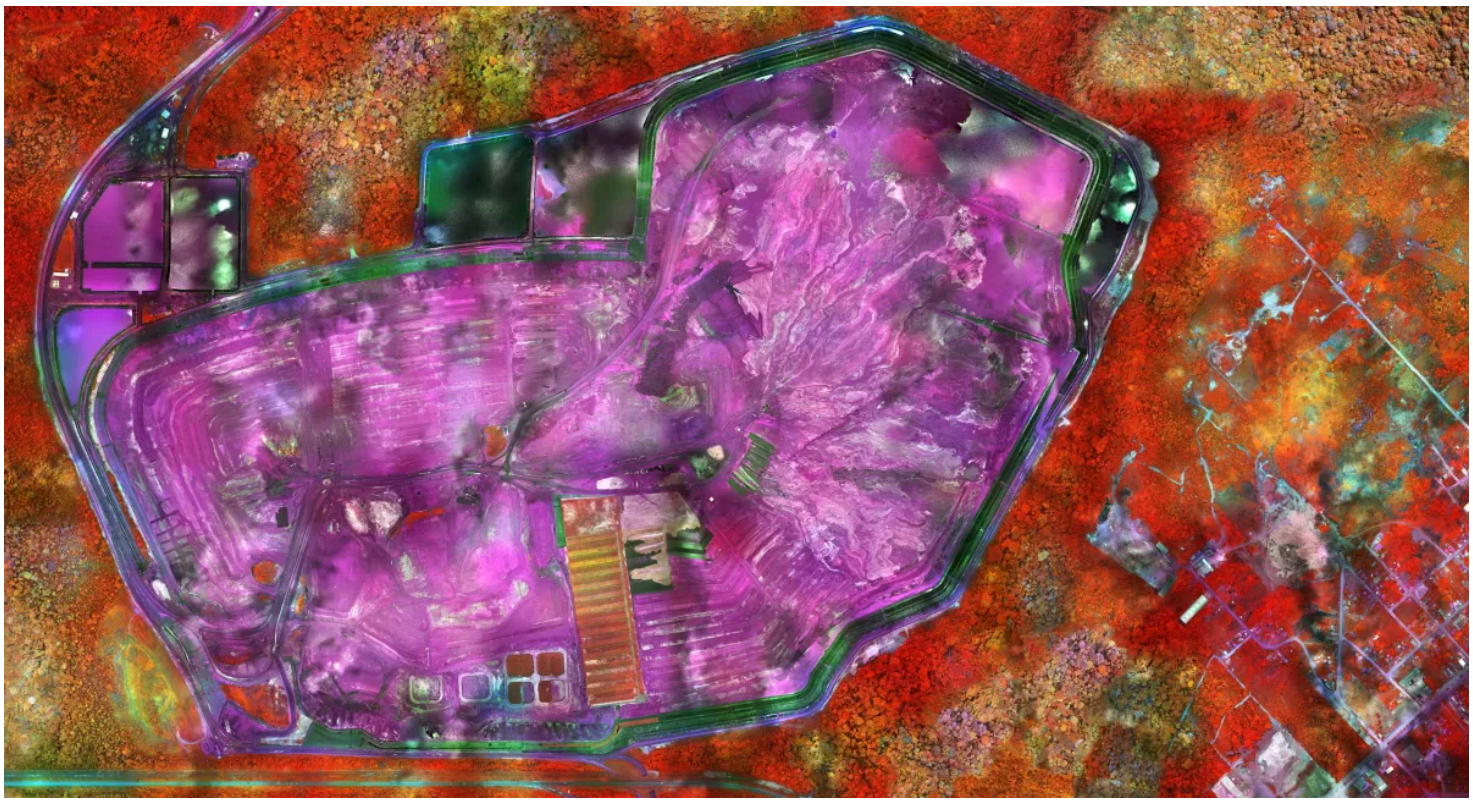
HYPERALLERGIC

Richard Mosse's Photos Exoticize Disaster

Employing drones, Mosse creates psychedelic aerial maps of ecological degradation.

