

ART

## Sight unseen

What does an expert in vision bring to the art of photography? The ability to “adjust people’s visual perception,” offers renowned photographer and optometrist, Larry Louie. Over the past two decades, Louie’s work has garnered over 24 awards and honours including, most recently, Britain’s Travel Photographer of the Year award. And while these travel images are stunning in composition and content, it is his work as a social documentary photographer that promises a meaningful adjustment.

Documentary photography as a powerful tool for social reform dates back to nearly the beginning of the technology and art. Thomas Annan’s photographs raised awareness about the living conditions in the slums of Glasgow, Scotland (1868–1877), while American Lewis Hine’s works in the early 1900s helped bring about reforms in child labour laws. The US government recognized the power of the form when it hired Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and others to bring a human face to the plight of impoverished Depression-era farmers. And the form flourished in the postwar era with Diane Arbus and Robert Frank among many others. Many readers will be familiar with W. Eugene Smith’s images from the late 1960s of people suffering from mercury poisoning in the Japanese fishing village of Minamata. The aims of social documentation continue today in Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado’s images of workers in 26 countries, and Puerto Rican Manuel Rivera-Ortiz’s heart-wrenching photographs of lives in poverty.

Louie’s documentary work similarly exposes some of the poorest regions of the world and some of the most disenfranchised people: the sight impaired.

The Edmonton, Alberta photographer brings these views to the uninformed developed world, while simul-



Larry Louie

“Cataract Woman with Children” Dhaka, Bangladesh (2010). Half of the approximately 13 million physically handicapped people in Bangladesh are visually impaired. A visually impaired or blind female is subjected to serious discrimination with limited access to education, jobs, health facilities, community involvement and so on, and is a major burden for her family.



Larry Louie

“Cover in White Powder — Balloon Factory” Dhaka, Bangladesh (2010). There are an estimated 4.9 million working children (5–15 years of age) in Bangladesh, comprising 13.4 per cent of the country’s workforce. Few of these children will ever receive an education or acquire job skills. Forty per cent of the 166 million people in Bangladesh make less than \$1 a day and spend 80 per cent of that income on food.

taneously spreading awareness and raising money for Seva Canada, a charity that aims to eliminate preventable and treatable blindness around the world.

Despite being contemporary,

Louie's intimate black-and-white images harken back to an earlier period. Some are reminiscent of Lange's work in their artful composition, dramatic lighting and subject matter. As Lange documented farm

workers, Louie, in his series, *A Working Day in Dhaka, Bangladesh* (2010), documents the appalling working conditions in the shipyards, a tannery and elsewhere.

In his images from the balloon factory and scrap metal factory, Louie delves into Hines' territory in depicting child labour. Working conditions are likewise explored in *the Underbelly of Kathmandu* (2009–2010), in photos of labourers in brickyards and in *Factories* (2009–ongoing).

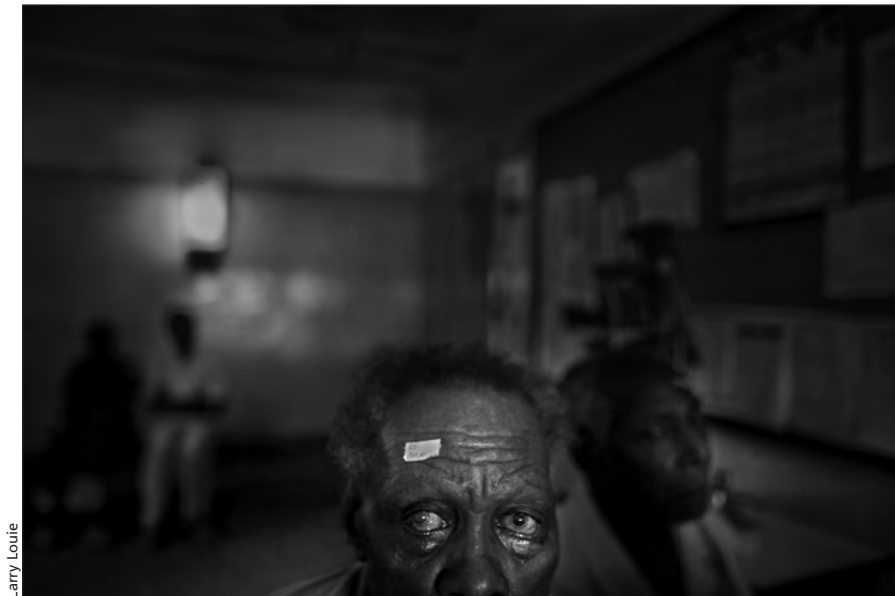
Like Jacob Riis' depictions of the garbage and decay of New York City in 1888, Louie documents the environment degradation in several Asian countries: the Kathmandu, Nepal children amid garbage in "Playing by the River," the mounds of trash and broken trees in the eerie, postapocalyptic "Campground," the deterioration of "The City of Dhaka" and "Urban Slum." Louie also speaks to the woeful living conditions in Dhaka, where 80 per cent of the population lives in poverty, with images such as the heart-wrenching "Cataract Woman with Children."

