



Mathieu Young on Assignment: Photographing by Moonlight In Cambodia

Wendy Erickson

Wendy Erickson: You are an advertising photographer based in LA. How is it you ended up in a fishing village in Cambodia making photographs by solar powered LED light?

Mathieu Young: Self-assigned photojournalistic projects have always been an important part of what I do. I haven't found total artistic fulfillment doing only my commercial work, and I haven't found a sustainable financial model in doing only reportage projects, so I have always done both. To that end, I booked a months trip to Cambodia

with the intention of meeting, learning about and promoting innovative social enterprises. I met dozens through photographing the TEDx conference when I arrived there, and photographed for several.

The opportunity to travel to the fishing villages to photograph the Moonlight came up even more serendipitously. I was eating dinner with the family that owned the guest house I was staying at in Phnom Penh, and another guest came and joined us. He turned out to be the new marketing director



for KamWorks, the social enterprise behind the product, and a couple days later I was in a Tuk Tuk on my way several hours outside Phnom Penh.

One of the main things that drew me to this particular assignment was the idea that the story was the light, which really is a dream opportunity for a photographer.

WE: I read that the company that makes the Moonlight, KamWorks, designed the light. What can you tell me about the concept and product?

MY: KamWorks is a Dutch company that deals mostly with solar power. Their main industry is making at home solar, which has a strong future in a place like Cambodia, where 70% of the people don't have access to power, and the infrastructure for the power grid seems unlikely to grow rapidly. The Moonlight was developed as a design project by a group of students who came over to try and develop a small solar powered LED light that would specifically address the needs of the potential market. They designed several different

versions and then worked with the Cambodians in the nearby villages to refine the design to something that would be most useful for them.

The lanterns are constructed by a small Cambodian crew at the KamWorks campus, which is a solar powered facility in a fishing village outside of Phnom Penh.

There are several important benefits for people using the solar powered LED lantern instead of the traditional kerosene lamps, including the fire hazards posed by open fire in wood and straw houses, and the harmful emissions caused by burning kerosene in an enclosed structure.

WE: So you must have had some technical challenges in making these photographs. The lighting is beautiful. Tell me a little bit about the equipment you used. Was it just the available LED light or did you supplement it? The lighting looks very natural.

MY: There were several challenges to making these photographs. The remoteness of the villages,



the language barrier and the thick mud in many of the locations were difficult to deal with, but the main challenge was the technical one, balancing the light from the LED product with the ambient light with the strobe light I needed to introduce, to properly expose the people using the Moonlight.

Since the Moonlight can't balance against the direct sunlight, but I still wanted the environment to be a central character in the photos, I knew that the short windows of dawn and dusk were going to be our best times to make photos. I was out there for two nights, which meant I only had two dusks and one dawn to make all the photos, which meant working very fast.

As much as possible I used only the Moonlights to light the photos, including often using extra Moonlights out of frame to add light to the scene,

but I also used an Elinchrom Quadra Ranger 400w/s battery pack, which was the perfect tool because it is incredibly light and I could pack it into my backpack (important because one of the villages could only be accessed via motorcycle, so packing light was essential,) but also because it could dial all the way down to 8.2w/s an incredibly low power point that most equipment can't do, and which I used for nearly every single one of these shots. It was great for other shoots for other groups that the light could then power up to 400w/s, but for these shots I needed that low light control.

WE: How were your photographs used by KamWorks?

MY: KamWorks had an exhibition of the photos printed by a friend and used them to help launch



their Phnom Penh offices. The photos were written about in *The Phnom Penh Post* and several other Cambodian media outlets that helped promote their work.

Unfortunately, as a small social enterprise, they weren't able to fully capitalize on them and use them on their website or any social media since they didn't have a team that could work on that. It was a lesson learned for me, and I am now partnering with ad agencies to do pro bono work as well as collaborating with a group called Taproot which brings pro bono consultants from a wide range of backgrounds together, so that when we work on a pro bono assignment there is a greater chance of more being made from it. For instance, I have just joined a Taproot team to make an annual report for a nonprofit that helps underserved families find good child care, and our team has a

leader, a copywriter, a financial strategist, a graphic designer, as well as myself as the photographer.

WE: What advice would you have for other photographers who want to volunteer and make a difference and positive impact with their photographs? How can they create a project that will not only be meaningful to them, but to others?

MY: Joining a team of professionals through an organization like Taproot is a good place to start. They have frequent orientations in cities across the country. Doing as much research as possible on groups that you want to volunteer for is important. But more than anything, if you feel the desire to volunteer and promote innovative positive work through images, just get going. Don't let fear or too much self-doubt stand in the way. It feels good to promote projects that you believe in.



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WE: What new projects are in store for you for 2012?

MY: 2011 was an incredibly busy year commercially, and 2012 is shaping up to be even busier. But, within the constraints of working commercially, I am looking to start a longer term journalistic project in Los Angeles, as well as continue to volunteer with groups like Taproot, and the Pablove Shutterbugs (a wonderful group that provides photographic mentoring to young cancer patients). I'm also hoping to travel again this year, perhaps back to Cambodia to work with some of the great groups I met but wasn't able to work with last time around.

WE: What's important to you now?

MY: I am constantly reminded what a blessing it is to be able to work as a photographer and sus-

tain myself, but hopefully add something positive to the larger conversation. Photography is an extremely powerful medium that has a real power to affect social progress, and I think it's important to take that into consideration when you pick up a camera.



Mathieu Young is an LA based photographer, who shoots a blend of commercial work for TV and Film clients, including Paramount, Dreamworks, FOX, The CW and WB TV, and photojournalism, which has appeared in outlets like TIME Magazine, Newsweek, Rolling Stone, Fortune Magazine and on CNN. He also shoots pro bono assignments for a range of nonprofits and social enterprises. His work can be seen at mathieuyoung.com.

Resources

Websites: pablove.org/shutterbugs; taprootfoundation.org; ted.com/tedx; elinchrom.us; kamworks.com