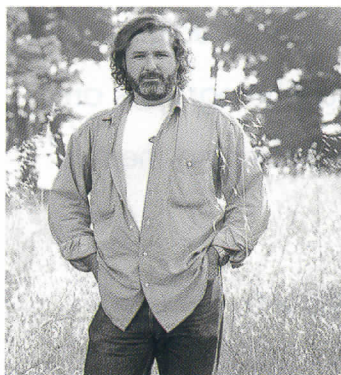


Last year was a good one for Colin Finlay. The 32-year-old Santa Barbara-based photographer burst into the hardscrabble world of photojournalism with pictures in top American and European newsweeklies, magazine assignments in places from Haiti to Bangladesh, major exhibitions, and a book of his images of children in distress—a subject especially near to his heart. “He just bloomed like a flower,” says Finlay’s New York agent, Marcel Saba. “Since I met him a year and a half ago, his style has improved 100 percent. His pictures are more moving now.”

Finlay’s ascent is a virtual case study in how young photojournalists can expand their professional horizons even as magazine and newspaper budgets shrink. After graduating in 1987 with honors from the University of California at Santa Barbara and doing a corporate stint at 3M (“I was driving a black BMW and wearing Armani suits,” he recalls), Finlay under-

Right: Shrouded by toxic smoke from refuse-fueled kilns, underage Egyptian boys scoop mud for clay tiles at a factory on the fringes of Cairo’s “City of the Dead.” Finlay (below) captured the surreal scene with a Canon EF 28mm f/1.8 USM wide-angle (his favorite lens) on a Canon EOS A2 (his standard camera).



Photojournalism: Colin

By Russell Hart



Finlay Breaks Through



Finlay uses Kodak Tri-X film for nearly all his work because its speed and exposure latitude let him shoot by available light, as in this horrific image of an altar of death at a Rwandan Catholic church. The skulls were left by genocidal Hutus as a warning to rival Tutsi tribespeople, whom they slaughtered by the dozens in the sanctuary.

went "a complete transformation of character" after seeing the 1990 Kevin Costner film *Dances With Wolves*. "It had a profound effect," he says. "It made me want to move people the way it had moved me."

Not knowing "an f-stop from a hole in the ground," but

knowing that the life of a still photographer has an independence not possible in filmmaking, Finlay took several classes at Santa Barbara's Brooks Institute. He then began to bankroll his own photographic expeditions with seven-day-a-week, fourteen-hour-a-day

stints repairing oil refineries. "I'd come away with maybe \$8,000," says Finlay, "then spend it on my next few trips." Early destinations included Northern Ireland, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Germany.

Finlay soon showed the work from those trips to a Los Angeles-based international relief agency, forging an important connection with the group; it uses his photographs to document its many humanitarian projects, reproducing them in corporate publications and appeals. "They fly me all over the place, get me visas, put me up, and pay for translators, guides, and car rentals," Finlay says. But covering expenses doesn't pay the rent, so Finlay is allowed to market the photographs he takes, and he negotiates time off while on location to pursue his own stories.

“Colin is really aggressive about finding good stories.”

The photographer's 1996 sojourn in Rwanda, a recent hotbed of ethnic strife, is a case in point. "I was on the way to Burundi to do some photography for the relief agency when I learned about a children's prison," says Finlay. Through UNICEF, Finlay got permission

Top: An aspiring cowboy checks out the action at a unique inner-city children's rodeo program in South-Central Los Angeles, part of a Finlay photo essay that *Sports Illustrated* will publish this month. Center: This Tutsi boy lost both legs to Hutu machetes, and now makes rosaries to pay for meals at his Burundi orphanage. Bottom: Two Romanian boys huddle for warmth, sharing cigarettes bought with money begged from passengers at the train station they call home.

from Rwanda's interior and justice ministers to visit the prison. "They told me I was the first outsider to see it in a year," he says. His unflinching pictures of the facility raise complex and disturbing feelings. Though its Hutu inmates—some as young as six years old—have been charged with the genocidal murder of rival Tutsis, the squalid living conditions would surely be considered cruel and unusual punishment in the United States. The images were first published in America in the September/October 1996 issue of *American Photo* and are now being considered by several other major magazines.

Meanwhile, Finlay was showing his other work and pitching story ideas to smaller magazines. Wisely, he looked for publications with less of a hard-news orientation—and more openness to up-and-coming photographers. These include *Who Cares*, a Washington, DC-based journal of social concerns that published a wide-ranging portfolio of Finlay's work, and a well-known educational magazine that provides him with a regular outlet for his pictures of children. More importantly, Finlay was cultivating a relationship with Saba, an experienced and skillful groomer of young talent. "I brought him work maybe four times over the course of a year," says the photographer. "I kept showing him new pictures



The plight of the world's children has become Finlay's trademark subject.

to prove that my style and abilities were growing, and that I could get him more than a couple of stories a year."

