

Critical Review of Practice

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PHO720: Informing Contexts

Introduction

My photography and practice are relatable to my work and have been vital in re-establishing my self-worth. Water is a recurring theme for me, with my work and volunteering taking me from the coast, with all its turbulence and tides, upstream to the calmer inland waterways and tributaries of the river Stour.

I've found a position where I feel safe, as part of a team...But there's a battle every day in controlling the water. The peace of the countryside offers the illusion of beauty and tranquillity, yet when you look beyond the surface you see a war, the war that man is having with the environment.

As a progression from my last module, my images included a component of self-portraiture, which aims to document my new-found security and stability within this role but reflect my ongoing battle to stay in that place. A war on two fronts.

The fight

Flusser's premise of fighting against the machine has always resonated with me. In terms of the technical aspect, he's a theorist who is accessible and whose work relates to mine. I own an expensive digital camera, and I love it, but it takes photos for me. I wanted to move away from the perfection imposed on the image by the self-correcting nature of a totally digital camera.

What I've come to understand from reading Flusser, has drawn me to use less sophisticated cameras and processes. To take back control from the camera with my choice of simple and naive equipment and to accept, and celebrate, that the results may be flawed. Embrace the beauty and imperfections. Welcome the unknown and fragile outcomes created.

“First, one can outwit the camera’s rigidity. Second, one can smuggle human intentions into its program that are not predicted by it. Third, one can force the camera to create the unpredictable, the improbable, the informative. Fourth, one can show contempt for the camera and its creations and turn one’s interest away from the thing in general in order to concentrate on information. In short Freedom is the strategy of making chance and necessity subordinate to human intention. Freedom is playing against the camera.” (Flusser. 2000:80).

I began this module, continuing to use experimental processes and further exploring long-exposure and historical photographic methods and techniques. I recently purchased a 1/6th plate camera, which I've repaired and have used successfully with homemade glass plates (fig. 1). I have also continued to work with my make-shift digital pinhole camera and film cameras, as well as my phone camera when circumstances or the environment dictate.

But I have struggled to capture the images and results I wanted using this methodology. Having been such an admirer of Flusser, and his desire to fight against the program, I may now have to concede that it does offer practicality and the opportunity to produce the images that I want, in order to tell my story.



This is a photograph of my colleague, Dan, taken on the $\frac{1}{6}$ th plate camera. It's interesting to me for its flaws and rawness. It could have been taken in any era since cameras existed. But it requires a long exposure and the camera itself is cumbersome and difficult to use in the areas that I find myself for my work.

Fig. 1: Hicks 2023. *Dan, $\frac{1}{6}$ th Plate image.*

Jem Southam, whose subject matter and remote locations are similar to mine, also struggled with a large format camera. After breaking an arm, he found that managing his 10×8 became impossible, and he was forced back to using his digital camera. Although like me he was still fascinated by large format, he became aware that certain images were so much more accessible with a digital format.

Like Southam, I have accepted that I may need to succumb to a machine that has been designed and evolved to take photographs. It's become inevitable that in order to tell the story of my struggle to find my place, and our ongoing war with the environment, I'll need to use my digital camera, not only for its accessibility but also its practicality.

With the use of the digital camera, my methodology has become more sophisticated and instant, the faster shutter speed doesn't require the rigid staging that plate or large format cameras require. And with no chemical processing needed, and the opportunity to adjust the camera settings, I'm able to more easily achieve the images to fit my narrative.

Truth or Illusion

Historical images were often staged due to the constraints of the equipment available. Just like my own issue with my 1/6th plate camera, making it almost impossible to tell my story without taking time to set the scene, and take the shot. Early war photographers, like Roger Fenton, often represented reality by reproducing and manipulating it.

His famous image *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (fig. 2), was one of a series of images that he took. It's believed that he rearranged the cannonballs within the shot and selected this image to be published in order to best convey the feeling of war that he had been exposed to during his time in the Crimea.

That's what we do as photographers. Today, we understand and interpret images in a more sophisticated manner, knowing that what we see may have been there, maybe the truth, but we're also aware that it may have been created or maybe an illusion. At that time the viewer would have trusted the image to be the truth, even those unable to read could see and understand an image. Barthes (1977:22) says: *'Special importance must be accorded to what could be called the posing of objects. The interest lies in the fact that the objects are accepted inducers of associations of ideas'*



Fig. 2: Roger Fenton 1855. *The Valley of the Shadow of Death, Sevastopol.*

Gideon Mendel's photo-journalistic work *Fire/Flood* displayed in the lane outside The Photographer's Gallery is a body of work exposing the grief of those affected by natural disasters. Mendel manipulates the viewer to a particular interpretation or reaction with his images. Positioning his subjects centred within the frame, looking directly at the lens, to direct and provoke the viewer to connect and empathise exactly as Barthes theorised. The subject is 'staged' as the victim (fig. 3). This positioning, allows the viewer to look directly into their faces and begin to feel their pain. His images are often bright and colourful. Sublime in contrast to the sadness and gravity of what they portray. There's a stillness to them, yet the emotion is palpable - you can feel the sorrow.



Fig. 3: Mendel 2015. *João Peira de Araújo*.

In working towards this module, I became aware that my images had a dark, foreboding feel to them (fig. 4). Subconsciously, I'd begun to document my own war. My fight within myself to find security and stability, while battling the water that threatens to invade. Like Mendel, my images have been manipulated to fit this narrative. To tell my own story.

