



‘The project is a meditation on devotion and then, through that, Alzheimer’s’



FAUSTO PODAVINI

Born in Rome where he still lives and works, Fausto Podavini’s passion for photography began when he was 18. His first job was as an assistant and studio photographer, then he worked on ethnological and social reportage. In 1992, he worked at the photography museum at Tor Vergata University in Rome, and then studied at the John Kaverdash Photography Academy in Milan, taking a master’s degree in reportage. Podavini left studio photography to dedicate himself exclusively to reportage, and is now a freelance photographer, collaborating with a number of NGOs.

© FAUSTO PODAVINI

devotion, love, pain, battle and resignation. That can often happen when you are putting a project together – in the shooting stage you realise the potential of your images and then in the editing stage you see if it lives up to that.

This shot was taken when I was in the bathroom with Mirella and Luigi. I was waiting in the corner of the room while Mirella was helping Luigi wash himself in the shower. As the bathroom was very small and I didn’t have much room to move around, I was forced to shoot their reflections in the mirror. There wasn’t a large field of view to work with. There was also a lot of steam in the air, so it wasn’t an easy shot to get.

I began to see the image come together slowly through the viewfinder of my camera. I could see the reflections in the mirror on the left – although there was a lot of condensation – and I also noticed Mirella’s image in the smaller right-hand mirror. I shifted slightly to ensure that I got both mirrors into the frame, and after a while the image in the left mirror began to clear.

The composition of the image is simple yet well structured. I respected the classic rules, such as the rule of thirds and the golden section, but more than that it’s an image that manages to capture intense expressions and gestures in one moment. It’s particularly strong because it is only Mirella’s reflection captured in the small mirror, which communicates her feelings of isolation.

The reason that I chose to shoot this project in black & white is that I come from a film background. When I first started taking photographs, I was shooting in monochrome and working with wet-darkroom processes. I got used to seeing the world in black & white. It taught me to look for shapes, graphic elements and focus in on the more emotional aspects of my work. For the ‘Mirella’ project, I felt that the addition of colour could detract from what we were seeing in the images. Shooting in black & white strips down the work and forces you to focus on the emotional level.

I firmly believe that more needs to be done to educate people about dementia. For a long time we’ve associated the disease with old age, but we’re now seeing it affect people who really aren’t that old. Luigi’s Alzheimer’s was identified when he was 65 years old. That means his dementia was with him before this age.

I’m still in contact with Mirella. Luigi died in May 2011 and it was this event that brought my project to an end. The work has been incredibly well received and recently won first prize in the World Press Photo 2013 Daily Life stories category. Every time the project wins an award, I call Mirella and say, ‘Mirella, you won again’. **AP**



Fausto Podavini was talking to Oliver Atwell

PHOTO INSIGHT

Italian reportage photographer Fausto Podavini talks us through his moving image of a married couple living with the spectre of dementia

THE ISSUE of people living with dementia is a subject that has interested me for a long time. As I worked in the field of social reportage for many years, I tend to look for issues that may not necessarily be widely discussed. The most difficult part of working in reportage, particularly as a freelance photographer, is finding stories to tell. Dementia stood out to me because it’s something that doesn’t just affect the person who has been afflicted by the disease – it touches everyone around them.

We are all aware of dementia, but often we choose not to acknowledge it. Perhaps something about the nature of losing control of your own mind scares us. Dementia is not a popular theme to explore. It usually lies hidden within the four walls of a home,

thus remaining very private.

The couple you see in this photograph are Mirella and Luigi. They had spent together for most of their lives and lived in Rome. In fact, when I took this image they had been married for 43 years. When I compare the number of years they have spent together with my own life, I realise that I’ll never be able to reach a target like that. They married in the 1970s and were a couple who had strong values and true feelings of devotion. They carried that through the rest of their lives together.

When you work in reportage, it can be tricky approaching people you’re interested in photographing. If people already know you as a photographer, the task is a little easier as they have some idea of what to

expect. However, when you have to approach someone you don’t know, it can be difficult because people are often suspicious of your intentions. When I had settled on the idea of a project about dementia, I approached Mirella and explained to her that my project would look at what it’s like to live with dementia.

However, as I got to know Mirella and Luigi I realised that the project was taking on a different direction. The images became much more about Mirella’s love for her husband. I spoke about Alzheimer’s through the exploration of Mirella’s actions and feelings. Therefore, the project is a meditation on devotion and then, through that, Alzheimer’s. That’s why I decided to name the project ‘Mirella’.

Over time, we became close. I think

that’s reflected in the nature of some of the imagery because many of the photographs would not have been possible without that level of intimacy. It allowed me to become invisible and capture the moments that make up the project.

The image you see here sums up so much about ‘Mirella’. It’s an incredible shot that was in a sense born twice: the first time when the shutter was tripped and the second time in editing. When I first took the image I wasn’t sure if I had managed to capture something worthwhile. It was only during the editing stages that I realised what I had achieved. It’s an image that encapsulates many of the themes present throughout the rest of the project: the