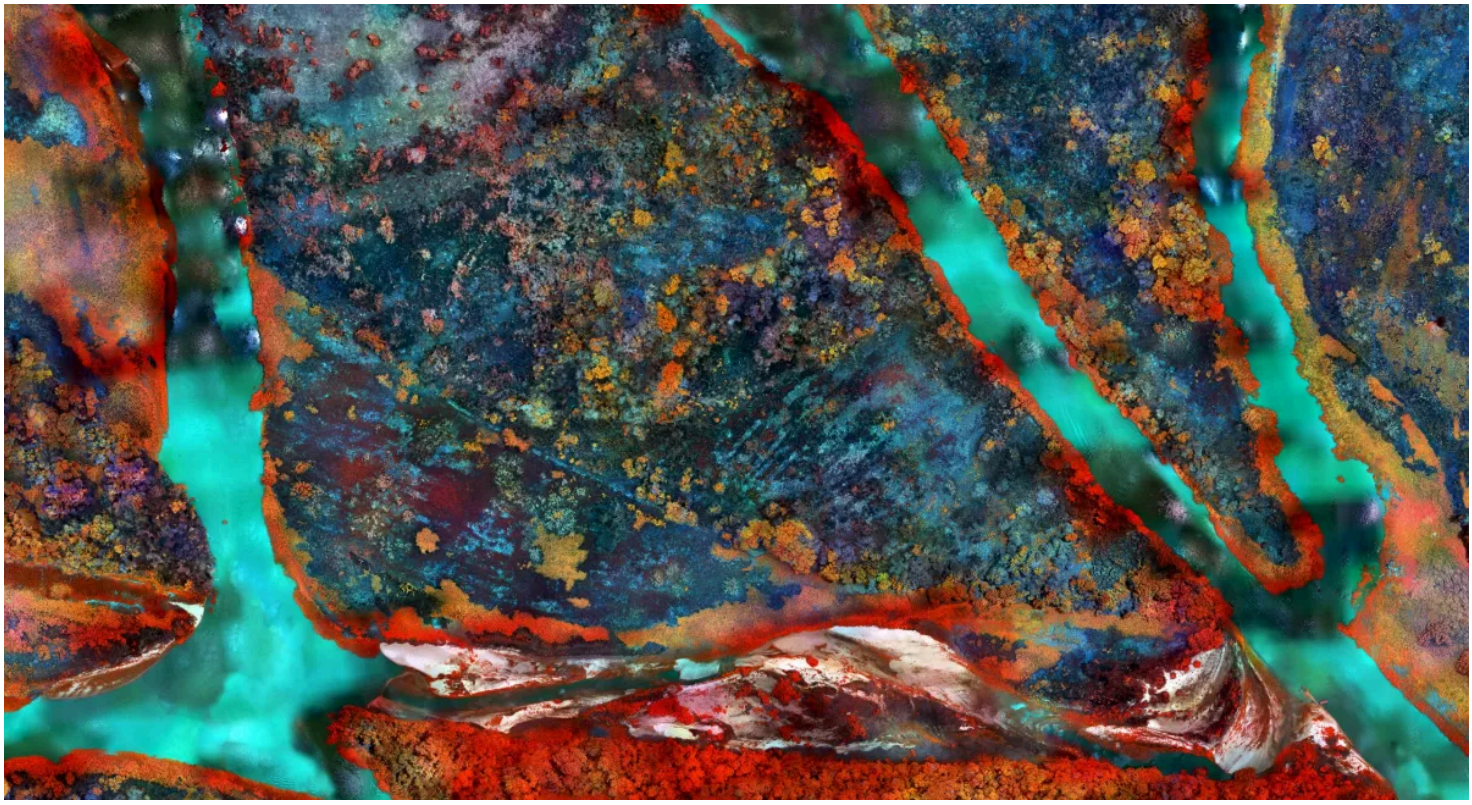
Louis Bury May 8, 2021



Richard Mosse, "Alumina Refinery, Para" (2020), archival pigment print diptych: 64 x 59 inches (print) and 59 x 109 1/2 inches (print) (all images © Richard Mosse; courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Acclaimed photographer Richard Mosse repurposes specialized photographic processes to document humanitarian and environmental crises with aesthetic pizzazz. For his 2012 *Infra* series, in which he depicts the ongoing armed conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the discontinued 16mm infrared film he used, originally designed for military reconnaissance, resulted in incongruous background swathes of cotton candy pink flora. His series *Incoming* (2017) won the Prix Pictet, which awards photography that addresses social and environmental concerns, for its use of a body-heat detecting military surveillance camera that rendered North African and Middle Eastern refugees as glowing grayscale phantasms. Mosse's surreal color schemes, devised to go beyond photojournalistic commonplace, walk the line between defamiliarizing and exoticizing their subjects.

His latest series, *Tristes Tropiques*, on view at both Chelsea locations of Jack Shainman Gallery, captures traces of Brazilian environmental crimes, particularly recent deforestation of the Amazon, with the same forensic élan. Using multispectral images taken by drones, Mosse has created vivid, borderline psychedelic, large-scale aerial maps of ecological degradation. Multispectral imaging is a technique used by scientists, militaries, and even agribusinesses to detect wavelength ranges that are invisible to the human eye; it can provide information about the presence of things such as pollution, landmines, and as-yet-unexploited natural resources. Mosse uses this technology in a spirit similar to that of eco-minded contemporaries, such as Mary Mattingly and Alice Miceli, whose recondite, self-reflexive photographic procedures are meant to highlight the medium's ontological and environmentalist tensions.



