

Blurry Borders

Kristan Emerson

'I take photographs not despite being legally blind but because I am legally blind.'

Blurry Borders is the first exhibition by Kristan Emerson, a photographer from Swan Hill in rural Victoria.

Kristan has been shooting the world on his overseas travels since 2016. On their own, the photographs are beautiful – but consider that the photographer only has 3% vision in one eye alone.

Blurry Borders features images from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and elsewhere in Asia. The photographs were taken as a way for Kristan to see and experience the world using digital technology.

'My eyes do not have lenses but my camera does. It is my way of seeing detail in an otherwise blurry world.'

If you would like to experience more of Kristan's travel stories and photography or to get in contact please visit: www.blindasabackpack.com

Blurry Borders has been audio described so that those who are blind or have low vision can experience the images and stories. The audio descriptions can be found at www.blurryborders.com

All artworks in the exhibition available for sale: \$100 each



(You Hit the Wrong Note) Billy Goat

Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, August 2018.

I love goats. They make me laugh, they fill my belly and when sitting on the back of a motorbike in Lao with the world going blurrily past the ring of their bells herald something happening; a village coming up, a place to stop and eat or well, maybe just a few goats feeding on the scrub at the side of the road.

If you visit Peshawar, Pakistan you'll see shops full of them. Not necessarily just in a butcher's shop, restaurant or a livestock market but in the street not far from a mobile phone or slingshot shop. Unfortunately we didn't have time to stop and peruse the shelves for the latest model and the vendor was too busy with his already intrigued customer whilst looking for the next buyer but I did have a second to click on my camera.

When walking past such shops it is hard for me to know whether they are selling goats or boats but my brother knows what I like and was quick to point out the goat shop. By snapping a quick pic I can take the whole herd home with me. I can see that the goats seem to be a different breed to those we occasionally see here in Australia. I can see the grime covered salesmen. The bright blue paint on a crumbling wall and the mess inside and outside of the shop. By taking a quick photo I can see. Who wouldn't want to see a goat shop?

99 Red Balloons

Rajasthan, India, June 2017.

To me balloons are like smiles. Smiles that I can actually see, well kind of. They are a burst of colour, a flicker of fun and my camera and my eye love them.

Balloons stand out even more in the dirty streets of India, Lao, Myanmar, etcetera, than they do at a kid's birthday party at home. They are a modern juxtaposition in an often timeless scenario. They are a glimmer of hope, of joy in an otherwise relentless and often difficult existence. They are a bit of fun for children who often don't have much of a childhood. They are an income for old men who may have passed the prime of their working life. They are something that I can sort of see even without a camera.

This photograph was taken while a street parade was taking place, celebrating one of many 'special days' on the Indian cultural calendar. Whilst the men in the picture were busy watching the parade, I turned my back to it preferring to watch the crowd. And then balloons! Yes!

The men themselves appear in no rush to party, but the balloons are. The police officer, like all good Indian police officers, would prefer to hide in the background and look away rather than do anything. It is up to the balloons to do the talking. The colourful balloons are echoed in the rugs above them, and well, I really don't care what else. I mean, balloons!!!

Can't See the Florist for the Flowers

Solo, Java, Indonesia, July 2019.

The bright yellows and oranges of these flowers nearly tripped me up as we walked the streets of Solo in east Java, Indonesia.

I couldn't see the people at first but I could hear them, well one of them. 'Yes! *Photo, photo!*' I heard a female voice excitedly say.

I quickly clicked the camera to try and catch the scene so that I could explore it better on a computer screen.

When I looked back at the image later, the flowers and their colours still screamed out, now with more vibrance and detail but the people also came into focus. That female voice I originally heard had turned into an actual, physical person: the excited tone into a smile. The men, too involved in their work to worry about me at the time, are revealed; their faces masked as their voices were muted.

Colour and sound are what I focus my camera on; the detail seems to magically appear later like a flower opening.

Dancing in the Street (The Colour and the Shape)

Rajasthan, India, June 2017.

This photograph illustrates how and why I take photographs. I don't often sit and look through the viewfinder waiting for the perfect frame. That's a luxury I am rarely afforded due to the busy streets we travel and more so because I just can't see through the viewfinder properly. My one working eye only partially works, meaning I see slices of things rather than the full picture. I'm not necessarily attracted to a detail and I don't necessarily use visual cues to snap. I take photographs of sounds, in this case it was the noise of the drum that drew me closer and made me click. The vibrant colours are of course also attractive; I may be colour-blind but I'm not blind to colour. I take photographs of shapes and patterns then let my camera and computer screen turn them into a person, a family, a dance, a moment in time both abstract and detailed.

