

Nancy Goulet



## A Picture's Worth

*How photographers and designers collaborate to impact social causes*

**H**is gaze is steady and soft. He stares forward in a dreamy fog. And though he looks you straight in the eye, sunlight from a nearby doorway glinting off the dark pools of his pupils, it is evident his thoughts are elsewhere.

Is he contemplating? Is he caught in a fantasy? A memory? What have those beseeching eyes seen during his short life to leave such a haunting expression? He continues to stare at me, and I stare back.

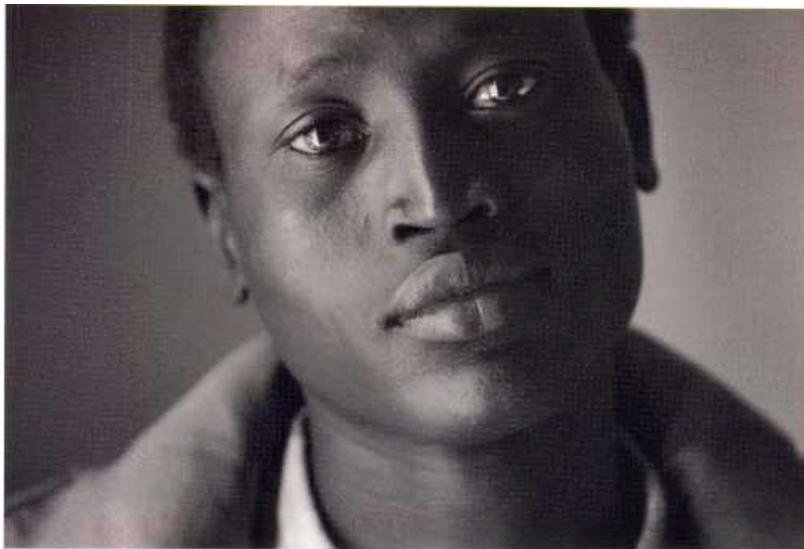
I am mesmerized by how simultaneously familiar and foreign he appears. "This could be the kid next door," I think as I search for more clues to his identity. I imagine him sporting some athletic jersey and a backwards cap peddling up my street on his bike, popping wheelies as he spies an onlooker. Except for those eyes. Behind those eyes lives a story. It's just one among many

stories photographer Sean Kernan of Connecticut longs to share, if only we will listen or, should I say, *look*.

Kernan shot the photograph of this young man and several dozen others last February during a trip to a refugee center in Cairo, where he ventured to capture the plight of those fleeing war-ravaged Sudan. He spent two weeks at the St. Andrew's Church Refugee Center taking the portraits of those seeking safety and assistance with the hopes of sharing their stories to

encourage people abroad to wonder about these people or as he said, to really look.

"I wondered, what might you learn just by looking at their faces?" Kernan asked. "I want others to look at one of these people and imagine they are one of them...put themselves as much in their places as they can and just stay with them... Stay in the awareness of them."



Sean Kernan, *Sudanese Man*, [www.facesudan.com](http://www.facesudan.com).

But getting the message out hasn't been so easy. Since returning from Africa, Kernan has tried to donate his work to several aid agencies. While many took interest in the photos, none have taken him up on his offer. And Kernan believes there is a reason for that.

"It's like I was going to GM (General Motors) with a car design and saying, here's this great idea for a new car. They just don't know what

to do with it or me...I feel like I'm walking around trying to give these organizations a gift they don't know what to do with," Kernan said.

Like Kernan, photographer Phil Borges likes to literally show the face of the issue. His most recent project involves photographing portraits of courageous women around the world to expose gender discrimination and to stir dialogue about how to obliterate inequalities. Borges is currently working on a

## design issues

book exhibiting portraits of these valiant women and their stories titled *"Women Empowered: Inspiring Changes in an Emerging World"*. The book is due out March 2007. The image collection will tour around the country, debuting at the United Nations Building, March 8th on International Women's Day.

