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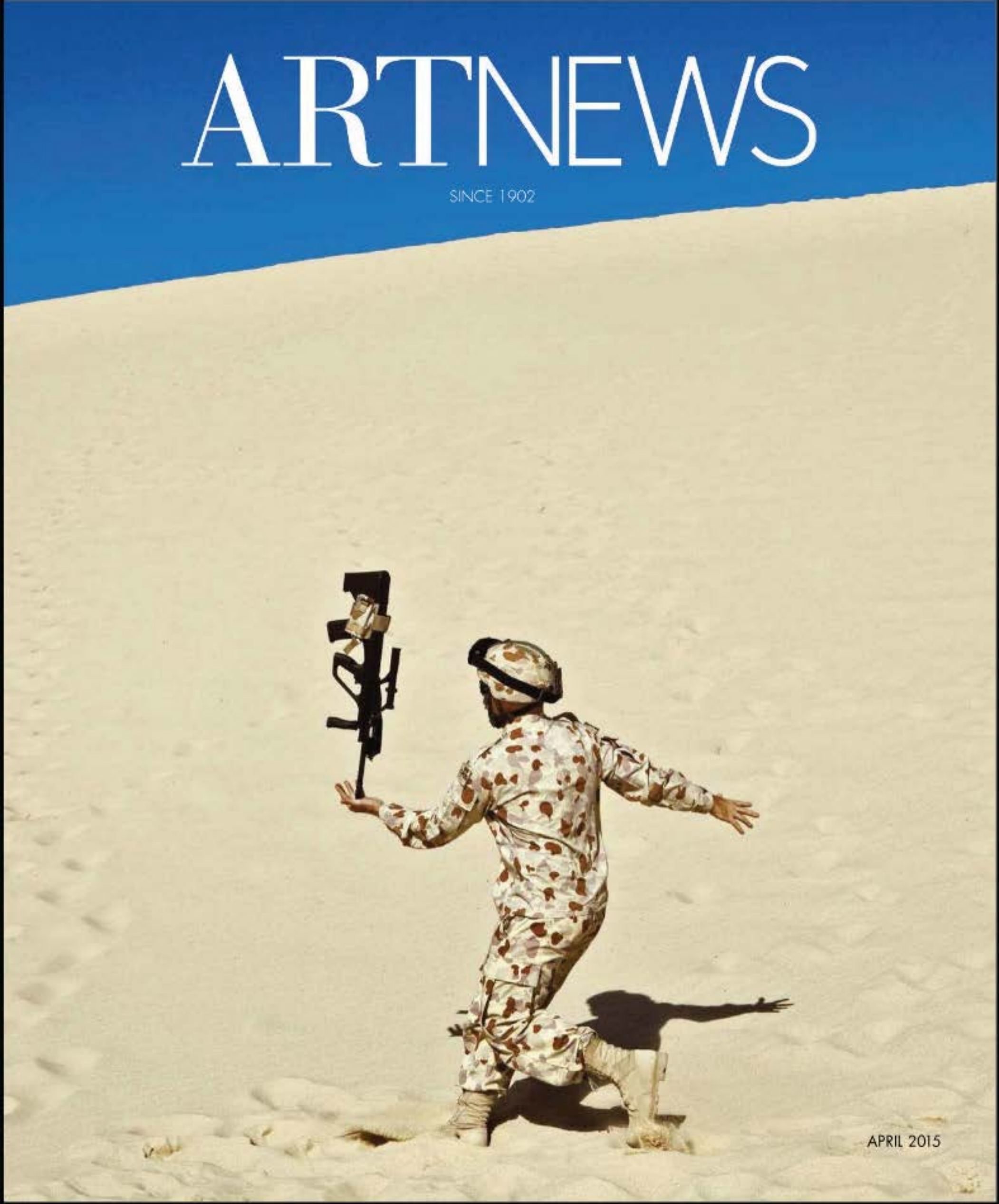

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IN HARM'S WAY

From war zones to natural disasters, many artists are seduced by extreme conditions

BY LILLY WEI

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY, AUSTRALIA (ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA, DONATED THROUGH THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS CULTURAL GIFTS PROGRAM THEMIS COLLECTION)

Why do certain artists seek extremes? What makes them test their psychological, physical, aesthetic, and moral limits, often in the face of great danger? What do they hope to discover or achieve? Why are they fascinated by risk, uncertainty, the unfamiliar, the other?

