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Martine Perret's United Nations



Melody and her partner
after sex. Dili, East Timor.

A full-time photographer with the United Nations, Martine Perret has often found herself in the middle of violent conflicts as she documents the organisation's peace-keeping activities. Interview by Alison Stieven-Taylor

Tracer bullets scream across the night sky, dust from exploding earth and shattered trees fills the air with a thick haze, people run blindly through the streets in an attempt to escape, panic adding to confusion. And a lone photographer stands her ground to capture history as it unfolds.

This photographer is French-Australian Martine Perret, today one of only nine photographers assigned

full-time to the United Nations (UN). This scene – which was played out in Burundi, a land-locked African country bordered by Rwanda, Tanzania and DR Congo – was the first assignment for Martine with the UN as a volunteer. It was 2004. At the time Martine was living in Timor Leste (East Timor). She'd first visited this country to cover the independence celebrations two years earlier as a freelance photographer.

"It is Robert McFarlane's fault I went to East Timor," she laughs.

"I was attending his master-class in Sydney. He asked the students what they were interested in shooting. I had been talking to a Timorese guy that morning at a café and he was excited about his country's independence. So when it came for me to answer Robert's question, I said I was going to East Timor."



LEFT: Peppi getting dressed, Dili, East Timor.

BELOW: Tuta getting ready for a fashion show, Dili, East Timor.

BELOW LEFT: Women crying at Alfredo Reinado's funeral in Dili, East Timor.



"I was doing all sorts of things to survive – postcards, exhibitions, working with NGO and UN agencies as a freelancer and sending photos to newspapers in Australia."

Through her contacts Martine applied as a UN volunteer.

"One day I got a call and was told the elections are going to be on in Burundi and we need a photographer and do you want to go? I'd been a year-and-a-half in Dili and I needed the work. I didn't know where Burundi was. I went there and it was a huge change from East Timor which, in 2004, was politically quiet in comparison. In Burundi on the first night, a girlfriend of mine who was also there with an electoral team picked me up and we went to a really dodgy, crappy hotel. At night there was shooting in the hills and you could see the tracer bullets and I'm thinking 'Where am I?' I was really freaking." Martine stayed in Burundi for a year.

"When the UN mission starts up, it's frantic. You have no desk, no computer, no chair, no cameras. I knew that so I came with my own equipment. My first assignment in Burundi was meant to be of a post-massacre site full of rebels and mines and headless victims. That was going to be my Monday morning job. I thought it was ridiculous and I refused.

"And thank God I did, as we learned later we had been given wrong information, it was a set-up. It sur-

In To Africa

After shooting her photo essay on the East Timor independence celebrations Martine returned to Australia, "...but freelance work was diminishing with the dailies and my relationship had broken down, I didn't think there was any reason to stay.

"I was starting to think about going to Cambodia and then all of a sudden I thought 'I'm an idiot. I just went to East Timor last year. Why don't I try there? So I took my two suitcases and flew to Dili and thought, 'Let's see what I can do'."

What was proposed as a two-month visit turned into an 18-month stay. Effusive and friendly, Martine quickly made contacts.

And she took off for a new adventure into the unknown as she has done many times in her life. At 19, Martine left her native France with a degree in international relations and a thirst to see the world. In the 1990s she made her way to Australia. On her second visit she met her partner and settled in Sydney in 1997.

"There was no clear path that led me to photography. I just started to take night classes and suddenly I had a new career direction," she states cheerfully. At the time she taught French to make ends meet as she attempted to pick up freelance work. A chance encounter led to a job on the picture desk at the *Financial Review* and Martine entered the world of photojournalism.



Child soldier in Kambutao, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

prised me because I never refuse a job, but this one sounded too crazy."

Emotional Exhaustion

After her time in Burundi, Martine was emotionally exhausted and ready to resign.

"I went to France in winter to visit with my parents, but it was too cold so I headed to Bali to relax. After two months I was bored and went to Aceh. It was a year-and-a-half after the tsunami and I needed to do something creative for myself. I stayed there for two months and did a multimedia piece; a self-funded, 25-minute film about a fisherman's life after the tsunami. I followed my fisherman everyday. It was really great."

By March 2007 Martine was back in Africa, caught up in the fighting between the Republican Guard and MLC troops in Kinshasa in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

"I worked non-stop for 48 hours. There was shooting in the streets, the whole city had shut down and bombs were going off. That was my first really strong experience because we were evacuating and I had to photograph the evacuation. Can you imagine a city of six million and it is empty except for the dead bodies? It was pretty confronting. And we were evacuating people and some died next to me while we were driving them. It was really intense."

