

## Peripheral Vision

Photographer Álvaro Laiz offers [Deborah Lam](#) and [Jack Richardson](#) a glimpse into the lives of fringe societies and the stories behind them

Tuesday 13 October 2015



Images: Alvaro Laiz

Nighty Akoko was abducted in 1991. When he was 16 years old, he was forced to club to death a group of civilians who had tried to escape the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Thirteen years later, he was released and tried to build a home for his family: "I try to forget and build a home for me and my sons, but many of my neighbours do not understand."

Álvaro Laiz is a photographer who documents people like Nighty, who have been ignored by mainstream media, beginning with the series *Memory Books*, which tells the story of Ugandan women living with AIDS who have been displaced by the LRA. Liiaz has travelled the world looking for communities on the fringes of the world's consciousness.

His most well-known project, *Transmongolian*, captures transgender people in Mongolia. The photographs contrast dramatic portraits of figures in traditional queens' costumes and more vulnerable images of daily life of the transgender Mongolians. They are at once grand and personal. The pictures of lone ornately-dressed figures against the backdrop of distant mountains are powerful. But we are not allowed to forget their humanity.

The isolation of people in traditional garments against the mountainous landscape continues into his more poignant pictures, though less obviously. Mongolia remains the country with the lowest population rate in the world with less than two inhabitants per square kilometre. As homosexuality is still very much a

taboo, the sense of isolation is only compounded for these people, who either turn to prostitution or live a life apart from society. For some, the only choice is to flee to other countries like the Philippines or Japan where their 'condition' is more accepted.



Laiz's photographs catch glimpses of what would normally be done in secret — evocative scenes of a transgender sex worker sitting on a bed viewed only through a door left ajar, another adjusting his wig and several in the middle of applying make up or shaving.

Photographer Robert Capa said, "If your photos aren't good enough, it's because you're not close enough." "Nowadays," explains Laiz, "That has evolved to, 'If your photos aren't good enough it's because you're not thinking enough.'" The intimacy of many of his photos challenge us to contemplate issues beyond our own lives, but rarely are they politically charged. The focus always remains on the individual subjects and their lives rather than moralising their situations.

While Laiz confesses, "My trip to Mongolia changed the way I perceive photography," working on his latest series *The Hunt* changed the way he perceives storytelling. His photographs document communities, be they geographical or perceived. In *The Hunt*, he explores the animistic beliefs of Udege people of the Russian Far East. One of the last remnants of shamanism, their lives are closely intertwined with nature and their hunting activities are surrounded by folklore. The Udege people believe that if someone attacks a tiger without reason, the dark spirit Amba will be unleashed in the tiger and hunt him down. Inspired by a story of a Russian poacher named Markov who shot a tiger which then killed him three days later, Laiz looks at the fears and beliefs about powerful spirits in the bodies of animals.

With hunting being so central to their way of life, the cultural tapestry of folktales is interwoven with the very real dangers in the boreal forests of Russia. Alongside these folktales are tales of personal tragedy and loss like that of Markov's widow. Despite the risk, Laiz's photos portray people of all ages engaging in hunting, showing just how intrinsic the practice is to their livelihood.

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The self-styled "storyteller", despite believing that his photos can stand without captions, still thinks it important that his images have context and meaning: "Photography has the power to shock the viewer within a second, so you need to build powerful images to lure the viewer into deeper meanings. You can

give them a wider perspective. We are not just photographers, we are responsible for [transmitting] a message from the source to the viewer. We do stories, not just single images.”

In what is probably his most personal series, Future Plans depicts victims of war in Uganda with a list of things lost and, conversely, aspirations for the future written in chalk on the walls behind them. Among things and people listed as ‘lost’ are a chance at education, family members and limbs. Yet none of the aspirations are overly idealistic, most either wanting education for either themselves or their children and a home.

Some stories, like Nighty’s, are tragic, but some are uplifting. The most significant for Laiz was that of Grace Arach; kidnapped by the LRA in 1996 when she was just nine years old and threatened at gunpoint. She managed to escape and after walking for days, returned to her village. Fortunately, she was able to complete her studies at school and graduate from the University of Makerere in Kampala. “Right now she is a social worker in Sydney, Australia,” Laiz tells us. “I am absolutely proud of her.”



Regardless of the location or subject matter, Laiz’s work is compelling, provocative and humanising. He allows us a window into the societies, individuals and stories that are hidden from the world for all sorts of reasons. The privilege of being a photographer, he says, is the ability to “learn about the world around you as much as you learn about yourself.” Through his images, Laiz is able to pass that knowledge on to us.



## One comment

Katil

25 Dec '15 at 12:43 am

admin March 15, 2012 - 8:52 pm You’re totally right, Marcus. That is the preblom: Commodified Compassion. We like to support things when there is personal gain. People support IC not just because it is the right thing to do, but b/c it is the cool thing to do and all of their friends are doing it. And IC did an excellent job with their marketing so that it appealed to youngsters who are internet and social network-saavy..and in turn it became a cult classic. World Vision has spent a larger percent of their funds on the needy and i have so much respect for them because of this. I just wish more people know about WV and that more people would give money without wanting something in return.

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