

# Heather McClintock

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*Alema Rose, Aler IDP Camp, Uganda, 2006 photograph copyright Heather McClintock*

I am incredibly pleased to announce that my solo exhibition, *The Innocent: Casualties of the Civil War in Northern Uganda*, opens at Gallery FCB in New York City November 13th and remains on exhibit until January 1st. The artist's opening reception is this Thursday November 13th from 6-9PM. (See details in the attached email invite below or go to <http://www.galleryfcb.com>)

I am also happy to announce that on Friday November 21st, powerHouse Arena will have a reception for the launch of the book *Child Soldiers*, Edited by Leora Kahn, from 7-9PM at 37 Main Street, Brooklyn, (718) 666-3049 RSVP: [rsvp@powerhousearena.com](mailto:rsvp@powerhousearena.com). Editor Leora Kahn will present a slide show of images from *Child Soldiers* which focuses on individual stories about these children, captured by photographers and writers from across the globe. The actress Melissa Fitzgerald will perform two monologues from her play, *Child Soldiers*. (<http://www.powerhousebooks.com/book/428>)

The Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict are hosting a photo exhibition celebrating the release of *Child Soldiers* at the North Gallery - UN Lobby - Ground Floor - United Nations Secretariat Building from Thursday, November 20th until the end of December 2008.

"I would like to give you a message. Please do your best to tell the world what is happening to us, the children, so that other children don't have to pass through this violence."

—A 15-year-old girl who escaped from the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda



*"Strive for Success," Lira, Uganda, 2005*

*While other internal conflicts have been waged among separate ethnic or religious groups, the conflict in northern Uganda has been among a single people, and it is this unique legacy that will make its resolution an extraordinarily complicated task. However, the Acholi's strong faith and commitment to build a better future in the midst of such hardship is incredibly powerful.*



*Abalo Joyce, Lacor Hospital, Gulu, Uganda, 2006*

*Joyce was traveling with her mother from Pader to Kitgum when their taxi bus was ambushed by the LRA. Thirteen of the seventeen passengers were shot, including her mother. Joyce was lying on her mother's body when the taxi bus was set on fire; she was then rolled up in the floor carpet. Joyce is now being cared for and loved by her father and stepmother. She receives ongoing medical treatment for both burns and HIV, and also receives family guidance and support from a mentor. She is a bright and happy 5-year-old girl who loves school, dancing, and playing with her siblings and friends.*

Traveling from Boone, NC to Kampala takes roughly 25+ hours; a two-hour drive to the airport, then flights from Charlotte, NC to JFK-New York, JFK to London, a long layover, then a final flight from London to Entebbe. While this could be seen as a microcosm of sleep-deprived torment, in reality this contemplative downtime has become an occasion for peaceful meditation. I'm traveling half way around the world without having to be in control or focused: no driving, no directions or decisions to be made, other than wondering what I want to eat and where the bathroom is. It's the interim space before a new journey begins, a time where my thoughts and feelings are set free to wander, stabilize and then focus.

I arrive in Entebbe to a slow burning sunrise, and to that first exquisite smell of African earth. Then it's an hour-long drive along the shores of Lake Victoria to Kampala, a city of confusion and raw energy. It's frenetic mayhem: drive on whatever side of the road that gets you to your destination faster and with more aplomb. Motorcycles (known locally as boda-boda's, commonly used as taxi's) weave in and out of traffic, a glorious rhythmic chaos of honking, yelling, motion, and dust. I stay for a night or two at a dear friends' hotel and restaurant, Tuhende Safari Lodge, where one is made to feel as if they were in



*King David, Lacor Hospital, Gulu, Uganda, 2007*

*Waiting for a procedure that would remove incredibly painful keloids and generate greater mobility in one arm, King's mind was pre-occupied with playing catch with a ball made from plastic bags. In December of 2007 he was transferred to Kampala for surgery, as it was too complicated for the Gulu facility. As of this printing, King is still in Kampala, unable to receive the operation because of his young age and the delicate positions of the keloids. He receives palliative care for the pain and wears a pressure garment so protruding keloids won't increase in size, but the garment has only created more wounds, and doctor's fear, more keloidal tissue.*

their own home. For the final leg, I head to the bus station for a 6 to 8 hour White Dove bus ride to Lira or Gulu; a kidney-firming, "connect-the-dots" pothole extravaganza (with fingers crossed that there isn't a flat tire). There is nothing quite so humorously character-building as the near inability to move for several hours, crammed up against other sweating bodies, the windows closed for everyone's comfort (apparently it's chilly), backpack between your legs and 40 pounds of equipment in another pack on your lap. There are children quietly and patiently sitting on their books crammed into the aisle, while adults boisterously laugh and banter back and forth to pass the time.

