

WATERSHED

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Planespotters – Toronto Pearson Airport, 1995

RITA LEISTNER



This photograph was a “watershed” in my photography practice for several reasons. I’d driven-by “planespotters” many times on my way in and out of Toronto. Like many scenes and people I’ve observed, I’d seen the potential for an image right away. But there is a world of difference between imagining you can make a photograph of something or someone, and actually following through with the motions to make it happen. The courage to pursue an impulse, to approach strangers, or just to turn the car around and go back to a place is something that has evolved in me overtime. It’s never easy; not then, not today. I liken it to asking someone on a date: You have to make yourself vulnerable to rejection or failure, but it will never happen if you don’t make that first, terrifying move. It’s not like a fictional story or picture that you can go home and create after the fact, drawn from imagination. You have to be present in the moment – this is an essential fact of photojournalistic practice.



The Women of al-Rashad Psychiatric Hospital - Baghdad, 2004.

Over time, as my faith in photography increased and I gained experience, I became willing to take greater risks to get a photograph and tell a story. This second photograph is an example. First I had to get to Iraq, and later I would repeatedly cross front lines of fighting to get to the hospital. There was a lot of danger and bureaucracy to face along the way. It’s humbling. The world is a sea of missed photo opportunities and untold stories, and all we can do is make a tiny ripple by pulling-over to the side of the road, one photograph at a time.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Toronto, Rita Leistner earned a master’s degree in comparative literature from the University of Toronto in 1990, and worked for six years as a photographer and as a lighting specialist in the film industry before moving to Cambodia in 1998 to work as an independent photojournalist. In 2000, she moved to New York to study photojournalism at The International Center for Photography, and later went on to cover the wars in Iraq and Lebanon. Rita’s photographs have been exhibited widely, and published in Time, Newsweek, Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair Italy, The Walrus, Colors, Ideas and Maclean’s among other publications and have been recognized with awards from the National Press Photographers’ Association, The Canadian National Magazine Awards Foundation and the Advertising and Design Club of Canada. Rita has also won

awards for her writing, which often accompanies her in-depth feature stories. She is the recipient of the prestigious 2007 Arts Partners in Creative Development (APCD) grant to collaborate with First Nations' playwright Marie Clements. Rita is co-author of several books including *Unembedded: Four Independent Photojournalists on the War in Iraq*, and is represented by Redux Pictures in New York. Rita has been based in Toronto since returning home in 2007 to be closer to her family.

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