

Inspirational world press photography in Malta

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"Images have a way of fixing in your memory in a manner that words cannot."

A very apt quote indeed from the World Press jury chairman, Michele McNally.

For the first time in its history, the world famous World Press Photo Exhibition can be seen in Malta until 7 October in St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity in Valletta. This travelling exhibition, unique in its kind, is the result of a worldwide annual contest on press photography and is brought to Valletta with the support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of The Netherlands, the Malta Tourism Authority, the Strickland Foundation and TNT local branch in Malta, C&C Express.

World Press Photo was founded in 1955. Its main aim is to support and promote internationally the work of professional press photographers.

In order to realise its objectives, World Press Photo organises the world's largest

and most prestigious annual press photography contest. The event is considered as the highest benchmark for press photography and photographers.

Each year, an independent international jury, consisting of 13 members, judges the entries in 10 different categories, submitted by photo-journalists, agencies, newspapers and magazines from all corners of the world.

This year's competition attracted no fewer than 4,460 photographers from 124 countries with a staggering total of 78,083 images.

The idea to bring the World Press Photo Exhibition to Malta came from a group of enthusiastic young amateur photographers and art promoters in Malta called PHOS.

They organised the exhibition in close cooperation with the Embassy of the Kingdom of The Netherlands and St James Cavalier.

At the end of October, a debate will also be organised at the University of Malta on ethics in the media. Among the participants are Jerry Lampen, a Dutch professional press photographer and

jury member of the World Press Photo contest as well as Professor Father Chircop from the University of Malta.

The St James Exhibition, consisting of 178 memorable images, is a unique opportunity to view and study so many poignant photographs by the world's top press photographers. All local photographers, be they press or not, should not miss this occasion to stimulate their creativity. In fact, I am convinced that anyone connected with the media and art should not allow this unforgettable opportunity to pass them by.

It is also wise to note that one needs ample time to view this incredible collection. It is no use just glossing over the images - one must stop, read the informative captions and meditate on the substance of each and every image. I assure you, it will not be wasted time.

In this article, it is impossible to dwell on each of the exhibits, but I will attempt to give my impressions on the ones which struck and moved me and kept me rooted to the spot. Some images are quite harsh and not for the faint hearted, but then, how is a press photographer going to raise awareness and conscience without portraying things as they really are? In today's world, where viewers are continuously bombarded with strong images, one cannot blame the media for showing pictures which can perhaps stimulate the masses into realising what is actually occurring around the world as well as, perhaps, getting governments and individuals to attempt to remedy these situations.

Granted, the media does sometimes manipulate images for its own scope (in fact, the exhibition contains a lot of images on the horrifying effect of the Israeli Defence Force bombardments in Lebanon last year, but no images on Hezbollah rockets landing on the Israeli population - could this be an honest, chance omission or



Akintunde Akinleye, Nigeria, Reuters

were the pictures in Lebanon more ably manipulated by the Middle East Press?

But perhaps, this is a question for the eventual debate which will take place at the University in conjunction with this exhibition.

This brings us to the actual images. Unfortunately, the exhibits are not numbered so I will be mentioning the name of the author for identification purposes.

The first couple of amazing pictures are by Franck Seguin (first prize Sports Features Singles) and Craig Golding (second Prize Sports Action Stories). The first shows French diver Guillaume Nery training to break the world free diving record. The light here is incredible, so dramatic, dark and deep around the diver, while the diver's white suit glows mysteriously.

The second photo depicts action during the Australia vs England match for the Ashes. The two cricket players are delightfully spot lit by the strong, directional sunlight. Again the brilliant white of their sportswear comes out stunningly against the green of the field.

I think these are two very good examples of the photo-

journalist picking not only the right time and place but also using composition, lighting and cropping to high creative levels. Although photojournalism is all about emotions and capturing that elusive, unrepeatable moment, creativity is also a strong factor and can transform an average image into a great pictorial instant.

Nothing illustrates capturing the right moment better than the image by Alex Livesey of Liverpool striker Peter Crouch doing an acrobatic scissors kick. Everything is perfect in this action picture, including the flying divots of turf which give the image much of its dynamic movement.

Max Rossi, an Italian press photographer, shows us a studied version of gymnastic action during the rings event. Here again is a creative angle of a sports image. The movement in the athlete's hands on the rings conveys his power and concentration, while the unusual composition of the "upside down" athletes also contributes to the image's originality.

The first prize in Sport Feature Stories went to Joao Kehl with a series of images illustrating an unconvention-

al boxing gym in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Training methods are not always orthodox. A young boxer pummels an improvised punch-bag, while a friend scales a rope tied to the viaduct.

Garrido's boxing gym is located under a viaduct in the central area of Sao Paulo, Brazil, a quarter with one of the highest rates of homelessness in the city. The fighters are people who survive in difficult conditions, often without having a place to live, but believing that boxing is a way towards a more dignified life.

The hard determination in the boxer's close-up reflects these harsh conditions and difficult way of life.

The exhibition also carries some superb and stunning nature pictorial illustrations, with one of the most impressive being Jorgen Fleming's action shot of two buzzards fighting over a dead hare. This picture has it all - action, drama, technique as well as an ideal background which brings out the main subject to its full potential.

Another stunning nature image is Fayeze Nureldine's study of a flock of Starlings coming in to roost. The pleasing pattern that the birds have created, crowned by a stupendous Algerian sunset and the dark trees at the bottom of the picture (giving a suitable anchor to the image) makes this exhibit quite remarkable.

