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WHERE CHILDREN SLEEP

The bedroom of my childhood memories is a small room with sloping eaves in the attic of the family home, a tall semi-detached house in Oxford. It's where I slept between the ages of five and nineteen. First decorated with wooden animals from Kenya (where I was born) and a teddy bear made by Mum, I progressively made the room my own, its changing contents reflecting my identity, interests and aspirations as they evolved through childhood. My bedroom was my personal kingdom.

It occurred to me that a way to address some of the complex situations and social issues affecting children would be to look at the bedrooms of children in all kinds of different circumstances. From the start, I didn't want it just to be about 'needy children' in the developing world, but rather something more inclusive, about children from all types of situations. It seemed to make sense to photograph the children themselves, too, but separately from their bedrooms, using a neutral background. For me, the project became a vehicle to think about issues of poverty and wealth, about the relationship of children to personal possessions, and the power of children – or lack of it – to make decisions about their lives. I am not qualified to give anyone a lecture on the state of childhood today, or the future of children's rights. Although I have relied on the help of Save the Children, Italy, there is no agenda to the book other than my own journey and curiosity, and wanting to share in pictures and words the stories that I found interesting, or that moved me. In the end, I hope the pictures and the stories in this book speak to children. Yes, so that lucky children (like I was) may better appreciate what they have. But more than that, I hope my work will help children think about inequality, within and between societies around the world, and perhaps start to figure out how, in their own lives, they may respond. James Mollison

TransRedaktion (tr): There's little that tells more about who we are than our bedrooms or the places we sleep. With your photo series: 'Where Children sleep' you have found a very subtle and genuine way of showing the differences between lives and social systems all over the world. What was the general reaction to your request to photograph one of the most private spaces there is, the sleeping place?

James Mollison (jm): That depended on the situation, in many of the poorer places there is a different idea of personal and private space, many people can live in one room, children might sleep in spaces of convenience rather than our western idea of what the bedroom is. In those situations I would ask if people minded showing me how they lived, and I found people to be very welcoming.

Unfortunately the bedroom is a problematic term with connotations, and with more fortunate situations it was about trying to explain why you wanted to go in and see the bedroom. Luckily I've done a few books now and parents were able to see I did serious work.

tr: Do you have a favorite picture and if yes, which one?

jm: It would have to be Indira, a young 7 year old girl who was working in a stone

quarry in Kathmandu; you can see some of her life experience in the incredible strength in her face.

tr: Some pictures seem to show typical, maybe even clichéd situations, others are very surprising. Did you try to avoid certain situations or specifically look for others?

jm: I had a basic aim (as my budget allowed) to give a 'glimpse' of children around the world. And also to try to find didactic children at different ends of the wealth / poverty scale. Children seemed an interesting way of looking at different situations; as children, they're blameless for their surrounding conditions. Whereas with adults there could be a sense that they are responsible for their situations. With that in mind I wanted to photograph Palestinian and Israeli children. I didn't really avoid situations, but I did want the rooms to be engaging, which ended up ruling lots of them out.

tr: Did you ask the children to give you a specific facial expression? Lots of them seem very serious.

jm: I just asked them to look into the camera, and unless you instruct people to smile they tend to be serious. I think the serious expression can lend dignity and prosperity to the portrait. If you think back to portrait

painting before photography, people were not represented smiling.

tr: For our current issue 'in order' we are specifically interested in the sleeping place and its inherent order, sometimes obvious, sometimes hidden, and also very diverse depending on the social background. Did you notice this aspect in your work and maybe even specifically draw attention to it?

jm: I saw many bedrooms whose order was chaos.

tr: The picture of the child turns this analytical interest into something far more personal, more emotional. Do you think it would be a completely different piece of work if we didn't have the picture of the child and the sleeping place together?

jm: Yes, I hope that the emotional response comes from the juxtaposition of the kids that are all photographed on the plain background, 'equally' and the huge difference hinted at by their bedrooms.

tr: Do you have any thoughts on the selection of your work we picked?

jm: Your selection illustrates well how hard life is for so many people. Finding Prena's cage-like room at the top of the stairs of the house was shocking.

James Mollison, born 1973

grew up in England. After studying Art and Design at Oxford Brookes University, and later film and photography at Newport School of Art and Design, he moved to Italy to work at Benetton's creative lab, Fabbrica. In 2009 he won the Royal Photographic Society's Vic Odden Award, for notable achievement in the art of photography by a British photographer aged 35 or under. His latest book 'Where Children Sleep' was published in November 2010. Mollison lives in Venice with his wife and son.

fig. 077

Ahkôhxet's Bedroom.
Brazil, 2010.
© James Mollison.

fig. 078

Ahkôhxet.
Brazil, 2010.
© James Mollison.

