



Don McCullin

Shaped by war and more...

Internationally renowned photojournalist Don McCullin recently gave a talk at the Imperial War Museum, London, where an exhibition surveying his life's work – *Shaped by War* – is now on display. In attendance was a young man. “He was a photographer, I thought he was a soldier... He went to Afghanistan, he wasn't there very long; he trod on one of those IEDs [improvised explosive devices], land mines, that blew both his legs off and his arm. He didn't need to be there, poor man.” The veteran photographer speaks with real concern about the younger's injuries, his voice soft with the empathy

that is earned only through hard-lived experience.

McCullin began his journalistic career on a salary of two Guineas per week at *The Observer*, taking hard-hitting pictures of British urban strife, before regularly risking his life as a *Sunday Times* war photographer in locations such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Uganda, where he spent some terrifying nights in prison. The photographer's struggle with fear in the midst of horror has taken its toll. “I used to persuade myself that I wasn't going to get killed. It's a difficult act of persuasion when you're looking around,

and you're standing knee deep in bodies in paddy fields in Cambodia, where someone has just died in front of you. They're splashing through water, mown down by snipers who are trying to kill me at the same time. It wasn't an easy game, and yet you play the game to be near the victims and the truth of the story.”

His torn and tattered, army-issue helmet, on show at the Imperial War Museum, bears, alongside the scars of conflict, the prestigious, Magnum photographic agency logo sketched in black ink. “When I was young, I used to make irrational statements, like I wanted to be the best



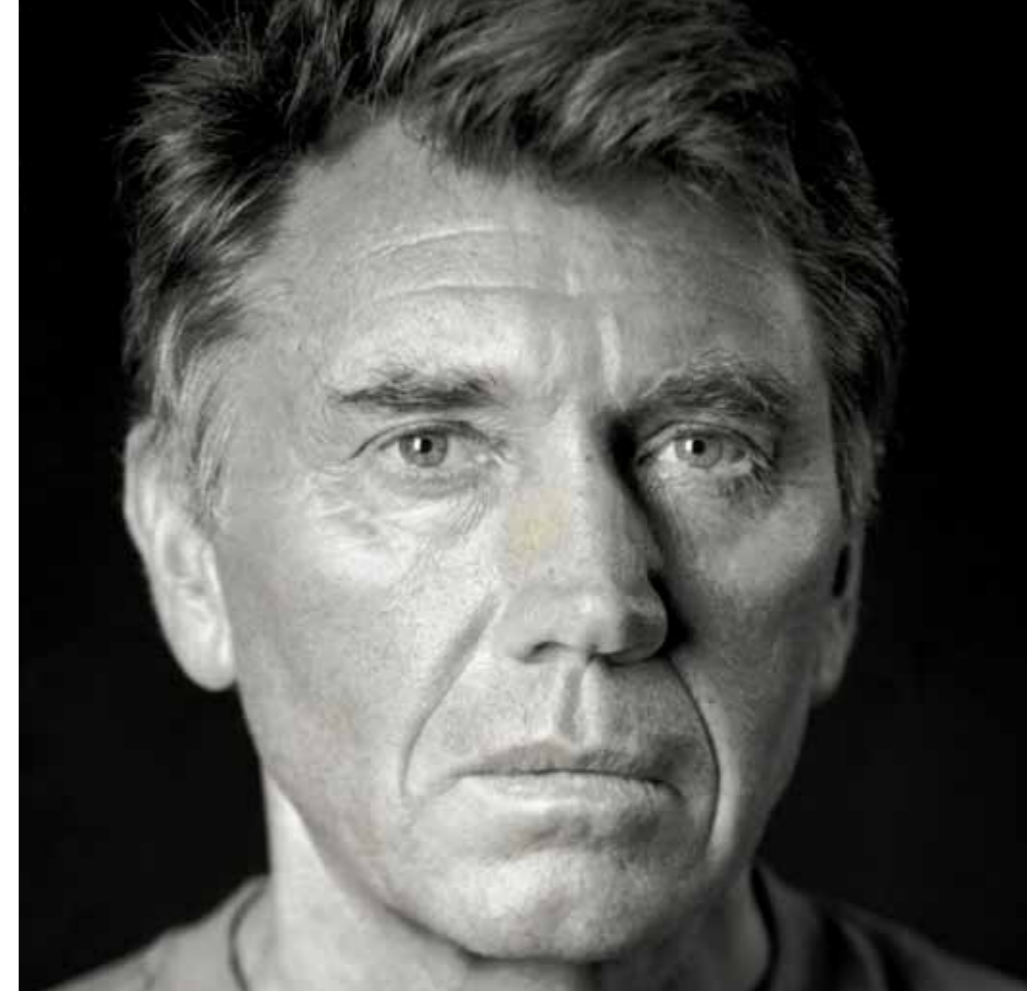


war photographer in the world, which was a really silly thing for me to have said. I suppose I was trying to draw attention to myself. Since then, I've changed my whole attitude." Rather than focusing on personal ambition, or drama, he says: "Photography in general is about feeling, you look at something and you're moved by it, and you have to convey that feeling to others." His 1964 image, *A Turkish Cypriot woman mourns the death of her husband at Ghaziveram, Cyprus*, is a heart-wrenching example.

