

Girls on Film

Steve Monnington looks at how live events are becoming an increasingly important part of the exhibitions and events mix with a trip to Cannes to visit a launch event with a difference.

In 2006, I wrote an article for *Exhibition World's* sister publication *Exhibition News* about the Unsung Heroes of our industry, the lone entrepreneurs who are continually innovating. One of those featured was Scott Gray, who, a little later asked me to help him find an investor for an event that celebrated the world of photography.

Sony was already interested in being the title sponsor but Gray needed resource, cash flow and additional expertise to help him achieve his vision faster. I introduced Gray to Andrew Morris, one of the UK exhibition industry's most successful entrepreneurs, who in turn brought in Montgomery as a partner. The title sponsorship was signed and the Sony World Photography Awards were born. I am now in Cannes to see the results.

The SWPA celebrates photography in all its forms and is open to both professional and amateur photographers. There are 11 different categories for the professionals from abstract to portraits to photojournalism and the amateurs have eight different categories. Since the competition opened in October the SWPA website has received over 68 million visits and over 70,000 entries have been received from photographers from a staggering 178 countries across the world.

The finalists and the winner for each category are decided by the World Photographic Academy, made up of world famous photographers, gallery owners and picture editors, and the photograph of the year wins the "L'iris D'or" and with it a \$25,000 prize. The event opened with an exhibition of all of the finalists' photos. I was genuinely surprised at the quality of the photos and the diversity of subjects.

Inevitably in such a competitive industry, the SWPA has attracted its fair share of critics over such issues as what exactly constitutes 'amateur' and the choice of people on the judging panel. This simply proves that the awards have identified a gap and addressed a real need.

The focal point of the week-long event is the awards ceremony and after the gala dinner it was time for the ceremony. Even I recognised some of the names of the people there which included Rankin and Elliot Erwitt. The awards started with the overall amateur winner, Arup Ghosh, a physician from India, whose winning photo was a clever image of a barber shaving a man with both reflected in a mirror. Underlining the international nature of the awards, Ghosh gave a video address from his home in



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Calcutta.

Then it was time for the awards for the professionals in each of the 11 categories, which went to photographers from eight different countries. The winner of the main prize, the L'iris d'or was Vanessa Winship from the UK with a portrait of two little girls from eastern Turkey.

The Lifetime Achievement Award went to Phil Stern, who is famous for his photos of Marilyn Monroe, for his outstanding contribution to the industry. He took the stage to an emotional, standing ovation.

I asked Gray what his highlights were. "Waiting for the entries to be submitted was a bit like waiting for the visitors at a regular exhibition but I was genuinely surprised and of course delighted by the sheer number of high quality entries we received" Gray recalls. "and tonight also surpassed my expectations in just how engaged everyone was".

The SWPA provides further evidence that live events are becoming an increasingly important part of the exhibitions and events mix and that traditional tradeshow organisers are moving into this space. It also demonstrates how individual entrepreneurs can reach their goals far faster if they are prepared to trade equity for the help and support of companies who have a greater access to resource and who are free-thinking enough to support ventures that are outside the mainstream.