I am documenting the personal stories of people that we have known for twenty years, and who suffered during the Khmer Rouge Genocide of 1975-1979.

This is a multi-faceted project, with activities that will go on past the MA. Photography, text, voice recording, and video are all part of it.

In this Work in Progress, I am combining infrared photographs with quotes from Sarath, a survivor of the Genocide, and my friend.

The aim is to create images which only give up the horror of place when studied, so engaging the audience without being overly literal. The eye should move from image to text, and back again. Each of the images stands alone, although the series narrates a story.

The work involves paradox, with haunting images, possibly even beautiful ones, uncovering personal suffering and social atrocity.
Over the years, my documentary practice has evolved towards a desire to change people’s
perceptions about social issues. Robert Frank summed this up perfectly.

‘Above all, life for a photographer cannot be a matter of indifference, and it is important to see
what is invisible to others’. (1958).

Bill Jay went further, making it essentially an ethical responsibility to share the truth, a view I share.

‘While images still have the capacity to disturb us, I have hopes for both the human race and

I am guided by the principle that ‘we are more the same than we are different, although the details
of difference matter’. Photographers can tell the truth in respectful and ethical ways. although, as
Susie Linfield pointed out, the audience still remains responsible ‘for the ethics of seeing’.

In the current project and unlike previous documentary work, such as on the Sugar Daddy culture
in East Africa, I am not recording events as they happen. I am going back in time, so dealing with
aftermath. I am revealing stories that have been hidden, where closure has not yet occurred.

My story starts with our first family visit to Cambodia. It was a sunny day at Angkor Wat, when,
suddenly we heard the distant rumbles of shellfire. We then realised we were close to an ongoing
war zone. The year was 1994, and the guns jump-started our understanding of Cambodia and love for its people. The Genocide, which killed 1.7-2.2 million people, stopped in 1979. But parts of the country remained under Khmer Rouge control until Pol Pot died, in 1998.

When the 1999 Reconciliation process started, we funded a primary school project, including teacher training and libraries. We met local Khmer Rouge leadership. The program, administered by Save the Children, gathered significant Cambodian and international support, and involved more than 130,000 children.

There are two audiences for this project.

First, in Cambodia, I want to contribute to opening-up examination of this painful subject. It is rarely discussed, and I am deeply aware of its cathartic impact on Sarath and my other friends.
And, second, internationally, I want to reach an audience who may have forgotten (or not even know) about the history and lessons of the Genocide.

For both audiences, the project is not memorialisation or reconciliation. Rather, I am seeking to appeal to the imagination, to engender reconsideration \(^{iv}\), and to hopefully draw lessons.

My CRJ includes research on documentary, atrocity, aftermath and dark tourism. I am also studying imagination, realism and ethics. There is a rich history of concerned atrocity photography, despite the protestations of post-modernists such as Susan Sontag \(^{v}\).

My photography has usually been indexical, despite a history as an abstract painter. Tantalisingly, Hariman and Lucaites suggest that a deeper sense of realism is needed to prompt imagination.

‘Realism requires imagination to be more than mere information, but the imagination needs realism as well’. (2016: 95).

I originally thought that archives, rephotography and portraits would be the key. But I over-relied on index, and photographs of infamous sites meant that ‘dark tourism’ \(^{vi}\) was a justified critique.

Whilst I believe that public exposure to images of Genocide can both bear witness and testify for change \(^{vi}\), I am not covering current events. Rather, I am working more in the style of Susan Meiselas (Kurdistan) and Allan Sekula (Fish Story). Meiselas and Sekula’s work was research intensive, creating rich, narrative series – in Sekula’s words, ‘critical realism’.

This is in stark contrast with the equally real but cerebral documentary from such as Bernd & Hilla Becher, whose work influenced Andreas Gursky and Axel Hütte.
Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin’s *Red House*, an Iraqi torture facility, is instructive. Whilst somewhat abstract and typological in their portrayal of graffiti, the work is thought-provoking.

Who were the people that made the traces, and what happened to them? Yet, the series lacks the context of the prison, and the photographs could be almost anywhere.

Pieter Hugo also captured the detritus of atrocity, in his work on the Rwandan Genocide.

Hugo wanted to keep a certain distance away from the victims, adopting a rigorous and methodical approach. The aesthetic is powerful, although that ‘distance’ makes it unexpectedly impersonal.
Natalie Herschdorfer identified the need to connect place to the human experience of atrocity.


Sophie Ristelhueber in many ways defined the ‘aftermath’ genre, and she commented:

'I have these obsessions … with the deep mark, with the ruptured surface, with scars and traces, traces that human beings are leaving on the earth. It is not a comment on the environment … it is metaphysical'. (Brutvan, 2001).

Fig 6. Ristelhueber. 2001. Fait #46.

Her work is engaging, almost poetic, though Ristelhueber doesn't tell individual stories.

My initial exploration of Traces was, unfortunately, still 'dark tourist', and lacked intimacy.
My next work, *I Missed my Mother* was more metaphorical.

