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Interview - George Butler

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George Butler is a reportage artist and co-founder of the Hands Up Foundation. His work as a reportage artist has taken him all over the world, where he has captured scenes from the war-torn town of Azaz in Syria and the refugee camps in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. George won the V&A Illustration Awards in 2013. His work has appeared in The Times, NPR, The Guardian, BBC, and the New York Times. Recently, George's work on migration was displayed at the Bankside Gallery in his Anima Mundi exhibition in 2018. Co-founded by George in 2014, the Hands Up Foundation helps fund health and education needs in Syria. Their latest fundraising event, Music for Syria, is being held on 12 June 2019.

Where do you see the most exciting work happening in your field?

Field is a generous word for what I do: it's more of a very small pond with a few people in it. There aren't many artists that specialise in drawing the news, but there are lots who draw from life on the street. But drawing the news is different. It has a specific purpose: to tell a story in conjunction with a good-looking picture. This becomes exciting when the story and picture are more than the sum of their two parts. In my field, I have recreated that only a handful of times: during the Syria war in Idlib, in a surgeon's theatre operating on leprosy patients in Nepal and drawing around the subject of death row in Belarus for Amnesty. There is a powerful correlation between drawing something that is misunderstood, distant or even uncomfortable. Inevitably, I draw the news: refugee camps, war zones, court rooms, oil rigs, riots, protests, stories that make the news. I feel like I have done my job when I do that and offer a side to the story that would otherwise have been missed. In Syria, that was people continuing their lives despite the war rolling on in the background. There is real weight in the juxtaposition of drawing war beautifully.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Drawing has been an introduction to parts of the world that I would have otherwise never have known. I seek out places that are thought of as intimidating or alien because I want to prove to myself and others that people are the same the world over. Of course, I knew that before but it's easy to forget. It's the people I have met whilst drawing that have collectively taught me almost everything I understand of the world: generosity of spirit, communication, how to be kind, how to care, community, family and having time for people. The list is endless, but one of those people was Mama Nazak. She was a Syrian mother who told me the story of how her sons fought against the Syrian regime – a heart-wrenching time which ended in disaster. However, for the entire conversation and despite being in deep mourning, she made me feel like I was being looked after by her. Also, there was Mustafa – a shy and softly spoken artist from Iraq. Mustafa bravely drew the atrocities Daesh committed in his home town before he was discovered and beaten. And then there was Ndongo – a single father of one living in Dakar. I stayed with Ndongo for a week and we became friends for life.

Having worked in the war-damaged town of Azaz in Syria and the refugee camps in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, what impact did your presence and your art have on the people you met there?

It's a lovely idea that as an artist you can have an impact. Realistically, I think my drawings have had some impact at home when they were published in the Guardian, the Times, and on the BBC. Will people have seen them that would

have otherwise would not have? Does drawing demand a moment's more attention just by the virtue of it being different from the last 100 photographs? I hope so. However, on the ground in that moment, drawings, journalists and press are very far down the list of priorities. That is worth remembering at all times. I learnt that it can be enough just to acknowledge these situations to the people whose country you are in. For example, it is a huge relief for the Syrians I have met to know that others in the world were equally outraged by the actions of their own government. We owe them not to forget. In that sense, a foreigner in a strange place can be useful. It was for that reason I started a small charity with my mates called Hands Up Foundation.

Given the range of complex human emotions and experiences, do you find there are things you are unable to capture through your art? If so, how do you deal with the missing realities?

I actually think human emotions are very basic. There is nothing more straight forward than grief, sadness, loneliness – but that doesn't make them easy to record in depth or with intimacy. There are many moments that I wish I could have written down or photographed or filmed instead. I just hope in return that a writer or photographer is thinking, "I wish I could draw that." But they are probably not! There is a correlation between the amount of time spent doing a drawing and the time looking at it. Especially in an immediate world addicted to photography. In that sense I find people are engaged with the aesthetic of the drawing and the weight of the story. Ideally, the combination of the two is more than the sum of the parts. The trick, if you can call it that, is to leave enough to the imagination and knowledge of the viewer so that if they fill in the blanks then they are engaged.

Your art appears to portray a relatively objective image of the scenes you are witnessing. After seeing the scenes in Mosul in 2017, are you ever tempted to be more political in your work?

Not really. It is often easier to pick a side and to voice an opinion. We see that all too often in our press: an overworked headline, a promoted link, confirmation bias in social media. Even well-intentioned opinion can often be divisive – instead of pacifying a situation it can strengthen the divide. It is not the only job of the journalist to say provocative things. If there is a criticism of my drawing, it is that they are biased in favour of the person sitting in front of me. And I'll take that. It is their story.

The way I arrive at a story is fairly straightforward and it doesn't change whether I am commissioned or if it is self-initiated. I will be in a place that, as a location, has an interesting background. It may be news worthy; it may be a charity project; it may be political. Primarily, I am limited by my ability, like all artists, and I want to draw something that looks good. So, I start with that scene, and then by virtue of spending time in that place, I learn more and more. Usually, what happens is that a person will lean over my shoulder and we'll talk, and their stories will start to pour out as they often do with strangers. It's from that moment that I then follow these individuals' histories. Nothing focuses my mind more on making the drawing good than having someone tell their story over my shoulder whilst I draw. I feel so inspired to do them justice.

In 2018 you displayed your work on migration in the exhibit Anima Mundi at the Bankside Gallery. What inspired you to link the concept of anima mundi (a spiritual connection between all things) with migration, a term the West commonly associates with disconnection and loss of belonging?

Having drawn in many places where people are moving and having recorded the stories they tell as they move, I found that migration in the UK is something that is always wanting in us. In a stable political society with no war, no natural disaster and with access to water, we are unlikely to have to move. But for many millions of people in the world, migration is as much a part of life as working, sleeping and eating. Most people would expect to do it. I believe that people should have the right to seek a better future. I included an animalistic part in the exhibit because of the provocative comparison between the animals that can move freely around the face of the earth and the humans that cannot. Often, we are awestruck by the wildebeest or the swallow but are terrified of a human migrant.

You and your friends established the Hands Up Foundation to fund health and education needs in Syria. What do you think the future holds for the next generation of Syrians?

Sadly, the future for the next generation of Syrians is by all predictions pretty grim. Hundreds of thousands of young men have been killed and children under the age of 8 have only ever known war. However, we know from nature and human nature that it doesn't take much to get people back on their feet. That's the role we try and play at Hands Up – simple, unconditional, basic, unpitying support for ordinary people that need a helping hand. Realistically, this is difficult to achieve. The assumption in the UK is that the war is over. It is not. The hospital we support has been targeted and bombed more than once. It has moved location and operated out of a basement. The staff can't always get to work and quite rightly donors are always concerned about where their money goes. But in the case of our projects, we know as far as legally, ethically and practically possible where it goes. And the mistake in Syria is to say you are 100% sure – because that is not possible.

That success is very rewarding. We have paid the wages of 21 medical staff in Idlib for over three years now. We will give over £100,000 to a prosthetic limb project. In turn, that supports people like Rayan, aged 10, who was last year fitted with new limbs after losing both her legs in a car bomb inside Syria. She said, "Even if I have prosthetic legs, I can study to be an engineer. I have to tell myself that I can walk again that I can get up and walk like everyone else. I did this myself, pulled myself together, I raised my spirits and walked." Anyone interested is welcome to come to our next event, Music for Syria, on 12 June.

What is the most important advice you could give to aspiring artists specialising in current affairs?

Don't be indifferent. It's much easier to draw something that you care about.