The first prize in the Nature stories, was won by Canadian Paul Nicklen who documented leopard seals preying on penguins. It seems that the photographer spent so much time photographing the voracious attacks of the seals on penguins, that a female leopard seal actually placed a dead penguin on top of his camera! Over several days the leopard seal grew agitated as the photographer could not accept her offerings!

Another Sports action story which local football-crazy

fans undoubtedly recall is the World Cup Final Zidane-Materassi head-butting incident. The sequence shows the whole story including Zidane's sending off. Unfortunately, although pictures do sometimes speak a thousand words, in this instance we still cannot decipher what Materassi's comments were!

The exposition on the upper levels of St James is a bit harder on the emotions and several images are not so easy to stomach. Davide Monteleone's first prize winning News Story shows Israel's ground and air campaign against Hezbollah. The picture of a baby of a few weeks buried during a mass funeral in Tyre demonstrates the sheer inhumanity and senselessness of wars. Tyre was one of the worst-hit areas of the conflict. The screaming desperation of an outraged old woman fleeing from the conflict underlines the hopeless plight of war refugees. Even though these images are lurid and somewhat sensational, I think it is indispensable that they are shown by the world's press. Such pictures cannot fail to evoke a reaction from the viewer.

Unfortunately, the exhibition highlights the plight of the Middle East situation and most of the shocking images are from the area. Seeing the picture by Mohammed Ballas, entitled *Execution of suspected collaborator, Jenin, West Bank*, not only shows the state of affairs present there, but also gives us a glimpse into the horrors and dangers the press photographers face in the war zones. In fact, for example, in Iraq alone, since hostilities began in 2003, 112 journalists and 40 media support workers have been killed. Not the kind of job one recommends to one's children.

The actual picture shows Islamic Jihad gunmen executing a man in front of hundreds of people. The victim was accused of collaboration with Israel. The first prize for People in News Stories went to Japanese photographer Sakamaki, with his photo essay on political violence in Sri Lanka's so-called "War without End". A particularly harsh image is that of funeral workers preparing a child victim for burial. It is again a

picture which is meant to shock us into consciousness and hopefully raise an outcry against such appalling injustices - mostly brought about by corrupt and unscrupulous politicians or religious fanatics.

Another of Sakamaki's pictures, from the same photo essay, is quite intriguing showing a close-up of an out-of-focus soldier attending a funeral, with a background of sharply-defined soldiers. The clever use of differential focusing, although breaking the fundamentals of photography, works very well in this case.

Another insight into war zones, this time Iraq, is the reportage by Peter Van Agtmael, illustrating US marine soldiers rooting out insurgents during a night raid in Iraq. A slightly humorous and humane image of Sergeant Jackson, of the 172nd Stryker Brigade, as he rests in the living room of a home after the detention of two suspected insurgents.

Still inevitably on the Iraq conflict, a picture by Nina Berman shows a disturbing wedding portrait of US marine Ty Ziegel with his bride, Rena Kline, in Washington. Ziegel was severely wounded in a suicide bomb attack during his second tour of duty in Iraq. He was blinded in one eye, his skull was shattered and most of his skin was burned off. The couple were engaged following Ziegel's first deployment in Iraq. After Ziegel was injured, Kline lived with him for over a year while he recovered at a hospital in Texas.

Another picture which I really think the photographer, Akintunde Akinleye, has really worked to perfection is the one which won the first prize in Spot News Stories, *Man at the scene of petrol pipeline explosion, Lagos, Nigeria*. This shows a male figure rinsing his face from soot at the scene of a pipeline explosion. At least 260 people died after a punctured pipeline caught fire. Thieves had tapped it to fill tankers with petrol for resale and hundreds of people had gone to the scene to scoop up the fuel in plastic containers. Fuel theft is common in Nigeria, the world's eighth largest exporter of oil where, ironi-

cally, people live in dire poverty - again a sign of corrupt politicians and greed.

Discussing the image photographically, it transports the viewer straight into the apocalyptic scene. The blue colour of the bucket is controversial and the image could look more powerful in monochrome, taking away the attention from the bucket and focusing more on the scene of destruction and the man's face.

A topic which interests our island closely is the irregular migrant issue. Arturo Rodriguez's photo story on African migrants in the Canary Island of Tenerife before being transferred to a holding centre demonstrates the drama and desperation of these luckless people. Spanish officials estimated that more than 31,000 people reached the Atlantic islands irregularly during last year, a fivefold increase on 2005. The story told in just one of the images has incredible strength and stopping power - the carved boat on the wall, the threatening shadows in the background as well as the frightened gaze on the migrants' faces says it all.

Although we have some very good press photographers on the island, and opportunities are surely not lacking, we still haven't seen such powerful images in our publications. Could it be perhaps that local picture edi-



Max Rossi, Italy, Reuters

tors are not so adventurous or do not wish to be controversial?

If so, I think this is a bit against the spirit of true photojournalism and any images which can make a difference, even slightly, should be shown by the powers that be.

In this exposition, there are countless other images which merit mention and attention. Still, the scope of

this write-up is not to list all the World Press photos being shown at St James but to stimulate and awaken interest in all kinds of people who should be concerned at the turn our world is taking and who might be ready to contribute even minutely to its betterment.

I really must thank PHOS for their indefatigable efforts to enlighten us with this memorable viewing.



Paul Nicklen, Canada, National Geographic Magazine



Peter Schols, The Netherlands, Dagblad De Limburger, GPD, Reuters

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