We in the developed world seem to live increasingly in a virtual realm, largely insulated from reality while bombarded with images, both actual and concocted, through increasingly sophisticated technologies. Others live in regions of devastation, overwhelmed by a reality that is all too real, where there is little choice but to endure. Still others have gone in search of that reality. They are driven to bear witness, to rub against the bone of existence, to see how people survive unholy conditions, and to find ways to capture that experience.

For some artists, risk is part of their practice, lured, as they are, by a heightened, icy awareness at the cusp of life and death and by an urgent need to take radical stances. Many of this ilk find their way to remote locations and punishing conflict zones.

Alfredo Jaar, a prominent Chilean-born artist, referring to the enormity of the horrors he witnessed during the Rwanda genocide, the subject of one of his most powerful projects, asked himself, "How can this be transferred into a work of art?" American painter Steve Mumford went to Iraq for the first time in 2003, directly after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Embedded with U.S. troops, he used ink, watercolor, and oil to depict the war, experimenting with traditional rather than digital mediums as a way to represent contemporary conflict.

AMERICAN VIDEO ARTIST JANET BIGGS, AUSTRALIAN VIDEO installation artist and photographer Shaun Gladwell, and Irish photographer and video artist Richard Mosse have recently spent time in war zones, and their memorable works vividly attest to the intensity and complexity of their experience.

Biggs, based in Brooklyn, is a veteran of the Taklamakan Desert, the Arctic Circle, and Indonesian sulfur mines, among other harsh locales. She has just returned from filming for a new project in the north of Ethiopia, the Afar region, which has been increasingly unstable since 2012 due to ongoing hostilities with bordering Eritrea. Exploring the Great Rift Valley, which contains the Danakil Depression, one of the world's most active volcanic sites, she traveled with an assistant, Luke Cape, and a minimum crew of 12, including eight Ethiopian soldiers, at least two Afar militia, and two Afar policemen; she was told it was the right balance for security, but who really knows? Surrounded by male soldiers, their AK-47s primed, Biggs was acutely aware that she was white, uncovered, and often the only woman present. When asked what surprised her about this trip, she said, "I thought I knew what to expect, the waiting for an attack, the constant level of anxiety, but what I didn't expect was the boredom. And this complete lack of anything to do creates a craving for conflict, I've heard. It was also incredibly hot, with no water except what was trucked in. You had to conserve all your energy, sleeping during the hottest part of the day, moving around when it got somewhat cooler, when the sun began to set and at night. It was a survival regimen. The Danakil Depression is one of the most unlivable areas in the world, but of course, people live there, and for me, that's compelling."

Biggs's subject is "people," she said, and the thread often begins in the autobiographical and associative, then winds its way into the scientific, the social, and back again into the personal. "I'm not a landscape artist. I'm also not a political artist—I hope I am something of a poet when I'm successful—but there are parts of the world where just to pick up a camera is a political act."

To travel to a region, she continued, "where water, which is such a basic resource, is so scarce that it can be used as a tool of war inevitably makes me think about climate change and a future where more and more of our world will have to deal with extreme conditions and dwindling natural resources. I've just come home and am still trying to understand what I saw, so I don't know yet what I will do with the footage. So much was so visually stunning, like standing at the rim of an active, superheated volcano, the lava 30 meters below, boiling, bubbling, glowing, shooting up beyond the rim of the crater." She described a constantly changing lava lake, with its brilliant mineral colors

PREVIOUS SPREAD Shaun Gladwell, *Double Field / Viewfinder (Torin Kourt)*, 2009–10. OPPOSITE Janet Biggs, working video stills from the Afar Region Project, 2015.

COURTESY THE ARTIST; AYALA FOREVER GALERIA, SWITZERLAND; AND CONNERSMITH., WASHINGTON, D.C. (2)

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY, AUSTRALIA; COLLECTION OF ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA; MONA/JAC FOLEY, 2011

and strange, sculptural forms, as "otherworldly, in ways I've never seen, like stepping off the earth and I disappear completely from the life I know."

