

South Africa's Jodi Bieber won World Press Photo of the Year for her image of an Afghan woman who had her nose and ears cut off by her husband. *Oliver Roberts* meets her to discuss the photo, its aftermath and the innate intensity that lives within great photographers

An intimate eye

OF all the significant things that come with winning World Press Photo of the Year 2010, there is one that nobody has mentioned. Such is the interest in her, South African Jodi Bieber now tops Jodi Picoult in Google's predictive search menu. And when a brave and modest photographer is more fascinating than someone who churns out sappy novels by the week, then things, for the time being at least, are right with the world.

If you go to the World Press Photo website, you can listen to the moment Bieber found out she'd won photography's Oscar: "What?!" she shouts over the line. "You're joking. Are you serious? I cannot believe it. Never in a million years would I think the jury would want... I can't believe it!" But she's not unused to the acclaim. She has won numerous international awards, including eight World Press Awards.

A few days later, I'm sitting with Bieber at a coffee shop in Joburg and her phone is still ringing off the hook with interview requests. It's two days after the U2 concert and Bono ain't the only rock star in town.

"It's not the first time this has happened," Bieber, who learnt the trade in the early 1990s under the guidance of Ken Oosterbrook, says. "When the story broke in *Time* magazine, it was berserk. The headline was misleading and it flew all over the world, all over, in front of Obama, everyone. But it was a good thing, regardless of the headline."

Bieber's photograph is of Bibi Aisha, an 18-year-old woman from Afghanistan's rural Oruzgan province. To escape her husband's violent treatment, she ran away from their marital home back to her family and was later accosted by the Taliban.

As punishment, Aisha was held down by her brother-in-law while her husband sliced off her nose and ears. She was picked up by aid workers and, before being given a visa and sent to the US, she was taken to a refugee in Kabul. That is where Bieber met her. The photograph was printed on the front page of *Time* on August 9 last year, with the headline "What happens if we leave Afghanistan". Some called it US propaganda, a way of justifying the US military presence in the country.

For Bieber, the picture was just about a woman who was violated by her husband.

"There were some women who said I objectified Aisha by showing her in that way, but I want to go and tell them: 'F**k you, you're sitting in an armchair at a university and she hasn't got a nose. Must I show her crying and without ears, too?'"

"I learnt a lot, because there wasn't just one response. It depended on whether you're right- or left-wing American, or a feminist. In South Africa, it was more about the photograph, because we have no association with the politics between America and Afghanistan. In the end, you just put your picture out there and you can't determine the response or push it in any direction."



DARK SIDE: A photo from Jodi Bieber's series 'Between Dogs & Wolves'. 'Every project relates to my life,' she says

Bieber reveals that getting the iconic image of Aisha was a delicate process.

"I didn't know what I wanted to capture in the beginning," she says. "I was warned to be sensitive. She suffers from very bad post-traumatic stress and got upset while another photographer was taking her picture a few days before. The social worker, a translator and myself, we all went into a very small, non-descript room. Just some cushions against the wall and a carpet and one fan."

"Photographically I was thinking 'What am I going to do?' In the beginning, it wasn't working. I don't know how to describe it, but I try to capture something of who you are and not someone you are for the camera. But it got to a point where I thought, 'I'm not happy' and I put the camera down and had a talk with her."

"I spoke about her being a beautiful woman and I wanted to try and capture her inner beauty, I wanted to try and capture her power. I told her I could never understand what it's like not to have a nose and ears, but I wanted her, instead of showing her in vulnerable way, to think of something that made her feel happy and powerful. Everyone must have thought I was a bit of a nutter but the room went a bit lighter; it wasn't so serious anymore. That's when I said, 'let's go for it again!'"

This is Bieber's flair — capturing not just the person, but their soul. All great photographers have it. Bieber had only three hours to convince Aisha that photographing her was an

act of care, not of exploitation. The outcome is an image that World Press jury chairman David Burnett says "could become one of those pictures — and we have maybe just to in our lifetime — where if somebody says 'You know, that picture of a girl...' you know exactly which one they're talking about."

Bieber's portfolio includes *Las Canas*, in which she photographed drug addicts in Spain, *Survivors*, where she portrays, in a most gentle and shocking way, abused South African women, and *Between Dogs & Wolves* — a result of 10 years photographing those living on the ragged outskirts of derelict communities in Joburg and the Northern Cape.

The photographs in these projects speak of haunted faces, bleak landscapes and messy rooms that stink of despair. All the images manage to delicately hover, just like the picture of Aisha, between brutal confrontation and a deep, tender intimacy.

One photograph from *Between Dogs & Wolves* shows a small, naked child with its back to the camera, standing in front of a table in a dilapidated kitchen. To me, the child's nakedness — its newness — standing there among all that ruin, speaks of an unchangeable destiny, a future that the subject cannot yet comprehend. It could also just be a photograph of a naked child in a kitchen. But, of course, it's not.

I ask Bieber whether the ability to recognise the significance of a moment like this, and portray it in all its intensity, is something learned or something that's

planted, at birth, in an artist's heart.

"I work hard," she says, just to make sure I know that it doesn't just happen. "I don't know where it comes from."

"So it must be innate then, if you don't know," I say. Then I mention something about the natural intensity that creative people possess, the intensity that drives them and opens their eyes to the significance of slight actions and settings, the intensity that effortlessly connects them to a table, a naked child and the coincidence of light in a dirty kitchen.

"Now we're getting into personal things," Bieber says and looks away cryptically. "That intensity. Sometimes you don't like that part of yourself. Intensity is not always exciting for other people." And we discuss the subject of intensity no further.

Bieber says one of her favourite feelings is when she's on a plane with the Royal Air Force, bound for Iraq. Yet, strangely, she doesn't consider herself a brave person.

"I'm not brave enough to walk a street and take pictures of people," she says. "I try to create an intimacy first, get involved in people's lives, come with no agenda, then I can get to the subject without fear. I've photographed men who are murderers and rapists, but they are some of the most charming people I've ever met. We all have light and dark sides."

Bieber won't tell me what her next project is, only that it's a "tough" one.

"Every project relates to my life, where I am, to the history of where I live and what's happening there," she says. "I don't like doing projects that I don't really feel for, just because it's topical or whatever. I want to do them because I'm curious."

Then her phone rings again. Someone wants an interview.