Sometimes it works and I get a nice picture, other times it doesn't work out and I end with a blurry mess. Both endings are happy because for me photography isn't about having a piece of fine art to hang on the wall, and it isn't always about having a picture I can study to find the details either. It is the process of taking photos that makes me get up and look and listen to what is going on. It is the process that makes me become part of the action rather than just an unobservant observer. It is not just how I can see the world, but it is how I can become part of the world.

Don't Take Your Guns to Town

Bumburet, Chitral District, Pakistan, August 2017.

The Kalash believe they originate from a small group of absconders from Alexander the Great's army who decided to settle in the fertile and well-watered valleys. Following the Greek tradition, they enjoy a tippie or two of alcohol, mainly home-made wine with their meals and delicacies such as fresh goat's milk cheese. They have been isolated in their remote valleys for most of their existence and as such are fiercely independent and proud of their unique culture. When I say fiercely, I do not mean violently as they prefer a peaceful life of song, dance and friendship.

Being so close to the Afghanistan border means that all visitors, including us, must have an armed guard with them at all times. The armed guards themselves were friendly and free, but the feeling of having an automatic weapon behind your back or just outside your door doesn't exactly scream friendliness or freedom.

Our armed guard was just out of the frame to the left. There is a space in the right-hand side of the picture. In reality this is because I cannot see through the camera's view finder properly as what seems like the centre to me is often actually to the side. These happy accidents sometimes make sense though.

The space on the right side of the picture would perfectly fit our armed guard but in none of my photographs of the place will you see a gun. Why ruin such beauty with violence? Why highlight the war machine when the beauty from an ancient sewing machine can be seen instead?

Imagine

Sadan Cave, Hpa-An, Kayin State, Myanmar, October 2016.

After finding our way through the pitch black Sadan Cave I was blessed to find that the light at the end of the tunnel was perfectly filtered by the greenery that grew at the cave's exit. I snapped away at some Buddhist shrines just inside the cave, proud that we had managed to make it through.

There was no time to rest though. Some locals had come through and were making their way towards a lake. I was always going to take a photograph of the scene, even my eyes could tell it was beautiful even if I didn't see the detail and I knew I would be able to see more of the detail later on my computer screen. The locals' arrival meant I had to be quick though. I hurriedly aimed my camera at the scene before me. Only time for one quick snap.

Thankfully the light and life aligned for that one snap, freezing it forever. Now I can go back to that cave whenever I like and each time see something new in the scene, something fresh to discover, something else to treat the eyes. Something else to imagine.

Orange

Yogyakarta, Indonesia, July 2019.

Entering the Taman Sari in Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia was like stepping into a different world. First a downwards walk through total darkness; like traversing a cave. Then streaming sunlight as a series of dimension defying steps appear and lead onwards. A circular passageway hovers in between, a neverland both cloaked in darkness and bathed in light.

Taman Sari is an underground mosque. A relic of a sultan's palace; in this case a water palace. The mosque was a sanctuary for the sultan's harem; a place to reflect and pray, to escape the suffocating heat and mayhem of humanity knocking on the palace doors. It was a place of beauty with swirling colour decorating the walls, coloured light streaming in and a cool breeze amplified by the aqua and architecture.

The decorations are long dismantled and disappeared, the colour like the water has drained and the façade is crumbling. Only the breeze remains as designed.

Colour is still attracted to this otherwise darkened place. For a brief instant a female figure lingers between the light and the dark. She takes a step; her black attire ties her to the darkness she is leaving behind while her bright orange headscarf moves forward to be bathed in light. A glimpse of bright colour emerging from the darkness; a flickering image that will appear and disappear again within the blink of an eye.

Queen's Tattoo

A Chin village, Rakhine State, Myanmar, October 2016.

Whilst sitting in Ma's bamboo house, in remote Rakhine State, Myanmar, she told us about her face tattoo, a tradition of the Chin ethnic group. When she was young the practice was banned by the military government. Ma was not meant to be tattooed but she was not one to be told what to do. She begged her family to let her receive the tattoo, even going on a hunger strike.

She began to tell us the cultural reasons why the tattoo was so important and how it was done. This story was interrupted as her daughter-in-law nudged her and motioned towards my face. They were interested in my face covering; to them it was a sight rarer than a heavily tattooed grandma.

Ma's grandson had recently lost an eye, for what reason we couldn't quite gather. She asked me about why I wore the patch and I tried my best to explain a complicated medical history. She told me about her fears and concerns for her grandson. It was a story I knew well. Her concerns were the same as my mother's towards me. The grandson's struggles were my struggles. We both did our best to hold back tears as we talked. The language barriers and cultural differences disappeared.

