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After the flood: From Haiti to Britain, one man has captured the devastation of our increasingly deluged lands

Photographer Gideon Mendel's series, Drowning World, not only shows the effect of flooding on communities, but also encompasses traditional portraiture, and explores the often striking visuals such huge influxes of water produce.

HOLLY WILLIAMS | SATURDAY 25 MAY 2013

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How do you produce art about climate change? Everyone from writers to painters to film-makers itch to grapple with this question – but often struggle, getting bogged down in the complicated science, or the worthiness of the subject. It's the same for photographers: "There's a real problem with the image of climate change; it's either evidence – 'the water was up to here, and now it's there' – or it's cute polar bears," says Gideon Mendel.

He has, however, been absorbed with an ongoing photographic project, zooming in on one aspect of climate change: flooding. Mendel's series, *Drowning World*, not only shows the effect of flooding on communities, but also encompasses traditional portraiture, and explores the often striking visuals such huge influxes of water produce.

The floods in Yorkshire in 2007 started him off down this watery route. "I had the idea of photographing drought victims, forest fires, a vast variety [of climate change effects], but what I actually found was there was something Biblical and metaphoric about flood," he explains. "Flooding is very dramatic, and often very beautiful – that mix of suffering and beauty is quite powerful. So there is an activist dimension, but it's quite a conceptual way of doing it."

The project soon gained its own momentum; he followed the British series with images of deluges in India. Soon the photojournalist was attempting to get to major floods, wherever in the world they were rising.

"It's logistically very complicated and expensive," says Mendel, who hasn't always been able to get to floods in time. He regrets not making it to China in 2011, as he is particularly interested in documenting flooding in the very countries that most contribute to increasing CO₂ rates. "I would like to include the major emitters of greenhouse gasses. It's not the sort of thing you can plan or predict, but in theory it would be good to include America and China."

So far, Mendel has shot in seven countries – Britain, India, Haiti (in the year before the earthquake), Pakistan, Australia, Thailand and, most recently, Nigeria. The final of these forms the focus of a new show of Mendel's *Drowning World* series, at Tiwani Contemporary gallery in London. It's curated by Christine Eyene, who uses the Nigerian shots to make up the bulk of the show.

The floods there in November 2012, despite being the worst in 50 years, received almost zero international media coverage. "Flooding is not part of a journalistic narrative from Nigeria," suggests Mendel. "We expect corruption, violence between Muslims and Christians, or polluting oil companies. Also, it's not an easy place to report from. I got there quite late, but the whole of [Bayelsa] state was almost cut off. It was hard to find the resources and to get there in time."

Mendel's photographs not only show the dramatic impact the water has had on people's homes and lives, but also seem to highlight the faith of the community. "What's always interesting about floods is what they show about the society," Mendel agrees. "That Pentecostal thing is huge in Nigeria, and people in their lovely church clothes were having to get through flood water on the way to church."

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In other images throughout the series, Mendel goes full circle by examining the literal impact of flooding on photography. He's taken shots of people holding their own flood-damaged photographs, or of soggy prints drying out. Some, apparently straightforward portraits, are also given a soupy, swimmy look – after even Mendel's own camera and equipment proved no match for the flood water.

Gideon Mendel's Drowning World is at Tiwani Contemporary, London W1, 7 June to 27 July; tiwani.co.uk

