

SINGAPORE

Photographing portraits is like falling in love: Steve McCurry

The renowned American photographer was in Singapore for the opening of an exhibition of some of his most iconic images. He spoke to Channel NewsAsia about his curiosity for people in exotic places.

By [Lam Shushan](#) and [Ray Yeh](#)

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 PHOTOS



McCurry was in Singapore for the opening of his exhibition as part of Singapore Art Week. (Photo: Lam Shushan)

SINGAPORE: His appetite for travel and foreign cultures began when he was a teenager. While working in an international company in Philadelphia, he met people from Africa, Asia and Europe - people he was not exposed to while growing up in suburban America.

He knew then that he had to get out of America to see the world, so later on while he worked as a photographer for a local newspaper, he saved up his money for a trip to India - a country he calls a "monumental place of extremes."

That trip turned into a lifetime of exploration for Steve McCurry, who for the past 45 years, has taken the road less travelled, capturing striking images of people and their cultures. He is perhaps best known for the photograph of the Afghan girl with piercing green eyes, a photograph that became an iconic image of the era of the Soviet-Afghan war.



First of all, are you tired of talking about the Afghan girl?

I don't get tired of talking about the Afghan girl. I think it's an important picture, people respond to it and the picture makes people want to find out more about her background, who she was, where she is now. We received thousands of letters and enquiries about her. The whole world was curious. For me the best photographs tell stories, human stories.

Don't you wish that people would talk more about your other photographs?

You can't control how people respond to your work. You can say "I have all this wonderful work and pictures" but it's up to the people to decide if they are interested in what you do. I am happy that my work has been appreciated as much as it has.

The way I look at my pictures is whether it is successful or not and whether I am proud of it, but I don't think of the covers of books or magazines. If I think a picture is successful then I can only hope other people think the same.



Steve McCurry at a Q&A session with photography enthusiasts. (Photo: Ray Yeh)

Why are you drawn to people from exotic landscapes and culture, and not urban cityscapes?

I am interested in places that have some soul, some individuality, some connection to the past. So much of the world is becoming homogeneous, globalisation is taking over everything and before you know it we are all going to dress the same, eat the same food, listen to the same music and it's all going to become boring after a while.

But I think you are inspired by certain things that are unpredictable. We fall in love with certain people in life, we prefer one kind of food over another. Sometimes there's no reason. Sometimes the reason is mysterious.

Looking at Singapore, which is an urban cityscape of many cultures, how would you photograph the country?

To try and come up with some interesting ideas or projects or photographic stories, I think you would have to stay at a place for some time and dig deep into the culture. I think that would take time. It's hard to know that just on the surface, walking around.



Steve McCurry's Rabari Shepherd (2009). Rajasthan, India.

When you are in a new country seeing everything for the first time, how do you decide which person you want to photograph?

I think with people, it's like some connection, some chemistry. Somehow they inspire you. It's sort of like falling in love with somebody, whatever that magic is that draws you to that person. It's just some animalistic attraction I suppose.

How do you manage to capture that perfect photograph of someone staring intently at you?

It has to do with practice. If you photograph thousands of people over many years, you develop a technique that produces results. You go through trial and error to perfect your technique.

To me it seems logical for someone to look into your lens if you are taking a picture. I can't imagine saying to somebody, "I want to take your picture now can you look over there?" To me it makes more sense to have that connection.

