

LOOKING FOR ELSEWHERE

Petra Barth's documentary work has taken her to all corners of the world, and her new book *Anderswo / Elsewhere* tells some of the stories she found. She talks to Jon Stapley about the joys of connecting with people through photography.

All images
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It's appropriate that Petra Barth ended up titling her collection *Anderswo*, the German word for 'elsewhere'. Just like everyone else, she spent the majority of 2020 stuck inside due to the coronavirus pandemic, and it was during this time

she found herself delving deep into her archives of images taken across a storied, well-travelled career. At a time when any kind of elsewhere was out of reach, Barth constructed one from the past. But it wasn't just about lockdown – it was the

culmination of a project that had begun all the way back in the early 2000s.

'I started photography 18 years ago,' Barth recalls. 'I was a visual artist before and studied fashion design in Milan. My first serious photography project was when



Managua, Nicaragua, 2006.



Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2007.

I went to Central America in 2005, and that's also when the book starts.'

Over a two-month trip, starting in Nicaragua and proceeding through Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, Barth shot around 150 rolls of 6x6 film. She had expected to leave the project there, but encouragement from her mentor, Andy Grundberg at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design in Washington DC, made her realise there was more story to tell. She began returning to the Americas, often in two-month stints.

As she travelled, Barth sought out quiet

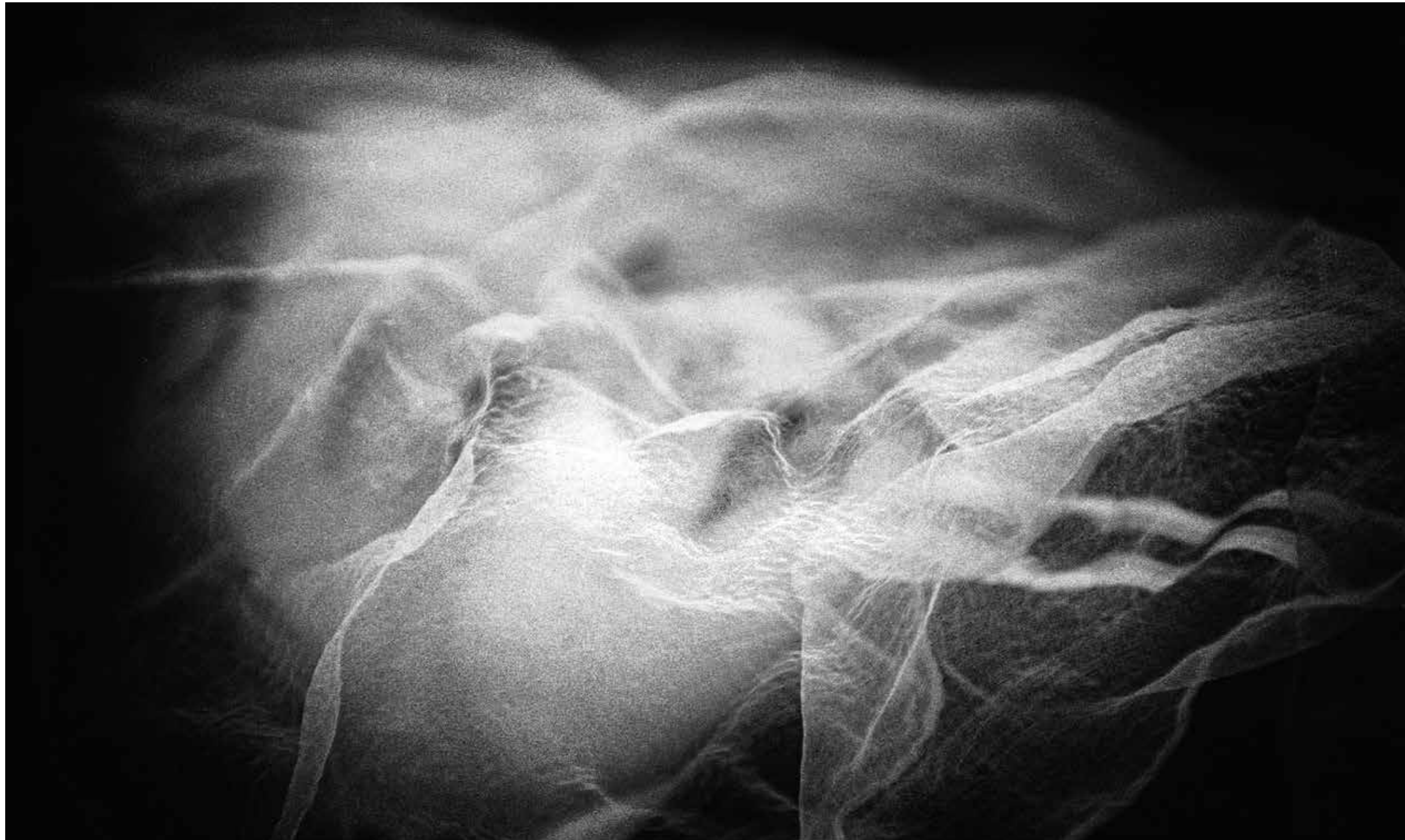
'Over the years, Barth's travels with her camera would take her all across the world, from earthquake-ravaged Haiti to remote villages in the Arctic Circle with only a handful of inhabitants.'

