



ARTS ILLUSTRATED



Sculpture and text by Riyas Komu



A Shot of Reverence

In a rare interview with veteran photographer Don McCullin, a lot was revealed – about the challenges of being a photographer, of living with memories, of making sense of the intricate filaments that make up our realities – but most of all, McCullin revealed that between the photographer and the photograph there are many worlds that exist

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Don McCullin, Image Courtesy of The English Group

The first time I held an SLR camera in my hand as a media student in Mumbai, I felt invincible. It was as if someone had thrown a mask on my face and tied a cape around my neck and any moment now I would up, up, and away with the trusty camera in my hand. That feeling lasted for exactly two seconds, because soon I was drowning in a barrage of instructions – no paw marks on the lens, make sure the body of the camera is placed on your palm, check the focus, study the light, set your exposure, decide your shutter speed, remember the ISO number of your film, look at the frame, compose the shot – it was endless and it was exhilarating. Eventually, you learn to internalise all of that, you learn to read the image for what it is, you learn to listen to the stories the camera will show you, and you build a sense of unimpeachable reverence for this process of revelation unfolding in front of your eyes. Something, perhaps, like what Clark Kent would feel as he changed into his Superman persona – the mask and the cape might be tools, but the reverence for change is as real as the ‘S’ blazoned on his chest.

Amidst the deluge of images we live in today – we are either taking pictures, or looking at pictures, or commenting on pictures – this reverence might be hard to understand or come by. It might be hard to fathom that a photograph isn’t an app for our memories to be clicked with the alacrity of a hungry beaver, and probably harder still to wade through the dissonance of constantly shifting pixels in virtual space without unconsciously becoming inure to images that matter, to voices that scream.

I spoke to Don McCullin, who for the past 50 years has given us an unerring dose of human darkness with his war photographs shot in Africa, Asia and the Middle East and his photographs that document everyday social wars on our streets, and realised I was speaking to someone who was achingly honest at best – ‘I have seen conflict over a long time in countries in the Middle East, Asia and Africa and I am usually there a couple of weeks at a time. I know I am just passing through, and it’s a job – a good job – one that is organised on a limited budget. So I am just trying to do

my job, and trying to tell the truth of the story through my images’ – and searingly honest at worst – ‘I never give interviews as they irritate me, and the only reason I agreed to this interview is because you are from India and India is my favourite country. I have been visiting every year for the past 46 years now’ – but that candour, which could have only matured with the experience of age, never left the 40-minute duration of the interview. And it is something you see in his images as well that despite capturing some of human nature’s bleakest, darkest and weakest moments, it always carries a vestige of truth – Irreconcilable Truth, if you must, Don’s aptly named collection of over 700 photographs – that reaches out to us and settles on our skin like early morning mist, reminding us that perhaps the only thing that separates the two entirely different worlds that the word ‘shooting’ carries is this thing called reverence.



To buy a copy of this book, log on to www.donmccullin.com



Early Morning, West Hartlepool, 1963

The Guvnors in their Sunday Suits, Finsbury Park, London, 1958

Sheep going to the Slaughter, Early Morning, Near the Caledonian Road, London, 1965

A dead Vietnamese soldier and his plundered belongings, Hue, 1968

US Soldiers tormenting a civilian in the old city of Hue during the offensive, Tet, Hue, 1968



Excerpts from the interview

What is the image that comes to your mind when you think of this word ‘conflict’? It may or may not be something you have photographed, but something that is irrevocably registered in your mind.

At this juncture it would be the image of the little boy, bomb blasted in Syria, sitting in that hospital van with blood on his face that absolutely disrupted the world. The other image that really shocked me would be the dead boy washed up on the beach in Greece. Both of these images weren’t taken by reputed or celebrity photographers just passing through, but perhaps by lesser qualified individuals, though the impact was big.

Which brings me to the next question – about images irrevocably registered in your mind. Because photographs are also, unconsciously, narratives of our feelings, of what we project on to the image through the camera. Not as tangible things, of course, but as fleeting shadows. With images that are seared in your mind as against the photograph we see, where would you place Don the photographer? Behind the image in your mind or behind the photograph we see? Which one leads to the other?

It’s my emotional commitment to where I am at that moment on behalf of the people. I am doing this voluntarily. Even though this is a job for the Sunday Times, I didn’t have to get on that plane, I could have stayed away. But I did, and I am on a mission, so I had a certain persuasion for what I was doing, for the innocent bystanders of people who become victims. I have seen people murdered in Beirut – and the murderers are ruthless – and I had to walk away because I couldn’t help. You are a small pin in a very big cog, your opinions don’t matter; nothing matters. It’s very difficult because you want to help, you want to stop suffering, and sometimes your presence could be dangerous and precipitate the

violence. Maybe it is the danger of tormenting where you want to degrade the victim. It’s pathetic. You can’t raise any questions and just have to do your job.

