

ART

A PHOTOJOURNALIST TAKES A TWO-YEAR WALK IN THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK, SEARCHING FOR TRUTH IN TROUBLED TIMES

CHASING THE LIGHT

The Australian photojournalist **TRENT PARKE**, the first photographer of his country to become a full member of Magnum Photo Agency, has created some haunting, dreamlike, often eerie images that stand out amidst the welter of visual material. In 2003, Parke, along with his partner Narelle Autio, travelled 90,000 km across the Australian outback for two years in the tradition of the Swiss-born photographer Robert Frank, who, in 1955, undertook a journey of America to produce the pathbreaking book, *The Americans*. Parke himself produced the most startling body of photographs, that exposed the pessimism, poverty and racism of a land ravaged by firestorms and droughts and plagued by vermin. This significant body of work, titled 'Minutes To Midnight', is being exhibited at Bose-Pacia on Park Street. The exhibition is being organised by the Australian High Commission and Drik. Trent's works and an interview can be viewed on <http://inmotion.magnumphotos.com/essay/minutes>

Trent Parke was unable to attend the opening of the exhibition last Friday, but he was sporting enough to respond to queries from t2 via email:

• YOU WORK BOTH IN COLOUR AND BLACK AND WHITE. DO YOU PREFER BLACK AND WHITE?

I like both mediums for different reasons. With 'Minutes To Midnight (MTM)', I wanted to create a body of work that dealt with the emotion of the time we are living in. I think B&W is more powerful when trying to convey an emotion. It can be much more open to interpretation and this is also an important part of MTM. As well as being a document of real life, it allows one to use their imagination.

Colour is more descriptive and for my latest work called 'Coming Soon', I wanted to show what the country physically looks like, so colour was the natural choice.

• DID YOU CHOOSE TO PORTRAY THE CHAOS AND SADNESS OF AUSTRALIA, OR IS THAT THE ONLY ASPECT OF THAT ISLAND THAT YOU ENCOUNTERED?

There was a poll in one of the weekend newspapers that said that 60 per cent of Australians thought the country had come to the end of an era and lost its so-called innocence or carefree, relaxed lifestyle.

When I set out on the two-year journey, this was always in my mind. So to a certain extent, I did focus a lot more on the troubled as-

pects of Australia. It is also a side to Australia that is rarely shown.

I was trying to build up a psychological portrait of a country, or what it's like to be in the minds of many Australians (or many people worldwide) living in this era. The imagery is, in a sense, like dreams or nightmares.

Generally, I concentrated on the outback and country areas as this is one area of Australia that is truly unique. It is also the area experiencing the most hardship.

Australia was in the middle of the worst drought in recorded history which also led to some of the worst firestorms ever experienced. The outback towns and country areas were (and still are) really suffering.

A lot of people who have spent their whole life living off the land and especially the younger generation, are leaving to live in the city or live by the coast.

• DID YOU USE A FLASH TO BURN CERTAIN IMAGES?

At night time, I did use long time exposures and a powerful torch to highlight certain areas.

• WHAT CAMERA DO YOU USE AND ARE THESE SILVER GELATIN PRINTS?

I used my battered old Leica camera to shoot everything and then processed the negatives along the way.

I would process almost every day and as I was travelling in a small tent, I would just hang the films up on trees or clothesline in caravan parks or whatever I could find. The master prints I made are all silver gelatin and printed by traditional methods, but for the purpose of the touring show, they are all printed digitally.

• SO YOU NEVER USED A FLASH?

I did use a flash for some images, but the majority were done with a torch.

The possum was taken by shooting full power flash and completely overexposing it. The technique only works when the object you are photographing is white.

The pig, however, was completely lit by torch. It's kind of like painting with light. While the camera is left open I walk around and shine the torch onto the objects I want to light up. As it is done in darkness it only records what I shine the torch on. There is no flash used here. The large shadows are people's shadows cast by the sun on the side of a moving bus.

It is a time exposure of about three seconds. It's very hard to under-

somehow remained sharp and see-through, even though the white bus has blurred. It took me months to work out and it's only something that photography can capture. You can't see it with the naked eye. Most people assume it is a reflection, but it is not.

The image of my parents is once again achieved by using torch light to walk around and paint with the light.

• DID YOU HAVE TO DEPEND ON THE DARKROOM TO ACHIEVE THOSE HAUNTING AND DRAMATIC CONTRASTS?

Most of the time, contrast is achieved by the quality of light. The Australian light is very harsh but also very sharp and not like many other places in the world. I remember when travelling in India where I covered the 1996 cricket World Cup for six weeks, that the light was very different to Australia, even though it was course hot. Especially in the country areas where there was a lot of dust and smoke in the air.

I have spent my entire life trying to understand and use light. Light changes everything; it can turn the ordinary into the magical. By exposing for the highlights it can produce this effect.