Hens are squawking, tied and hanging upside down from the overhead racks, rhythmically swaying alongside whole loaves of bread. On the roadside, women walk in a line, their heads laden with firewood, slowly, majestically carry their burdens home. When we stop, vendors rush the bus to sell water, sticks of goat meat and roasted cassava; time itself bends and folds as life rushes at me...so sticky, pungent clothes and numb lower extremities hardly seem worth acknowledging.

Because there are so many stories to tell in regards to the conditions, logistics, and challenges one faces, the only way to reference any of it is to understand that you are absolutely not in control, that gifts may come into your path



*Abia Church, Abia IDP Camp,  
Uganda, 2007*

*My beloved is small, oh,  
She is small and truly beautiful;  
She is small,  
My love, oh,  
She is small,  
Grow up slowly my love, there is no  
hurry,  
Oh my love.*

*-Ugandan love poem by  
Okot p'Bitek*

when you least expect them or know you need them, that roadblocks are simply a challenge or a sign to turn elsewhere, that the rhythm of life is bigger than just you, and that it's absolutely, spectacularly, frustratingly, simply and perfectly honorable to find your own breath and feel how it flows in and around you...to learn how to move and connect with the ebb and flow of life itself.

I've danced with a propositioning Brigadier and realized I didn't need his offers of access quite so much, and I've looked into weary imploring eyes still glowing with life, uniting with mine from within mutilated and scarred bodies, seeking a few gentle moments of hope and comfort. I've ridden with a friend and interpreter from a camp for two hrs in the dark on a motorcycle without lights after a heavy rainfall on a clay "slickery" wet road, dodging random potholes, chickens, people, and pigs...and slipping and falling on my camera bag in the sticky mud. "You ok?!" "I'm fine." Right. "My camera is strong like bull...my lens not so much. Maybe we could buy a blankety-blank-blank bulb for that headlight tomorrow morning?" A dear friend and colleague implored me not to stop as I made pictures of a beautiful nine month old baby whose mother had been shot through the heart with the same bullet that tore through the little ones shoulder...and for the only time I promised myself, cried with and in



*Akullu Evelyn and Akello Mildred, Abia IDP Camp, Uganda, 2006*

*In February of 2002, the LRA attacked Abia, searching for food, supplies and children to abduct. Mildred was inside her home with her six children when the rebels set fire to all the thatched roofs in the camp. The civilians were then forced to choose between staying inside their burning homes, or being shot by the rebels while attempting to escape. After she and her children were burned, Mildred's husband left her and found another wife.*

front of her as my camera covered my tears. I prayed that I could make an image worthy of that delicate little hand covering her face, as she wept as an elderly woman might when the darkness in the world has blanketed her shoulders. There was one rare instance when a short-term (and I will make the distinction: a white, First World) volunteer at an NGO made me feel that, for reasons of control, policy, personal issues (whatever), I didn't belong with the team. It was, in the end, a gift. I mentally untied the

bunch in my knickers, and found myself rejoicing at all the amazing people I had met in my journey and refocused on what was important...what I could positively accomplish with the time I had left in the region. A woman that had been badly burned and who owned very little came running after me with my lens that I had inadvertently left on her bed while photographing in the dimness of her home. Villagers constantly offered precious food that had taken many hours to prepare, as well as giving me at different times two hens and a rooster (it would have been insufferably rude not to accept). Even a gentle,

giant cockroach named Fred shared a room with me during a few lonely evenings. I laughed harder at the wicked sense of humor, felt more rage at the brutality and injustice, and more joy for each little glimpse of humanity there than in any other place I have ever been.

I traveled very lightly, just two backpacks, as I wanted to be as mobile as possible. It was hot and crowded, and wasn't always particularly smart to be out of physical contact with your bags at all times.

My front backpack held my clothes; 3 pairs of pants, 3 t-shirts, 3 pairs of socks and underwear, flip-flops, my notebooks full of interviews of everyone I photographed, and as few toiletries as possible. My equipment backpack, roughly 40 pounds, held a Canon 1Ds Mark II and a Canon 5D (my back-up body), Canon Zoom Lens EF 28-70mm f/2.8 L, Canon EF Lens 17-40mm f/4.0 L, Canon Speedlite 550EX, Edirol / Roland R-09 - Portable 24-Bit WAV/MP3 Audio Recorder, a 15-inch Apple Powerbook G4, multiple Lexar card readers, two 250Gb portable pocket Firewire hard drives, and other miscellaneous cables, adaptors, etc.

For my equipment daypack out in the field, I usually only took the 1Ds Mark II, the 28-70mm, 17-40mm, the Edirol Audio Recorder and the Canon Speedlite 550EX. Any more than that was much too uncomfortably heavy and hot. Now that I have acquired a Canon Lens EF 50mm f/1.2 L USM, I am in love and wondering why I haven't been using prime lenses all along.