Ahkôhxet is eight years old and a member of the Kraho tribe, who live in the basin of the Amazon River, in Brazil. There are only 1,900 members of the tribe. The Kraho people believe that the sun and moon were creators of the universe, and they engage in rituals that are many centuries old. The red paint on Ahkôhxet's chest is from one of his tribe's rituals. The elders teach Ahkôhxet's generation to respect nature and their surroundings. Their huts are arranged in a circle, leaving space in the middle for gatherings and ceremonies to take place. The nearby river provides water for drinking and washing. The tribe grow half their food in the poor soil using basic tools. They also hunt. The rest of their food is bought using money earned from film crews and photographers who visit their camp. There is one car, shared between the whole tribe.

fig. 079

Tzvika's Bedroom.
West Bank, Israel, 2010.
© James Mollison.

fig. 080

Tzvika.
West Bank, Israel, 2010.
© James Mollison.

Tzvika is nine years old and lives in Beitar Illit, an Israeli settlement in the West Bank. It is a gated community of thirty-six thousand Haredi (Orthodox) Jews, who live their lives according to a strict religious code set out in the Jewish holy book, the Talmud. Televisions and newspapers are banned from the settlement. The average family has nine children, but Tzvika has just one sister and two brothers, with whom he shares his room. Like all good Haredi boys, Tzvika reveres God and wants to become a rabbi when he is older. He lives in a modern apartment block and is taken by car to school, a two-minute drive away. Religion is the most important subject, followed by Hebrew and maths. Sport is banned from the curriculum. Tzvika goes to the library every day and enjoys reading the holy scriptures. All the books in the library are religious books. Tzvika also likes to play religious games on his computer. His favourite food is schnitzel and chips.

fig. 081

Boy's Place to Sleep.
Rome, Italy, 2010.
© James Mollison.

fig. 082

Boy.
Rome, Italy, 2010.
© James Mollison.

Home for this four-year-old boy and his family is a mattress in a field on the outskirts of Rome, Italy. The family came from Romania by bus, after begging on the streets for enough money to pay for their tickets (€100 per adult and €80 per child). When they first arrived in Rome, they camped in a tent, but the police threw them off the site because they were trespassing on private land and did not have the correct documents. Now the family sleep together on the mattress in the open. When it rains, they hastily erect a tent and use umbrellas for shelter, hoping they will not be spotted by the police. They left Romania without identity documents or work papers and so are unable to obtain legal employment. This boy sits by the kerbside while his parents clean car windscreens at traffic lights, to earn thirty to fifty cents a time. No one from the boy's family has ever been to school. His parents cannot read or write.




fig. 083

Prena's Place to Sleep.
Kathmandu, Nepal, 2010.
©James Mollison.

fig. 084

Prena.
Kathmandu, Nepal, 2010.
©James Mollison.



Prena lives in Kathmandu, Nepal. Her room is a tiny, cell-like space at the top of the house where she is employed as a domestic worker. Her diet is mainly rice and vegetables. She is fourteen years old and one of thousands of child domestic workers in the country. Prena carries out household chores such as sweeping, cleaning, cooking and washing. She starts work at five in the morning and finishes at six in the evening. For this, she earns five hundred Nepali rupees per month (about \$6.50). She sends the money back to her parents, who have eight other children to support. Prena visits her family twice a year. She goes to school three times a week – which is the main highlight in her life. She admires her teacher, who has made it his mission to educate children like Prena. She would like to be a doctor when she is older.

fig. 085

Lewis's Bedroom.
Barnsley, England, 2010.
© James Mollison.

fig. 086

Lewis.
Barnsley, England, 2010.
© James Mollison.

Ten-year-old Lewis lives with his parents and sister in a semi-detached house on the outskirts of Barnsley, in Yorkshire, England. He has been given an ASBO (Anti-Social Behaviour Order) because of his challenging behaviour. This means he is banned from going out at night, and must not possess drugs, alcohol, knives, or even a screwdriver. Lewis has a behaviour disorder known as ADHD (Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder) and has also been diagnosed with schizophrenia, both of which require daily medication. His aggressive behaviour has led to his being excluded from his special school seven times. His mother is quite exhausted after years of trying to control her son. As well as one-to-one counselling sessions, Lewis and his family receive family therapy from a psychologist. Lewis has felt happier since taking his medication but resents his curfew because he misses playing outside in the street with his friends.






fig. 087

Jivan's Bedroom.
Brooklyn, New York, 2010.
© James Mollison.

fig. 088

Jivan.
Brooklyn, New York, 2010.
© James Mollison.



Jivan is four years old. He lives with his parents in a skyscraper in Brooklyn, New York. From his bedroom window, he can see across the East River to New York's Manhattan Island and the Williamsburg Suspension Bridge which connects it to Brooklyn. Jivan has his own bedroom with an en-suite bathroom and a toy cupboard. The room was designed by Jivan's mother, who is an interior designer. His father is a DJ and music producer. Jivan's school is only ten minutes' walk away. To gain a place at this school, Jivan had to take a test to prove that he can mix socially with other children. He found this quite stressful as he is a very shy boy. His parents were also interviewed before he was accepted by the school. Jivan's favourite foods are steak and chocolate. He would like to be a fireman when he grows up.