



FACES OF THE FLOOD

Gideon Mendel tells David Land about his powerful project *Drowning World*, which offers a personal perspective on the effects of climate change across the globe, and is currently the subject of an exhibition at Tiwani Contemporary

“It’s an interesting time to be a photographer”, says Gideon Mendel. “When I was photographing the floods in Nigeria, I was shooting on old Rolleiflex twin lens reflex medium format film cameras, and simultaneously doing an Instagram feed from my phone. It was an interesting juxtapa-

position and it was amazing how good the images from my phone were!”

South Africa-born UK-based, Gideon is referring to his project *Drowning World*, a series of portraits of flood victims shot in the UK, India, Haiti, Pakistan, Australia, Nigeria and Thailand, images from which are

currently showing at Tiwani Contemporary Gallery, London.

Conferring individuality on victims of climate change, it is Gideon’s way of engaging with a global issue that is typically presented in terms of faceless statistics.

“My outputs from each flood have devel-



Left Isaac Deruy with a photograph of his grandfather, damaged by floodwaters. Sampo Village, Bayelsa State, Nigeria, November 2012.

Above Wisdom and Lilian Ginikawan, Igbogeni Bayelsa State, Nigeria, November 2012.

oped over the course of the project”, he says. “From 2007-2008, in the UK, India and Haiti, I shot on my Rolleiflexes. From 2010-2011, in Pakistan, Australia, and Thailand, I added video and recorded sound.

“The most recent part of the project was my documentation of the floods in Nigeria at the end of last year, where the new element was a daily Instagram feed of images shot on my iPhone, and I hope eventually to build a multiscreen video installation.

“Climate change is immensely significant in the world today, and this body of work is my

attempt to make visual the threat we all face. My initial idea had been to photograph victims of drought and fire, and the landscapes of these places, but it didn’t really work.

“After I photographed the floods in the north of England in 2007, I went on to floods in India, and began shooting portraits of flood victims, too. It became a sort of social and political dialogue between different parts of the world. So far, I have covered scenes of inundation in seven countries, and I hope to continue photographing flooding for at least the next two years, with the intention

of making a book and exhibition in 2015.”

2015, Gideon points out, is a crucial year: the point which many believe is the last chance moment – without significant agreement by then about reductions in CO₂ emissions, it will become too late to have a real impact on global warming and the destruction it could unleash.

Shooting in a variety of locations emphasises that climate change is a global problem, while Gideon’s work suggests a sense of unity among victims by retaining a coherent style throughout. “When you think of victims of climate change, you imagine people living in the poorest parts of the world”, says Gideon. “But it affects us all.

“There are many debates surrounding whether or not particular floods are consequences of climate change, but what is



inarguable is that we are becoming exposed to more and more of these situations. My intention is to show the subjects' faces, and for their gaze to imply their linked vulnerability, despite the vast differences in their lives and circumstances."

Portraits of flood victims are at the heart of this project, and Gideon often returned with them through deep floodwaters, to make the images within, or in front of, the remains of their homes.

"They address the camera", says Gideon, "looking outward from the landscape of an environmental calamity that has all but destroyed their lives. Their unsettling gaze challenges the viewer, questioning our communal culpability for their plight."

Working with Rolleiflexes on *Drowning World* was a decision Gideon took to slow

down his workflow, and has been integral to the project. "It's so easy to shoot large amounts of frames in this increasingly digital age", he says. "And I like the fact that you have to look down in order to compose with a Rolleiflex. But it's actually quite mad to be shooting with Rolleiflexes in flooded areas. They aren't waterproof, they're heavy, and it's a lot easier working with a digital camera."

Born in Johannesburg, Gideon studied psychology and African history at the University of Cape Town, after which he began working as a freelance photographer, documenting change and conflict in South Africa in the lead up to Nelson Mandela's release from prison.

Gideon moved to London in 1990, and began to focus on responding to social is-

sues globally. He has been challenging the stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS since 1993, working on projects with charities and campaigning organisations such as The Global Fund, Shelter, ActionAid and Unicef.

His work has earned him international acclaim, including six World Press Photo Awards, first prize in the American Photo Images of the Year Competition, and the Amnesty International Media Award for Photojournalism.

