

f F O T O I M A G E

Rita Leistner: The Tree Planters

Having planted over a half a million trees between 1983 and 1992, Leistner perceives this series as an homage of sorts, to all the Canadian tree planters; past, present, and future. Canadian tree planting is unique in the world and is entering its third generation. It has become an indelible part of our national identity, changing not only the geographic landscape of Canada, but also its cultural mindset. It is an essential contributor to Canada being the world leader in sustainable forest management, which all our futures depend on.

Best known for her work in war zones as a conflict photographer, Leistner came to recognize how the strenuous, remote job of tree planting prepared her for that role. Now, she has turned the tables and is using her accumulated knowledge as a photographer to offer a unique perspective of her former occupation. After years of photographing war zones, Leistner reached a point in her life where she wanted to make photographs that did not represent death, despair, hatred, loss, and violence. Instead of the deserts of the Middle-East, these photographs were made in British Columbia during 2016 and 2017, while "embedded" within the planting camps of Coast Range Contractors.

Using high-resolution digital cameras and a battery-powered electronic flash, Leistner's large-scale colour photographs present the tree planters in heroic fashion; the sheer physicality of their work depicts a back-breaking dance of bodies, shovels, and dirt. To help orient gallery-goers to the live-action context on the ground, a video of the planters with Rita and her assistant accompanies the exhibition. While each photograph features an individual tree planter, they represent something more universal about hope, belief in the future, living in the moment, and the power of perseverance - one tree at a time.

Award-winning photographer, writer, and educator, Rita Leistner's varied career has taken her from academia to war and back again, intersecting the genres of art, photojournalism, and literary criticism. She is a graduate of the International Center of Photography in New York and has a Master of Arts in comparative literature from the University of Toronto, where she has also previously taught the history of photojournalism and documentary photography. Her first sole-authored book, *Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan*, was shortlisted for the 2015 Marshall McLuhan Award for Outstanding Book in the Field of Media Ecology. She is co-author of several other books including *Unembedded: Four Independent Photojournalists on the War in Iraq* and *The Edward Curtis Project: A Modern Picture Story*. Her photography has been exhibited and published internationally, and her articles, essays, and reviews have appeared in numerous magazines and books including Julian Stallabrass's *Memories of Fire: Images of War and the Wars of Images* and Michael Kamber's *Photojournalists on War: The Untold Stories from Iraq*. In 2015, she completed work on a ten-year trilogy project in the Levant, which includes the award-winning film *Miklat*. Leistner was also a finalist for the 2017 Robert Gardner Fellowship in Photography at Harvard.