You have said before that the label of ‘war photographer’ is an uncomfortable one to carry, and yet that is how you are described most times. And this is something to do with how much we tend to love labels and categories – many times, issues of conflict too are neatly pigeonholed, making the complex simple. Do you think, sometimes, labels hinder one’s experience of reality?

I think in the Western world and in India, one is constantly looking for titles. Celebrities are associated with titles trying to up their profile. But in my line, I am ashamed of the awards I get, for the kind of brutal suffering I have seen and documented. I don’t want to stand on the bodies of other people. And it is not a good place to be in; it is a very bad place sometimes being a war photographer. The famous British actor Albert Finney, when he received his Knighthood, said ‘no, thank you’ and that he was satisfied with the title of Mr. So I am very happy just being a photographer; it’s enough for me.

Poet Raúl Zurita, who witnessed and lived through Pinochet’s rule in Chile, writes in one of his interviews that even though he was jailed only for six weeks, those six weeks have never left him. And you have talked about this too in your earlier interviews, about the smell and voices of war never leaving you. While Raúl’s was an unexpected experience, yours is tied in much more deeply to your profession as a photographer – it’s a choice you make. Do you then find yourself constantly and consciously trying to find the right voice through which you can navigate this space of collected memories in your work today?

This was one of the best questions for me. I was imprisoned during a war, too, in Uganda for four days. It was during Idi Amin’s regime in the early 1970s, an out-of-control, powerful, despot ruler of Africa who was expelling

the Indian population. I was there for the Sunday Times and was in my hotel when I was taken to the military prison. Those four days, trapped inside the prison cell, with just the bare walls around me, the blood around me, the killings and the beating I witnessed... it’s a dark side that steals your soul away from you. You are never the same again. It wasn’t six weeks for me, but those four days after which they let us go – one day, in fact – was enough. I am surprised my hair didn’t go white.

In retrospect, what do you find harder to reconcile with – the silence of memories or the noise of conflict?

It’s the silence of memories, that’s all I ever do. The silence gets louder and louder and starts drumming, especially at night when I go to bed. It’s a kind of conflict with no conclusion. The sound of conflict, though, is like an adrenalin rush. There are many photographers who like it, that noise. You have danced with death and you go into it not knowing the outcome and it is like death has let you go and you come back to your hotel room, sip a beer and you are a normal human being. I don’t mean to shock you, but, in honesty, this is what happens. You go to these places and come back to your normal life, but the emotional struggles continue in your head all the time. Even if you are not there. I can just switch on the television and I am there, especially with what is happening in the Middle East, which is no different from World War II. So it just is a constant turning it on and you don’t know how to turn it off.

When you look at your own photographs, what do you notice first? The technicality of the photograph itself, or the moment it carries within? More importantly, with time and distance, which one takes precedence over the other?

Frankly, it’s not the technicality. The first thing that strikes me



Tormented, Homeless
Irishman, Spitalfields,
London, 1969



when I look at my own photograph is 'Did I do that?' 'When did I do it?' I have these doubts of whether I stood in front of that image and clicked that button. All the technicality I can bring when I am in the darkroom. But in the battlefield it is just me, the camera and the exposure meter to get my exposure right. Technicality is a by-product in the image. It's the people, the cultures, the climates – it's a different journey when I see the image. Any war is terrible, and I am only talking about the battlefields. You also have your social wars. I get so angry when young photographers call and ask me how to become a war photographer. So I tell them, you want to become a war photographer, go to the streets in your city.

We are, no doubt, living in the age of the photograph. As a photographer, do you feel that we are losing the sense of appreciating or connecting with a photograph today?

The irony is that all of them are instant trophy pictures. It's absurd. There are some ten million photographs taken on a daily basis. The photograph was meant to keep a family record. We walk this earth for a very short time and it was meant to be a record of your journey. But today, it's a tidal wave, a tsunami of photographs and this is not photography, it's a social activity. But, having said that, if not for the mobile phone cameras, we wouldn't know of what was happening in Syria and the awfulness going on there.

And, finally, do you think your role as a photographer is to break the paradox we all seem to be living in – of isolated lives in virtual communities? Do you think that is the power of an image deeply felt and consciously crafted?

It was the role. It has lost its way now because the art world encroached on the photography world and vice versa. Photography is now meant to be communication and not a record and all the money is being kept away for that. Editors and proprietors have lost interest in the truth now. There is a celebrity overspill, clever advertising and narcissism, and photography is losing its role as the finder of truth.



Unemployed Men
Gathering Coal,
Sunderland, Early
1970s

Christian Woman
with Hand Grenade,
Holiday Inn, Beirut,
1976

Mother and son in
their slum kitchen,
Bradford, 1978

All images © Don
McCullin, courtesy of
Hamiltons Gallery,
London

അകത്താരപ്പുറത്താർ
ശോകസ്തംഭം വരും

Who is inside
Who is outside
Await the pillarstop
of repentance
