

## Stranger than fiction: Should documentary photographers add fiction to reality?

Documentary photography belongs to the realm of truth, yet some photographers are testing the boundaries between reality and fiction in a bid to reach a public that is accustomed to these narrative forms in the literary and cinematic worlds

Olivier Laurent — 30 August 2013

[excerpt]

### Fictitious truths

McDonald is not the only documentary photographer to experiment with fiction to tell stories that are based on fact. At a time when the photojournalism and documentary photographic industry is struggling with reduced exposure in newspapers and magazines, and when funding is increasingly hard to come by, a number of these photographers are looking at new narrative structures to attract an audience and, they admit, find an enthusiasm that might have been lacking in recent years.

Cristina de Middel used to work for a Spanish newspaper as a photojournalist until early 2011, when she had had enough. "I was disappointed with photojournalism. I'm very passionate about everything I do and when I don't get the feedback that I expect, I'm disappointed," she says. "I really believed, when I started being a photojournalist, that I would help change the world by taking these images. Then when I started working for a newspaper, I realised that truth is built by advertisers, political parties and corporations - at least that's the case in Spain. When I realised I was working 12 to 14 hours a day to help someone else make money, I thought I'd rather work for my father. I went freelance and gave myself a year to do what I wanted to do."

De Middel believes strongly in the power of photography. "I think there are a lot of stories that need to be told and photography is an extremely powerful tool to tell these stories." For the Spanish photographer, it all started with *Life and Miracles of Paula P.* "My intention was not to do something fictionalised; instead, my intention was to do something that conveyed what I had experienced. For me, the language of reportage is not enough when compared with everything I had experienced. It started with Paula P, a prostitute. I worked with her for three years, and it wasn't enough. I couldn't reduce it to just a reportage about her life - her story was much more complex."

One aspect de Middel couldn't convey in her images was the judgment that other people have towards her and towards prostitution. "This is something you cannot add to an image, so I decided to take the book and change the narrative of the story by using verses from the Bible," she says. De Middel also added images shot for other projects to convey the oppressive nature of other people's views on her life. "Everything I used to tell her story is real, but by using this freedom in the approach, and by using images that didn't belong to the project, I was telling a fuller story. I wasn't misleading the readers, I was instead giving them more information. I was giving them a more complete experience of what I had to say. I was sharing more on so many different levels. That's one thing photography can do when you know how to do it."

De Middel went one step further with *The Afronauts*, which tells the story of Zambia's failed space programme in 1964. The fictive narrative is based on true accounts de Middel found of that programme. "For me, it's the most successful documentary story I've made in my life. If you go back to the definition of photojournalism, it's all about telling a story with images, and in this case I'm telling a story that happened in the 1960s. There were no images available, so I had to create these images. I wasn't deliberately playing with fiction, I was using what I could use."

De Middel is adamant that *The Afronauts* is documentary photography. "If not, then what is it? Why does photography have to be either documentary or an art piece? Why do we feel the need to classify? And why is one better than the other? It's about telling the story with images, and the story about these Afronauts is true. In a sense, I was working as a historian - rebuilding what happened and documenting it," she says.