rural communities, places that echoed her own upbringing in the countryside by Nuremberg. Many of the inhabitants' lives had been shaped and scarred by conflict and

disaster, and their stories echoed Barth's own: her mother was a refugee who fled the Red Army's invasion of Silesia in 1945.

'I like to travel, but not as a tourist,' she says. 'To see how people live, and how they deal with post-conflict situations and build up their lives again. And mainly, what I discovered is that all over it's the same, because everywhere everybody deals with the same traumatic experience. It makes you understand your own history much better.'

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Lunenburg, Vermont, 2006.

◀ villages in the Arctic Circle with only a handful of inhabitants. Her relentless drive to document these places, and the people living there, on 6x6 film would result in the building of a huge archive of images. Now, she has spun them into a narrative of other places; of 'anderswo'.

The images in *Anderswo* vary considerably in style. At times, the compositions are extremely formal, with stately forms dominating the

frames, rendered with crystal-sharp detail. At other times, the images give over to abstraction, either through artful blur, or through an intense, almost uncomfortable closeness. Barth sometimes pushes so close to her subject that it's almost impossible to tell exactly what it is we're seeing – the viewer reaches for context, but none is given.

In form, however, the images are very consistent. All are square format, shot on 6x6 using a trusty Hasselblad, and almost all are shot on film – it was only fairly late in

her travels that Barth relented and acquired a digital back, in part due to the difficulty of getting film rolls in and out of the countries where she was working. Despite this, she estimates about 80% of the images in the project are shot on film.

'I like the 6x6 format because it gives me a different perspective,' Barth says. 'Someone said to me once, "Don't you feel overwhelmed by this big camera?" And I said that I feel much less like I'm invading the space of people when working with this

camera, because I'm looking down. I don't hold this big camera in the face of someone – I'm kind of taking myself back by looking down; I'm giving the subjects more privacy.'

The other half of the picture is that the images of *Anderswo* are exclusively, of course, black & white. While it's not unusual for a photographer to work exclusively in monochrome, it is a little more uncommon for someone with Barth's background in fashion, where colour is so important.

'I came from fashion and I'm a textile

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person. I love textiles,' Barth says. 'I love their rich and beautiful colours. I started photography with colour, and went on that first trip with many rolls of colour film. But my professor said I should also try and take some black & white photographs. So, I came back after four months of shooting – and it was Peru, which is so colourful – and I developed this film, and I saw that the colour images were just meaningless. Meanwhile, the black & white photos gave me something. I saw layers, I saw forms, >



Suchitoto, El Salvador, 2007.