Richard Mosse, "Burnt Pantanal II" (2020), archival pigment print, 59 x 108 1/2 inches (print)

But *Tristes Tropiques*'s strongest aesthetic affinities are with renowned contemporary photographer Edward Burtynsky's dramatic aerial views of industrial landscapes. With both artists, the camera's supra-human perspective renders the terrain a formalist jigsaw of textures, shapes, and colors. Both, too, incorporate hues — from milky waterways to neon pools of runoff — not typically considered natural. The difference is that Burtynsky's colors are, to my knowledge, mimetic, whereas Mosse's are assigned during post-production according to what the multispectral images have detected. Both Burtynsky's and Mosse's aerial landscapes elicit wonder, but in the former it derives in part from the realization that this seemingly alien terrain actually exists on earth, while in the latter, from seeing the earth as a bouquet of delirious color.

The Burtynsky comparison illustrates how *Tristes Tropiques*'s fantastical colors embellish a photographic perspective already prone to aestheticization. The bottom half of the diptych "Alumina Refinery, Pará" (2020), for example, depicts an industrial compound as a venous, kidney-shaped, neon pink glob, surrounded by forestland streaked with synthetic reds and yellows. The nigh-Pointillist composition of "Burnt Eucalyptus Plantation, Rondônia" (2020) translates the titular field's parched remains into textured twinkles of turquoise and teal. Mosse's color choices, as over the top as my use of alliteration in the previous sentence, call attention to themselves. The question is to what end.

One answer is that *Tristes Tropiques*'s flashy colors expose otherwise invisible traces of environmental damage, from subterranean fires to contaminated waters. This rationale has an important pedigree in ecological thought, dating back at least to Rachel Carson's seminal 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, and informing more recent ideas, such as philosopher Timothy Morton's concept of "hyperobjects" and literary critic Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence." But *Tristes Tropiques*'s invisible referents remain largely unspecified and the colors that represent those referents are arbitrary, both of which decisions emphasize the work's hallucinatory surface level appearance over its underlying content.

Richard Mosse, "Submerged Forest, Rondônia" (2020), archival pigment print, 59 x 106 inches (print)

Another answer is that chromatic dislocations are part of the artist's signature style. Mosse takes scenes that possess intrinsic humanitarian drama — an armed soldier cradling an infant; a group of refugees huddled together on a raft; an aerial view of a scorched rainforest — and torques their

coloration to make the scenes even starker. In interviews, he explains that his methods are intended to sidestep cliché and provide viewers something other than stale documentary images of crisis. But that rationale undersells the impact of much straightforward documentation, such as Burtynsky's landscapes, and also assumes — similar to how high information voters often mistakenly assume that other voters have comparably high levels of political motivation and knowledge — that viewers are as steeped in such images as the documentarians producing them.

A more complex answer is that Mosse's efforts to avoid cliché, while thoughtful in intent and suggestive in appearance, often exoticize their subjects. At their best, *Tristes Tropiques*'s landscapes possess a beauty that's sinister in its deliberate artifice, such as the fuchsia tree line that snakes around a labyrinthine feedlot in "Intensive Cattle Feedlot, Rondônia" (2020). Other times, however, an abstract, frictionless beauty predominates, as in the pleasing peninsular forms and complementary oranges and blues of "Submerged Forest, Rondônia" (2020). Even when the mood is more wary, such as the splotchy purples and pinks of "Juvencio's Mine, Pará" (2020), the snazzy visuals tend to amplify the foreignness of atrocities Western audiences may already be inclined to understand as remote. *Tristes Tropiques*'s aerial perspectives only accentuate this sense of alienation.

The exhibition's title, an allusion to anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's eponymous 1955 memoir, feels telling. The book has been a staple of college surveys for generations, typically taught as an important link between structuralist and poststructuralist sensibilities. When you read *Tristes Tropiques* beyond just anthology excerpts, the book is wildly heterogeneous, in terms of both its contents (from gritty travelogue to high academic theory) and the politics of its methodologies (rejecting certain colonialist assumptions of previous anthropologists while at the same time holding onto its own colonialist stereotypes). Just as Levi-Strauss's book is an uneven, self-reflexive meditation on how and why our species studies itself, Mosse's exhibition is an uneven, self-reflexive investigation of how and why our species visually documents its destructiveness. The effort helps move the conversation forward, even when it doesn't entirely hit the mark.

Richard Mosse: Tristes Tropiques *continues at Jack Shainman Gallery until May 15*.
