

Jacob Foko: Storyteller

By Devon Pettengill / CASA

THE POIGNANT TALE

of social injustice in the human experience becomes a vivid reality through Jacob Foko's touching photojournalism. His work, which he calls humanitarian photojournalism, will be on display at U Gallery at Salon U through the end of June.

"Photography is so important to me because it allows me to show the truth of every day life, however beautiful or ugly it may be," Foko shared.

Foko's work shows an obvious connection with his subjects, who often meet eyes with the camera. Their frank expressions expose the viewer to the reality of the struggle in their lives, but images of people working, learning, and crying remind us of the universality of certain experiences.



Jacob Foko

"I always put myself in the situation that my subject is. I usually forget about taking a photo right away," Foko shared. "Being a storyteller has helped me develop confidence between the subject and myself."

The photographs in Foko's show at U Gallery were taken during a trip to the Republic of the Congo in 2008 that focused on the women and children who were affected by Congo's devastating civil war, which took place from 1997 to 2000.

The photos and a documentary by Foko called *The Flux Mothers*, are part of the Congo Project, initiated by Global Humanitarian Photojournalists, Inc., a non-profit organization founded by Foko which aims to raise awareness of social injustices around the world, using photojournalism as one of its strongest tools.

Foko is a native of Cameroon, and it was there that his interest in photography began. As a youngster, Foko would often sketch images that caught his eye, such as the shape of a flower or the intimidating face of a boxer. His discovery of photography in high school led to an inspiring new medium for capturing images that interested him.

"I began photographing my classmates



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in a unique and rather different way," shared Foko. "One of my earliest and most memorable classmate photos was of a friend who had fallen asleep at his desk while the teacher was lecturing. When I took the photograph, the class broke out in laughter and the teacher looked over at me. I sat there neither smiling nor frowning without a need for an explanation. See, I was just being myself."

Foko first earned notoriety for his work with his exhibit *Cameroon's 100 Faces of Poverty*, the result of an assignment for Cameroon Radio and National Television and Libre Afrique Magazine. The exhibit was censored by the Cameroon government. Foko notes that the biggest challenge facing a photojournalist is access.

"When covering an event that requires a humanitarian response, usually there are political forces that are intentionally trying to



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keep the eyes of the world out," Foko shared.

Foko learned English before moving to California in 2003 to attend Brooks Institute to earn his Bachelor's degree in visual journalism. Upon graduating he received the Outstanding Achievement Award, and has since received the Career College Association's GREAT Award in recognition of his accomplishments.

In Santa Barbara, Foko has found a

community that has taken an interest in his work and is an ideal audience.

"Santa Barbara's community spirit is well known throughout the world," Foko shared. "This small community supports thousands of organizations around the globe."

U Gallery, located at 1719 State St, is open Mon-Fri 9am-6pm & Sat 10am-5pm. For more information, call 898-8962. For more information on Global Humanitarian Photojournalists, visit www.globalhp.org.