

LIFTING THE LID

From the glitz of a grand prix
to the horrors of genocide,
photographer Jon Nicholson's
images lift the lid on real life

WORDS: Simone Hellyer ♦ PHOTOS: Jon Nicholson

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the death of Ayrton Senna, one of the greatest ever

Formula One racing drivers. One of the last people to photograph Ayrton before his fateful crash was West Sussex photographer Jon Nicholson. And his poignant portrait, which lay forgotten in a drawer for nearly 25 years, is set to be one of the standout images in a new exhibition of his work at Augustus Brandt in Petworth.

"It's bizarre because the picture hasn't been seen for 25 years and now I have people coming up to me and saying that they remember where they were when he died," says Jon, who was childhood friends with Ayrton's teammate Damon Hill. He was working as a sports photographer when Senna died after a horrific crash at the 1994 San Marino Grand Prix.

"On the Saturday after that picture was taken Ayrton's best friend crashed and was killed," Jon recalls. "I was with the team



in the debrief room taking pictures on the Sunday and it was clear he didn't want to race. And that afternoon he died."

The portrait of Ayrton is certainly very poignant, but John also has a collection of intimate images of Senna and Hill in the debrief room on the day of the race that seem to capture the

"It still chokes me to tell the stories behind some of my images"

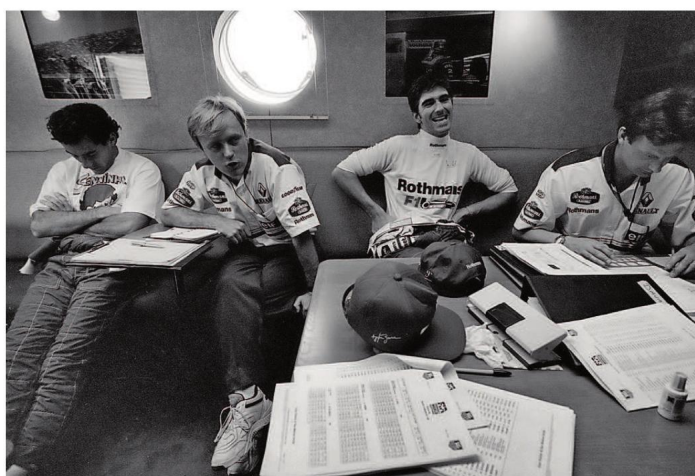
uneasy mood of the drivers. It is this behind the scenes action that came to shape Jon's career as a sports photographer. "At that time I was a sports photographer, but I wanted to be a documentary photographer like Dom McCullen. I wasn't really bothered about the action, I wanted the behind the scenes stuff."

Jon went on to produce behind the scenes photography books with Ferrari, Chelsea and Barcelona football clubs, Linford Christie and the England rugby team.

For Jon, taking photos is easy, it is gaining the trust of your subject that you need to work hardest on. And he isn't afraid of getting stuck in to help build up a rapport. "When I was doing the rugby, Will Carling got up and said to me: 'Look Nicholson, if you're going to come to any more closed training sessions, you need to wear this.' And he threw an England shirt at me with my name on the back. I had to join in on the training sessions, although it was mostly just carrying the training bags. But that integrated me into the squad and meant that I could sit there with my camera more comfortably," he says.

That willingness to really get to know his subjects carried into his later work – which took him a long way from the world of sport. He started working with the UN at the insistence of his neighbour, who was a lawyer for the organisation. His work took him to eight countries in Africa to shoot a body of work on the issues contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS. This project led Jon into a long relationship with UNICEF and UNFPA to cover stories on conflict and post-conflict in Africa.

He says: "There was nothing heroic about it – it is what it is and it terrified me at times. I definitely



ABOVE:

Ayrton Senna 30 May 1994 in the Williams garage Imola Italy

TOP RIGHT:

Afar herdsman in Ethiopia

BOTTOM RIGHT:

Ayrton Senna and Damon Hill plus race engineers David Brown and John Russell, taken two hours before Ayrton's death

LEFT:

Camel fair in Rajasthan

wasn't foolhardy about it. Seeing people who are ill and are really struggling is bloody horrible. It still chokes me to tell the stories behind some of my images."

Some of these images will be included in the Petworth exhibition, including one entitled *Walked to Freedom*, which depicts the feet of women who had fled the genocide in Darfur on foot.

Jon's work has also taken him to America, where he spent four years documenting the lives of cowboys, and across much of Asia. Wherever his work takes him, Jon places a great deal of importance of connecting with people, often trying to keep in touch and send prints of his finished images.

During his travels in Laos he took a photo of a female leaf picker at his hotel, which he printed and rushed to give to her – only for her to burst into tears. When he asked why she was crying, she told him that no hotel guest had ever spoken to her before. This, Jon says, is a lesson that many holidaymakers could

learn: "You shouldn't stand across the street and take a picture of the old woman selling pineapple, who is getting increasingly irritated at you. Why don't you go across the road, eat the pineapple and actually talk to her? She may even ask you to come round the back and meet her husband, who looks about 300 years and is feeding beans on toast to their 20 children. That's your picture, not the woman on the street."

The Goodwood estate is the much more convenient site of Jon's latest project. He is the first photographer to be given access to document the estate and for the past few months has been busy learning about its forestry, farming and racing pedigree as well as experimenting with large plate cameras to capture the house and grounds. ♦

Jon's exhibition Pausing For Breath is at Augustus Brandt in Petworth until 10 August. augustusbrandt.co.uk