I found a spare patch and offered it to Ma. She took and held it softly and with reverence. She was genuinely touched to receive something from a tourist, being more used to tourists wanting to take something away, and I was humbled to be able to share.

When it came time to take a few photographs I struggled. The tear stained eyes were one thing but the desire to not treat Ma as a freak show oddity was more overwhelming. I quickly snapped a few photographs so I could see the tattoo on my computer screen. I couldn't see it in real life.



I prize Ma's photographs and the story behind them but was even more humbled by the photo I received via email after returning to Australia. The picture was of her and her grandson. The grandson was wearing my patch. His patch. The tears started again along with smiles.

Row, Row, Row Your Boat

Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India, May 2017.

Varanasi is a city devoted to death. Some see it as a hell on earth, complete with non-stop fires and trident-carrying holy men. For others it is a place of salvation; it is the Hindu belief that if an individual dies in Varanasi they will automatically be released from the eternal wheel of life, karma and suffering. Bodies of the deceased are brought to Varanasi to be cremated for the same purpose.

The city sits on the banks of the Ganges river and it is into this holy watercourse that the remains of the deceased are released after cremation. Not everyone can afford the required wood, so many are released only partly cremated or not at all.

I'm more interested in the life of a place rather than the death that inhabits it, so I took no photographs of the burning funeral pyres. I took no baths in the holy water either. Instead, my brother and I took to the water with a local boatman. Sitting on a boat is a celebration of life for me while travelling. A chance to sit back rather than be swept up in the hecticness. A chance to take photographs, lots of photographs, while being able survey the scene and not be rushed.

I ignored the burnings going on on the bank and let them become a blurry background, and focused on the living before me; the boatman. He is dressed only in white; the symbolic colour of mourning, peace, purity and knowledge. His face-paint echoes this. All we asked of him was to row, row, row your boat.

Somewhere Over the Rainbow

Nyaung Shwe, Shan State, Myanmar, October 2016.

When I first thought of visiting Myanmar, inspired by my brother's visit there, I knew nothing about the country except that it had been largely isolated from the wider world due to a strict military regime. When I thought of the place, all I could see in my mind's eye was greyness. No colour, no sound, no smiles, no stories; just greyness.

There is a lot of colour bursting to show itself through the grey haze. Golden stupas (Buddhist shrines) rise out of the ground, markets with fruit and vegetables of all hues rise out of the concrete and dirt, people in brightly coloured outfits rise early from their simple homes with smiles. Colour is energy and Myanmar is full of it.

Boats are used daily in Nyaung Shwe, and as such have potential to disappear into the background. The boatmen ensure their water craft don't disappear by painting them in bright primary colours. All the colours of the rainbow. The paint protects and attracts; the paint is a technicolour coat.

My eyes and my camera smile at such colour, happy to take in all its frequencies and fun. Often I take many photographs of the one thing hoping that amongst them is a non-blurry, focused picture. This doesn't always work out. In this instance though it was simple. The colour and the lines were there bold and bright and needed only one click to be captured.

I like this picture because the details don't really matter. The form is simple and the colours bright. It is basic, it doesn't need to be thought about or analysed. It just is

Tea, Toast and Turmoil

Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, August 2017.

A good cup of tea is not exactly rocket science. An urn with a constant stream of hot water, a container of tea, a jug of milk (optional of course along with sugar and cardamom), lots of pots and some chipped cups. That's all that is really needed.

It is impossible to walk the streets of Pakistan as a foreigner and not be offered tea after tea, occasionally interspersed with a delicious mango lassi. It is their culture to make sure guests are welcomed with open arms and have their needs taken care of. This means drinking tea.

We spent numerous days in Peshawar just walking the streets and accepting this hospitality. With some we shared only a cup, with others we shared multiple drinking sessions over numerous days. We often didn't share a language with our drinking mates but we were always happy to share a pot of tea. Pakistan hospitality means the locals won't take no for an answer when offering tea and they will always make sure that they, not the guest, pays. We had to sneakily order a few pots ourselves to share with our new friends. They would of course at first be annoyed that we paid. We let them know as best as we could that we appreciated their culture and hospitality but our culture dictated that we must 'shout' our friends a drink in return. It was then that we went from guests to friends; from tourists looking at the culture from the outer, to people sharing cultures from within.

'Another pot of tea please!'

The Ship Song

Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh, November 2019.

Our itinerary had us hunting for tigers in southern Bangladesh. With an armed guard in tow we headed into the open water of the Bay of Bengal to reach the Sundarbans mangrove forest.

