

Deutsch Börse Photography Prize 2006

Photographer's Gallery, London

Published in *HotShoe* no.141, April/May 2006, pp.64-67

This year sees the annual Photography Prize in its tenth consecutive year, and its second under the support of the Deutsch Börse Group. The importance of the award cannot be underestimated, with a top prize of £30,000 and more importantly, securing the winner and the other nominees firmly within the canon of contemporary photographic artists. The criteria could neither be simpler, nor more demanding: "to reward a living photographer, of any nationality, who has made the most significant contribution to the medium of photography in Europe between 1 November 2004 and 30 September 2005". Nominees are traditionally diverse in their disciplines and subjects, yet each year the judges (or jury as they are known) manage to compare these artists within the defined criteria and come up with an outcome that is generally popular as well as informed. Last year's winner for example, Luc Delahaye's project *History*, was not only a fine series of images, but it has been extremely important in the ongoing debate on scenes of conflict within the context of the art gallery, and a superb example of the ever-developing medium of photojournalism. The works of this year's nominees not only engage with various debates within photography, but they do what photography does best: engage with other situations and contemporary issues.

Robert Adams (USA), the most senior nominee, has been selected for his project *Turning Back — A Photographic Journal of Re-exploration*. This somewhat classical project is a topographic investigation from the Pacific Ocean to eastern Oregon. It was published to coincide with the bicentennial of Lewis and Clark's epic expedition to document the North West territory and establish trade with Native Americans, which was commissioned by Thomas Jefferson following the Louisiana Purchase that secured the land from France in 1803, and thus the work has important undertones of imperialism. Adams is an established landscape photographer — he has photographed this region prolifically and is already celebrated for his devotion to the study of industrial development and ecological

© Jesse Alexander, 2006

www.jessealexander.co.uk

issues in America. Adams' images are delicate and somewhat understated, but they have a more dramatic resonance in light of their historical context, and our ecological and political climate.

Alec Soth (USA) is another artist who has chosen the landscape of another of America's great mythologies as his subject — the Mississippi River. *Sleeping by the Mississippi* upholds the traditions of American road-trip photography, perhaps a genre of its own. Soth's images are very familiar — indeed it is hard to come up with particularly inventive images of America, as it is perhaps the most photographed country in the world — yet they are totally unique (he has even managed to make the obligatory gas-station photo look original). And perhaps so they should be, as American road-trip photography is what Soth was brought up on: He turned to photography after attending a lecture by Joel Sternfeld, winner of the Photography Prize in 2004. Many of the images by the road-trip masters however, can often feel fleeting - as if they were just passing through, like a traveling salesman using a town's facilities for the night. Soth's images on the other hand, show a tenderness and intimacy much deeper than most, not just towards the people he photographed along the river, but to the places also. This was perhaps achieved by Soth's commitment to the project, as demonstrated by the fact that he re-visited the river frequently over a period of five years.

Sleeping by the Mississippi was exhibited at the Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool, as too was Yto Barrada's (Morocco) *The Strait Project – A Life Full of Holes*. This is another documentary project, made around Tangiers, a centre for illegal immigration and a city desperate to escape across the Strait of Gibraltar. The stretch of water which has claimed so many lives is only hinted at in Barrada's images (on posters etc), and her commentary focuses on the people of Tangiers, disaffected and claustrophobic, turning their backs to the camera as they turn their backs on the city. Like Soth's photographs, the imagery is very poetic, and Barrada offers an insight that is not only fresh but highly personal, on a region, a population, and an issue that has been in and out of the history books for thousands of years.

This year's wild card is Phil Collins (UK), for the exhibition *yeah...you, baby you* at Milton Keynes Gallery. The show consisted of several works, including a video installation - *el mundo no escuchará (the world will not listen)* – which is

presented at the Photographers' Gallery. This series of clips is a re-recording of a Smiths album, sung karaoke-style by fans from Bogotá. At first, these are quite difficult to watch, and read like audition tapes for *Pop Idol* or some other odious talent show. Watching these fans sing their hearts out while the camera records their changing emotions is slightly exploitative, if we forget that they are having the time of their lives. But their function as portraits is quite remarkable. Collins does not record the fans' voices during the in/out-takes, and keeps the lens fixed on their faces until the backing-track has finished. These vignettes are perhaps the most important and telling moments; when the singers show a range of emotions from triumph to embarrassment. Projected as tall as any cinema screen, every tiny facial gesture or flinch is penetrating and fabulously unsettling.

Some will claim that it is high time Robert Adams won the award, and others will argue that his contribution to contemporary photographic practice and theory is beyond the accolade of the annual Photography Prize. It is unlikely that Phil Collins will win this year, simply as this is the first time a video installation has been short-listed, and despite the fact that this shows the ongoing commitment of the Photographers' Gallery to the development of lens-based media, it will be un-welcomed by many. From a cynical point of view, the jury often favour documentary-based projects with strong human elements. With this in mind, it is likely that either Alec Soth or Yto Barrada will scoop first prize, and my money is on Soth.