Running concurrently to *Shaped by War* is McCullin's major retrospective exhibition at Tate Britain, part of the BP British Artists Displays series. This show takes a broader view of the artist's career, offering journalistic images of northern industrial life and stark portraits of homeless men and women in Spitalfields, London, from the 1960s and 1970s. The only references to international conflict come in shots of American soldiers supervising the Berlin Wall's 1961 construction, and some haunting views of the Somme grassland, taken many decades after the Great War. There is also a collection of pristine scenes that capture the stillness of the Somerset countryside. He explains: "My life's work was mainly involved in wars and tragedies. Because that's tapered off – it started damaging me mentally – I needed some way of regaining my self-respect and my direction, so I started turning my camera on the landscape."

One work hanging at the Tate Britain, *Somerset Levels near Glastonbury circa 1990*, conveys a sense of all-enveloping, and very English, tranquility. Like an iconic religious painting, all lines – the road, the trees, the silvery brook, the sloping clouds – gather towards a near-central point, in this case a dark, bun-shaped cloud, and a bright spot of sun. It is McCullin's intention that the photograph affords the viewer that moment of respite that he experienced while walking in the landscape. "We see so many ugly, negative things in our lives now; we need positive imagery, stuff that can be therapeutic to us."

Capturing that powerful but short-lived emotion on film demands not only years of photographic experience, but also an element of chance. "I was on a train



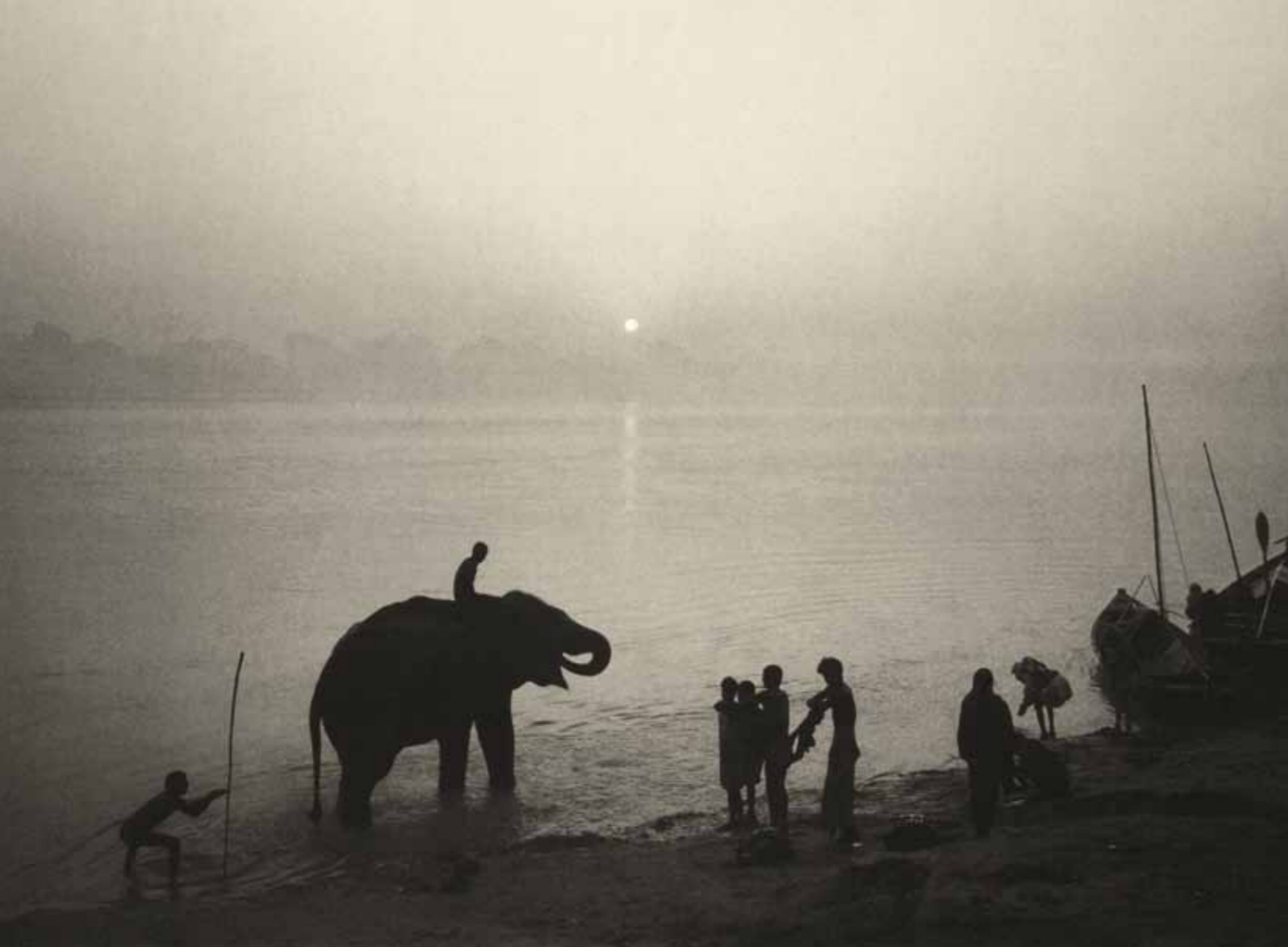
one day, it started in Marrakesh, and it was belting down with rain from dawn. I jumped off the train near a famous Roman site. The rain had stopped but the cloud formations were quite the most breathtaking thing you'd ever seen... archaeological sites, or trees, are already there, but if you don't have an amazing sky, or mood, it doesn't work. That's why I have limited success with landscape, I get probably one beautiful landscape picture every year, one."

