

VANITY FAIR

AFRICA



Young girls leave a camp for "internally displaced persons" to gather firewood, a necessary activity that leaves them vulnerable to rape or murder. Abu Shouk, North Darfur, Sudan, June 25, 2005. *Photograph by Ron Haviv/VII.*

Picturing Genocide

Inspired by images of suffering in Africa, a lone Chicago woman pulls together "Darfur/Darfur," an exhibit of haunting photos by important photographers. The show is now traveling the world—and making a difference.

by **EVGENIA PERETZ** **VF.COM** June 18, 2007

"I think I'm a little stupid sometimes," says Leslie Thomas, the woman behind the traveling digital-projection exhibit "Darfur/Darfur," "but in a convenient fashion." To wit, this architect and new mother living in Chicago decided one night—despite zero contacts in the worlds of activism or politics—that she was going to do something significant to end the genocide in Darfur. Now, just over a year later, her project is hitting viewers in the gut, one city at a time. It's even helping to propel legislative action.

In March 2006, while surfing the Web after a middle-of-the-night feed with her infant son, Thomas came across a photograph of a one-year-old Sudanese girl with a bullet hole in her back. It was this image that inspired her to take action. "I harbor this fantasy that she survived," Thomas says. "The reality is that she just died, most likely, but now it's hard for me to just say that. I sat and cried for hours." The infant in her arms had something to do with it. "If my son died, and I was killed," she recalls thinking, "I would want someone to remember Niko, just for a moment to think of him." She knew from the very beginning that her project would involve photography: when she was young, her father showed her the famous photographs by Eugene Smith that revealed the crippling effects of mercury poisoning in Japan. Those photos had a huge political impact in the 1970s, and Thomas never forgot their power.

After hundreds of cold calls, Thomas amassed a group of some of the most important photojournalists

working today: Paolo Pellegrin, Lynsey Addario, Mark Brecke, Helene Caux, Ron Haviv, Ryan Spencer Reed, Brian Steidle, and Michal Ronnen Safdie, all of whom have been focusing on Darfur in their work. She then lined up a slew of impressive venues, from the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., to the Hammer Museum in L.A., to the Jewish Museum in Berlin. The photographs collected in the exhibit reveal not just the effects of a genocide—with haunting images of corpses and burnt villages, children on their last breath, refugees headed to the unknown, child soldiers with vacant stares—but also Darfur's agrarian history, before men, women, and children began fearing for their lives every single day. A third group of photos consists of intimate portraits—poignant reminders that these victims are not statistics, they are people.



The "Darfur/Darfur" photography exhibit as projected on the exterior walls of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, March 15, 2007. *Photograph by Helene Caux.* [Enlarge this photo.](#)

The exhibit is not intended to inspire quiet self-reflection. Accompanied by keening African music, the pictures are projected on walls (both interior and exterior), giving them a monumentality that is inescapable. "If you are a young mother in Darfur, and you have children and you are trying to protect them and save your own life, but most importantly, the life of your family, you are a hundred percent overwhelmed all the time," says Thomas. "I don't think it's possible for us to picture that [unless] *we're* overwhelmed."

With current and upcoming shows at Milan's Centro Internazionale di Fotografia, Philadelphia's Constitution Center, Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, and the New-York Historical Society, the exhibit has accomplished a major first step: shaking viewers into outrage and convincing them that standing by is no longer acceptable. The show has also had more concrete effects. Thanks in part to "Darfur/Darfur," the Texas state legislature has passed a Sudan divestment bill; a similar measure is on the docket in Rhode Island. And Senator Dick Durbin, Democrat of Illinois, may bring the exhibit to the halls of Congress as part of his Darfur efforts.



African Union soldiers find the village of Tama, in South Darfur, still burning in June 2005, more than a week after it was first attacked by Arab nomads. *Photograph by Lynsey Addario/Corbis.* [Enlarge this photo.](#)

With such progress in just a year, Thomas is unfazed by the fact that she started it all herself. "I come from a family in which failing after a strong attempt was something to be proud of. *Not* trying was really an embarrassing state."

For more about "Darfur/Darfur," visit the [official site](#).

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