

Richard Mosse – *The Enclave* Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

Seeing Pink

The photographer Richard Mosse's exhibition *The Enclave* at Louisiana features a selection of photographs and a video installation of the same name, from the Kivu province of the eastern Congo. He has chosen as his medium Kodak Aerochrome film, which traces its origins to the US Military, who used it to identify camouflaged enemies; it reads Infrared light reflected from foliage and thus registers the greens of nature as bright pinks. Mosse makes the phrase 'rose-tinted' the prism through which we view his images of the armed conflict in Kivu province. At the same time, because of the film's past, there lurks the promise to reveal to us something we couldn't see for the trees. It is through this incongruence of metaphor that we approach the photographer's images. Mosse himself does not seem to have sorted out the intertwined branches of thought:

"... Aerochrome is a tool which with its nuances of pink is eccentric, surreal, almost unreal, and full of taboos. There is something shameful and almost voyeuristic about the material in itself. ... It was the most politically incorrect solution I could think of. Colonialism, surveillance, the double standards of the West, photography's authenticity — everything was at stake right there! All these ideas about the invisible, the taboo, and the repressed were racing through my mind in an attempt to find a way in which I could cast a new, humane light on a hidden aspect of life". (Kunsten.nu)

Surely these ideas merit some reflection, as the medium itself, its very pinkness, risks being little more than a visual gimmick. One is tempted to ask to what extent these works allow the viewer to experience Mosse's professed political incorrectness, while being bombarded with a pink which, in all its novelty, may overwhelm the deeper message so as to become the focus of the experience itself.

Louisiana has certainly done its bit, intentionally or not, to showcase the politically (in)correct aspect of the project, as is evident already in the first room of the exhibition. We are confronted with stacks of posters showing two of Mosse's motifs, *Drag* and *Protection*. They depict young militiamen, surrounded by bright pink foliage. Please take only one poster per person, a sign ineffectually requests, as people hoard several of each. Marie Lauerberg's curatorial text, as well as the words of a lullaby sung by a little girl in the video work *The Enclave*, are printed on the back. Even so, the visitor's impulse is clearly to get hold of the free pretty picture while you still can. And yet, for me, taking one from each stack for the purposes of writing this article, there was something creepy about having the possibility of hanging on my wall at home a highly aestheticised image of a young soldier, killer of who knows how many. The curator's intention was no doubt to give people a picture they could reflect on at home. But the visual pleasure of Aerochrome pink somehow perverts the move: what occurs instead is that the viewer becomes a witness to a dramatic conflict between the impulse to possess the exotic and the ability to reflect — a drama staged and lustily performed, *mis en abyme*, as it were, within the context of an exhibition struggling with precisely these two conflicting inclinations. For the question of the aesthetic effect does not stop with the free posters.

In this first room, we see large-format photos taken in the region of conflict using Kodak Aerochrome. The images show different aspects of the devastation of war. Each is accompanied by an explanatory wall text. But should the viewer not trouble to read the texts, the response to the pink pictures is almost inevitably aesthetic. Take for example the photo, *Hunches in Bunches*. I could deduce from the wall text that the image documents the unsustainable production of charcoal in the region (the fighting is also about this terrain). And yet, with its bagged bales and lone calf in a clearing, the photo could just as well be about the life of a small scale farmer. The connection between the colonialism which has ultimately led to the fight for charcoal producing terrain, and the global power agendas of the West, which Mosse wants the pink of the surveillance film to signify, is not easily noticed. Or take *Platon*, which shows a river winding in great bows through a valley, for all the world idyllic. The wall text informs us that this fertile grassland is what remained after the land was taken from the indigenous tribes by Tutsis displaced from Rwanda, who cut down the forest. Of course, our understanding of the images may improve the more of the context we learn, indeed it is more or less *de rigueur* in contemporary art that we must read the accompanying texts in order to understand the works. And it may be a serviceable artistic strategy to cause the viewer to be shocked by the discovery that what seemed to be pastoral bliss is in fact a site of ethnic atrocities and murderous conflict. And yet the visual effect of the pinkness stimulates a primal response to precisely colour. Perhaps the very painterliness of the Aerochrome film's rendition of landscape invites us to read it — to borrow the terminology of academic painting — as landscape and not as history. (For hasn't the medium of photography mimicked that terminology, dividing its practice into, for example, landscape, portrait, street, and documentary photography?)