Patagonia, Argentina, 2010.



La Libertad, El Salvador, 2007.

◀ I saw the graphic and the lines. The colour had just been totally distracting. And now, when I look through a camera, I only see black & white. It's like I'm colour blind!

Every photograph comes with its own story. This is the case for any photographer, not just Barth, but many of the experiences she underwent throughout the *Anderswo* project were so striking and unique that she remembers their stories keenly.

Mentioning any image from the collection is enough to spark off a vivid recollection of the story surrounding it.

A particularly arresting image from later in the book shows a young girl outside her house in San Miguel, El Salvador. The girl is rendered in pin-sharp detail, fitting entirely inside the frame, while her mother is blurred, and obscured both by shadow and the dimensions of the image. It gives us a powerful sensation of the reality of being a child – both the immediacy of

physical sensation, and the inscrutable nature of adults.

'It was a really tiny village in the middle of El Salvador – 55°C,' recalls Barth. 'The village was little shacks. I speak barely any Spanish – I know some Italian, and I'd picked up a little Spanish on the trip – but I started connecting with the people and was blown away by how nice and welcoming they were. They offered me food, and the girl was so nicely dressed, despite the very simple location.'



Harbour Island, Bahamas, 2009.

Barth ended up lingering at the village, returning day after day to photograph and converse with the people who lived there.

'You could really only shoot in the mornings and afternoons, because in the middle of the day it was so hot it would give you hallucinations,' she says. 'But the experience made me realise I really loved working with people. I was very shy before, and my previous profession had actually been ideal for hiding. This was one of the stories which really changed things for me,

and I really loved the connection I formed with the mother of this girl.'

This theme of a powerful connection with a mother, finding common ground despite the completely different circumstances in which they lived, and the literal ocean that separated their upbringings, would surface again in Barth's work. In 2010, she spent time in Haiti following the earthquake that had occurred in January. As people set about the task of rebuilding their lives, Barth

once again found a beautiful image of mother and child.

There's an interesting reversal between this and the previous image – this time, it's the mother rendered sharply, and the child withheld from us, through blur and the limits of the frame. The mother's expression is soft, hard to read, but there's something unmistakably serene about it – all the more striking when you consider the context of the image. She's extremely still, while her baby is all motion and blur. This little life >



Exclusion Zone, Chernobyl, Ukraine, 2009.



Beaver Creek, Arctic Circle, Yukon, Canada, 2015.

form is impossible to control, and yet we see how its mother draws a sense of peace from their unspoken bond.

'I love this photo,' Barth says. 'This was after the earthquake, in Martissant. I'd connected with the UN the year before, and got access to this quarter where nobody really went. I met community leaders, many of whom I'm still connected with today, and I stayed in this area for a really long time, so I got to know them well. They invited me to their homes and we had dinners and lunches together.'

The woman in the image, Barth says, was 'the sister of one of these community leaders – she lived in this tiny shack, about 2x2m in size. She was just resting with her baby, and she seemed so at ease. It was so nice seeing their family together; they had such a strong family hold. It was a time of sadness about what they had lost, but life for them also hadn't changed a whole lot. They were together. They were kind of lucky – they'd lost friends, and some family, but they were alive.'

Barth's travels would take her to many other elsewheres. She and her camera would find themselves on the Arctic Circle, in a village of people who live with their backs to the Yukon River, and can only venture beyond it when the surface freezes over. She would head to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in Ukraine, and to Phnom Penh in Cambodia. Cultivating a sharp eye for details, for the small moments that are often overlooked, would prove to be the crucial thing that gave life to *Anderswo* – the story of elsewhere.

Opposite **Martissant, Haiti, 2009.**

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Anderswo / Elsewhere is published by Schilt Publishing, and will be available later in 2021, price £45