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Stepping over the edge and pursuing documentary photography is intrinsically *not* supposed to be about oneself... but of course life is never so black and white. The situations we find ourselves in as photographers inevitably point and entwine that outer lens back onto ourselves. How do we photograph differently so people won't turn away from more pain seen in

another's eyes? Are we taking that nebulous something; pride, dignity, humanity, away from someone more than we are actually helping? In northern Uganda, I lost all hesitancy and self-doubt when asking for everyone's permission to photograph them. 'We *want* our plight to be seen. Show these images. Bring people back to help us. Please.' We are graced with a huge amount of responsibility when we don't look away from another's plight, another's soul. We have been entrusted with the burden of helping people with our images. And most disturbingly, we can *leave* these places. Are we then strong enough to continue to persevere on their behalf from the outside? If *they* can survive with such strength and grace, how *dare* we do anything less?

Seeing and showing their pain IS the point.

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There comes a time in each of our lives when we question who we are, what we wish to become, why we are here. Sometimes we fall and break, sometimes we rise to what is in each of us, sometimes we do nothing. Facing my personal demon meant deciding whether to remain on the safe and secure path I had chosen, or find the courage to embrace the elusive unknown. I hunger and am restless for intimacy, purity, and hope: seeking visual truth as evidence that we are all one.

Over a period of six months I lived in northern Uganda, initially pursuing my desire to focus on humanitarian relief work; and instead finding myself longing to document the strength of will and hope smoldering in every unwavering look, subtle gesture, or shrouded moment of unfathomable contemplation. The Acholi tribe has shared, gracefully and with fire, their strength and courage amidst conflict. Quietly, yet almost defiantly they entrusted me with their pain and beauty, entwining their demons with mine. In a voice that soars, they bestowed their stories of devastation and dignity, reflecting the ambiguity and mystery that resonates within each of us.

I am more than this.

After more than twenty years of civil war in northern Uganda and two years of peace negotiations between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government's Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF), the peace process has all but been declared dead. For now, peace in the north has been transferred to instability in the northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo as the LRA have recently abducted over 159 children, killed at least 52 civilians and reportedly displaced up to 75,000. In the northern region of Uganda, the Acholi tribe has been caught in the middle of this complex and barbaric civil war, in which countless numbers have been brutalized, and abducted minors comprised almost 90% of the rebel soldiers. It is estimated that as many as 66,000 children have been abducted by the LRA, wrenched from their families and forced to become soldiers and sex slaves. The Ugandan government's strategy of moving northerners into "protected villages" has turned into a displacement nightmare for 1.7 million people - over 80% of the region - who now live in squalid camps and lack access to basic resources.

Uganda, known as the Pearl of Africa, is located in the continent's geographic heart and bordered by Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and the DRC. The civil war in the north is an almost incomprehensible conflict that arose from a repressive colonial past and years of division between the north and south. The end result was a political rebellion that set the stage for an insurgency by the LRA. Fearing discrimination by Uganda's government, the LRA represented the Acholi ethnic group in Uganda's northern districts. The LRA evolved into its current leadership under religious extremist Joseph Kony, and his cult-like guerilla army, which has combined an apocalyptic spiritualism with opportunistic politics and warlordism. As the war progressed, the support of the war-weary Acholi diminished; so Kony turned his wrath upon his own tribe. Geography, porous borders, low risk/high reward raids on civilian targets, regional rivalry and proxy relationships involving the Ugandan government, the government of Sudan, the Sudan People's

Liberation Army and the US government have sustained the life of the LRA, making this Africa's longest running conflict and as one senior U.N. official described it "the world's worst neglected humanitarian crisis."

The Acholi are a proud and gracious people who want nothing more than to be educated, sleep safely in their own homes, have food to eat and clothing on their backs, live in peace; no different than you and I. We are all inextricably linked in this complicated and imperfect life we share, and while these images only touch upon their unimaginable suffering, it is my hope that they will underscore this simple equation, and that viewers will lend compassion towards all brave survivors of conflict.

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For more information on the conflict in Uganda, recovery efforts or to lend support:

African Youth Initiative Network  
<http://www.ayinet.or.ug>

Resolve Uganda  
<http://www.resolveuganda.org>

Medical Teams International  
<http://www.medicalteams.org>

Freidis Rehabilitation and Disable Center  
[freidishp@yahoo.no](mailto:freidishp@yahoo.no)  
[cjogole@yahoo.no](mailto:cjogole@yahoo.no)

Rachele Rehabilitation Center: now Rachele Comprehensive Secondary School  
<http://childsoldiers.net/>

Blue Earth Alliance  
<http://blueearth.org/>

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