Biggs emphatically declared that she doesn't have a death wish. She is very conscious of the different levels of risk, especially kidnapping, in regions like this. She was as prepared as she could be. What really compels her to make the work is an attempt to understand people's ideas of self and how that is construed under treacherous conditions. "It's a definition that can be incredibly slippery and under constant revision—you need to constantly figure out who you are and how you survive. It's also about the inevitability of change, of cultural loss, and about transcending and reconstructing it, about human desires."

GLADWELL, WHO LIVES BETWEEN SYDNEY AND LONDON, IS known for his physically strenuous work. He represented Australia at the Venice Biennale in 2009 and was chosen to be Australia's official war artist that same year. He went to Afghanistan and the Middle East with the Australian Defence Force in 2009, and a book about his time there by Kit Messham-Muir is soon to be released. Gladwell said that he has always been anti-war and left-leaning, having chosen art school partly in reaction to his family's tradition of military service. Nonetheless, he remains sympathetic toward his father, who served in Vietnam and whom he admired. Gladwell shared with his father and brothers a love of physical risk and intense sports, playing a kind of Russian roulette to see if he could sidestep death or severe injury.

When he went to Afghanistan and the Middle East, Gladwell wanted to analyze the war experience from a less dramatic perspective, using a less expected language, one that was empathetic but critical. He said it was hard to anticipate what happens in a war zone—the amount of down time, waiting time, as well as the traveling, and more waiting—echoing Biggs about the crippling boredom. "These were schizophrenic environments," he said, "where some people welcomed your presence, others tolerated you, and others tried to kill you. But it was the tension of waiting that was my experience of war, waiting for the IED to go off or the threat of indirect fire."

For Gladwell, photojournalism and the newly emerging genre of soldier-produced documentaries via body and helmet cameras proved to be the best medium for describing the experience. "I was not a combat soldier and did not pretend to be. Instead, I conducted a series of experiments with photography and video that would not try to represent the pressure, the insanity, but generate its own pressure. For instance, I made a video of me stalking a fully equipped combat soldier. We both locked video cameras onto each other and mirrored each other's movements. Then I asked two soldiers to also perform this almost ritualistic mirror-

OPPOSITE Shaun Gladwell, *Double Balancing Act (left)*, 2010.

ing. When installed in a gallery, the viewers stand between the videos of the two soldiers, the tension partly generated by the installation and partly by the video content."

What surprised Gladwell were the very realistic mannequins used as training aids. They were computer-programmed to simulate blinking, breathing, and bleeding. There was only a given amount of time allocated for first aid to be delivered or they would "die," which he found strangely disturbing—as disturbing in its way as real carnage. "The worst was seeing children caught in conflict," he said. And there were other situations that he decided not to photograph. "I didn't think it was appropriate for me to take anything from these patients/victims in a base hospital I went to in Kandahar, not even their image."

Gladwell said he felt complicit just by accepting the commission. If he'd been asked today, now that he has a family, he probably wouldn't have accepted. "There are works of mine that are still enigmatic, even to me. I just seem to have arrived at more questions, and I am haunted by the experience. I took photos of soldiers sleeping in the field, in bases, in tanks, on aircraft. Sometimes they look dead from a distance. Other times, I try to imagine what they are dreaming of. For me, the irony is that they are closing their eyes to escape the war for a moment, but sleep and dreams are also the state in which the war will return to them. For some, this will occur for the rest of their lives. I have never stopped thinking about the experience, and consequently, I have never stopped making work about it. I am not sure there will ever be closure."

MOSSE MADE HIS EXPERIENCE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC of the Congo the focus of *Enclave* (2012–13), the multiscreen installation he showed at the 2013 Venice Biennale, where he represented Ireland. He said that he had started out to become a photojournalist and went to Bosnia to document its vast numbers of missing persons, but it was difficult. How does one represent an absence with a camera? he asked. "This is the abiding question that runs through my practice. [It] is really about the limits of documentary photography, predicated on a trace."