As many photojournalists have told me over the years, plunging deep into her work and focusing on

"I always remember that man who died next to me. I didn't know who he was, but he was in total delirium and kept saying the same thing over and over again and he then just died. This pained me."

getting the shots shielded Martine from the horrors she was witnessing, if temporarily.

"Seeing people dying in front of you is pretty disturbing. I was concentrating on the peacekeepers. You know; when shit is happening what is the UN doing? It's my job to show they are busy helping and evacuating. In Kinshasa there was a lot of distress, people were locked in compounds and it was very dangerous. We had to liberate them."

As she continues, Martine's French accent thickens with the telling of the tale.

"At this moment my role is to be the witness and to record what is happening and, as long as I am doing that, I'm fine. It's at night time your mind plays up, and I always remember that man who died next to me. I didn't know who he was, but he was in total delirium and kept saying the same thing over and over again and he then just died. This pained me."

After two frantic days photographing the mayhem and sending photos to New York, Martine finally was able to rest in an abandoned house. Sitting in what had once been someone's home in the now shattered city, she couldn't stop thinking about "...all the children in the world going through war and how terrible it must be. Those of us who live in Australia or France don't know that kind of existence. I thought about those who live with war everyday and I was going through it for the first time in my life. It is terrifying."

In Perspective

The Kinshasa experience still rattles Martine, but she uses it to put her own life in perspective.

"When I'm having a bad day, it's like 'Come on, snap out of it!' All the people living in horrible situations, all the places where there are daily bombings. It taught me a lot of things. I didn't suffer from depres-



PROFILE

RIGHT: Portuguese FPU (UN police) patrol.

BELOW: FARDC (the DR Congo army) participating in tactics training.



"Can you imagine a city of six million and it is empty except for the dead bodies? It was pretty confronting."

sion afterwards, but there is one thing I wish I could still do today and that is talk it through with someone because I never did, but I am okay with it, I'm fine".

After her assignment in the DR Congo, Martine went back to Dili this time with the UN to cover the elections in 2007, a temporary assignment that turned into a full-time offer.

"I never expected to stay in East Timor, but there is something about this place, many people work here and leave and then come back again. I don't know why. For me I felt I was really living history. There have been a lot of things happen, but now it is fairly quiet."

There isn't a lot of 'quiet' in the life of a UN photographer. So when Martine found she wasn't working seven days a week, she decided to do something for herself and went in search of a story yet to be told.

"In Dili, in my daily life, it took me a long time to know what would I really want to photograph – something close to my heart. In my neighbourhood I could see there were quite a number of men who dressed as women. We are in a very conservative Catholic patriarchal society and it struck me, 'How are they surviving in such an environment?' So I started asking myself this question and it came to the point where I said 'I have to do this'."

It took Martine months of research and interviews before she started to talk directly with the transsexuals.

"In Dili we talk about HIV awareness and female sex workers, but the transvestite population is virtually ignored. I ended up interviewing all the people working with this group. There was very little information. The few things that had been written about the trans-



UN photographer Martine Perret. Portrait by David Dare Parker.

sexuals had been burned in the 2006 crises so I was in virgin territory".

At first her meetings were about gaining trust.

"I would have coffee and a chat. Then, later, I started taking photographs. They love posing and a lot of photos I took were for them, not for my project. In

the end, we got to a point where I was no longer contacting them, they were coming to me and that was a big achievement. It is difficult in East Timor to go under the layers in society".

As Martine built her friendship with the transsexuals, she was invited further into their world. One had been beaten by his brothers, another exiled by his father. For many, life is hard under the disapproving gaze of others and often her choice of shooting location was dictated to by the individual's situation.

"I shot one of the transsexuals in an abandoned house so he could feel safe. That house is now the site of a hotel and when they excavated they discovered bodies, Mon Dieu!" She continues, "Another time I was photographing Melody. She works in a beauty salon and has a boyfriend who is married with two children. In the photograph she is standing with her boyfriend sitting on the bed. When I took the picture it was hilarious because the painting of Christ on the wall kept falling down. She kept putting him back up and, as soon as I shot, it fell down again. To me it was perfect. It was Sunday and they'd just had sex. They allowed me to photograph them in a very private moment".

Martine's quiet time is now over. In June she left for the Western Sahara with the UN for a three-week mission. Asked what she was going to do after that, she answered with a very French shrug of her shoulders and a broad grin that said, 'Who knows, but it will be an adventure.' **QP**

*Alison Stieven-Taylor is an author and photographer based in Melbourne. For more information visit www.realityillusion.com and www.astloveslife.blogspot.com. Her latest book, *Rock Chicks*, profiles the leading female rock stars from the 1960s to today.*

Photography by Martine Perret, copyright 2010.