

Exhibition

Tuberculosis: pictures of a ticking time bomb

Mortal danger has been part and parcel of his trade for the past 30 years, having dodged machetes, snipers' bullets, tank wheels, and even napalm bombs in some of the most gruesome conflict zones on earth. But as he greets those attending his *Struggle For Life* exhibition in the heart of Berlin, it is surprising how shy and humble James Nachtwey appears. Although officially the star of tonight's show, the award-winning war photographer chooses to give only a short speech, quietly apologising for being "a man of pictures, not words" as he emphasises the humanitarian aspects of his work: "Unlike paparazzi, the people I photo are inherently non-commercial. They often do not have, or are being denied, a voice. My biggest problem as a photographer of war is that I could profit from the suffering of others. This thought haunts me". He goes on to explain that "I also take photos from a perspective of compassion. With this project, I hope that my work will contribute to a collective conscience and awareness of tuberculosis today."

Awareness is certainly needed. About 2 million people die each year from tuberculosis, a poverty-related disease that is preventable. Yet the spread of multidrug-resistant and extensively drug-resistant strains threatens progress in tackling the disease, as does the fact that it is a leading killer of people with HIV/AIDS. In his opening speech for Nachtwey's exhibition at the Max-Planck-Institute for Infection-Biology, institute director Stefan Kaufmann explains that "TB is a ticking bomb. It kills someone every 20 seconds but today we still have no effective vaccine against it. We need to know more about the basic principles of this disease, whose causative organisms increasingly show themselves to be resistant to previously effective medicine. James Nachtwey

unflinchingly shows us how important our research against this epidemic plague is."

Spread over concrete walls on the ground and first floor of the lobby, Nachtwey's pictures definitely grab your attention. Thrusting you into each patient's private world of pain, they are relentless in their intensity. You see mouths scrunched up in agony as drugs are swallowed, mothers

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struggling to comfort feverish children who scream in pain, seeping mouth wounds, skeletal patients too frail to stand being showered in their wheelchairs, and even people spluttering on life support machines.

Surrounding by these scenes, it suddenly feels distasteful to be wandering around, champagne in hand and nibbling finger-food. But Anne Goldfeld, whose text features alongside Nachtwey's work, insists that despite whatever sense of unease these images inspire, it is essential that people see the reality of tuberculosis. Goldfeld is president and co-founder

of the Cambodian Health Committee (CHC) that focuses on tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS in rural Cambodia, and she is also working on a similar project with the Ethiopian Government. CHC workers and patients feature in some of the exhibits and Goldfeld says although Nachtwey's images are difficult to digest, they are desperately needed: "When you look at the pictures, you see people in pain, people dying of TB and AIDS, although there are drugs to prevent and treat AIDS and to cure TB...You just think to yourself—this is not acceptable. Many of the people in the photos in this exhibition are now dead." But for Goldfeld, the images also reveal a sense of humanity: "Jim's photos do many things at once—they show the horror of TB and AIDS and the desperate need for new treatments and vaccines. But ultimately they also show the strength of the human spirit—the patients' will to live and fight despite finding themselves in the worst conditions possible—and they show the compassion of countless health workers and family members."

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James Nachtwey: Struggle for Life

Max-Planck-Institute for Infection-Biology, Berlin, Germany, until June 25, 2009. <http://www.mpiib-berlin.mpg.de/nachtwey/nachtwey1.htm>

For **James Nachtwey's work** see <http://www.jamesnachtwey.com>

For **Cambodian Health Committee** see <http://www.cambodianhealthcommittee.org>



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