Since then, Mosse has worked in many troubled areas: Kosovo, Serbia, Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Uganda, Ethiopia, Haiti, Malaysia, and Myanmar, among others. He said it isn't the extreme nature of the situations that fascinates him as much as it is the complexity of their narratives and how difficult it is to recount them. "These are places where personal narratives are saturated with hyperbole, hysteria, and paranoia, where it's difficult if not impossible to be objective, but where everyone is pretending to be just that."

Mosse wants to make work that is open-ended, that provokes questions. "Embracing ambivalence, not to mention aesthetics, in places of human suffering may seem unethical to some, and there is an element of transgression to my approach," he explained. "People are often seduced by the beauty, at least at first, so it becomes a kind of advocacy, a way of communicating." He also hopes to actively engage the viewer by emphasizing the artifice, using color infrared film. "It's a completely different approach to a conventional documentary; it's also a lot truer to my own impressions of the place and the situation."

Mosse added, "These are also journeys into the self. Any Westerner arriving in Congo travels in the wake of Conrad, Gide, Kapuściński, Naipaul. . . . Congo is a profoundly beautiful place; the soil is fertile but the people are often famished because war prevents farming, because they are constantly in flight. Yet they seem extraordinarily warm and happier than many Westerners. That's one reason why the story there is so difficult to tell."

Above all, he said, "I see myself as an artist, but I have also been a witness. I have a special kind of independence, since I operate outside of all of the usual institutions. Perhaps I don't have the same power to change specific situations in ways that journalists or activists do. Yet there's an advantage to being the outsider, and the work is still investigative. What I've found most exhausting yet rewarding is uncertainty."

Mosse and his collaborator Trevor Tweeten were once trapped by artillery fire for about 14 hours during the battle of Goma. Mosse discovered he was more fragile than he had realized. As Biggs, Gladwell, and Mosse noted, exposure to conflict, even as observers, even without injury, is charged, complicated, and potentially emotionally damaging. Healing can be slow—and incomplete. ■

OPPOSITE (from top) Richard Mosse. *Madonna and Child*. 2012 and *Nowhere to Run* (from the "Infra" series). 2010.

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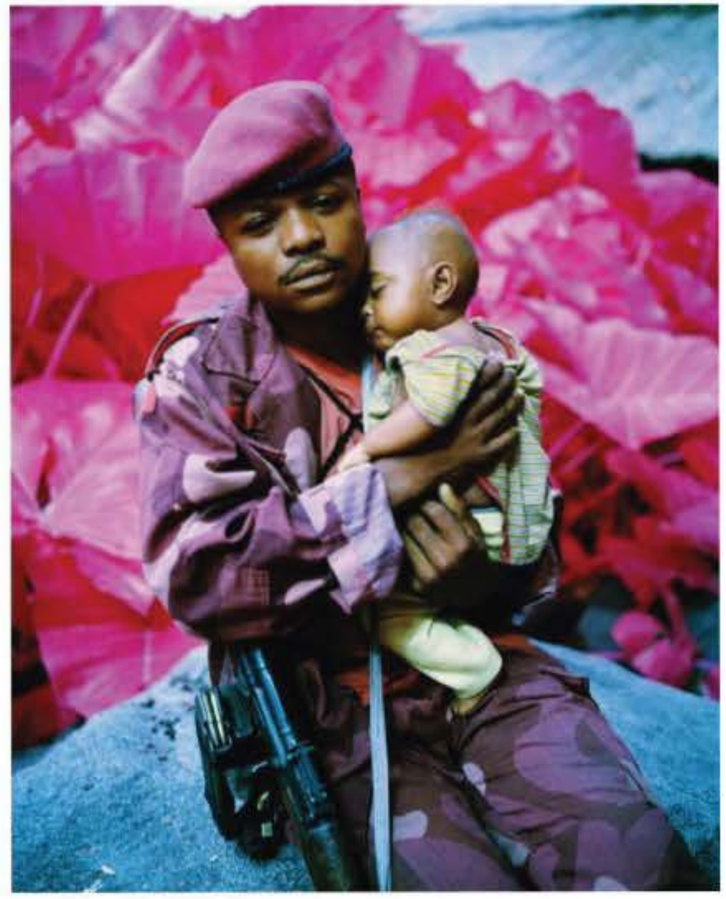

COURTESY RICHARD MOSSE; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK