



PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID BURNETT

# Bare Witness

FRENCH PHOTOGRAPHER **GÉRARD RANCINAN**  
SHARES HIS WORK WITH STEVE WILLIAMS

**H**IS WEBSITE puts it simply: “Rancinan is a photographer.” An incredible understatement as Gérard Rancinan is one of the world’s leading contemporary photographers.

Discussing his latest project *The Photographer* over coffee in Paris, the rather diminutive Rancinan is extremely animated, yet quite humble about his work, which has been exhibited and published across the globe. Names such as the Dalai Lama, Tiger Woods, Bill Gates, Fidel Castro, Zinedine Zidane, Lance Armstrong, Yasser Arafat and Pope John-Paul II have been captured in the light of his camera, as have many anonymous subjects, including Hiroshima survivors.

“I started at 15 years old in a regional newspaper in France and for three years I just learned in the lab. During my days off I would shoot pictures, then get other photographers to explain their work to me. That’s how I learnt.” Rancinan honed his craft and became a published photographer quite by accident – literally. He recounts, “There’s a big crash on a bridge in Bordeaux. They say ‘Okay Gérard, go.’ When I shot this picture it is only the crash of a truck, but I put the filter on so the sky was dark, to make it a big catastrophe.” The newspaper published the image across eight columns on the front page with his first credit.

As an eager 18-year-old, he was understandably fairly impressed with himself. “Everybody knows me! The next day I see people looking at my picture in the street. I was so proud! Much too proud.” Then reality kicked in. “Two hours later, people take the newspaper and scrunch it up ... finished. Back to work again. It is a good lesson.”

He became the youngest photojournalist in France and spent three years in Bordeaux before being sent to a regional agency of the paper in

the Pyrenees. Utilising his spare time, Rancinan produced assignments in Kuwait and Portugal, drawing the attention of the photo-press agency Sygma, which he joined. After five years, he became a staff photographer in Paris, covering events as diverse as riots in Britain, Olympic Games and show business. His images were published in the world’s major magazines.

In 2005, Rancinan travelled to Hiroshima to mark the 60th anniversary of the atomic destruction of the city. He photographed 70 *hibakusha*, survivors who not only cheated death the day the world went dark, but spent their lives exiled for fear they may be contaminated by nuclear radiation.

Rancinan remembers the reaction to his photographs. “We exhibited all the Hiroshima portraits in a very old church. We watched as people touched the pictures and cried in front of them. This is the best result. Nobody said ‘this is a good picture,’ they talked about the emotion. This is our work and this is my deal today.”

His deal now includes *The Photographer* – a new book and art installation, the latest in a series of collaborations with renowned French journalist Caroline Gaudriault. The project was commissioned by Swiss watchmaker Baume & Mercier, who Rancinan says has demonstrated a commitment to the art of photography, drawing the parallels of stopping time.

*The Photographer* is a unique concept. Rancinan says, “It’s not a catalogue of the 23 best photographers in the world. We don’t want to talk about each photographer, but about photography in general.”

The exhibition or, more correctly “installation,” opened late last year in Paris. Rancinan describes it as “different to the book. It’s a concept, it’s an idea and it’s very sensitive.” *The Photographer* is exhibiting around the world and will be on display in Singapore later this year.

Rancinan sums himself up, “I’m not a photographer who wants to shoot nice, beautiful, wonderful, charming pictures. I don’t care about that. When you look at my portraits of people, I try to go beyond the eyes and into the mind to see the ghosts. This is my work.” **T**

**AT A GLANCE**  
**EPOCHAL YEAR**  
1971, when the first photograph he took became the front-page story on a French regional newspaper  
**CREATIVE SPIRIT**  
Rancinan established his own agency, but realised the minutiae of business weighed him down, stifling that creativity and duty. “I had lost sight of my only goal.” After three years he turned freelance. “As light as a feather, as free as a bird.”