

As I Was Dying:

an exhibition by Paolo Pellegrin

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Most of us spend our lives avoiding environments or situations that are fraught with danger content to watch world events unfold from the comfort, and comparative safety, of our homes. That certainly cannot be said of Italian photographer Paolo Pellegrin who has spent much of the past decade in the world's political hotspots – Darfur, Haiti, Kosovo, Iraq, Lebanon – in his pursuit to capture the human condition in times of conflict.

His photographs have appeared in publications around the world and he is the recipient of numerous prizes including multiple Photographer of the Year awards, eight World Press Photo awards and the W. Eugene Smith Grant in Humanistic Photography (2006). He is currently contracted to *Newsweek* and lives between Rome and New York, although he is rarely at home admitting to being on the road 300 days of the year.

In February we caught up with Paolo via an unreliable phone link between Melbourne and Amman, Jordan where he was on assignment to document the Iraqi

Diaspora into Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. He hopes to make his inaugural visit to Australia in April where his black and white exhibition, *As I Was Dying*, premieres at Foto Freo (www.fotofreo.com.au) in Perth.

As opposed to his previous exhibitions which have followed a particular theme or specific issues, "the idea behind *As I Was Dying* is to put works together in an organic way representing different countries and different stories," says Pellegrin.

The exhibition features works from 25-30 countries and is "more than the sum of all these individual stories.

I've put them together to create a statement on the human condition and what I've worked on and been exposed to in the last ten years which for the most part relates to conflict and conflict trauma revolving around humanity living in extreme situations."

"When I started in photography I wanted to use it to investigate social issues, to use it to tell stories of people. In the past decade I have made a more conscious, focused effort to explore the world of Islam in a broad sense, not only in Arabic countries, but also Pakistan, Afghanistan and Africa. This is one of the great issues

LIBERIA. Banga. Funeral of the Governor of the Bassa Tribe.



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LEBANON. Beirut. Aug 2006. Moments after Israeli air strike destroys several buildings in Dahia.



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and topics of our age – the different relationships between Islam and the West and the volatile relationship within aspects of Islam itself. I want to try to investigate that.” Having shot on film for years Pellegrin has recently made the transition to digital - photography and printing. Works for this exhibition have been printed on the HP Designjet Z3100 series printer which uses twelve Viverra Pigment Inks including seven colors, four blacks, and a gloss enhancer for glossy and semi-gloss media. The HP Quad-Black ink system - matte black, photo black, grey and light gray – produces continuous tones and rich blacks. The HP Designjet Z3100 ensures Pellegrin’s striking black and white photographs are reproduced at a standard that meets the meticulous criteria of this artist. HP is also a sponsor of the exhibition in Australia. Moving to digital forced Pellegrin out of the darkroom and into a closer relationship with his computer. “I had done a lot of darkroom work and was really very much into that world, very interested by the complete process - shoot, develop, control. I wanted to have that with digital.”

But at the end of the day he is more focused on the composition. “That’s where I put my emphasis and energy - into my gaze and my compassion for what I have in front of me. I try to build and articulate a vision, one which makes sense for me and hopefully to others. The medium is important but only as a tool to get to the end result.” Fundamental to his success in capturing the essence of the moment is his integrity in honouring the ‘contract’ he has with the subject, and also with the viewer. “I have to be witness to something and not change or manipulate or alter what I see, what I tell. Of course I know that my presence in a way alters the situation. But that is the only alteration I allow myself. Even then I try as much as I can to disappear and be unobtrusive, to document and record what is in front of me in my way which is different to yours and to others, and is filtered by the nature of who we are in that given moment.” On assignment he carries a camera and a couple of lenses keeping his gear to a minimum in a bid “to use equipment that doesn’t impose itself on the scene.”

There are not only physical dangers in what he does – he has been injured a number of times whilst dodging bullets and missiles - but also emotional ones. Having witnessed some of the most harrowing moments in modern times one could assume Pellegrin is hardened to what he sees, but the timbre of his voice quickly dispels any notion that he has become impervious. “I am constantly exposed to the suffering of others, year after year, story after story. It has become an aspect of my life. To some extent what I do, my function, is something which protects me and gives a sense and a meaning. That helps me to go through the experience, but it doesn’t defend or protect you entirely.” As I Was Dying – Sponsored by HP is on show as part of the Foto Freo festival at the WAMM Gallery in Perth 5 April - June 4 2008.

For more information on Paolo’s work visit: www.magnumphotos.com