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## FEATURES



The Photohumanist

By Sarah Coleman

How do you photograph people's intense suffering and grief, year after year, without being driven mad or becoming a dry-eyed cynic? It's a question that has preoccupied many photojournalists, and Paolo Pellegrin is no exception. "We move in a delicate territory," he says of himself and his colleagues. "Basically, I try to be respectful in a situation which is not very respectful. I feel that I'm granted a privilege, to be able to witness people's extreme emotions, and I treat that with great care."



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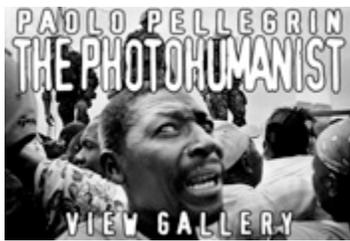
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Over the last decade or so, Pellegrin has made a name for himself by conveying, with great care and passion, the suffering of a broad range of people. First recognized in 1995 by World Press Photo for his work documenting AIDS in Uganda, he's gone on to photograph in conflict zones from Bosnia to Gaza, Afghanistan to Sudan. He's dodged bullets and bombs, outrun riots, and

been hand-fed by Yassir Arafat. Along the way, he's picked up almost every major photojournalism prize, culminating in October 2006 with the \$30,000 W. Eugene Smith Grant in Humanistic Photography.

It's a testament to Pellegrin's powerful vision that, although he's often covering the same events as others, his images are unique. Photographing in 2004 at a refugee camp in war-torn Darfur, for example, he eschewed familiar shots and instead went outdoors in a rainstorm, where he captured grainy, impressionistic images of figures under dark, threatening skies. The images, which won the Overseas Press Club's Oliver Rebbot Award, are amazingly raw and direct. With disarming simplicity, they get right under the viewer's skin and demand an emotional response.

Sitting in the New York offices of Magnum, the prestigious photo agency that accepted him as a full member in 2005, Pellegrin speaks eloquently about his passion for his work. Tall and rangy, with dark curly hair and wire-rimmed glasses, he could be a young professor – an impression that's borne out by his calm, soulful manner. "I'm always looking for a bridge, a place where I can connect to what is in front of me," he says. "Of course, there's always a distance, there are cultural and linguistic gaps. What I try to do is to reduce this distance."

One way he does this is literally – by using a wide-angle lens that forces him to get up close and personal with his subjects. "It helps to have a small camera which doesn't offend; it's not intrusive, as opposed to a huge monster," he says. Sensitive body language and a respectful manner also help him make a connection – like in Rome last year, when he photographed at the Vatican before and after Pope John Paul II's death. "I'm always amazed at how people welcome me to be part of their grief," he says. "As I become older and more mature, I'm increasingly careful. I think, what if it was *my* father's funeral and somebody was taking pictures?"

Shooting at the Vatican took Pellegrin back to his home city of Rome, where his mother, an architect, still lives (his father, also an architect, passed away in 2001). Given his intense focus on his work, it comes as a surprise to learn that Pellegrin initially studied architecture himself. Then, in the middle of what he calls "the architecture debacle," he dropped out of school and knocked on the door of Rome's newly-established *Istituto Italiano di Fotografia*. "I think I was lucky," he says. "I didn't know what to do with myself in those years. My encounter with photography was wonderful because for the first time I knew I'd found my direction."

Still, it took a good few years of apprenticeship — assisting other photographers, paying his dues — before Pellegrin felt he'd matured. In the early 1990s, he left Rome and moved to Paris with what he calls "a very unimpressive portfolio" of work he'd shot on homelessness and immigration in Rome. Luckily, Christian Caujolle at the photo agency VU "saw the seed of something in what I showed him," says Pellegrin, and invited him to join the agency, where he began to develop his unique style.

Now in a category — not to mention the same agency — with his heroes Josef Koudelka and Gilles Peress, Pellegrin continues to push himself. "Photography is like a difficult foreign language: if you want to speak it well, it requires a lot of study and thought," he says. He shoots primarily in black and white, he says, because "there's an abstract element that helps to convey meaning and symbols." For color work, he likes the Olympus E-330's small size and color profile. "It has these rusty colors which are unique to the system, and which are very beautiful," he says.

At VU, while covering Arab immigrants in Marseille, Pellegrin began a long-term project on how Islam affects people's lives around the world. The project's title, *MAKTUB: It is Written*, refers to the influence of the Qu'ran over Muslims all over the globe. After 9/11, the work took on a new urgency as Pellegrin

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traveled to Afghanistan, Iraq, Gaza and Lebanon.

With the Smith award, Pellegrin will be able to travel independently and stay longer in Islamic countries he has yet to visit, Syria and Saudi Arabia among them. He's particularly excited about Iran, which he visited for the first time recently. "There's a wonderful young generation there; they really have this great desire to exchange views and ideas with foreigners," he says, adding wryly, "I just hope they don't get bombed."

By spending longer in each country, Pellegrin hopes to delve beyond the 24-hour news cycle and reveal new insights about Islam. "I go with the eyes of a foreigner," he says. "It's a journey where I go through these countries trying to find relationships, to understand, to create a dialogue — first of all between me and what I see, but then, hopefully, to involve the viewers in this conversation."

In the current global environment, this conversation seems crucial. Rendered with Pellegrin's visual fluency, it has the potential to show Islam in subtle, complex ways. Too modest to claim he's breaking new ground, Pellegrin places himself in the tradition of documentary photographers from Robert Frank to Eugene Richards. "There are historic precedents where the sum of photographers' and writers' work has reached a mass where it promotes some change," he says. "To be part of this dynamic, that's what's important for me."

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