

State of the arts magazine Art (photography)

By Lee Tran Lam

“You just hear the inside of your nose and your brain rattling –it’s so quiet, it’s staggering’ says artist Phillip George . Th experience of shooting in the Balgo desert in western /Australia for his most resent exhibition,” Lost Stories”, was not one to forget. And his trip to the Middle East to document the landscapes book – ending the show was equally memorable. Despite the climate of fear surrounding travel to the region the 46 year old didn’t find it a problem. “There’s an Arabic tradition of huge hospitality, so there’s nowhere I went that I didn’t find hospitable’. He adds, it’s always the poorest people who are the most hospitable’.

While there , he discovered many of the locals were dismayed at being considered terrorists by default, simply because they wore a scarf or hijab. ‘people would come up at me and say . I’m not a terrorist. I’m very conservative, religious person. But I’m not a terrorist.’ George notes . Given the geo political nature of his work, which deals with the contested landscape of Australian and the Middle East, it’s no surprise that such heated issues arise from talking about his images. The current ‘militaristic American paradigm’ is also another contentious theme in his work.

‘There’s a village in Syria (called Ma’arat): it’s a place where, when the first Crusaders went through, they killed and ate the women and children...This is the introduction to the Middle East of the West- from their point of view, nothings’ changed.’

While it’s apparent where his politics lie. The photographer adds,” I don’t want to make work that is jingoistic, where its saying this is bad or this is good. Things are so complex, it’s not that simple. I’m trying to open up windows into dialogues in the east and the West. The idea of Lost Stories is it’s opening up those dialogues of being heard,(instead of) where you have these lunatics on both sides dominating debate’

Certainly, the technology behind Lost Stories hints at this complexity. Using a medium –formate camera, each image contains a 180-degree view and five or six layers of transparencies. One photograph of a16 kilometre coastline features 35mm transparencies(of that work, Terra Australis Incognito, he says ‘it’s almost like mapmaking where you sail down the coast and you put this big mosaic of images together’) .This image manipulation also refers to the “slippery’ nature of information being slicked up and handed down to us, by politicians and the media

. The green tint used in several shots mimics the 'infrared vision of CNN, which is all jerky and un-focused and looking dangerous, but you don't see much' His images on the other hand . re sharp. Big detailed and more open-ended.

While Lost Stories was the most 'extreme; and 'enjoyable ' project George has conducted so far, which exhibited at Grantpirre gallery in Sydney earlier this year, he looks forward to his up coming show at the Australian Centre of Photography in October, which involves his work with night vision cameras. Hopefully it will spark as much interest as the latest show- the national galleries as well as the Indian Triennale have been in contact about it('colonialism 'George remarks , is also a hot issue in the subcontinent). And there's talk of taking a Larger scale version of Lost Stories to the Middle East next year, to open up dialogue between deserts'.

Having made computer –based art for the last decade, the photographer is keen to stay within the field. "I don't want to get into the notion of time-based(video art)he states. "I want to capture an icon and make it sit there forever."

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