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SUMMARY

- All of the images in Weiss's exhibition have a narrative quality.
- Critics of Weiss's exhibition might see it as a white voyeur's perspective on poverty in Africa.
- Some of Weiss's photos that couldn't find room in this show were shot in Kibera where he was covering a COVID-awareness campaign designed by artists from the Maasai Mbili collective.



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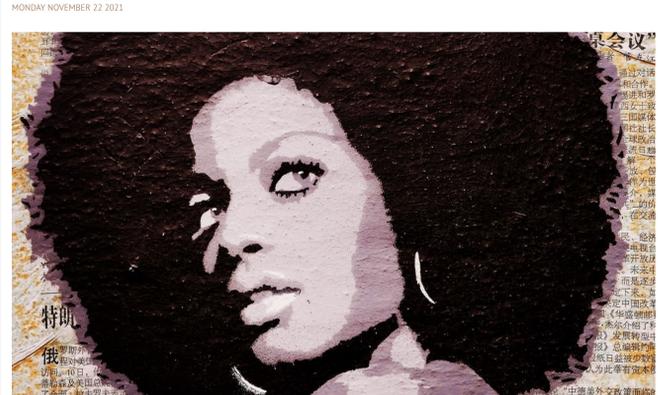
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Unforgettable memories captured in photographs



German photographer, writer, journalist, and filmmaker Sonke C. Weiss has spent the past 25 years traveling and working in Africa. In all that time, his camera has been close at hand to capture memorable moments. Many of those images have earned him international awards.

But they also reflect what the photographer calls "unforgettable memories", a few of which he's currently exhibiting at Red Hill Gallery in a show he entitled "All that I can't leave behind."

His exhibition opened last Sunday, November 14 and runs until January 9 next year. Its title suggests he has a deep attachment to the places, people, and memories each image represents.



German photographer, writer, journalist, and filmmaker Sonke C. Weiss. PHOTO | COURTESY

It also implies that for all the decades he has been in Africa, working everywhere from Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania, South Africa to Kenya, he is still something of a stranger in the region however rich his experience has been here.

The exhibition itself is honed down from his huge collection of photos taken since the 1990s when he first came to Africa for an "adventure" and for "kicks".

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"I'd yearned since childhood for the kind of adventure I'd found in my Tintin comic books," he wrote in his artist's statement. "I wanted to see the world. I wanted [especially] to see Africa."

Getting a job as a communications officer with the humanitarian aid NGO, World Vision enabled him to work in several trouble spots in the region, including northern Uganda.

"We had a rehabilitation centre in Gulu for child soldiers who'd been rescued from the Lord's Resistance Army," he recalls. One of those child soldiers named Christine is in the exhibition. Hers is one of the three collage portraits that Weiss created to compliment the 30 photos in the show.

"I also wrote a book on child soldiers, focused in Christine's life story," he says. "She was able to accompany me on a book tour in Germany which was quite successful," he adds.

What he calls his favorite photo in the exhibition was also shot in Gulu. It's of a woman street-food vendor at the end of her working day. She's packing up her cooking pots and tea kettles. But Weiss says what appeals to him about the shot is the way her pose looks as graceful as that of a ballerina.

There are other elements of the image that are striking: the texture and weather-worn color of the tall wall in the photograph; the balance of simple elements hanging from the wall; and the way the photograph itself looks almost like a hyper-realist painting.

The one other photo from Uganda that grabs one's attention is another portrait, only this one is of a businesswoman surrounded by huge gunia (hessian) sacks filled with charcoal. Having a personal concern for trees and the acute problem of deforestation, I find the image painful in its implications.



But it is eloquent in its ability to visually narrate a complicated story about trees and Ugandans' need for energy irrespective of the long-term implications of destroying Africa's rainforests.

All of the images in Weiss's exhibition have that narrative quality. He has two photographs taken in Tanzania during the pandemic and hung almost as if they were a diptych. In one, the young woman wears a mask; in the other, the young mask-less man looks embarrassed with his hand over his mouth.

"You remember how the former leader of Tanzania opposed masks, but things changed with the change of leadership," Weiss says.

But it's on the gallery wall where Weiss, with the Gallery's owner-curator Hellmuth Rossler-Musch, hung over 20 of the photographer's smaller images that one will see how intimately he got to know the non-touristic life of African peoples. For one thing, there isn't one zebra, elephant, or lion in the whole show.

Only African people living in families, often in informal settlements, and reflecting less on the poverty of the people and more on the aesthetic elements of what he sees.

Critics of Weiss's exhibition might see it as a white voyeur's perspective on poverty in Africa. And yet, the photographer has initially gone to all those countries on a mission to assist. In the process, he has witnessed people's everyday lives, like the lady street vendor and the former child soldier.

Some of Weiss's photos that couldn't find room in this show were shot in Kibera where he was covering a COVID-awareness campaign designed by artists from the Maasai Mbili collective.

"They painted walls that said, BEWARE COVID, and the community took note," he says, clearly impressed with the M2 initiative.

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