

Steve McCurry is not the easiest man to interview. The New-York based photographer best known for his iconic 'Afghan Girl'

cover shot for *National Geographic* tends to speak in half-completed phrases, floating from one subject to another. He's friendly enough when we first meet, but soon becomes prickly when the conversation touches on topics that he'd rather avoid.

Who can blame him? McCurry's work depicting various global conflicts, ancient traditions and cultures has won him countless awards, including an unprecedented four first prizes in the World Press Photo contest. His prints sell at auctions for tens of thousands of US dollars, and he has 1.6 million followers on Instagram. But he's had a rocky year, with a recent Photoshopped scandal putting decades of his work as a photojournalist under new, unflattering scrutiny.

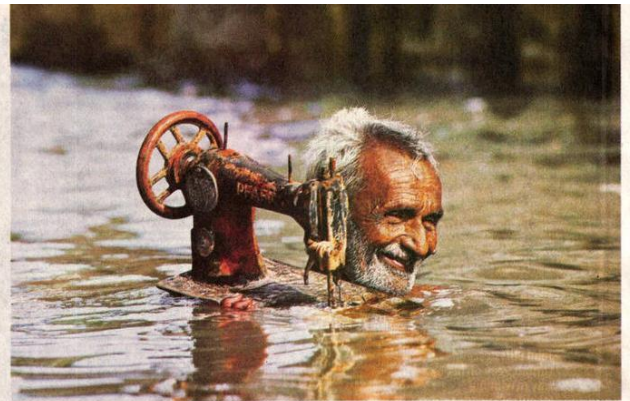
McCurry, 66, has flown to Hong Kong from New York to promote a joint exhibition that commemorates the 60th anniversary of Asia Society Hong Kong Centre: *Picturing Asia: Double Take – The Photography of Brian Brake and Steve McCurry*.

The exhibition is positioned as a dialogue between the two Magnum photographers, who shared a fascination with Asia and a special relationship with Hong Kong, and includes nearly 100 images.

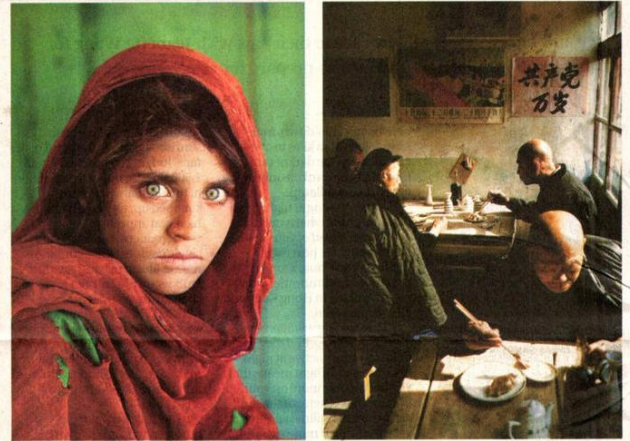
McCurry attributes his first memorable experience of photography to New Zealander Brian Brake (1927-1988). "My grandparents had lots of *Life* magazines, so I was going through these and I saw his photo essay on the monsoon season in India – I was 12 – and I thought, wow, this place is incredible. It's this faraway land, it's very exotic ... and the dramatic weather. It just really captured my imagination," he says. "I thought, I'd really love to go there and experience that some day."

That day came when he was 28 years old, when, inspired by Brake's work, he travelled to India. "I was just there in general to photograph, but I lived through two monsoons during that period," he says. "I spent four, five months, I went to Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, China, Indonesia ..."

"We were both at Magnum, and we were both looking at these



Clockwise from left: "Hong Kong, China, 1985" by Steve McCurry; "Tailor in Monsoon", Porbandar, India, 1983 by Steve McCurry; "Pedi-cab drivers in a restaurant in Luliichang Street, Beijing", 1957 by Brian Brake; "Afghan Girl", Peshawar, Pakistan, 1984 by Steve McCurry.



# DOUBLE EXPOSURE

Steve McCurry, the award-winning photographer who shot the famous 'Afghan Girl' portrait, is happy to talk about his years in Asia and his joint exhibition with a childhood inspiration. Just don't mention the Photoshop scandal that is threatening his legacy, writes Tessa Chan

locations as outsiders and we were doing it in different eras," says McCurry. "Brake was in Asia in the '50s and I was there 30 to 40 years later. It's interesting to see it from two points of view, both colour, both photographing, documenting life on the street."

Both photographers' careers have revolved largely around Asia. Brake spent months documenting China in the '50s, and set up a film company in Hong Kong, where he lived in the '60s and '70s. Some of his photos of the city are included in the exhibition.

Also featured are McCurry's images from Afghanistan, a place that marked a turning point in his career, when he was smuggled into the country during the Soviet invasion. "It became this big international story, so I was one of the few people that had pictures from that area," he says. "I went in without a passport, there were no roads, electricity or communication, no hospitals, doctors or anything; we were in the mountains. And I was on my own with these fighters."

