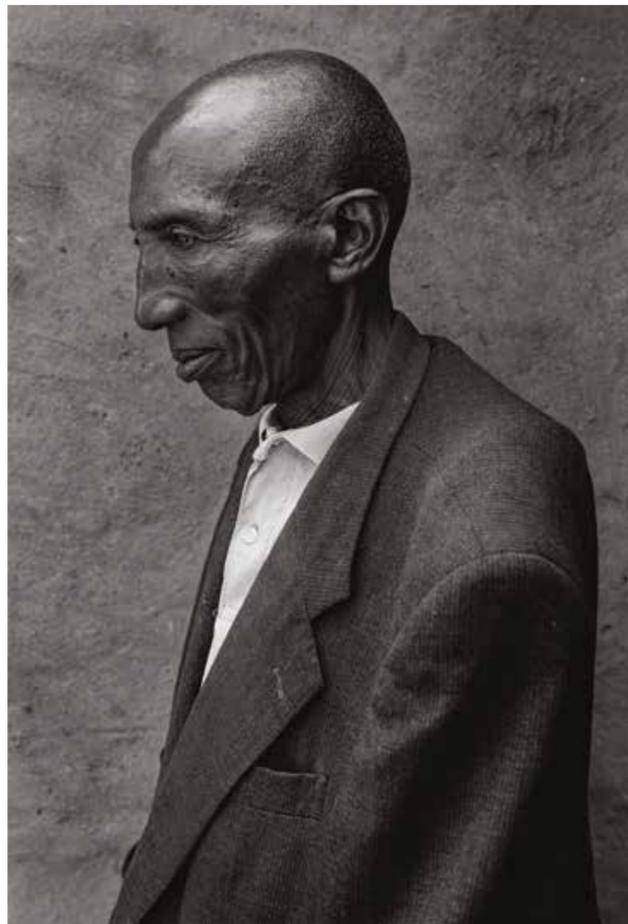


AMERICAN CONNECTION

Photographs of refugees often portray them as stripped of their dignity, but **Daniel Portal** wanted to show them with a fresh perspective that told their stories in a new light. He talks to Susan Burnstine.

susanburnstine.com



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Photographer Daniel Portal's soulful portraits of Ugandan refugees reflect on the deeper meaning of living in a state of limbo and what it means to live in a constant state of duality. His series *Dignity In Limbo* focuses on a simultaneous existence of living and dying, being hopeful and hopeless, revisiting home and re-settling, longing for a better future and struggling with the atrocities of the past.

Largely a self-taught photographer, Portal grew up in Buenos Aires and emigrated to the United States 17 years ago. He migrated as a scientist, met his wife and started a family in

Boston. Additionally, he has worked as a commercial and editorial photographer specialising in world-class athletes and a wide span of portraiture and he also manages logistics for several international photography workshops.

Following the birth of his daughter and the loss of his father, Portal began looking back at his life in Buenos Aires and felt the desire to reconnect and share his cultural background with his daughter. This revisiting triggered an interest in the thematic concept of physical and emotional departure, which subsequently inspired him to create personal fine art and documentary portrait series

that embody the topic.

He became inspired to create portraits of refugees in Uganda after a friend who is an ER doctor mentioned she had plans to travel to the country to work in a refugee camp. He asked if he could travel with her team to photograph refugees and document their stories. 'I have always been very interested in the plight and resilience of refugees, but I wanted to approach this project in a different way,' he says. 'As I did more research, I realised that the images that I kept seeing over and over again were for the most part of people stripped of their dignity. Maybe these are the images that are more likely

to help NGOs to get donations and support. I don't know. I'm not judging. But I wanted a fresh perspective that didn't unfairly and inaccurately strip refugees of their dignity, and told each of their stories in a new light.'

Portal had to keep his backpack light so he packed a limited collection of gear, including a Nikon DSLR, plus 24-70mm f/2.8 and 50mm f/1.8 lenses and a Polaroid instant camera. 'By giving my subjects a physical photo of themselves to keep, it felt like a more fair transaction. I knew I wasn't going to compensate the subjects financially, so the least I could do was to give them something back for their time.'



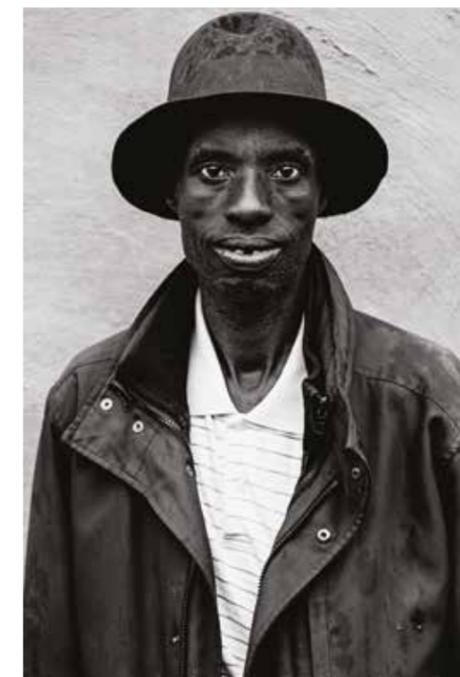
All images © Daniel Portal

Portal visited three settlements – Nakivale in the south and Bidi Bidi and White Rhino in the north. He had two approaches to creating his portraits: to emphasise the subjects and to incorporate long exposures and blur to metaphorically convey what he describes as a sense of living in limbo. He explains that this limbo is an emotional and physical state that many refugees in Uganda experience

since they can't work and they can't return to their countries of origin.

During his two-week visit, Portal walked through settlements for more than 10 hours a day and met 105 refugees. He hired a refugee who acted as an interpreter and intermediary. Each neighbourhood they visited had a chief, so they presented themselves to each chief as they arrived, explained the project and if he approved they would be

allowed to walk around and talk to the refugees. Portal explained his project to every potential subject he met and he'd spend a considerable amount of time getting to know every individual before making a portrait. Currently Portal is working on a portrait series of refugees at the US-Mexico border, a fine art series that focuses on climate change and he is also planning to return to Uganda to create more portraits at refugee camps. danielportalstudio.com



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EXHIBITIONS
USA

ANDOVER

Addison Gallery of American Art
Until 26 April
Gordon Parks: *The New Tide, Early Work 1940-1950*
addison.andover.edu

BOCA RATON

Boca Raton Museum of Art
Until 31 May
Phyllis Galemba: *Maske*
bocamuseum.org

BOSTON

Museum of Fine Arts
Until 21 June
Elsa Dorfman: *Me and My Camera*
mfa.org

CHICAGO

Catherine Edelman Gallery
Until 25 April
Daniel Beltrá: *The Amazon*
edelmangallery.com

FORT WORTH

Amon Carter Museum of American Art
Until 10 May
Eliot Porter: *Birds*
cartermuseum.org

LOS ANGELES

Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Until 9 August
Vera Lutter: *Museum in the Camera*
lacma.org

RIVERSIDE

California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTS
Until 9 August
Noah Berger: *Facing Fire*
ucrarts.ucr.edu

SAN FRANCISCO

SFMOMA
Until 25 May
Dawoud Bey: *An American Project*
sfmoma.org

WASHINGTON DC

National Museum of Women in the Arts
Until 25 May
Graciela Iturbide: *Mexico*
nmwa.org