

INTERVIEW WITH SIMON HALL FROM PHOTOGRAPHIC MUSEUM OF HUMANITY ABOUT
BUTTERFLIES CHAPTER III

Butterflies (Chapter 3) explores the stigmatized world of mental health. What were your motivations for producing this series?

I think that human dysfunction is a timeless and universal theme. Before starting this work, I'd read a lot about various mind deviances. I have long been fascinated by human behavior and patterns, the way people relate to one another. It started with a need to verify a darkness I could sense but not comprehend. Later on, theoretical knowledge started feeling insufficient and I wanted to supplement it with field work. I became invaded with a desire to meet people evolving in mental illness. I needed to put both my body and mind in contact with turmoil. It had to become physical and sensory. I realized this was a total, intimate, and limitless project; the only theme which could have so strongly challenged and provoked me without losing its momentum. I have been inhabited by it for 4 years .

How do you decide which institutions to photograph? What research processes do you undertake? Where were the images in this series taken?

It starts with a long research process. I read reports, statistics, newspaper articles, watch videos, correspond with NGOs working in the field. I write a tremendous amount of unanswered emails. I try to convince people that transparency is in their long term interest but in the vast majority of cases, I fail. Since I started this project, I have tried to create variations but it would be a lie to say that I have the luxury to be very selective in what I can photograph. Getting into any institution is always hard work and once you are granted this privilege, you usually seize the opportunity. In rare cases I refused to photograph institutions that limited my freedom of action or force me into a type of positive propaganda. This project was never about the political interests of the people running psychiatric hospitals or healing center, it was about the people staying in them. The photographs from the third chapter were taken in Bosnia.

Documenting mental illness has taken you all over the world. What differences in the way patients are treated - from country to country, and indeed continent to continent - have you encountered?

Mental illnesses are defined by societies. Despite world health norms, diagnoses change depending on culture, religion and economic development. In western Africa, there are "spiritual" illnesses which are managed through praying and exorcism. The sufferer is forced to go through a

Christlike calvary to cure himself from his possessions. Concurrently, homosexuality is often regarded as an illness like it used to be in western societies. Milder symptoms of depression and anxiety are sometimes not even dealt with while they occupy a major role back home. Access to medication and complex psychoanalytical techniques are next to impossible because of the lack of means, education and cultural differences. There also are many cases in which patients are treated for non existent illnesses which are the result of a stigma. Mental illness has long been a way to discredit opponents, canceling their integrity to outcast them from group. I've come across many individuals locked up or chained because they were somehow different. The reasons could go from not believing in God to not wanting to participate in some important aspect of society. In the Balkans, I found situations that felt closer. I became more permeable to the people. There was no common language but perhaps that the pain's nature felt familiar. It was the first time I'd come across so many war victims with anxiety resulting from trauma. Cultural proximity made illness more understandable. It was not only absurdly stigmatic as the link to the original psychic wound seemed to make more sense. In addition medicines were more commonly administered which created another level. New characters were created as the pills were kicking in or wearing off. Ultimately, there is no doubt that mental illness lives by the rules of the capitalist world. Everywhere, psychotics lead a painful life but being schizophrenic in Switzerland brings you privileges. You go from being chained to a wall under the sun for years to having a comfortable government pension with the most up to date medical treatment. The absence of total cures is real but some patients' pain is increased while others' is reduced.

Did you have any preconceptions about mental illness before starting your project? Has your experience of working in close quarters with mental illness sufferers altered your perception?

I don't remember having preconceptions. I simply moved from theory to practice. I'd read a lot about the illness groups, their symptoms and actions but all of this became almost irrelevant when I came in contact with the real people. I realized I was a photographer with another objective than therapists. My role as a photographer is not to heal people but to describe and reveal them. My prior knowledge only became useful for anticipation purposes or for creating situations that I could later on photograph. Few subjects in mental asylums are easy to photograph. I used some of my instincts and knowledge to strengthen my bonds, to be given some space and freedom. I had to instinctively learn how to be in these places. There is nothing you can read that can prepare you for it. The rules change from a location to the next, from one individual to another. It is highly unpredictable. In addition the place has a very strong effect on you. There is a constantly moving membrane that separates sanity from insanity and I often fell into its trap. I sometimes lose perspective and the concept of time. It is a sensation I am afraid of but also have a strange attraction towards.

Your work is direct, yet it utilizes a lot of metaphors - starting from the title, to the pictures of the pigeons at the end of your series. How do these two supposed opposite languages coexist in your work?

The biggest challenge when photographing mental illness is to find a way to describe an aspect of it which is mainly invisible. There are obvious visual elements in facial and body expression which are very photogenic but the people's inner world is mostly hidden. It has been a struggle to find a coherent way of showing these buried elements. What became quite apparent is that the effect the places had on the patients' inner state needed to be sublimated for it become coherent on photographs. Photographing the places as they were could not render this effect. It's for this reason I started using movement and photographing elements which pointed towards an exit from the place. The title Butterflies comes from this idea: The ancient Greeks represented the soul through butterfly symbols. I wanted to develop the hypothesis that a human being can be immensely compromised and dysfunctional in this world but keep an immutable soul. I've felt that someone locked up in between walls or chained by the ankle for years can give up on his body and brain. I have been increasingly using these metaphors to bring myself closer to the people I encounter.

What do you hope viewers will take away from your work?

I'd like to stimulate people on subjects like closeness, intersubjectivity and alienation. When I take the pictures, I feel myself close but simultaneously terribly distant. I'd like people to feel this paradox. This contradiction should unsettle the viewers. I'd also like them to feel as trapped, disorientated, uncertain and intense as the people I photograph. I also aspire for the work to be a reflection in which people can test their own psychological constructions. For most people, the proposal is that sanity might not exist without artificial social normalization. For others, these social stratagems become the very source of their illness. Sanity might be created through a commonly accepted chaos and insanity by a failed quest to organize and understand this chaos.

You recently received the Swiss Photo Award in the Reportage category. Has winning this award changed anything in your career? What are your plans for 2015?

I've never paid much attention to the awards given to others or myself because all of it is very subjective and political. There are many good photographers currently evolving and I don't like to think of myself at their competitor. I am careful that recognition does not change me or interfere with the creative part of my projects. The rawer and uncorrupted a photographer's vision is the better. Despite that, the Swiss Photo Award was useful because it brought some economical relief which is the reason I enter most call for entries. A lot of commissioned work resulted from the award which has given me the means to continue my project. In 2015, I will continue to shoot Butterflies in Asia. It's been a year long preparation and I'm glad that it can finally happen.