The collection has been almost a lifetime in the making. During his many travels Borges has collected the stories of his featured heroes. But it is more recently, over the past two years, that he has actively documented their inspiring life stories through film and pen.

"I like to tell the story through people," Borges said. "Through their eyes and faces. ...I tell the stories of heroes, ordinary women who have done extraordinary things...I believe the most effective way of eliminating poverty is through women. Women invest in their families. They invest in their children. That translates into communities."

But how do the images like those of Borges, Kernan and the myriad of other activist documentarians translate into the world? In other words, are the images enough to incite awareness, involvement and change?

"To me the portraits are a kind of hook to build the story around. They captivate to draw in the reader," Borges said.

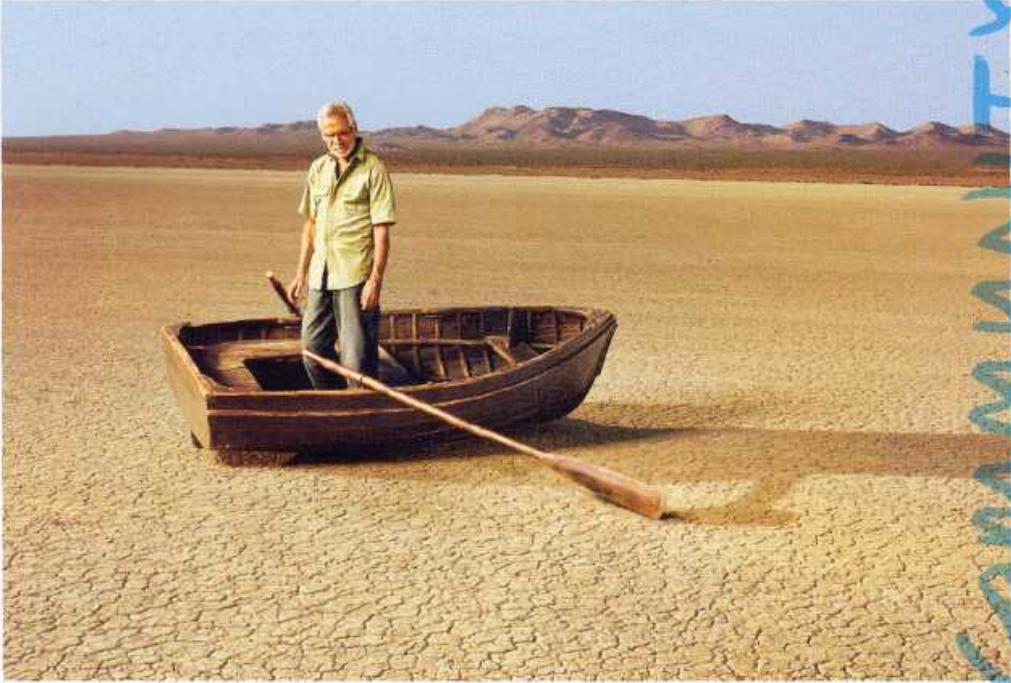
"Imagery begins the process of awareness," said the renowned environmentalist photographer Edward Burtynsky. "It allows us to begin to understand the complexity of an issue."

"People see  
a picture long  
before they read,  
It influences how  
they understand  
(what they read)."

—Alice Rose George

Over the past 25 years Burtynsky has recorded the results of human desecration of the planet in conflictually beautiful and horrific depictions of global industrial landscapes. His collections appear in more than fifteen major museums worldwide including the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the Biblioteque Nationale in Paris, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

In 2005 Burtynsky won the 2005 TED Prize (TED, the Technology, Entertainment, Design Conference, is a gathering of thought-leaders in technology, entertainment and design, plus business, science, the arts, music, global issues and more). He was awarded a \$100,000 purse and granted



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Phil Borges, *Awash Fontale, Ethiopia, Abay, 28*. Abay brought an end to female circumcision in her village, [www.womenempoweredonline.com](http://www.womenempoweredonline.com).

resources and support for three wishes to better the world. Part of the results of his first wish will be published in 2007 in a 400-page book titled *World Changing*. The book, designed by another TEDster, Stefan Sagmeister, showcases Burtynsky's collection detailing the effects of progress in nature. The second half of his work can be read daily as Burtynsky works to promote the blog by the same name ([www.worldchanging.com](http://www.worldchanging.com)) which is sponsored by TED.