Finlay's persistence and self-directedness helped convince Saba to take him on. "He has an amazing eagerness," says the agent. "He's really aggressive about finding good stories." Saba is now introducing Finlay to mainstream newsmagazines, recently getting his pictures into Time Online, *U.S. News & World Report*, and Germany's *Der Spiegel* magazine. Besides placing stories and negotiating fees, Saba regularly counsels Finlay on the newsworthiness of his story ideas. "He's so connected that he knows if there are pictures of the same subjects already out there,"

says Finlay. "That way, I'm not duplicating the work of two dozen other photographers." But given that pictures from world hot spots can sell briskly, steering clear of them isn't necessarily the best idea. Says Finlay, "You have to ask yourself, 'Do I want to go to Rwanda and Zaire when I know that superstar photographers like Jim Nachtwey and Chris Morris and dozens of others are covering them? Or do I want to go to Sierra Leone and do this story that's been at the back of my mind for a year that no one else is doing?'"

Finlay still relies on smaller publications to provide the quirky, in-depth assignments that already distinguish him from big-name, heat-seeking

photojournalists. One remarkable recent story (assigned just as Finlay had pitched it) was funded by the in-flight magazine of Cathay Pacific airline. It was a three-part photo essay that sent him to Calcutta, Cairo, and Bangladesh.

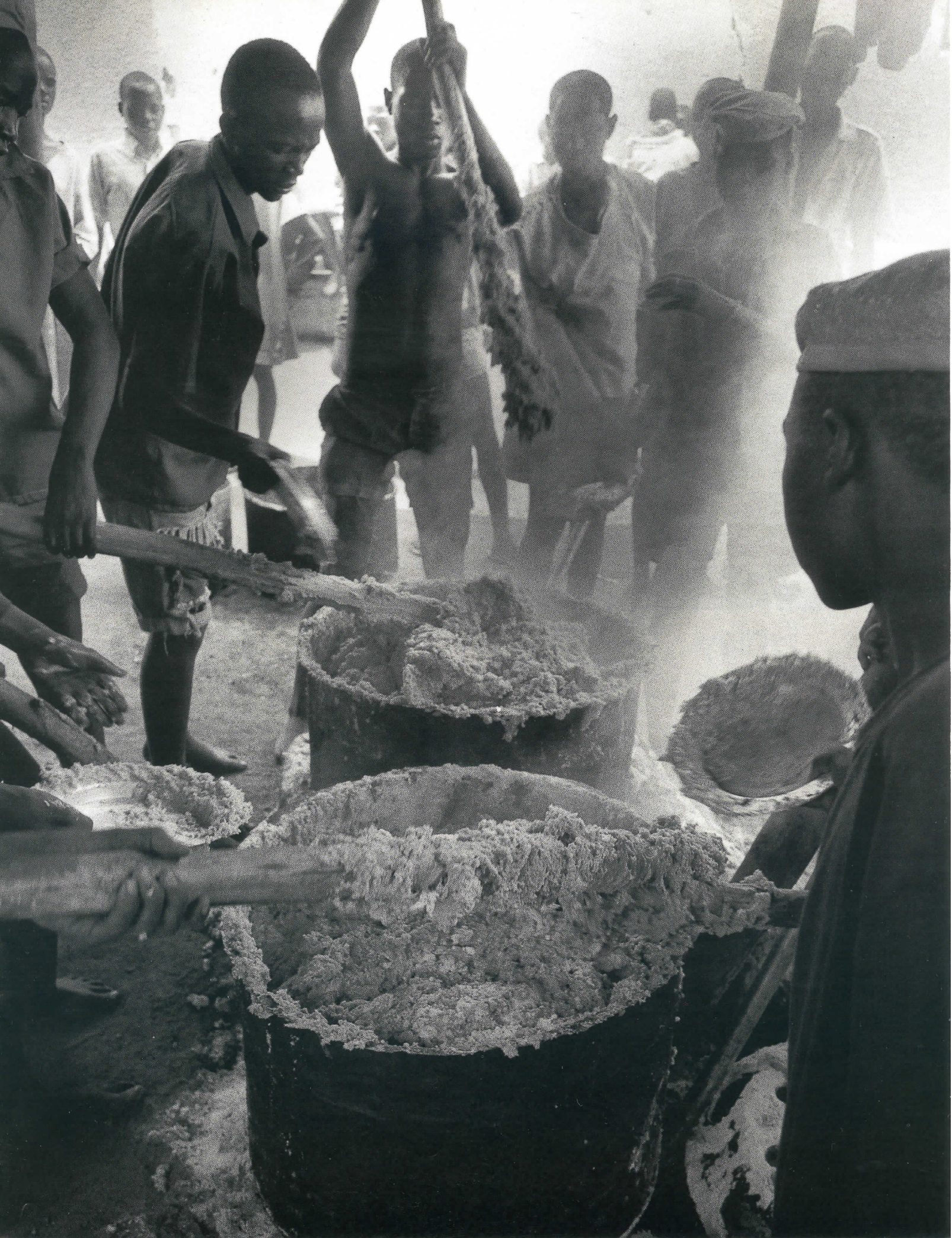
In Calcutta, he documented rickshaw pullers who were soon to be driven off the streets by the city's taxi fleet. "Once I'm on location," says Finlay, "I look for stories within stories." He certainly did that in Cairo, where he photographed children living in the so-called "City of the Dead," a large cemetery that has become home to many in the overcrowded city. Finlay's curiosity was piqued by a terra cotta tile- and vase-making factory on the

