

## **Don McCullin Tate Britain 5 Feb – 6 May 2019**

Looking back on the past half-century, there have been a handful of ‘giants’ who have kept us reliably informed about global events. The names of John Simpson, Martin Bell and Marie Colvin immediately spring to mind. The giant who looms largest for me, however, is (Sir) Don McCullin – a fearless photojournalist whose reportage from areas of conflict across the world has allowed us to glimpse domestic, national and international conflicts viewed without fear or favour to political parties or ideologies.



***Near Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin 1961***

The exhibition of his life's work (so far) which opened at the Tate Britain this week shows him as considerably more than a war photographer – a description he actively dislikes. It shows the work of a humanitarian, highly skilled with a Nikon camera.

The exhibition begins with stark images of north London street life in the late 1950's during which McCullin got his first big publishing break with the 'Guvnors' shot – a notorious local gang posed along a post-war bomb damaged building. You then move through to a set of cold, harsh images of

the 1960's 'Cold War' Berlin. Then turn left – and be prepared! You are suddenly amidst some of the most menacing, disturbing and violent images of the entire show taken in the Belgian Congo and Biafra. McCullin himself described these conflicts as beyond war, beyond journalism and even beyond photography – but not beyond politics. “We cannot, must not be allowed to forget the appalling things we are all capable of doing to our fellow beings” was a personal observation he made at the time. His pictures, however, said so much more. Slowly, move on to the Vietnam period. This room hold so many iconic images, including the world famous ‘Shell Shocked Marine, Battle of Hue 1968’. Continue on to the room focussing on the East End photos of the early 1970's. Fortunately, I have never seen war or witnessed street battles – but I did live only a few miles from the scenes presented of poverty, deprivation and human degradation recorded as harsh, unforgiving documentary shots. The contrast between my leafy-gladed north London suburb and the streets around Billingsgate were shocking. I had to stop for a few minutes' reflection ‘There but for fortune’ was my theme. The show then takes you through a set of grainy, misty images of Bradford and the north of England shot with a poetic intensity, but devoid of nostalgia. The final push is into Beirut, Iraq and the AIDS pandemic – all recorded through a camera held by someone with both respect and genuine compassion for all those who passed through the viewfinder. The exhibition ends with a set of landscapes, a field of photography he is currently engaging with in his early eighties!



***Protestor, Cuban Missile Crisis, Whitehall London, 1962***

This is a remarkable exhibition of a life lived in some of the darkest, dangerous and challenging environments that our planet has to offer. It is not always easy viewing, but I believe it is important. On a small stand in the middle of the war zone section, McCullin's Nikon body and helmet are displayed – if only they could speak.....

The 250 photographs on display have all been hand printed by the photographer himself in his darkroom. They, in some small part, allow us to begin to understand the depth of an extraordinary human who has led an extraordinary photographic career. So how did he manage to achieve this – ‘I was never anyone's enemy’ is the simple reply.

Richard Taylor

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***Near Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin 1961.***

***Protestor, Cuban Missile Crisis, Whitehall London, 1962***