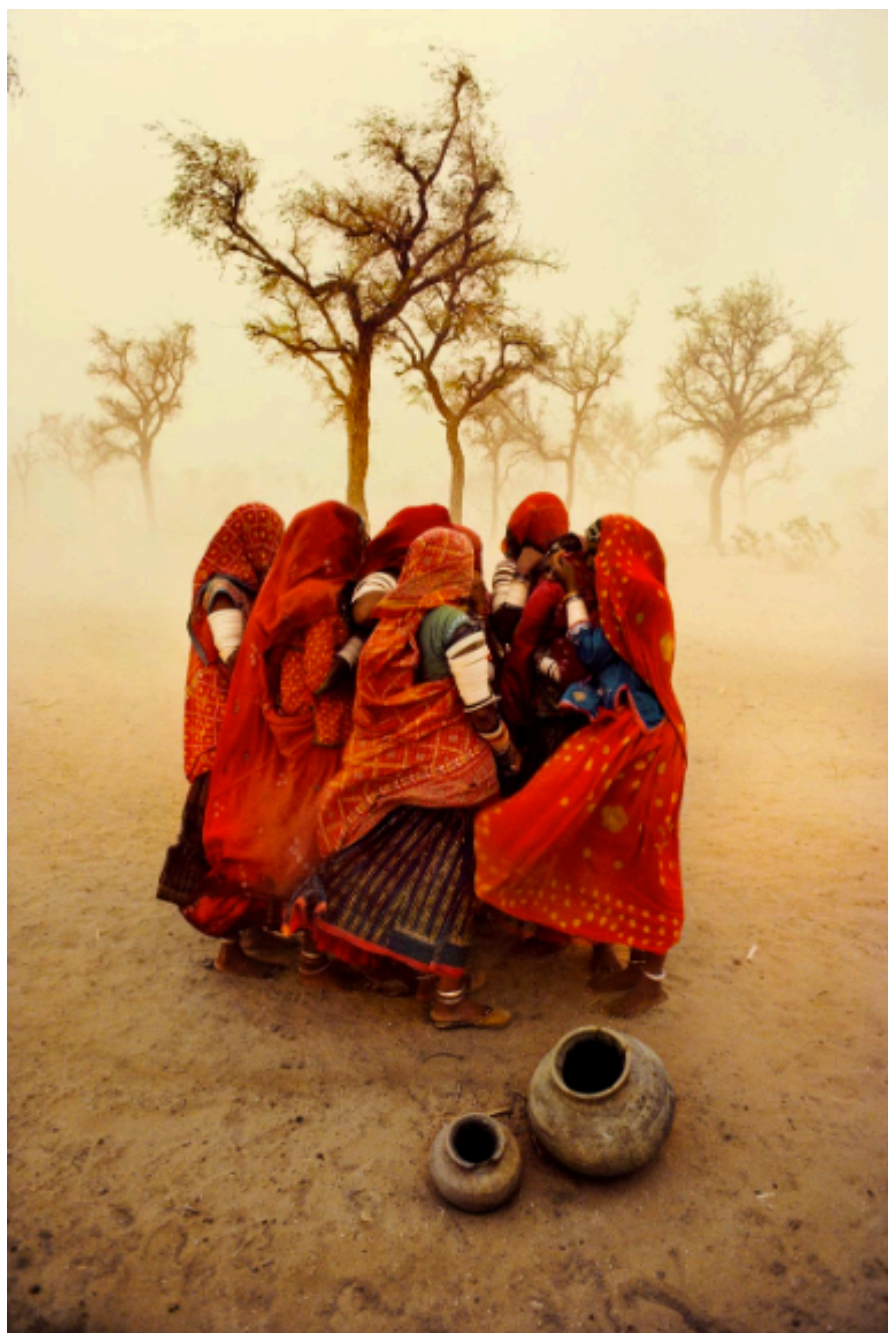
Do you have a particular way of approaching people you want to photograph?

You have to bring them into your process - your enthusiasm and excitement. If you are going to be a portrait photographer, you have to understand a certain amount of psychology. You need to establish some eye contact or chemistry - it's part charm, humour. I think this is essential if you want to take a portrait that actually says something through the photograph.

Most of the people in the pictures are very brief chance encounters. I always try to work with a local person so I can communicate with the person I am photographing. That person can be anybody - taxi driver, a tourist guide, but it's important to talk to people in their own language.

Has the proliferation of digital photography taken away the meaning of a photograph?

I don't think the amount of photographs being taken makes any difference to good photographs. Good pictures will be recognised and appreciated and the rest would just fall away. But having said that, most of the pictures people take now are of friends and family. They're not any more memorable than the text messages we send to each other.



Steve McCurry's Dust Storm (1983). Rajasthan, India.

When you look at the political situation in Afghanistan and the Middle East over the years, is there a sense of resignation that things haven't improved?