Burtynsky has become involved in the global movement of sustainability for many reasons; one of them is very personal. "Being a father of two kids I do think, 'What are we handing over to you?' My feeling right now is that we may be handing over something that is worse than what we were given," Burtynsky said. Adding that his hope for his photographs is "to allow the viewer to confront these places and begin a dialogue...to ask what is the artist trying to tell me...What these images do and what they provide is a glimpse of these (environmentally devastated) worlds that people wouldn't be aware of."

After speaking to Burtynsky I read a short article in *Newsweek* that reminded me a bit of Burtynsky's photographic goal in that it showed, as Burtynsky put it, "the effects of progress on nature." The story was about an anonymous group of artists who have collaborated to bring attention to the vacant, dilapidated ruins of former residences in Detroit. In the past 50 years, the once-prosperous city has lost a million residents who have fled the car-manufacturing town. Homes have been left to rot and litter the freeway landscapes. The artists have banded together to secretly paint the eyesores the bright orange color of the sunrise. At the time of the writing of this article, the group, who has

called the project "Object Orange," had painted eleven houses, three of which were knocked down by the city due to the new-found attention. The violation orange house was screaming for attention, saying "Hey, look at me." The article was only a paragraph long accompanied by a small photo showcasing a brilliant orange crumbling carcass of a home. Yet it was powerful.

Borges, Kernan and Burtynsky's photographs serve the same purpose as the painting of these houses. Like the lonely orange house in this sea of decay, the work needs context to resonate, whether that be placement in an exhibition, the design of a book, in a magazine or the creation of a campaign.

The *Newsweek* article got me thinking. Photographs, like the painted houses, arrest attention, compel you to look creating awareness of a situation you pass by everyday without notice. The artists, like designers, figured out a way to bring attention to this plaguing issue by juxtaposing a new reality against an old.

Once again I was intrigued. So after interviewing these three talented and passionate photographers I began to wonder; what is the role of design/designers in creating impact through imagery? I spoke to a few designers involved in social causes to find out their perspectives.

"It is not just about bringing images to life, it is about creating concrete and viable contexts in which they can be used. Photos without a venue are like words without sound or page," said Cheryl Heller of Heller Communication Design in New York City.

Heller was the developer of the Sappi Ideas that Matter program, which awards grants that enable the implementation of creative ideas designed to support social and environmental causes.



Edward Burtynsky, *Oxford Tire Pile No. 1, Westly, California 1999*, [www.worldchanging.com](http://www.worldchanging.com).

She is currently working with the World Wildlife Fund, IDE (poverty eradication) and Audubon New York, as well as an identity and promotional campaign for hybrid cabs in Boston.

"The truth is," said Lucas Guerra, principal of ARGUS, a multi-cultural and mission-based design firm in Boston, "anyone can knock out a little flyer. We are trained professionals. We have the responsibility to execute a message and make the message much more powerful.

"The way to do this is to use our skills of storytelling to compel people to pay attention and coax them into action," Guerra added. "As a designer your message travels. The message becomes knowledge and people carry that knowledge and tell other people. It's fluid. It's alive."

"Imagery is such an integral part of design; they are hard to separate," said Steve Liska of Liska + Associates in Chicago. "The skill is in the editing. Photographers grow close to their subject matter—which does not always make for a subjectively

great image that involves the viewer. A good designer is a skilled visual editor."

"People see a picture long before they read. It influences how they understand (what they read)," said Alice Rose George, whose credentials include serving as photo director for *Details* and *Double Take* magazines, and Magnum Photos as well as authoring five books on photography and curating several shows. But as she said, it's often only a beginning. "Photographs, like words, need to be sequenced, ordered and placed in context in order to convey the emotional, visual and aesthetic meaning they contain which might help to create understanding and possible solutions."

