IN HARM’S WAY

From war zones to natural disasters, many stories are produced by extreme conditions.

BY GRAY WALKER
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 are in a developed world that seems to live increasingly in a virtual realm, largely isolated from reality while bombarded with images, both actual and contrived, through increasingly sophisticated technologies. Oftn we live in regions of devastation; overwhelmed by a reality that is all too real, yet where there is little place to endure. Still others have gone in search of that reality. They are driven to bear witness, to submerge the borders of existence, to see how people survive under adverse conditions, and to find ways to capture that experience.

For some artists, risk is part of their practice, bared, as they are, by a heightened, lyrical awareness at the cost of life and death and 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 Rwandan genocide, the subject of one of his most powerful projects, asked himself: "How can this be transformed into a work of art?" American painter Steve Mumford went to Iraq for the first time in 2003, shortly after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Rhode Island-born U.S. soldier, he used film, 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 SHANA CLABBER, AND IRLS PHOTOGRAPHER AND VIDEO ARTIST RICHARD MOOSE 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 the author of the Tadanaden Desert, the Arctic Circle, and Indonesian warzones, among other hard locales. She has just returned from filming 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 militiamen, and two Afar police officers; she was told it was the right balance for security, but who really knows? Surrounded by male soldiers, their AK-47s pointed, Biggs was mainly aware that she was white, inexperienced, and off the only women 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 that 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 tracked 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 regime. The Danakil Depression is one of the most survivable 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 no parts of the world where you don't have to pick up a camera in 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 you 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 colored

PHOTOGRAPHED SHANA CLABBER / Double Landscape / Hometown (Ethiopia) 2010-11 / courtesy Janet Biggs, working videos from the Afar Region Project, 2015.
Gladdwell, 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 as Australia's official 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 Khris Marsham-Murray is soon to be released. Gladwell said that he has always been anti-war and anti-learning, 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 extreme sports, playing a kind of Russian roulette to see if he could withstand 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 downtime, waiting time, as well as the troubling and unending nature of it all...

"These were psychiatric environments," he said, "where some people welcomed your presence, others tolerated you, and others tried to kill you. 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. "It 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 two soldiers running along a dusty road with a suicide bomber off to the side. I also asked two soldiers to also perform this almost ritualistic mirror-
Gladding were the very realistic tran-
scenarios used as training aids. They were computer-pro-
grammed 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 car-
nage. "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."

Gladding said he felt conflicted 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 haunt-
ed by the experience. I took photos of soldiers sleeping in
the field, in buses, 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 ex-
perience, and consequently, I have never stopped making
work about it. I am not sure there will ever be closure."

MOSS MADE HIS EXPERIENCE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC
of the Congo the focus of Exilees (2012-13), the coal-
tiscreen installation he showed at the 2013 Venice Bienn-
eale, where he represented Ireland. He said that he had
started out to become a photojournalist and went to Bor-
tnia 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, Moss has worked in many troubled ar-
 eas: 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 na-
ture of the situations that fascinates him as much as it is
the complexity of these narratives and how difficult it is to
recount them. "These are places where personal narra-
tives 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."

Moss wants to make work that is open-ended, that
probes questions. "Embracing ambiguity, not to mention
aesthetics, in places of human suffering may seem unethical to some, and there is an element of trans-
gression 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 artefice,
using color infrared film. "It's a completely different ap-
proach to a conventional documentary; it's also a lot truer
to my own impressions of the place and the situation."

Moss added, "These are also journeys into the self."
Any Westerner arriving in Congo travels in the wake of
Conrad, Girard, Kapuscinski, Naipaul... Congo is a pro-
foundly beautiful place; the soil is fertile but the people
are often famished because war prevents farming, be-
cause they are constantly in flight. Yet they seem extraor-
dinarily warm and happy 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 independ-
ence, since I operate outside of all of the usual institu-
tions. 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 exhaust-
ing yet rewarding is recording in uncertainty."

Moss and his collaborator Trevor Tweeten were once
trapped by artillery fire for about 14 hours during the bat-
tle of Grozny. Moss discovered he was more fragile than
he had realized. As Biggs, Gladding, and Moss noted,
exposure to conflict, even as observers, even without injury, is
changed, complicated, and potentially emotionally dam-
ing. Healing can be slow—and incomplete.


Lilly Wei is an independent curator and a contributing editor of ARTnews.