

At peace in war



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Capturing daily life amid Afghanistan's strife. Andrew Quilty

By Vicki Fletcher

"I think to be passionate, to be committed, and to give the most that you can to your chosen field means that the balance has to tip in favour of that aspect of your life."

Few people would follow their search for balance into a war zone. Yet that is what charismatic Australian photographer Andrew Quilty has done, with some measure of success.

Afghanistan, which he currently calls home, is a place where going out for dinner, grocery shopping or simply walking down the street are matters of carefully considered security; a place where foreigners live behind blast walls and armed guards. It is also a place of extreme elements, intense interactions and where brittle nature becomes invitingly beautiful. And it is here, in the capital Kabul, that Andrew, 32, has found a meditative space to follow his passion.

"I'll hire a driver to take me to a new part of the city and I'll wander around (where safe) for a short while and shoot pictures. This time for me is what I imagine others would get through meditation. I'm there and there alone. All that matters is what the light is doing and what is going on around me. Everything else recedes."

It is this attitude of presence that allows Andrew to capture life behind the lens in Afghanistan. So often images emerge of the brutality of war, the moments of threat, action, impact and aftermath. Andrew has instead managed to capture moments of life for locals, exposing the world through their eyes, rather than through those of war, of soldiers, of outsiders.

His endearing, gentle nature allows him to connect with people he photographs, and who look at his images. He has cleverly created a balance between the harsh reality of war and the routine of daily life. He shares simple, powerful images, evoking disappointment yet hope, pity yet joy, sadness yet lust.

It's the search for this balance that ultimately brought Andrew to Afghanistan. On his first visit in early 2014, Andrew told his family and friends that he was just there looking, seeing what it was like. He was in fact, looking to see how he could live, and cut his teeth in working in that environment.

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He likes that everything in this land has a consequence. "It is hard to point a camera anywhere without it being aimed at something that conveys a struggle between life and death."

Photographing life in a war zone is worlds apart from where Andrew's career began. Growing up on Sydney's north shore, he attended a private school and started a design degree but quit in favour of photography. He carved out a career at The Australian Financial Review (AFR) and the AFR Magazine, building an impressive portfolio of high profile politicians, powerful businessmen and women and high commercially successful creative. Commissions for The New York Times, TIME Magazine, Le Monde and more followed.

Now in Afghanistan, he finds the positives outweigh the negatives. However, life in a war zone is no simple venture. For many foreigners in Kabul, their decision to be there is one of passion and sacrifice.

"The people that have come here from abroad are here because they're passionate and committed to whatever it is that they're doing," Andrew says.

"There's simply no other reason one would come here."

Finding a balance between work and play can be difficult at the best of times, but when the two happen to be one, the picture becomes more complicated. When asked about the significance of balance in his life, Andrew chuckles.

"It has a significance, certainly. What's most significant however, is the difficulty I have in finding it. I think to be passionate, to be committed, and to give the most that you can to your chosen field means that the balance has to tip in favour of that aspect of your life."

That means that other aspects of his life have to suffer. "I know I don't see enough of my family and friends, I'd like to cook more, I'd like to surf more, and I'd like to be able to give more of myself in relationships; but I'm deeply invested in my photography and right now it's a priority I am comfortable favouring."