



Sixty Days in Rwanda

The Power of Day and Night in a Brutal Time

Matt Wolfe

Tackling the evil and cruelty inherent in history's bloodiest century is not exactly easy fare, but this is exactly what Bridget Stewart does in *Both are Naked, None is Safe*.

The exhibit focuses on the horrors of war and violence in the twentieth century, with particular emphasis on what took place in Rwanda. The twentieth century, our century, has been the bloodiest in history. It is this same century that produced Hitler, Stalin and the combined 30 million plus deaths for which they were responsible. It is also a century that, as it closes and we are faced with beginning of a new millennium, still finds itself in the clutches of violence and murder. Within the last decade alone, the world has seen mass murder and ethnic cleansing in Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo.

It is in this world in which we all live that Stewart exhibits her work. Stewart attempts to relate the pain, suffering and violence of war through day dreams and night dreams, saying that "our dreams usually take us to comforting places and images while our night dreams process the incidents of the day."

An example of Stewart's layered portrayal of day dreams and night dreams is *Refugee Dreams: The Women Left*, one of five diptychs focusing on refugee

dreams. Done through a collection of monoprint, gum print, transfer print, collage and beeswax on muslin, *The Women Left* consists of two 42" x 22" panels hung beside each other with the left panel depicting the daydream and the right the night dream.

In Rwanda during the time of the war, however, neither daydreams nor night dreams were an escape from the horrors of everyday life. This is seen in *The Women Left* through Stewart's use of colors and layers. Stewart regularly uses prints to add layers to her works, both in the literal sense that there are actual layers woven into the piece and the figurative complexity that it adds to the piece.

This is exemplified in *The Women Left*'s night dream through the use of a print from Picasso's *Guernica*. *Guernica*, Picasso's epic work on the death, pain and destruction wrought by the Spanish bombing of a small Basque village named Guernica, depicts the chaos of war through the cries of grief stricken mothers and the images of death.

Stewart uses a print of a baby, dead, hanging from its mother's arms as the mother wails for the death of her child. Although this is taken from Picasso's *Guernica* in the late 1930's, it could have easily been Rwanda in the early 1990's. The pain and suffering of a mother for her fallen child is universal.

While the diptychs definitely challenge the viewer to think of what these people's lives must have been like, they do not catch the viewer's interest like *Both are Naked's* centerpiece, *Sixty Days in Rwanda: 60 Monotypes*. This mammoth

collection fully utilizes Joseph Nease's lofty ceilings by putting together 60 22" x 16" monotypes done in beeswax on muslin. The 60 monotypes placed on the wall looks like a gigantic TV with 60 individual screens, each one telling a unique, powerful story.

Of the 60 monotypes on the wall, all but one is streaked with red, meant to represent the incredible blood shed by the more than one million people killed in Rwanda. There were several works in *Sixty Days* which told the story, including the fifth day (from left to right, top to bottom). In this piece, a thin, brownish-gray silhouette of a person raises its bloody arms around a head that isn't there. I could almost see the grief this person was enduring—anguish deeper than I will, hopefully, ever experience. I again was reminded of Picasso's *Guernica*, as if the person was moving in slow motion and had just witnessed something so awful that it had pushed them over the edge and into madness.

The first and last day of *Sixty Days* looks like a bloody x-ray of a skeleton complete with broken ribs and a cracked skull. The skull's mouth is still open, however, as if it is still screaming—still experiencing the horrors it laid witness to in its life. The pieces symbolize the ever-present death that marked the beginning and end of Rwanda's sixty days. Again, streaks of red abound, the work, like the war, wash in blood.

Interestingly, the only piece that does not include streaks of blood red paint is one placed directly in the middle of the *Sixty Days*. In it an image of what appears to be a vulture flies above the landscape, looking down at the bloodletting below. Stewart says that it is not a vulture but a hand, though I was not the first person to see a bird of prey looking down at the slaughter. It would be ironic for a vulture to be in the middle of Rwanda's 60 days and be the only living thing prospering. What would be better for a vulture than a massacre?

Such is the irony of war and our bloody century, a story that Stewart, at times, tells with power and clarity. For all the millions of people that have died on the battlefield, in Hitler's concentration camps, Stalin's work camps, Cambodia's killing fields and in the streets here, we survive. Some, like the vulture, even prosper. Stewart's aim is to depart upon the viewer so many stories of want, of how individuals and families fled all that they knew and bore witness to—atrocities beyond the imagination of any horror story writer. She is successful, at the very least, in getting the viewer to think about what has taken place and how, as the end of the millennium approaches, we can keep it from happening again.



Clockwise, from top left: Fred with Tires, Masai Woman and Child, Woman in Sea, Dustin Hoffman.

Work a la Ritts: Objects or Subjects?

Kati Toivanen

The questions raised by the Herb Ritts photographs at the Kemper Museum revolve around the politics of representation, the complex relationship between art and commerce and the role of museums.


Work—the Herb Ritts exhibition, is about illusions, dreams and desires. The first series presented, *Fred with Tires*, includes eight photographs of a young man without a shirt on carrying tires in a garage. The illusion is constructed that Fred works hard and his muscular body is proof of this manual labor. However, the images seem extremely staged and idealized as they illustrate how "work" could be visualized in Hollywood.

Herb Ritts is best known for his fashion photographs and celebrity portraits. Many of his commercial assignments in this show have been published in a variety of magazines as commissioned editorial or advertising images. There

seems to be a trend for commercial photographers (Ritts, Irving Penn, Victor Skrebneski, etc.) to appear in major museums and be given retrospectives. What is the role of museums? To replicate what we see in magazines and billboards every day? To perpetuate the idealized, mostly unattainable dreams constructed by Hollywood and the fashion industry, while also sending a signal that the objectification of the human body is acceptable? In a capitalist society the premise of profit-bearing business practice is a given: what sells will be produced, advertised and sold. But does this approach need to penetrate our museums as well? Is it not the role of museums to educate their audiences, to provide new experiences, to expand minds, and to challenge existing points of view?


The Irving Penn retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago included contact sheets, printing notations, out-takes, etc. to reveal the complexity of the commercial field. I actually learned something from the exhibit. Also, the highly voluptuous female nudes by Penn stood in exciting contrast to the gaunt and fawned fashion models in his commercial work. Unfortunately I cannot say I acquired anything new from the Herb Ritts salon-style exhibition.

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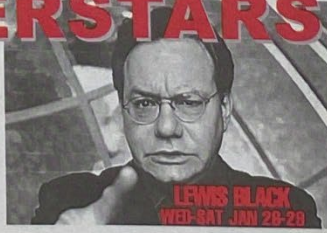
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