Not surprisingly, Louie has focused his photography on his area of professional expertise: sight. Since 2008, Louie and his wife, pharmacist Joanna Wong-Louie, have travelled (at their own expense) for Seva Canada to Tanzania, Nepal, Tibet and Bangladesh. Louie has created two online portfolios in *Touched by SEVA* (2008–ongoing).

The first documents the Kilimanjaro Centre for Community Ophthalmology in Moshi, Tanzania, with gritty, yet uplifting images such as "Hope," "The Need" and "Chance," interspersed with clinical images of examinations and surgical scenes.

The second portfolio from Dhaka, Bangladesh includes hopeful, even joyful scenes of opportunity at the Baptist Mission School for Blind Girls, including "In the Classroom" and "Born With No Sight," along with images of patients and clinical scenes at the overcrowded Islamia Eye Hospital.

Louie also fundraises for Seva projects and recently donated \$15 000 from the sale of images, cards and the like. Currently, Louie and Wong-Louie



Larry Louie

**"Waiting for Cataract Surgery" Tanzania (2008).** The band-aid on this woman's forehead indicates which eye requires surgery. Hundreds of patients are seen daily at the Kilimanjaro Centre for Community Ophthalmology. The hospital also provides outreach programs to distant villages that bring the old and needy in for surgery and is a major teaching and research hospital and resource centre for sub-Saharan Africa; it has recently expanded into Madagascar and Ethiopia.



Larry Louie

**"My Braille Typewriter" Tanzania (2008).** Students at the Mwereni Primary School for the visually impaired work on their Braille typewriters. "I want to engage people in inspiring stories of perseverance and strength, not only of those who have found themselves caught in such a plight, but also the amazing individuals and organizations who are lending a helping hand," Louie stated. This image recently won third prize in the UNDP-Olympus-AFP Foundation Photo Contest (2010) and is exhibited at the United Nations buildings in Tokyo and New York.

Larry Louie



**"Islamia Eye Hospital — Overload" Dhaka, Bangladesh (2010).** By noon most days, there are already 1000 patients registered to see a health professional. The hospital, which was founded by the Ispahani family in Dhaka, receives support from Seva International.

Larry Louie



**"Born With No Sight" Dhaka, Bangladesh (2010).** Batashi, nine, boards at the Baptist Mission School for Blind Girls where her friends and teachers are family to her. Blind girls are often left without care in countries such as Bangladesh, where it is rare indeed to see a smiling blind young girl, well-adjusted and happy.

are raising \$5000 through a documentary toward building a surgical eye camp in geographically isolated Humla, Western Nepal (<http://on.fb.me/ForgottenHimalayaEvent>). The ultimate aim is a permanent eye care facility for the region.

Louie has wielded a camera for more than two decades, initially as a travel photographer; this work has been published widely in *National Geographic Traveler* magazine and elsewhere. His awards include the Int'l Photography Awards' Lucie, the Condé Nast Traveler magazine Grand Prize and the National Geographic Photo Essay Award.

Gradually, Louie refocused his work on capturing a moment in time and on social issues such as global blindness, poverty and indigenous peoples who are losing their way of life (see his online portfolio, *Vanishing Faces, Disappearing Places Series*). For seven years, he has been devoted to shooting documentary, black-and-white photographs.

As he explains, his passion is photography and his work is optometry. "This has been a marriage between the two things I love," he says. "I do what I love to do, but I help too."

#### **Barbara Sibbald BJ**

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Louie's work is appearing in *Through a Lens: Inspiration or Desperation*, the Michael H. Kellicut International Juried Photo Show, July 1 to Aug. 1, 2011, at the Coastal Arts League Gallery and Museum, Half Moon Bay, Calif. Louie shoots with a Canon EOS 5D Mk II ([www.larrylouie.com](http://www.larrylouie.com))

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