'What's that?' 'It looks like he's in a flowerpot.' 'Is that a cut up buoy he is rowing?' The others on my boat excitedly pointed at the scene before them. I looked and wondered what they could see.

'What are we looking at?' I quietly asked my brother.

He replied, *'can you see the orange thing? It looks like a bloke has made a boat out of a giant bucket or something.'*

I lifted my camera to my eye and scanned the horizon. Eventually I found a blur of orange and clicked. *'Bugger!'* I knew straight away that I hadn't focussed properly.

On we went into the mangroves and the heat. Most people's minds focused on the tiger hunt. I kept thinking of what I had missed on the water. We walked and we sweated.

Finally it was time to head back and cross the water again. For me the hunt had just begun. I readied my camera waiting to take my shots. Would the elusive rower be seen again?

A blurry spot of orange appeared again. I lifted my camera for a better view and at the same time my brother confirmed we were approaching the Bangladeshi boatman again. I snapped and snapped. Zoomed in and out. Shot away as if a tiger was racing towards me.

I loaded my quarry onto a larger screen. The orange jumps out at me catching even my eye immediately. The craft, its cargo and the man stoically rowing it, slowly melts into view. As does the ship behind.



I may not have seen or photographed a tiger but I did manage to photograph and then see a guy rowing an improvised, recycled, orange boat with dirt as his cargo in the Bay of Bengal. I bet photographs of that are rarer than tiger shots.

There is a Light that Never Goes Out

Madyan, Swat Valley, Pakistan, July 2017.

Swat Valley is a place of beauty but has also been a place of terror. It was controlled by the Taliban not too long ago.

The people of Swat were not terrorists; they were terrific. They were warm hearted, eager to show us their homes and lives. We spoke with doctors, students, shop keepers, teachers, police and the unemployed. The young and the old. All of them welcoming us with open arms and cool drinks (and tea of course). They spoke of their love for learning and eagerness to see all the children of Swat, boys and girls, receive a proper, well-rounded education. We heard that in some of the towns and villages we visited we were the first tourists to venture there for 20 years or so. They asked us where our armed guards were and were overjoyed when we said we chose not to have them as we felt safe with the people around us; we felt safe with them.

I took this picture whilst walking the streets of Madyan. I didn't see any detail when I shot, just some colour, a light in the greyness. Colour, music and life is back in Swat. There may still be some bullets left but beauty is winning. The Taliban aren't powerful enough to stop a people who know who they are and know where they stand. These kids will do it tough but they will do it. Hopefully nations like ours will realise that these people are not part of the 'axis of evil'; they are children who want to learn, want to share, want to live. They just want peace in the valley.

Will the Circle Be Unbroken?

Bishnoi Village, Rajasthan, India, June 2017.

Sitting down peacefully and having time to take photographs is not always a possibility in the non-stop hecticness that is India. In this case we were lucky to be welcomed into a family's courtyard to watch and learn as the daily chapattis, or flat breads, were made.

Knowing that I would want to take this opportunity to sit and take lots of photographs, my brother made sure I got a front row seat. It was a joy to be able to snap away at what was happening before me; to make sure I got the colour of the people and the wall made of cow poo.

I waited for the circular chapattis to mirror the circular dishes; for the woman to smile and for the child to do what children do best; daydream. Then snap!

Winning Smile (What's That Sound?)

Nyaung Shwe, Shan State, Myanmar, October 2016.

This is one of my first travel photos and one of my favourites. It embodies why, I, as a legally blind person take photographs.

My brother and I were sitting in a wooden boat in a canal in a village named Nyaung Shwe, ready to explore nearby Inle Lake. The early morning scene was noisy with activity. Over the din came a loud, sharp, shrill sound. An excited and unstoppable 'Hello!!!', a magnificent 'Mingalabar!!!'

I involuntarily turned towards the shout, and as I did, I clicked the camera. There was no time to focus or frame.

Our boat trip out onto Inle Lake continued for most of the day. I saw and snapped, mainly snapped, various temples, villages and gardens all perched on stilts as if floating in the middle of the lake. I tried my best to photograph the iconic fishermen of the lake with their unique type of nets and even more unique style of leg rowing.

When it came time to look at the pictures I had taken, there was one thing I wanted to check. Who yelled that early morning welcome and had I even managed to capture them? As I scrolled through the images I found a near perfect frozen frame. Maybe not perfect as far as technical photography skills go but perfect for me.

There, standing out even louder and bolder than her voice, was the beaming face of a local girl. The raised, open palm is welcoming and inviting. The thanaka on her cheeks signifies the location, and the bored faces of her travelling companions show this is just one of many boat trips for them. Still, she is happy and we are welcomed.