This image also reveals that the aesthetic of the pinkness is not the only problem the exhibit presents; there is also the question of composition. In using Aerochrome, Mosse very consciously leaves behind the authenticity claims of black and white reportage. In so doing, he nevertheless allows the various motifs to be framed and composed in a rather classic way. Take, as another example, the series of images *Come Out (1966)*. They display a range of motifs typical of classic reportage: the images document the temporary structures people have been forced to build in lieu of permanent homes, with washing on the line signalling the presence of the quotidian amongst the destruction and catastrophe. Here the human tragedy and the ingenuity of people in their will to survive, intertwine with the larger and more abstract force of the disaster itself. It is a tried and tested documentary method, a visual language which we have been trained to understand. Once again the Aerochrome intervenes like a filter, aestheticising the washing on the line and the rickety walls, awakening curiosity and visual delight. But it abstracts from the message, a message which the artist clearly has a strong desire to communicate.

A Tale of Two Media

It is with the six channel video projection also entitled *The Enclave*, shown in the second room, that Mosse truly succeeds in breaking free of the traditional modes of documentary.

In making use of a whole catalogue of techniques from video art, he has created a video installation that in its composition and structure both asserts the fragmentary nature of its narrative, and

succeeds in immersing us in the conflict in the Kivu province: the narrative, in itself unresolved and irresolute, is dispersed across six screens; we are surrounded with segments of it, and are left to our own devices in piecing them together. We can view the projections from both sides of the screens, and walk around amongst them, yet it is impossible to catch everything that happens: some screens are blank for a time, on others the footage fades to white, elsewhere the same footage appears on two screens at once, before another piece of footage suddenly appears on a screen behind you or at an oblique angle. For example, the camera's tracking along a road where dead bodies lie plays only on one screen; but footage of a soldier slowly walking into a body of water, eventually submerging himself, plays on two screens at once.

This blurring of the lines between documentation and fiction is fundamental to the video's technique. In another sequence which the curator tells us is staged, we see an attack on a defenceless village, footage which with its not entirely convincing acting takes on a queasy hyper/un-reality. Furthermore, the soundtrack is not a field recording but has been composed. This is another element that deliberately throws us into doubt: is that a manipulated recording of actual radio communication? Are those actual explosions in the distance? Or has it all been made in a studio? The replication of both the audio and visual action of war, in a verisimilitude which — whether intentionally or not — doesn't quite convince, successfully contributes to throwing us into constant doubt about the veracity of what we see and hear. At bottom, we never quite know what is going on, we cannot form an overview or piece together a linear narrative, the events depicted refuse to settle, they continually slip from our grasp.

The viewer is not only presented with images of death, but with pictures of everyday life and natural beauty. The young soldiers entertain themselves with what seems to be a breakdancing competition. The camera pans across the beautiful mountain landscape. We sail lazily along the rippling surface of the peaceful Lac Vert (while a girl recites the aforementioned lullaby). We drift into a refugee camp, the long tracking shot intimating that we ourselves are behind or directly alongside the camera; children run in front and alongside, at once fascinated and afraid of the camera. These children live in the moment rather than in the surrounding catastrophe as only children can. We wander with the natives through a town — they uncover a corpse to gaze at the face (a sight the camera spares us).

In the video piece, the Aerochrome film suddenly makes sense as a vehicle of artistic representation. Here Mosse finds the right method to compliment the conceptual move of using Aerochrome — the pink hue, so pretty when the landscape drifts past, turns sickly when the focus turns to dead bodies and frightened faces. Rather than abstract ideas about Aerochrome's original use as a tool of surveillance, it is this affective impact of the colour which registers, as its character changes with the changing imagery. Does this rose-tinted medium, then, succeed in showing us something we couldn't see for the trees? It certainly amplifies our culturally learned response to the tree-clad mountains and the lake as beautiful — you might say our Western conception of mountains and jungle as 'wild' and 'impenetrable'; at the same time, the utterly synthetic character of Aerochrome's colour register underlines the fictional structure of the film: just as the analogue film distorts recorded reality with an intense pink, so the video's technique is to build fictional elements onto a documentary base.

That the narrative is fragmented yet physically surrounds us, that we cannot resolve the story, that it rebuffs our attempts to make sense of it—all this is part of Mosse's artistic method, resulting in a work that disorients us, bodily caught as we are in the middle of a barrage of information it is impossible to properly survey. We are left swimming around without reliable beacons where for some moments Mosse had let us sail serenely on the surface of the lake.

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