The popular photograph, *The Elephant Festival, Bihar (1993)*, and a travel story that it elicits, exposes the razor's edge McCullin still treads between the lighter and darker sides of life. The softly lit image – featured in another, just-closed London exhibition, *Platinum*, at Hamiltons – shows an Indian family bathing an elephant in the Gandak river, children and boats silhouetted against a pale grey sunrise. "I was the most excited man on earth, the only foreigner there. There are a million people, and 120 elephants tethered under mango trees. Can you imagine the glory of that scene? It's like something out of a Turner, this golden sun rising through the early morning mist; the river looked like a Monet, like Monet's London paintings."

The rising sun shines light on the hardships as well as the joys of life, as McCullin also does with his camera: "You'd find 200 lepers waiting in line to be fed and begging for money, this monumental human tragedy that you see at the same time as this great beauty. It was truly a mixture of pageantry, beauty, tragedy. You'd see lepers with half their faces missing and their hands all gone and their fingers and toes gone. It's almost too much to comprehend; it was like somebody was forcing me to have more and more images, to take pictures." Later, he talks of a certain American city having "the most compelling voices, from the mood, and what I see through my eyes".

Despite, or perhaps even because of, these unavoidable creative pulls and responsibilities, McCullin is grateful for his "charmed life". His first job on a steam train, at 15, gave him a visual and social education through travel, something which air force service in Kenya, the Middle East, and Egypt later magnified. As a photojournalist, the learning only intensified, as he worked with great travel writers, anthropologists, and novelists including John le Carré, Eric Newby, James Fox, and Bruce Chatwin. "I had this amazing good fortune to travel and





work with these extraordinary people, and go to the most fantastic places on earth, outside of war. I was blessed by bumping into one after the other of these amazingly talented educated people, so my standards started going up; my cultural awareness was growing by the minute.”

These meticulously high standards are reflected in his refusal to use digital equipment, claiming with boyish pride not to know how to switch on a computer. His mobile phone also lies dormant after being burned in a domestic accident. Its appearance now, he remarks with the black humour of a war journalist, “is like something out of Hiroshima”. It is a mark of McCullin’s eminent reputation that “magazines make special concessions to me by taking transparencies, when they really want electronic images”.

With a personal commitment to every stage of a picture’s production, McCullin used to fly home from war and exotic locations with his negatives, rather than trust them to professional developers. He has a darkroom at home, in which he hand-printed all 47 of the images for his Tate Britain exhibition. “It’s an intriguing place, the darkroom, because other people do their life’s work in the daytime, or in the daylight, like painters... When I make a mistake in the darkroom, I throw that sheet of paper away; it’s worth about £15. You bring all your skills and experience of 50 years, in my case, to that piece of paper. When I sell it, I can get a vast amount of money for that print.” He always uses medium warm tone paper, a subtler tint than sepia, “because it gives the prints a feeling of history.”

