



ALEX MAJOLI

anguish blaze

MUSÉE MAGAZINE: *What compels you to document conflicts?*

ALEX MAJOLI: It is true that I have found myself in conflict zones with a camera, but this is not what my work is all about. I can say that, in the past, one of the things that pushed me to document conflicts was the exploration of human nature in situations that really push human boundaries. In times of extreme emotions, all the masks that we build for ourselves are gone.

However, conflict documentation has only made up a small percent of my work. For the past 10 years I have dedicated my efforts almost exclusively to SKENE.

MUSÉE: *In your documentation of the Libya aftermath, you frequently photographed photographs themselves. Why were images particularly important in the representation of this tragedy?*

ALEX: The Libya aftermath was in conjunction with the Arab Spring, which included Tunisia and Egypt as well. I can say that imagery is part of who we are as individuals and as a society. Photographs spark an idea, a concept, or a memory, and in this vision there lies an understanding of human nature.

MUSÉE: *While you do photograph individuals who have experienced violence and instances of violence, you also tend to photograph objects that contain evidence of violence. What role do objects play in your work?*

ALEX: Traces of violence can be found anywhere if that is what you are looking for; it is all about perception. For example, I would describe the way society tries to determine our lives as violent. Sometimes the state of an object, its position and its purpose, can tell you a lot about the place it was found or the person who owned it. That object has been through a journey and carries every detail of it. Its meaning is far greater than its material reality.

MUSÉE: *Can you tell us about the experience of shooting in the midst of combat? Do you think the camera serves as armor for you as you put yourself in these physically and emotionally dangerous positions?*

ALEX: No, unfortunately there is no armor. A camera cannot protect your emotions no matter what meaning you project onto the camera.

MUSÉE: *Throughout your career you have photographed cadavers, refugee camps, funerals, bombings, and other high intensity experiences. Would you agree that during these moments you become a kind of voyeur of pain and violence? How do you view your position as an onlooker?*

Portrait by Daria Birang.



ALEX: Any moment you decide to take a photograph, you are voluntarily taking part in a scene. You cannot be a bystander if you are one of the characters involved. In any given situation, each person plays the role they choose for themselves.

MUSÉE: *Do you think people pose or behave less candidly when they notice the camera? Given your interest in obscuring the line between reality and theatre, do you think subjects who do perform in the presence of a camera are still enacting reality?*

ALEX: There is an initial moment of hesitation from some people, which is the reason one photograph might take longer than usual. It takes time for people to accept their surroundings and fall back into their own character. Suddenly unaware of the camera, people are able to re-enact themselves with more conviction, making the scene more real, if not reality itself.

MUSÉE: *You do both documentary photography and videography. What would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of each medium?*

ALEX: I would not compare photography and videography because, while the mediums may be similar in language, technique, and composition, they are completely different when it comes to how they convey emotion. The choice between using one or the other is heavily influenced by what I am surrounded by at a particular moment, especially sounds, and depends on what I would like to convey in a particular work.

MUSÉE: *You call your project Libera me "a reflection of the human condition." It has three chapters, the first being called "Persona," which consists of many faces illuminated in chiaroscuro. How do you think that the individual "persona" relates to the broad notions of paradise and hell which you represent, through images of nature and war, in the second and third chapters of Libera me?*

ALEX: This work is a re-interpretation, or better, a tribute to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, an incredible masterpiece of the early Renaissance. The full body of work never achieved its full physical form, having stopped at chapter 1 when my publisher and friend, Gigi Giannuzzi, died in 2012.

Alex Majoli, #6350, São Paulo, Brazil, Training at the "Imperador Do Ipiranga" samba school, June 14, 2014.



MUSÉE: *The dynamism and high-contrast black and whites of much of your work brings to mind early baroque painting. Do you intentionally reference this art historical era in your photography?*

ALEX: As an art student, I was introduced early on to a lot of incredible art and this is echoed, aesthetically, in all of my photography. The way I select and edit my photographs, however, is heavily influenced by literature.

MUSÉE: *Can you talk about what the strobe lights add to your imagery?*

ALEX: The strobe lights serve as a way of blurring the line between reality and fiction. They allow me to stage a play wherever I want by giving the characters a space in which they can perform their own lives.

MUSÉE: *Do you always have assistants to help light your shots? How does this work?*

ALEX: One of my assistants helps me with the lights, normally two strobes. One is placed still and the other moves as the scene evolves.

It can be quite difficult to coordinate, especially in situations where it is impossible to communicate verbally. Through experience we have worked out a way to understand each other very quickly.

MUSÉE: *Would you define your work as documentary, staged, or occupying a liminal space? Is the effect you create with staged lighting your signature?*

ALEX: My pictures are not staged. I do not direct my subjects; sometimes there is no communication between us at all. I have the tendency to avoid defining my work and confining it into a box, because the moment we decide to define something we have inadvertently killed a lot of the creativity behind it. However, my photographs do bring into play an aesthetic, influenced by Caravaggio, which is now something I would call a signature. These lighting techniques highlight the interplay between fiction and reality and the characters that travel back and forth between the two.

Alex Majoli, Above: Scene #60410, Lesbos, Greece 2/5, 2015; Following spread: Scene #50032, Lesbos, Greece, Migrants and refugees crowd around the food distribution van inside Moira refugee camp, 2015.





Alex Majoli, Scene #20508, Lesbos, Greece 1/5, 2015.



Alex Majoli, Above: Scene #1095, Pointe Noire, Congo 4/5, 2013. Following spread: Scene #0525, Pointe Noire, Congo 3/5, 2013.

