

Exhibition Review: *Pandemic objects: Photograph* – The way eye see it

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The exhibition *Pandemic objects: Photograph*, written by Duncan Forbes in collaboration with independent curator Marcela Chao

(<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/projects/pandemic-objects-photograph>), reflects upon the tragic consequences of the widespread coronavirus in Mexico City. What is unique about this particular exhibition is the lens through which it views how information is communicated in the twenty-first century – through photography. Given physical galleries are now closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual exhibitions offer a more private viewing of these images. This can create a sense of intimacy within viewers, but also it reduces audience attendees due to a lack of awareness of this new digital format.

The virtual exhibition from the Victoria and Albert Museum begins with a full A4-sized image of three individuals wearing masks with the words ‘I can’t breathe’ written with a black, thick marker. The photo is stretched horizontally across the page, deliberately catching viewers’ attention and directing their focus to the centre of the page. This image does exactly what the corresponding text discusses: it offers a deliberately confronting scene. The exhibition uses a balance between textual information and images, which interrupts the heaviness of the writing and creates a pictorial representation of a moment in time. The slogan ‘I can’t breathe’ is an interesting and clever choice to incorporate because it has become so recognisable in our information-driven world. The exhibit draws correlations between the excessive use of force used by police officers against George Floyd and the ‘structural inequalities’ in Mexico’s healthcare system that lead many people to experience serious breathing difficulties as a result of the coronavirus. The writer and curator’s ability to combine both separate issues – police treatment of African Americans and limited medical resources – is a significant highlight of this exhibition and should be positively viewed. The statement in the *Pandemic objects: Photograph* exhibition – ‘pandemic photography continues to generate new meanings with lightning speed’ – reiterates how photography has enabled these cross-connections and new ways of perceiving the world.

The inclusion of black and white photographs from the 1890s depicting a former health pandemic, the Bubonic Plague, helps to establish a chronology of events up until the present. Personal pandemic photography is employed here to establish a more 'intimate' view of society during this health crisis. The exhibit also compares digital photographs to deadly diseases, illustrating their speed of online transmission. The visual evidence of this global disaster is being captured easily and distributed quickly within minutes via social media channels.

There are three images included within the exhibition that stand out to me: two health care officials dressed in full PPE walking the streets; a bare supermarket shelf except for one product in Los Angeles, and an official sign indicating physical distance measures in an empty street in Mexico City. These photos are emotionally evocative because they capture and freeze an unprecedented moment in history. The bareness of these locations visually highlights the devastation this pandemic has caused right across the globe. The close-up shots are still images, yet they share this sense of heartbreak and unknowing despair that viewers have already probably experienced in their own lives. The simplicity of the photos adds to the overall mood of the exhibition, using common everyday routines such as grocery shopping and walking in the streets as activities that have been profoundly impacted by this virus. This links back to the title of the exhibition, narrowing focus upon the physical objects that are memorable during this period of human history. Therefore, this selection of photos is very important and relatable for viewers.

The photographs of the streets really emphasise how fragile human beings are, because our absence has not affected the surrounding urban environment. Tall buildings are positioned as looming structures high in the sky, reinforcing humanity's inferiority to both nature and construction. Whether this was a conscious choice by the curator or not, I still believe this is significant to note.

The exhibition largely places personal imagery within the Mexican context, using photography to display 'the uneven impact of the virus'. The textual component reveals the reality on the ground, mentioning body bags being sold for families with deceased loved ones and dangerous shortages of protective equipment. The accompanying image shows a masked man standing behind a counter with what appears to be plastic wrap stretched across the front of the register to protect him from customers. While this image is dreadfully sad, I'm unsure as to whether it's the most powerful photograph that could

have been selected for the exhibit. Images of families could have humanised the imagery further and appeared more candid, rather than a still portrait photo. Nevertheless, this is a very minor criticism of what is overall a highly engaging and thought-provoking online exhibit.

This exhibit deserves to be praised for its selection of very poignant photographs, some immediately noticeable and others less so. All photographs and incorporated text form their own individual stories as part of the global narrative that is documenting the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source

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