMOMA will begin screening *Incoming* for four months while also showing some of Mosse's "Heat Maps" series.

The art world has celebrated the work of the Irish photographer for years, and these overlapping San Francisco exhibits are a chance for Bay Area art-goers to see firsthand the unusual techniques that Mosse specializes in.

His "Heat Maps" series, for example, are composite panoramas of thousands of smaller images that have small vanishing points: Spots where the mounted camera panned but didn't leave a full image — just a leg or a foot or another partial shape that's almost ghostly. The thermal images are somewhat ghostly to begin with. So Mosse's "Heat Maps" series has ghosts within ghosts — a distortion that Mosse says is poignant. It certainly forces art-goers to really study Mosse's images.

"There's this disembodied, truncated piece of this refugee crossing the road here," Mosse says at Altman Siegel as he points to a dark blotch on an image of an Athens, Greece refugee camp. "I chose to leave in this condition of the refugee — [to show] that they can't move the way we can move, that they're trapped in time and space literally. They're stuck in this horrible uncertainty of the European asylum system."

The heat-seeking setup that Mosse used for "Heat Maps" can pick up a person's body heat from 18 miles away, and Mosse says, "It's an almost sinister technology, primarily used for insurgent detection — for tracking and targeting as part of a weapons system... 'Fortress Europe' uses it to keep people out, so it's very interesting to use it as a way to reveal the struggle and the journeys and the conditions of the refugee camps."

Pointing to an image he took of a camp for Syrian refugees in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, Mosse says, "I think 1-in-5 people in Lebanon is a Syrian refugee now. Two days after I took this picture, this part of the camp all burned because of a fire started by faulty electrics. Eighty people were burned, and a little girl died. And that's very tragic. . . . My work [asks people to see these conditions] through the metaphor and the index of heat. If you live in a tent, heat is an issue. You can freeze to death. It's very uncomfortable to be in this tent in the middle of the day. Physical vulnerability, bodily exposure, precarity — it's a crucial aspect of the story I wish to tell."

Altman Siegel is also showcasing Mosse's series of ultraviolet images from the rainforests of Peru and Ecuador. Like his migrant series, Mosse's rainforest photos are surreal affairs

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that are almost-seamless composites of many images. Using a process that scientists employ to pick up reflective ultraviolet fluorescence, Mosse turns small patches of South American rainforests into psychedelic, billboard-sized labyrinths that are full of hidden insects, blooming foliage, and a sheen that seems like the forests have been sprinkled with fairy dust. Bees see the forest this way, Mosse says. And anyone who's visited the South American rainforests will say the same thing: They feel like magical worlds. For Mosse, his Amazon work began as the antithesis of his projects in war-torn countries and troubled settings. But the respite didn't last. Mosse's rainforest work is ongoing, and he recently visited Brazil — a country whose Amazon forest has been burning from deliberate fires, many set illegally by cattle farmers but condoned by Brazil's newly conservative government of Jair Bolsonaro. Those fires garnered international headlines and, for Mosse, a sense that he always seems to find trouble.

"I really wanted something restorative — to do something reflective and restorative for myself," Mosse says. "I wanted to take pictures of flowers in the rain forest... But in the past two weeks I've been down in Brazil with my longtime collaborators, photographing and filming the burning rainforest there. One of the saddest things I saw was a sloth — a most extraordinary, soulful animal — trying to escape a fire and crawling on the ground. It looked up at me with the most plaintive, mournful eyes."

One of Mosse's best-known projects is his *Infra* series of infrared images from the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Eastern territory, where government and opposition forces have been clashing for more than a decade. The special film that Mosse used there turned the territory's foliage, trees, and hills into awe-inspiring, cherry-blossom-like colors. Tucked amid all those colors: Soldiers with guns, soldiers who've killed, soldiers who will probably kill again. The series also featured victims of that ongoing conflict, so "*Infra*" navigated a thin line between revulsion and attraction, death and life, and downtrodden and uplift.

Mosse's exhibit at Altman Siegel, called "*Ultra*," is a gallery full of fine lines. The migrants we see are in a kind of limbo — glad to have survived the journey overland and overwater, and glad to be away from their countries of conflict. But they're caught in a limbo state. They have shelter, but they're stateless and live as if they're homeless. They may or might not ever move much beyond their current transit state. Mosse has been a regular witness to this kind of uncertainty, which is what he's photographing.

But Mosse says he's also photographing the issues behind the photos — the political doings, the military matters, and the global gamesmanship that have produced instability in the places that Mosse inhabits. Mosse wants art-goers to make that connection and consider their own indirect role in contributing to the scenes at Altman Siegel and, in his almost-hour-long film, at SFMOMA.

"That's partly the objective," Mosse says. "It's a lot to do with perception and about attempting to find alternative strategies of advocating. But also to do it in a way that

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confronts the viewer and challenges them, and makes them reflexively consider their own role in complicity, and their own position in the world.”

“Richard Mosse: Ultra”

Through Nov. 2 at Altman Siegel, 1150 25th St., San Francisco. Free; 576-9300, altmansiegel.com.

“Richard Mosse: Incoming”

Oct. 26-Feb. 7 at SFMOMA, 151 Third St., S.F.: \$19-\$25; 415-357-4000, sfmoma.org.