"I remember trying to avoid

the helicopters and trying not to get killed. There were all these bombs falling and artillery and small rounds, bullets whizzing around, it was kind of frightening," he says. "I wasn't a combat photographer – I wasn't really there to cover a war, I was more interested in the people who'd been displaced and what was happening to the villages, which were being destroyed."

He became passionate about the story and went back to Afghanistan some 30 times. It was in 1984 in a refugee camp in Pakistan that he met Sharbat Gula, the Afghan schoolgirl who would captivate the world with her piercing green-eyed gaze in what became one of the world's most famous portraits.

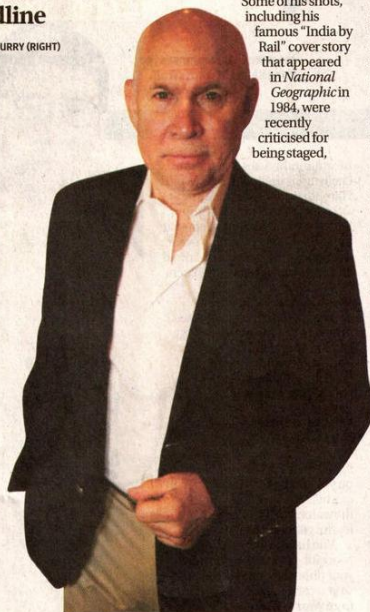
"I think a good portrait is one that says something about the person. A portrait should have some emotional component to it," says McCurry. "It should be something that's striking, something you can't forget. Something that says something about humanity."

Gula remained anonymous until 17 years later, when McCurry, with the help of *National Geographic*, managed to locate her. "It was like a miracle that we could find her," he says. "We were very excited to find out she was alive and find out her story."

Gula, who had no idea that millions had seen her face, had married a baker, had children of her own and was living in a village with her family. "She was living a pretty good life, considering the circumstances. But when we found her then her life kind of changed. There was some compensation for the picture, from me and *National Geographic*. That felt wonderful, to be able to give back to her."

**I have the means to go anywhere I want now. I don't need to get an assignment. I don't need a deadline**

STEVE MCCURRY (RIGHT)



McCurry says he doesn't like to research too much before he goes to a new country to shoot. "I'd rather just wander around and see what interests me. I shy away from situations where you have to get permission, you know, apply to the ministry of whatever. If I can't get it on the street, I probably won't get it. I just like these serendipitous moments on the street."

Some of his shots, including his famous 'India by Rail' cover story that appeared in *National Geographic* in 1984, were recently criticised for being staged,

while posing as documentary reportage. This emerged when other images of his came under fire for significant alteration using photo editing tools – including the removal of people and objects – and observers started to look more closely at his work.

While posing and heavy photo editing are common in commercial or art photography, industry standards for photojournalism dictate that photos reflect real situations. Failure to do so is considered misleading, unethical and has seen photojournalists disqualified from awards or even lose their jobs.

In response to the criticism, in a recent interview with *Time*, McCurry declared himself a "visual storyteller", as opposed to a photojournalist.

"I don't work for magazines, I'm doing books and exhibitions, or corporate advertising assignments. I would say my career's been moving in that direction for 12 years," he says. "I don't need the money in the sense that, well, it's a different time now with magazines and I'm at a different point. You know when you're young and you're starting out you do everything. I have the means to go anywhere I want now. I don't need to get an assignment. I don't need a deadline."

One of the highlights of the exhibition, and Brake's most celebrated image from his photo essay on the wet season in India, "Monsoon Girl", depicts a young girl, lifting her face ecstatically to the rain.

The shot, which made the cover of *Life International* magazine in 1961, was actually staged in a studio, with a young actress and a watering can. "That's one of my favourite

pictures. It's a stunning picture. And I think it's a perfect illustration of the joy that people feel at the onset of the monsoon," says McCurry.

So he doesn't feel that shots are any less valid if the subjects have been posed? "You mean like your colleague who just took my shot?" he demands, visibly irritated. When I ask for his take on where one draws the line between art and reportage, he tells me that's another discussion, for another time.

It'd be short-sighted to dismiss an entire career based on the recent scandals. After all, McCurry spent years working on perfecting his craft and building his reputation. His work is not only technically brilliant, it's had considerable social impact by giving a human face to conflicts around the world. People volunteered to work in the refugee camps after seeing "Afghan Girl", for example, and it led *National Geographic* to set up a fund for Afghan children.

Any parting advice for aspiring photographers who admire his work? "I think you have to find your own way, don't you? Isn't life about discovery? Rather than to say, 'I don't have a lot of time, can you tell me 10 quick tips about photography?' Can you give me the short cut, the silver bullet? There is no short cut. I mean, we all wish there was. "And if you don't want to take the time because you're not interested in really doing the work, then it probably doesn't matter anyway." tessa.chan@scmp.com

"Picturing Asia: Double Take – The Photography of Brian Brake and Steve McCurry", until Jan 7, 2017 at Chantal Miller Gallery, Asia Society Hong Kong Centre, 9 Justice Drive, Admiralty



May Day celebrations, Tiananmen Square, 1957 by Brian Brake