

# After the War at Home

For decades, a civil war ripped Angola apart; these photos capture the legacy of the conflict years after the shooting stopped: shanties, land mines and mass graves.

By  
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## Someone Else's Country, Photographs by Jo Ractliffe

Peabody Essex Museum  
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*Salem, Mass.*

To understand the images in the Peabody Essex Museum's "Someone Else's Country, Photographs by Jo Ractliffe," you have to know what happened in Angola before Ms. Ractliffe arrived. The Angolan War of Independence (1961-74) freed the country from Portuguese domination. But it was followed by the Angolan Civil War (1975-2002)—in which one side was supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba, and the other by the U.S. and South Africa. More than 1.5 million people died in the protracted conflict, four million were displaced, and an additional 500,000 fled. The country's infrastructure and economy were effectively destroyed. Eight million land mines had been deployed and remained in place. The country was a wreck.



Left side of Jo Ractliffe's diptych 'View over Boa Vista towards the city' (2007). JO RACTLIFFE/COURTESY OF STEVENSON



Right side of Jo Ractliffe's diptych 'View over Boa Vista towards the city' (2007). JO RACTLIFFE/COURTESY OF STEVENSON

Ms. Ractliffe (b. 1961) came to Angola in 2007, five years after the wars ended. Growing up in South Africa, she had heard the apartheid government's sanitized version of the conflict, but rumors and firsthand stories of soldiers who served there told a different, and far more disturbing, story. She photographed extensively in Luanda, the capital, and some of the pictures on display at PEM would make appropriate illustrations for parts of Dante's "Inferno." There is a diptych, black and white like all the prints in the exhibition, of Boa Vista from Roque Santeiro Market. The pair of pictures were taken at the head of a ravine, beyond which are warehouses and the distant port; the sides of the ravine are covered with garbage, papers, plastic bags, bits of broken things. Atop either side of the ravine is a jumble of corrugated tin shanties; on the right side of the ravine, the camera looks down on a man taking a shower in a canvas enclosure perched on the very edge of the decline. In the foreground on the left, two chickens peck for what little feed they can find.

Another picture of the same area shows the refuse and the shanties, their roofs held in place by rocks or tires that serve as weights, but it is animated by the presence of a young African woman at the bottom of the frame. We see her only from the knees up, but she is bent over carrying a black plastic bag filled with something she has collected and is taking away. Her expression shows her loathing at being a scavenger.

Some pictures have symbolic overtones; in one photograph, seven one-piece coveralls hang on long strings from a tree in a stall on the way to Viana. Rods support the shoulders in the suits so they have the appearance of headless men hanging by the side of the road. There is a sense of menace, reinforced by a

general murkiness in the print. The latter was caused by security personnel at the Luanda airport who insisted on putting Ms. Ractliffe's film through the antiquated X-ray system.

Two years later, Ms. Ractliffe went back to Angola and photographed extensively at combat sites in the countryside. Conversations with veterans returning to the places where they had fought gave her a sense of what the conflict was like, and a few visual reminders provided evidence. At Lobito she photographed the remains of a "comfort station," a small concrete structure in an open field with a painting of an exaggeratedly sexy woman on its side. All that is left of a runway and helipad in the midst of a vast empty expanse at Longa are some markings, as enigmatic as the glyphs the indigenous peoples of the Andes left on their mountains. A star of some undeterminable material placed awkwardly on the side of a mound of rocks roughly six miles from Cuito Cuanavale is thought to mark the mass grave of the soldiers who died there. The memorial to the civilians massacred at Cassinga in 1978 is a flat slab of concrete with grass growing from its cracks; the crude inscription reads "We Shall Always Remember Them."

Land mines cost tens of thousands of Angolans their limbs. Ractliffe's photograph of a mine field near Mupa looks benign, an extended area of wild grass bordered at the rear by trees, but the wall text encourages us to read into it its buried danger. She also took a picture of a deminer near Cuvelai; he looks like a creature from a low-budget science-fiction movie. The man wears a heavily padded outfit and has a bowl of glass or plastic on his head; he moves cautiously through a small clearing while holding a metal detector in front of him.

Coming belatedly to deserted battlefields as she did, Ms. Ractliffe's most difficult challenge was to document the presence of absence, to create images that imply what cannot actually be shown. A diptych of a woodland near Cassinga presents a dramatic landscape; a tree with very rough bark in the left foreground of the left-hand print creates a sense of scale. The area between it and the trees in the distance is covered with tall grass and leaves, and the grass, which appears white, is all bent, as if it is being tormented by the wind or is bowed down with a weight it cannot bear. What happened here? The wall text does not tell, but its presence in this exhibition makes one imagine horrendous scenarios.

South of Namibe, on a barren plain littered with only a few occasional stones, is an unidentified memorial. On top of a shallow mound is a cairn made of rocks, a tire, a helmet and some oddments; a pole about 6 feet tall sticks up from the base, and a piece of cloth tied to its top blows in the wind. Someone is certainly buried there, but who?

A South African colonel said, "If you're going to have a war, best to do it in someone else's country." Jo Ractliffe took the title of her exhibition from his aphorism but then, to her credit, went to see.

*Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. His photo book “Outer Boroughs: New York Beyond Manhattan” will be published by Damiani in February 2015.*

<http://online.wsj.com/articles/after-the-war-at-home-review-of-someone-elses-country-photographs-by-joractliffe-1414620573>