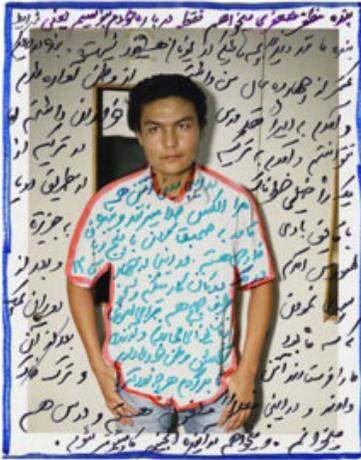


Jim Goldberg: Open See

Photographers' Gallery, London W1



Muzaffar 'Alex' Jafari, who walked from Afghanistan to Greece and found both work and study. Photograph: Jim Goldberg/Magnum

Jim Goldberg is best known for his book, *Raised By Wolves*, published in 1995, an impressionistic and often graphic document of the 10 years he spent photographing the young homeless of San Francisco. Now comes *Open See*, the book and accompanying exhibition, both part of a still-ongoing project about what Goldberg calls the "new Europeans" – illegal immigrants, refugees, displaced people and asylum seekers from Africa, the Middle East and eastern Europe.

Initially commissioned by the Magnum photographic agency, Goldberg began the project in 2003 in Greece, which has an estimated two million immigrants, most of whom live a clandestine life, unable to work legally or avail themselves of even the most basic rights. In 2007, his work in progress won him the Henri Cartier-Bresson prize, which helped fund his subsequent travels to the various countries of origin of his subjects: Ukraine, Bangladesh, Liberia and beyond. Soon, in collaboration with Magnum and various NGOs, Goldberg will be showing his work in the communities he has worked in.

Though Goldberg's work is political, he is uncomfortable with the term, describing himself instead as "a documentary storyteller". That just about nails it. He deploys various formats – Polaroids, photographs, video stills, found images and hand-written texts – to create a fragmented narrative that fractures the received conventions of reportage or straight documentary.

"Since 1970, I've been using text and ephemera as well as photographs in order to tell stories of one kind or another," says Goldberg, who lives in San Francisco and teaches photography at the California College of Arts. "There's a thread that runs through all the work that is to do with bearing witness. The photographs are about asking questions, though, not answering them. I'm not a politically radical person. In fact, I'm much more interested in being radical aesthetically."

Goldberg's "documentary storytelling" is both formally ambitious and self-questioning. The problematic issues that dog contemporary photographic reportage – the immigrant as spectacle, the desensitisation of the viewer through the sheer volume of images of suffering – are addressed indirectly within the work, which often takes the form of a kind of creative collaboration.

One of the first, and most direct, images you see is Goldberg's stark portrait of a young man called Syed Saibor Rahaman from Bangladesh. He is standing against a white wall, the silhouette of his shadow outlined in red. Inside the shadow, Syed has written simply: "My dream is to go to Europe." Goldberg often encourages his subjects to write on the Polaroid portraits he has taken of them. (The title, *Open See*, comes from one man's assertion that "in the open see [sic] there is no border".) The result can be mundane or heartfelt or harsh, but is nearly always forlornly poetic. One Somalian man has scrawled the words: "I make 68 taka [\$1] a day and have despair." Another states: "Don't have papers, I can't stay here, I can't go anywhere." This is the Kafkaesque nightmare of displacement captured in a few faltering words.

There are several layers of sadness and longing in many of Goldberg's images and suffering of one kind or another seems to suffuse his portraits. Many of the young women he encounters have been trafficked and sold into prostitution. One of them has written: "I am a whore" above her portrait, her expressionless face at odds

with the stark force of her testimony. In one of the longer testimonies that end the book, a girl called Beauty writes: "After seven years of this fucking life, the only thing left of my beauty is the name."

Several men have stripped off their shirts for Goldberg's camera, presenting their scarred backs to the camera, a kind of rejection of the traditional portrait. One man has drawn arrows in green felt tip that point to burn marks on his back. His testimony reads: "Taliban Torture Me." There is hope here, too, though, and happiness - one man refers to Greece as his "paradise" - alongside the sense that, when all else has gone, people's dreams of self-reinvention linger on.

Goldberg contextualises his portraits with street scenes and interiors, the jumbled, over-crowded, constantly threatened lives of the stateless illuminated in images that often possess a rare and elusive beauty. His colours are muted, or else saturated, and there is much blurred movement and diffused light. He is a master of juxtaposition: a woman is glimpsed at rest, daydreaming, through a half-open curtain that is the wall of her room; opposite, a flock of shadowy birds flits dreamlike through a grey sky. Sometimes, a single image startles with its mystery: a hand outlined in gold bears the message: "They Always Welcomed Me." You long to uncover the journey that led to this captured moment.

Often, too, Goldberg's images have been written over or around in the language of the person he has just photographed. This adds another level of mystery, as well as making an extra demand on the curious, potentially voyeuristic, viewer. It is as if the subject is asking, how far do you want to go into my life? That is a very pertinent question for a photograph to ask in an age when the sheer weight of images of suffering being produced only seems to diminish, rather than catalyse, our emotional response.

"In Europe, I am an outsider," says Goldberg. "I don't really understand anything that I am seeing. I can be welcomed into people's homes, I can be met with suspicion, I can be taken somewhere else altogether. There is always wonderment there for me, even if the person I am photographing may not see it or be aware of it."

It is this wonderment, perhaps, that makes *Open See* - the book maybe even more so than the show - such a fascinating document. The more you look, the more you are prompted to think about the uses - and the limits - of documentary photography. And the more you glimpse the cumulative power of the storyteller.