The powerful and painful, human element of war photography also lends gravitas – a cultural, historical, and emotional resonance – that contributes to a picture’s monetary value. McCullin’s *Shell Shocked Marine*, Vietnam, Hue, 1968, depicts a tense, battered American soldier, hands tightly clenched, refusing to meet our gaze. This year, a large-scale, signed, silver gelatin print of this most celebrated example of photojournalism sold for £18,750 at Christie’s London. At the same auction house in 2010, a smaller, annotated work, *Turkish Cypriot sprinting from a cinema door under fire*, Limassol, Cyprus, 1964, reached £2,375. The relatively high price tag assigned to images of violence and suffering is a

sensitive issue, but McCullin does not shy away from the debate. “Anyone who wags a finger at me and says, ‘you’re making money out of war,’ well, that wasn’t totally true.” As a National Union of Journalists member, when working as a war photographer his *Sunday Times* salary was equal to that of any other reporter, including those occupied with far less dangerous subjects. He continues: “Also, a couple of times I got injured and wound up in hospital in different countries. I paid my dues in a way. My conscience isn’t totally clear, but it certainly says to me, ‘you feel bad about certain things, but at least you bled for what you were doing’.”

Until recently, McCullin did not take an interest in money. “I’d always thought photography was my reward.” After decades of risk taking, however, the artist’s thoughts have belatedly turned to his mortality. “I’m not the man that used to run across those battlefields. I can’t even walk over my own fields here in Somerset; I puff and grind my way.” He recently engaged a Gloucestershire-based company to produce a special collection of favourite images using the extremely fine, platinum printing process. “I’ve kept a set of these prints back, because at the moment I die, it will be a form of pension, an insurance plan for my family.”

Retailing from £8,000 per image in a limited edition of 10, each successive print will sell for more than the last, based on a principle of scarcity value. “There’s a kind of gentlemen’s agreement when you have a limitation on the print sale. Over the years I’ve always sold them ad lib, when someone asks for them, but I can’t do that in this case.” Each photograph costs around £1,000 to make: “It’s a performance... You’re not using photographic paper, you’re using a watercolour-type cartridge paper. They coat it with platinum dust, then lay a big negative on it, which they’ve made from your original.” The resulting contact prints – images made as the negative is pressed tightly to the printing paper – intensify the atmospheric impact of some of McCullin’s most well-known pictures, such as *Early Morning*, West Hartlepool, County Durham, 1964, a northern industrial scene in which a grandmother pushing a pram adds a personable touch.

Though clearly aware of photography’s investment potential, McCullin chooses

instead to collect traditional painting and Eastern artefacts for their beauty, technique, and tranquility. His recently purchased, 19th century Dutch seascape is an “exquisitely painted” example. “You can look at the brushwork, the detail; the sea looks translucent and you feel as though it’s real water you’re looking at. It’s a most beautiful thing.” These objects also carry a therapeutic function, acting as a calming, external source of inspiration. “Creative people, artists, they have breakdowns, or they go off and get drunk, or they do terrible things and mess their lives up, but you can’t always find what you’re looking for in your own thoughts.”

He would take no part in the current, stricter rules for “embedded” war journalists attached to military units in Afghanistan and Iraq, who sign contracts promising not to reveal important information, or to take photographs of wounded Western soldiers. “It’s as if they’ve gone out on a dog walk, with a lead around their neck. You do as you’re told; you’re always being held back, so what’s the point of being there?” Yet, thinking of the ambitious, unfortunate young photographer at the Imperial War Museum, McCullin speaks with compassion. “Because he’s a very good photographer, it’s a tragedy. He paid the ultimate, over-the-top price, and now he’s saying he wants to go back... I want to have a talk with him. I want to try to put him on the proper road to recovery.”

McCullin is a fellow traveller on that road. He knows first-hand of the long struggle to heal, and redefine, oneself after enduring sustained trauma. It’s a tough process, but by enlisting his creativity to overcome major obstacles, McCullin is an example to all of us, whether artist, world traveller, or entrepreneur. ■

By Becky Hunter

Shaped by War: Photographs by Don McCullin. Imperial War Museum, London.

Until 15 April 2012. Open daily 10am-6pm. Closed 19, 24, 25, 26 December. Admission: adults £7, concessions £6. www.iwm.org.uk

BP British Art Displays: Don McCullin Tate Britain, Millbank, London.

Until 4 March 2012. Open Saturday-Thursday, 10am-6pm last admission at 5.15pm. Friday, 10am-10pm (10am-6pm on Friday 23 December) Last admission at 9.15pm. Closed 24, 25, 26 December. Admission: free. www.tate.org.uk/britain