graveyard's fringes, one of many industries that have sprung up in the area. It turned out that the factory was using the cemetery's children as a labor force. Finlay's photographs show mud-caked boys dredging pools bare-handed, straining under the weight of tiles they're forced to haul, and constantly enshrouded by clouds of

Below: Cut from a ship beached on the tidal flats of southern Bangladesh, a slab of steel is hauled to a foundry for recycling into construction materials. These and all the other images shown here were printed by Finlay on Kodak Polymax paper; the photographer often spends 16-hour days in the darkroom.

Right: Accused of genocidal murder by their Rwandan Tutsi jailers, Hutu boys (some as young as six) must prepare their own meals from supplies provided by UNICEF.







Finlay often takes young shooters under his wing.

toxic smoke created by the rubber tires and other refuse used to stoke the kilns.

In Bangladesh, Finlay photographed another instance in which human industry and degradation merge: There, steel is cut away piecemeal from beached ships and melted down for other uses. It's recycling at its most primitive—and dangerous. "I try to find stories with a special hook," Finlay says.

The plight of the world's children has become Finlay's trademark subject and is the focus

of his first book, *The Unheard Voice: Portraits of Childhood*. Sponsored by a consortium of children's clothing makers, the book is nonetheless a hard-hitting exposé on subjects ranging from Romanian urchins with AIDS to Bosnian war orphans.

With his typical creative thinking, though, Finlay believes that photography can be used for more than documenting ruined lives—he thinks it can also help heal psychological wounds. Last November, he traveled to Sarajevo to conduct week-long photography classes with Bosnian orphans. With cameras on loan from Canon and film donated by Kodak, he let his young students photograph their own lives. "We went back to where they used to live, their parents' gravesites, and the ruins of the library and the Olympic stadium," says Finlay. "I think it was a sort of catharsis for them." Finlay himself made medium-format portraits of the students with a Bronica system donated for the trip. An exhibition of the children's work will open in Sarajevo this spring

or summer—concurrent with one or the other of Finlay's own upcoming shows at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art and the United Nations.

For Finlay, the project's teaching aspect is a natural extension of his work. For some time, he has been taking aspiring photojournalists under his wing. One recent photo-school alumnus accompanied him on his six-week Cathay Pacific trip, then followed him home through South-Central Los Angeles as he shot stills of treacherous inner-city violence for CNN. Another young photographer, still in school, accompanied Finlay to Sarajevo. "They get to see how you develop a story, what it's like to shoot it, how to get access to places that seem inaccessible, and ways to build relationships with the people you're shooting," he says. "It's real-world experience even the best photo school can't teach."

And even as Finlay heads to Africa to continue a large (and largely self-assigned) project called "From the Earth"—about the ingenious and harmful ways

Above: Calcutta wrestlers and weight lifters work out to honor the Hindu god of strength. Opposite: A rickshaw repair shop from Finlay's three-part Cathay Pacific photo essay.

man uses the world's natural resources—he remains a student in the school of the real world. That continuing education is sure to have an effect on his work. His agent, Marcel Saba, puts it more plainly: "Colin is going to get even better."

interactive contact Colin

What advice does Colin Finlay have for would-be photojournalists? As an active mentor to photo students, he knows a good deal about the concerns of those just getting their careers started, and he's offered to give feedback to readers of *American Photo On Campus*. If you've got questions concerning how to put together a portfolio for a news agency, what kind of equipment you need, or other advice about the profession, please write: Finlay, *American Photo On Campus*, 1633 Broadway, New York, NY, 10019. Or you can e-mail questions to DSchon1@aol.com.

