

Jon Lewis

Jon Lewis - Retrato Timor Lorosae: Photographs from East Timor 2000-2001 Stills Gallery: 7 November - 8 December 2001

An Australian soldier stands at ease in the charred ruins of a hospital. On a wall is a painting of Jesus with his heart ablaze with light. The holy picture is the only thing untouched by fire. What miracle is this? Lewis calls it serendipity, and so it is. But it's also art and experience, and above all, great photography. 'Aussie Soldier inside Ainaro Hospital Ruins' is an iconic and singular image.

I am drawn to it to explain the meaning of this exhibition and hence the troubled lives of the East Timorese people. Is the soldier liberator or invader, perpetrator or peacekeeper, intruder, observer, saviour or martyr? Can the photographer get closer to the heart of East Timor than the detachment of this soldier; compassionate but always an outsider, an Australian on tour of duty?

Not constrained by uniform, client or cost, Lewis spent 16 months in East Timor: 10 months in 2000 and 6 months after the traumatic election period in 2001. From a 1,000 rolls of film and as many mixed emotions he produced this extraordinary exhibition of 30 large-format photographs. We now seem compelled to move through the exhibition as Lewis did the place; not with map or guide but as if drawn through a cultural landscape in flux, people and place experienced as a series of travel encounters.

Here is Bishop Belo, the people's hero, an imposing figure in impeccable robes and serene smile. And here is the bishop's indigenous counterpart, an animist elder who taunts through crooked teeth and glares through askew sunglasses. Paddy Keneally and Rufino Alves Correia, WW2 veterans, form a tight composition of clasped hands and bonded memory. And Madre Paulina, her stark white habit contrasting with the blurred village beyond, is 99.9% love.

These are fine portraits of cultural heroes. But as we encounter more of Lewis' people we become aware that he is building up a cultural portrait of rich diversity. A farmer emerges from the mountain mists astride a hardy mule as knotty as the trees around. A young widow holds the plump Timorese cucumbers in her hands as she leans against a bleak concrete wall with empty heart. A boy wears a devil printed on his T-shirt, a guerilla's camouflage mask of leaves on his head and a victory smile on his face. A blindfolded militiaman taped to a chair for interrogation is humble in his gestures of terror. A boy perches in an absurdly flimsy tree as its giant leaves form the border of Lewis' powerful composition. A penetrating shaft of light strikes the frail and twisted body of a tiny handicapped child. An albino child in the whitest dress is swathed in light amidst a Palm Sunday gathering of people and pattern.

Lewis' images are saturated with life's patterns and textures: wrinkled skin, gravel roads, woven textiles, stony beaches, matted grasses, graffiti walls, stencilled and scarred bodies. While his preoccupation is with people - he says he sees nothing else - this subtle layering of textured elements builds up a palpable sense of place. In 'Remelau' villagers make a dawn pilgrimage to Our Lady on Mt Ramelau, the highest mountain in East Timor. In the centre of the picture a young woman and child pause to rest shrouded in patterned shawls. Behind them a crowded diagonal of

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people climb to the summit. At their feet we notice the intimate textures of tufted grasses while beyond a foggy vista opens to the vast valley at dawn. This is a magnificent photograph of determined people in an awesome landscape.

Lewis is disarmingly frank about his feelings of uncertainty about what he is photographing as he opens the shutter. And this is the very quality that infuses his photographs with our sense of connectedness with the experience. His connectedness is with the people, the immersion in the human experience. It's the delicious contradiction of the photographer catching the subject unawares by actually catching the moment of awareness of each other. Lewis doesn't just open the shutter, he opens the heart.

On my subsequent travels through this exhibition I pass by the motionless Aussie soldier in ruins. I am drawn instead to a photograph that dances with movement. In 'Licidere, Dili' a small boy gleefully chases a ball along the wide expanse of the beach. The ball seems to bounce towards us in exaggerated scale. It's like a spinning world with the sweep of Timor beyond. The distant headland has the profile of a sleeping Crocodile, the creator of the island of Timor. And as East Timor is declared the world's newest nation, one leaves this exhibition with a feeling that Lewis has given us a profound insight into the courage and hope of the East Timorese people as they make their future.

Peter Emmett