The role of the designer in creating impact, however, can extend beyond the role of editing. It spills into creation. Not only can the designer enhance the impact of a photograph, but as many of the designers mentioned, designers as citizens can play a very important role in the cause by doing what we do everyday.

"The design object itself can work as a statement with impact that gets people to pay attention, to think, to notice, to act, to donate. Good designers will then go one step further to help an organization by providing the full spectrum of communications," Liska continued. "A poster, a banner, a Web site is not enough; there needs to be a strong, clear consistent voice aligned with a well-functioning organization. Designers look at a broader more holistic view of communication, of process and results. They look at the business model, the brand, the messaging, so that whatever they design is not created in a vacuum. It is a unique skill set that compliments other professional involvement."

The impact stretches beyond what designers create, to how they create them, Burtynsky pointed out. "Designers play a huge role (in social causes) because everything that exists in the world is designed," he said, "and designers are in a position to be more sensitive to the whole life of the project...They can propose how the project should be published or created. They can help create sustainability...They can begin to design so that the work has a recyclable path."

In other words, our work as designers involved in social causes can go beyond words and the use of photography. Because we are called upon to solve problems everyday, collecting pertinent facts and emotional ties, designers add the critical ingredient of out-of-the-box thinking to push and promote awareness and ultimately to help in finding the fix. We're not the only ones who can do this, but the point is that if we can find answers for corporate America, we can find the will and the way for causes if we too feel compelled. And perhaps that's the function of photos too. To call those of us who can to action.

"Designers don't have the power of Bono or George Clooney, but every once in a while design steps forward to help the world make a small change of perception, a yellow plastic bracelet, a peace poster, a small object that reminds us about our humanity," said Liska.

Which brings us back to Kernan and his memorable images of the Sudanese refugees. After his offers were rejected by the aid organizations, Kernan approached another community—designers.

"They're my family...These are the people I can talk to easily," he said.

He approached print designer Anita Soos to help him create a little book of the photos, and got the workshops where he teaches to agree to distribute them to students. And he called upon Web designer Matthew Garrett to help him develop a Web site ([www.facesudan.com](http://www.facesudan.com)) to put his photos into the world.

"I'm not expecting a walk on Washington," he said. "I just want to give people a view that's different than the news, and to point them toward a group of aid organizations listed on

the site if they are moved to do something." But ideally, Kernan would hope for more. He'd love to see the photos utilized in other meaningful ways as well.

So I posed the question of what to do with Kernan's photos to the designers interviewed. Almost immediately, they did what they do best and drummed up ideas.

Guerra suggested meeting with a Boston legend, Reverend Gloria White Hammond, who has worked as a medical missionary in several African countries including Sudan. She has been involved in gaining the freedom of 10,000 women and children enslaved during the civil war, as well as co-founding the humanitarian group "My Sister's Keeper." Guerra men-

tioned a postcard campaign launched by White Hammond and suggested contributing to the effort.

Stefan Sagmeister advocated teaming up with an organization or an individual deeply involved in the region. Taking it one step further, Sagmeister suggested the names of two *New York Times* writers.

Similarly Heller suggested what Kernan ultimately did; develop a program of his own first and approach groups second. "Sean and anybody else who wants to be heard must show people how they can be used, and to what end. People need to have concrete options to take, otherwise they don't know what to do," she said.

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—Cheryl Heller

Now I'm asking you. I'm issuing up a challenge to the proclaimed creative minds out there to take a look at Kernan's pictures. Tell me why the connection of photography and design in social activism is an important one. If you're inclined, show us what you'd do with Kernan's photos. Contact Kernan to obtain files at [seankernan.com](mailto:seankernan.com), and write me ([nancy@trdesign.com](mailto:nancy@trdesign.com)) with your ideas (and your stories) to create awareness or peace or social change using imagery.

I can't wait to hear what you come up with. CR

*Editor's note: This is just the beginning! Designers and photographers with collaboration ideas should get in touch with Nancy Goulet and we will move on to part two of this article.*

—DK Holland