It used traces to share a specific personal experience; Sarath’s walk through the jungle to see his Mother. He left the Khmer Rouge camp overnight, escaping wolves and evading soldiers.

The effect is more personal and coherent, although in retrospect lacked visceral impact.

To move ‘traces’ forward, I experimented with cyanotypes, including digital cyanotypes.
There was something of a light-bulb moment when I realised the power of negatives as a symbol of the real, without being real.

Jean Baudrillard wrote that, in today’s image-soaked environment:

‘… it is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real’. (1981: 2).

A negative is such a substitution for the real. Negatives are a representation of the hidden, which without developing we cannot see. Negatives require thought, interpretation, and study to extract meaning. Negatives, in the Cambodian context, could also be an allegory for an appalling history.

Diana Blok suggested ways that negatives could elicit enquiry from the viewer.

‘The process of inversion unexpectedly transforms the texture of the wall and re-creates the experience of time, texture and wishes which come to light’. (Artist Statement viii).

*Fig 11. Yates. 2018. Experimentation.*

*Fig 12. Blok. 2013. Time Tells.*
I first used negatives for *Landings* in 2018.


At that time, the series was not telling a story – it was based on the earlier work.

In the last Work in Progress, I also used digital negatives, but this time to retell Sarath’s story.


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The series was well-received in Cambodia and elsewhere. The title *Prayer from Hell* came from Youk Chhang, the founder of the Documentary Centre of Cambodia.

MA assessment suggested that this could indeed be a useful approach to engage audiences.

‘The technique you have used might not be to everyone’s liking but it gets people to stop, think and ask questions on the subject of Khmer Rouge Genocide, then that’s positive.’

There is still, however, a nagging concern that negatives could detract from the serious narrative. Another potential weakness is that the geographic context of the Genocide may be lost.

On this issue, Shneer commented that Western memory of the Holocaust has the liberation of the camps as an indelible imprint.

Yet, as the Soviet army approached Germany, their photographic record was full of forensic landscapes of ‘killing fields’, and not liberation. Geography was the focus, and thus:

‘Soviet photography [is] more reflective of the experience of Genocide than the human drama of survival ... in American and British photography’. (2014: 246).

These ‘hidden places’ of atrocity are similar to Cambodia, where there are thousands of ‘Killing Fields’.

Christian Schwager’s work on the aftermath in Bosnia used similar landscapes. Some of his photographs show landmines ‘in situ’. Others show panoramas, and the series encourages re-consideration of the impact and aftermath of war.
Yet, for me, there is a sense of observation, rather than emotional engagement.

What did the landscape mean to local inhabitants, rather than to the photographer?

Judy Glickman Lauder used a mix of black and white, negatives and infrared in her work on the Danish exception to the Holocaust. The intuitive, aesthetic process she employs is inspirational.

‘In the darkroom, if the negative itself expressed more of what I was seeing and feeling, we created a print in which the light and darks were reversed’. (2018: 149).
Glickman Lauder’s infrareds punctuate the other types of image, without disconnecting the audience from the story. Her unusual aesthetic adds to narrative power, rather than disrupts it.

'I felt that infrared film gave my images a feeling of timelessness'. (2018: 149).

The overall effect of the work is ghostly, eerie and has a melancholy sense of time. It also confirms that black and white, rather than colour, is a powerful way to tell Unfinished Stories of atrocity.

Compare this with the Richard Mosse’s infrareds.
From Jason Stearns’ review:

“When [Mosse] asked if I could take his picture, he shook his head. “You’re going to take my picture to Europe and show it to other white people. What do they know about my life?

He was not altogether wrong. All too often we have reduced the conflict in Congo to a spectacle of crazed warlords … But … Mosse’s approach makes us look again … to look slightly beneath the surface to understand the actors and their motivations’. (Stearns, 2011)

Mosse’s motivation, to get an audience to look again, and reconsider events, seems identical to mine. The red (or pink) is a natural symbol of blood.

But, unlike Mosse, and more like Glickman Lauder, I seek a quieter, more respectful, and yet still impactful aesthetic, to do justice to deeply painful stories.

Coming into Informing Contexts, I have moved from indices to metaphors, and from colour to black and white. From the obvious and the real, to the less real.


This module, I converted a camera to infrared and shot another series of A Prayer from Hell.

I then compared colour, black and white, negatives and infrared.
Chlorophyll is transparent to infrared, rendering it white (bottom right). The fallen tree stands out against the background whilst not being so noticeably ‘manipulated’ as the negative (bottom left).

I also considered faux-colour infrared – but frankly find this ‘too beautiful.’

Moving forward I questioned whether images alone are enough to tell the story. John Berger shared a powerful example by captioning a painting by Van Gogh.

‘This is a landscape of a cornfield with birds flying out of it. Look at it a moment. Then turn the page’. (1972: 27).
Turning the page, Berger wrote:

‘This is the last picture that Van Gogh painted before he killed himself’. (1972: 28).

Notwithstanding the fact that this is not the last picture that Van Gogh painted*, the power of those captions to change the way we ‘see’ the image is palpable.