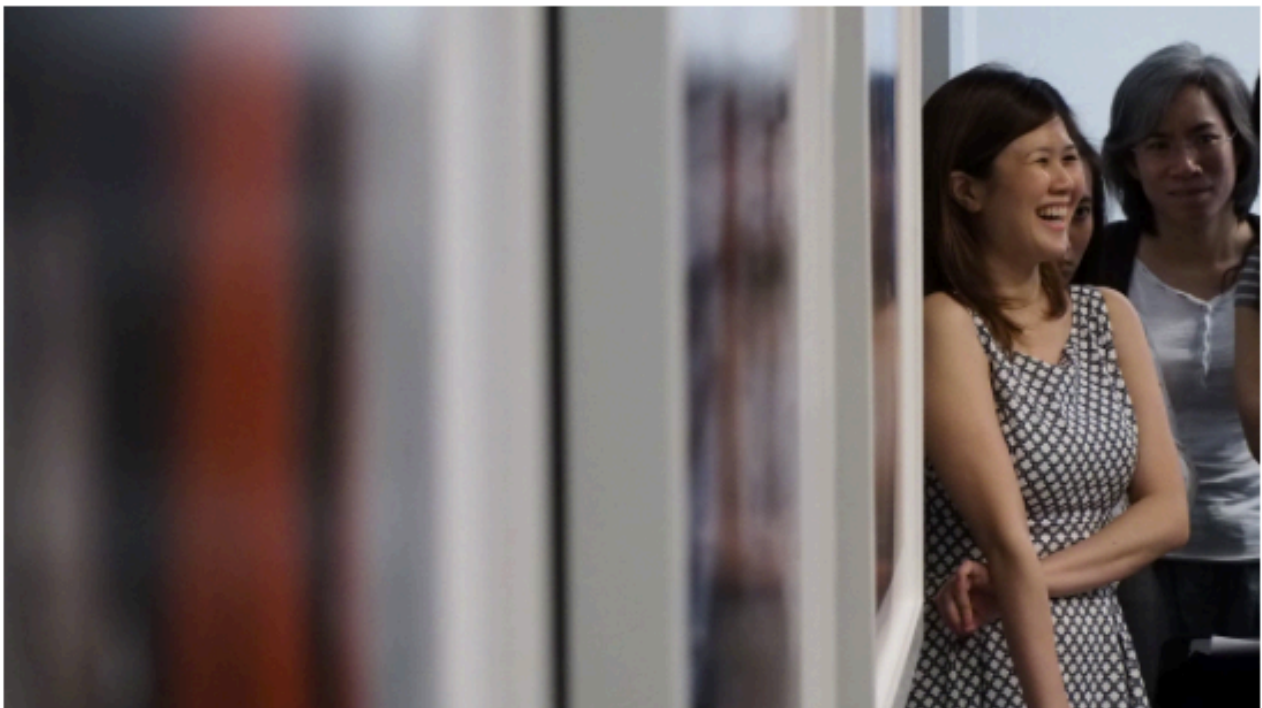
Afghanistan is a never-ending nightmare for people who want to go in and influence events. I think the story is still in flux, still happening. We are only maybe in the beginning or the middle of the story. It's been an enormous waste of time and money and lives. It's just been a disaster in my view.

It's disturbing that the world is becoming more of a dangerous place and many people either don't know or care about it, so I guess the situation will just keep deteriorating. Often people are more interested in their own problems and immediate concerns and that's just human nature.

Have your experiences in conflict situations made you more political?

I am not so political, but certainly you have to pay attention to politics. In my case, it's just amusing to follow the political world.

I'm not really involved in conflict areas anymore. I think that life is short and you want to experience life as much as you can. I'm more interested now in places like Cuba, it's a place that is under great transition, great political story, cultural story. Ethiopia, again a place that is in great transition.



Participants at the Steve McCurry Q&A session. (Photo: Ray Yeh)

Can you tell us about some of your upcoming projects?

I am working on a new book on Afghanistan, so I'm going there in March, just to see what life's like. And I'm going to Iran in April. Iran has a great heritage and culture, I have never seen it so I want to go there and see it for myself.

And I'm doing a book on people reading around the world that will be coming out in September. People reading in different places - on the airplane, at home, in school, at a park.

At 65 years old, do you feel like you're ready to put down your camera?

The idea of retiring - why would you do that if you are doing what you love? It's not anything I have ever thought about. I can understand if you're bored or hate what you're doing and want to retire as soon as possible. But for me, I just want to keep that ball rolling as long as possible.



Steve McCurry in Singapore. (Photo: Ray Yeh)

Steve McCurry: The Iconic Photographs exhibition runs from now till Feb 21 at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

- CNA/ss