Last year, *Drowning World* was adapted for an exhibition at Somerset House, which featured 31 images from six countries, while the current show at Tiwani Contemporary takes a different approach. Curated by Christine Eyene, it focuses on the trip Gideon made to Nigeria in November last year, when the country was experiencing



Left Walking to Church through floodwaters, Igbogeni Bayelsa State, Nigeria, November 2012.
Above Adlene Pierre Savanne Desolée, Gonaïves, Haiti, September 2008 (Water damaged film).

its worst flooding in 50 years.

“Christine is very engaged with African art”, explains Gideon, “and she proposed to do an exhibition from my project with Nigeria as its focus. I wouldn’t have thought to put that work together, so it’s nice to have a different perspective on things.”

While the show may be primarily focused on Nigeria, there is another facet to it – the mark of water. “When I was photographing in Haiti, I was working with two Roliflexes, and they both went in the water”, says Gideon. “I dried them out as quickly as I could, and they still worked, but there was quite a bit of moisture inside.

“Because of the humidity and the heat, all the images I’d shot were mucked up in different ways. One picture I got was quite beautiful though, and it’s interesting to see the direct impact of the floodwater on the film, as opposed to photographing it.

“When I shot flooding in Australia, the water was very quick, and went away within 24 hours. I was photographing a street being cleared, and I found a pile of photographs that were still wet. I managed to separate them and dry them out. There must have been something in the water that caused a chemical reaction. I’m exhibiting these in the show, too.”

One particularly striking image that demonstrates flood damage to imagery was

taken in Nigeria. “I was photographing in a town where there was a sea of mud”, says Gideon. “I found a local portrait photographer, and he was trying to dry out some pictures he had been given to copy by his grandfather. I photographed him clutching a damaged photograph of a relative.”

Best known as a photojournalist, Gideon describes the Tiwani Contemporary exhibition as, “... on the borderline of art and photojournalism”, and adds that he hopes it will help raise his profile in the art world.

“A lot of my work has been conceptual, but initially I was a traditional reportage photojournalist”, he says. “Now I work as a less objective photojournalist. It’s almost been a natural progression.”

Exhibitions are providing Gideon with well deserved exposure, and work from *Drowning World*, including a video installation, was shown at the International Center of Photography (ICP) Triennial in New York, earlier this year.

“As a part of that, my work featured in a rotating series of installations in the 13 massive windows of the ICP’s 43rd Street and Sixth Avenue building”, he says. “It was in a very public position – an amazing showcase – and I am grateful for the opportunity.”

Finding himself sceptical about the role of social media, Gideon committed while in Nigeria to what he calls his ‘Instagram Manifesto’:

to’: an undertaking to try upload at least one interesting photograph per day - no filters, no distressed borders. Pure photography.

“I am half way through now, and I can honestly say I am addicted”, he says. “I’ve learnt a lot about social media, but I still have many questions. Are you just giving something away for free? Is it an interesting way to connect to an audience, or just a narcissistic performance?”

Despite his reservations, Gideon concedes that tools such as Twitter are a useful way of raising awareness of his work, and subsequently the important causes that it highlights.

He says, “When I was in Nigeria, although I had very few followers on Twitter, my pictures got re-Tweeted frequently, which brought more global coverage to the floods. They weren’t being covered much by the media, and I found the speed at which social media could draw attention to things remarkable.

“I have over 4000 followers on Instagram, meanwhile. They are watching the world through my eyes, and seeing what I am seeing. It’s amazing. You wouldn’t be able to achieve that through a gallery space.”

Coming from a stills photography background, Gideon has shot video in four countries in connection with *Drowning World*.

“As a photographer, you are used to picking your strongest pictures and building a narrative around that”, he says. “God knows what’s coming next in media. I am sure everything will be shaken up, and who knows what’s going to be left behind?”

“Newspapers will always be around, although in what format we don’t know. I love holding and reading newspapers. I can’t get my head around reading them on a tablet, although that’s how a lot of people do it these days. But I believe there will always be a desire for the physical object – the print.”

With regard to future plans, Gideon reveals that he has publishers interested in turning *Drowning World* into a book, but adds, “It’s a difficult project to plan, as you can’t predict where and when these disasters are going to happen.

“Responding to floods in China and America is definitely the biggest priority, as they are the two largest emitters of greenhouse gases. It is a financially and logistically challenging project, so I am pursuing a number of fundraising initiatives, including applying for grants and issuing a limited edition set of prints.”

David Land

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DROWNING WORLD Gideon Mendel

- **To 27 July** Selection of *Drowning World* images, chosen by curator Christine Eyene, focusing on the recent work from Nigeria
- Tiwani Contemporary
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www.tiwani.co.uk