

Honoring News Photos as Picture-Taking Evolves

By DOUGLAS HEINGARTNER

Since handing out its first award in 1955 for a picture of a motorcyclist skidding out of control, the annual World Press Photo contest has grown into photojournalism's premier event. The 50th-anniversary exhibition, featuring prize-winning news images from 2004, opens tomorrow at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

This year's Photo of the Year award went to the Indian photographer Arko Datta for his shot of a woman in Cuddalore, in southern India, lamenting the death of a relative killed in the tsunami. World Press Photo, a nonprofit foundation based in Amsterdam, also handed out prizes to more than 60 other photographers from two dozen countries. They were chosen from almost 70,000 entries submitted by more than 4,000 photographers, more than in any previous year.

Though the international jury initially sees each image for a mere two seconds, it still takes almost two weeks of long days for the members to select the winners, using game-show-type clickers to enter their votes anonymously.

The recent uptick in submissions may seem linked to the proliferation of cameras in more and more devices, like cellphones, a phenomenon gradually turning everyone into an aspiring shutterbug. But World Press Photo is open to professionals only, which explains why some of the biggest news photos of 2004 were conspicuously absent.

"We had a lot of discussions this year because of the Abu Ghraib photos and the coffin pictures" of United States soldiers returning from Iraq, said the Argentine photographer Diego Goldberg, the chairman of this year's jury. But they were taken by amateurs. "Journalistically they were very important, extremely important," he said, "but the organization is called World Press, not 'photography in general.' It's about what is being produced by professionals for the press."

Echoing the arguments that news organizations frequently use to explain how what they do differs from what blogs do, many of this year's winners played down the threat of amateurs. Nina Berman, a New York-based photographer who won a prize for a series of pictures showing the lives of wounded American soldiers home from Iraq (originally published in *Mother Jones* magazine), said amateur photo scoops are an exception. "These took months and months of time," she said of her photographs, which have been collected in a book called "Purple Hearts." "The method of working, the level of expertise, of respect, is just totally different. It's like the third-grade scribble versus the Ph.D. thesis."

Mr. Datta, who works for Reuters, embraces the changes. "I feel it's a welcome trend," he said by e-mail. "The line between professional photojournalists and amateurs is thinning. And with more and more nonprofessionals opting to use their cameras to capture socially relevant images, it can only make photojournalism more popular."

Some winners bemoaned the decreasing number of outlets for classic reportage photography, which has long been a hallmark of World Press exhibitions. "There's so few venues for this work anymore," Ms. Berman said. "Magazines aren't interested so much in news beyond their demographic. This is a major problem."

Erik Refner, a Danish photographer who won the first of several World Press awards in 2002 at 31 (after successful stints as a soldier, athlete and photo model), agrees some markets are drying up. "I see less and less clients willing to publish these, and to pay a reasonable price for them," he said. "It's extremely difficult to sell."

All the more reason for photographers to rise to the challenge, he said, by more actively pursuing assignments, for example, "instead of just sitting and waiting for them to call you."

"You need to regroup," he added. "It's a part of the evolution. Of course the business has changed a lot, but then we just have to adapt to that."

That adaptation can come in the form of taking better photos. A trend that Mr. Goldberg noted this year was how "many photographers went back to shooting medium format," which produces large, lucid negatives still unrivaled by even the best digital cameras. "There you see really the difference in quality."

One photographer keen on traditional film is Paolo Woods, a self-described "digital dinosaur," who won a World Press prize this year for his idiosyncratic images of Iraq, which he shot on square-format, black-and-white film. In addition to the quality differences, Mr. Woods, who is based in Paris, appreciates the pace of analog shooting. "Photojournalists always look for speed, but I wanted to be slowed down somehow," he said. "It's a bit like wine: you make the wine; then you wait a while for it to become good before you drink it. But digital images, you consume immediately."

Though he occasionally shoots digitally and agrees that digital quality will surpass even medium-format film in a few years, he says that seeing each shot on a digicam's L.C.D. screen can lead to lazy picture-making. "You tend to be satisfied a lot more quickly," he said, "but when you're shooting with film, you never know what you've got, and you push on and eventually it's the last image that's the good one."

Another issue debated at this year's contest was whether the flood of pictures from camera phones and sites like Flickr.com might contribute to diminishing the power of the still image. "Those images will not have the same impact," Mr. Woods said, "and that has created a desire to see a certain photojournalism of quality, the real in-depth work. I think in the viewers there is a thirst for good, quality work."

And though space for contemplative photo essays may be decreasing in the print media, photography galleries and photo books are growing in popularity.

"I'm skeptical about the notion of tragedy fatigue or compassion fatigue," said David Campbell, a geography professor at the University of Durham, England, who spoke at the awards ceremony in Amsterdam on April 23, and in a telephone interview, said: "Still images continue to have a surprising degree of power. You wouldn't think that people in the age of the Internet and television would still go out and buy \$45 coffee-table books, but they do. It's still the still image, and not the television footage, that sticks in your head."



*(above) Arko Datta's photograph of a woman in Cuddalore, India, mourning a relative killed in the tsunami is the World Press Photo of the Year.
(below) David Robert Swanson's picture of an American soldier in Iraq won second prize in the category of general news singles.*