Allan Sekula, in Dismantling Modernism, also showed how explanations are powerful tools**.

Brown & Power shared research that audiences read captions only if they catch their attention.

‘Captions are often the only labels people will read in an exhibit and they will only read the captions of the objects that catch their eye’. (2005: 107).

Paul Seawright’s Sectarian Murder used similar ideas and combined a present-day landscape with details of a past murder committed at that spot, in a single image. Seawright commented that the work flowed over time and place. It:

‘… recognises the unstable nature of the relationship between place and identity and time and truth’ (Darke, 2013).

He successfully connected past atrocity and present normality, the shocking with the banal.
However, unlike Seawright, this project is about individuals who lived in both times and places - photographic time-travellers.

In 1977, Paula Luttringer was kidnapped and held in a secret centre in Argentina.
Eventually she was released, and years later she went back to tell the story. Luttringer photographed the cells, and included powerful personal testimony from victims.

I think this is stunning work.

In my latest Work in progress, I am thus combining photographs and text, landscape and traces.


Each image is ‘asynchronous’, as the text does not immediately explain the image.

A large image would work well in an installation, although in a book, the caption might be dealt with other ways.
'I looked at them and thought that they would not survive long, because they could not walk'

Fig 27. Yates. 2019. Choeung Ek.

"Then they brought us to an area far from the camp, where the pond was to be dug"


By including panoramic context, and details, when viewed across the series a story is revealed.
For this work in progress, all are infrared photographs, although in the FMP, I expect to mix black and white, infrared and negatives.

As next steps, I am continuing to extend our Cambodian network into printing, marketing and galleries, as well as national documentary organisations and academia.

This year we will publish a book in Phnom Penh, and an installation will be staged, in either or both of Phnom Penh and the UK. I am also discussing a future collaborative exhibition

Ryuji Miyamoto appropriately notes:

‘… perhaps a photograph can only be considered an independent, materially perfect entity once the scene that it captured has gone from this world entirely’. (Vartanian et al. 2006: pg. 78).

My goal is to create work that keeps past events alive and relevant.
‘Photojournalists are responsible for the ethics of showing, but we are responsible for the ethics of seeing’. (2010: 60).

i For a scientific discussion of the death toll during the Genocide, see Bruce Sharp, Counting Hell on the Cambodia: Beauty and Darkness website.

ii More detail on the start-up of the program can be found on Yatesweb. Some of the writing and details would benefit from updating, but the activities are accurate. There are links to the photographic archive.


Imagination is not the same as memorialisation. Paraphrasing Samuel Taylor Coleridge, they note:

‘Imagination is the vital ability of the mind to see its way into new perceptions, new creations, new syntheses; it is the human ability to create ideas, images, and relationships that had never existed before, and to do so in a way that brings us closer to the real nature of things. … Fancy, by contrast, is merely the mind at play with things it already knows: it is the mechanism by which we assemble and reassemble memories without regard for reality in order to pander to our desires’. (2016: 71).


‘We don’t get it. We truly can’t imagine what it was like. We can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is, and how normal it becomes. Can’t understand, can’t imagine’. (2003: 113).

Susie Linfield took Sontag head-on:

‘Sontag, more than anyone else, was responsible for establishing a tone of suspicion and distrust in photography criticism, and for teaching … sour, arrogant disdain for the traditions, the practice and the
ideals of documentary photography. … We need to respond to and learn from photographs rather than simply disassemble them. I believe we need to look at, and into, what James Agee called “the cruel radiance of what is”. (Linfield, 2010: XV).


‘Tourism activity offers a rare, observable form of ethical behaviour. Tourists ‘vote with their feet’, and … demonstrate in visiting ‘dark’ … sites that these are morally acceptable spaces’. (2009: 143).

Hariman, Robert & Lucaites, John Louis.

‘Even though images document that we arrive too late, that justice will never be met, and that the suffering of the victims will never be redeemed, the same archive also testifies to the dignity of the victims, the scandal of abandonment, and the possibility of change’. (2016: 175).

Diana Blok.

Artist Statement on Time Tells.

Sustainable Practice Feedback.
Available at: https://www.yatesweb.com/sustainable-prospects-grades/ (accessed 18/04/2019).

Van Gogh Museum. Wheatfield with Crows.

‘One of Van Gogh's most famous paintings. It is often claimed that this was his very last work. The menacing sky, the crows and the dead-end path are said to refer to the end of his life approaching. But that is just a persistent myth. In fact, he made several other works after this one’.


‘A small number of contemporary photographers have set out deliberately to work against the strategies that have succeeded in making photography a high art. …

These artists … openly bracket their photographs with language, using texts to anchor, contradict, reinforce, subvert, complement, particularize, or go beyond the meanings offered by the images themselves. These pictures are often located within an extended narrative structure’. (2016: 60).
FIGURES


Fig 5. Mick Yates. 2018. Tuol Sleng.


Fig 10. Mick Yates. 2018. I Missed my Mother.


All photographs by Mick Yates from mickyatesphotography.com.
REFERENCES


FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY: https://www.yatesweb.com/crj/bibliography/