Szarkowski (1966) explains that the photographer chooses, either consciously or unconsciously to arrange a photograph in terms of the thing itself, the detail, the frame, time and vantage point. If all this is done effectively it will affect the viewer. As a photographer, I'm constantly making decisions and choices about the 'reality' that I choose to show and the reaction that I want to generate in the observer.

Like Shore (2021), I've elected to give structure to this battle theme with the framing and editing throughout, but also by building on it with a raft of images that when viewed as a series can't fail to portray the battle that I'm fighting personally and against the environment.



Fig. 4: Hicks 2023, *Burning*.

The Battle

Black and white has been my preference. The contrast and impact can be so much more powerful, the detail is so much more explicit. It seems to remove the aesthetic that can distract from the deeper meaning of the image. I want the viewer to look into the subject itself, and black and white promotes this.

The landscape work of Don McCullin, takes on the feeling of a war zone, even when the content is far from the fields of combat he's so well known for documenting (fig. 5). They say something about his past and how what he's seen may have scarred his view of the world. They become autobiographical. English landscapes are likened to battlefields with dark skies, water-filled streams resembling trenches and fog hanging in the air like smoke. Malevolent and foreboding.



Fig. 5: McCullin 2017, *Somerset Landscape*.

“I’m becoming more poetical; and of course, it’s got something to do with the fact that I’m looking at the horizon of the end of my journey. I’m looking at the infinity mark where I will finally wind up.”

(Don McCullin 2002. The John Tusa Interviews, BBC Radio 3)

My own practice, like McCullen's, relates to my battle with self-worth. Last year I was 'Lost' and felt no desire or ability to take images, I wasn't working at that time, so perhaps that's important to consider too. Looking further back I spent time in the British Army, so conflict is also part of my past.

My new work environment has been vital in re-establishing my confidence, but it's also a battlefield. On the surface beautiful and tranquil but there's an undercurrent of tension and foreboding. An understanding that the water will never surrender. My images reflect that narrative. Cormorants flying overhead in formation, men working in trenches, early morning fog hanging over the water and smoke drifting across the horizon (fig. 6-7). And my own battle to maintain the security that I now feel amongst my colleagues.



Fig. 6: Hicks 2023. *Trenches*.



Fig. 7: Hicks 2023. *Frontline*.

The Sublime

Colour can add visual beauty. It can display the vastness of the sky in the reflections, but it's an illusion. The sublime hiding the truth beneath. Alexander (2023) recently posted an image on Instagram of a flooded landscape with a car parked outside a building (fig. 8).

A still and silent image that made a statement so loud to me, that it shouted! It's a visually captivating image, with its almost-perfect reflection and clear blue skies. But there's a deeper narrative. The devastation that's caused has encroached on a life and business. There's a sadness beyond the beautiful, colourful facade.



Fig. 8: Alexander 2023. *Somerset Levels*.

In my Environment Agency role, I work to manage the water and prevent flooding, but ultimately we can't stop it. The water is beyond absolute containment. We work with it to manage it reactively but have no certainty of the outcome. The rivers rise and fall due to rainfall, and tidal influences, and we must continually respond to manage the outcomes. Regroup and defend certain areas, but 'surrender' others to save vital spaces.

Tareke (2016), talks about being constantly torn between the urge to find something beautiful in a place that has been ravaged by war and how unsettling it is to feel that way. There is beauty in the stunning 'lakes' created by allowing rural areas to flood in order to save residential and industrial areas. Man has conceded the battle, allowing man-made structures and trees alike to stand isolated, with their roots firmly planted and their heads just above the water.

The landscape becomes autobiographical. A metaphor for my own recent struggle and current situation. I am the lone tree still standing in the flood!



Fig. 9: Hicks 2023. *Standing*.



Fig. 10: Hicks 2023. *Surrender*.

The thing itself

Szarkowski (1966:8) says about the thing itself: 'It was the photographers problem to see not simply the reality before him but the still invisible picture, and to make his choices in terms of the latter. The thing itself is more than the subject or the content, it's what the image represents.

Chris Killip: Retrospective recently displayed at The Photographer's Gallery in Soho, was captivating and moving. It defined the thing itself. The detail was vital but Killip's choices when taking an image tell us much more than the content alone. Focused on communities, struggling to survive while living in hardship. Captured in black and white, the features in the clothing and surroundings show us this in every detail. Yet the strength of solidarity was obvious. Their difficult lifestyle united the subjects, who worked, rallied, suffered and celebrated together.

Killip isn't bothered about beauty. He's about cold, hardship, endurance and meaning. His photographs tell us all we need to know about the person, the landscape, the weather and their purpose. Like Killip, my images document my work within my team at the Environment Agency. Work that mostly goes unseen, but is vital. I have photographed myself, while at work beside, and in, the waterways that we maintain. My worn and dirty boots on the snowy, frozen ground are a metaphor for the security I've found and my ongoing battle (fig. 11).



Fig. 11: Hicks 2023. *Security*.

“I wanted to record people’s lives because I valued them. I wanted them to be remembered. If you take a photograph of someone they are immortalized, they’re there forever. For me that was important, that you’re acknowledging people’s lives, and also contextualizing people’s lives.”

(Chris Killip 1988, In Flagante Two).



Fig. 12: Killip 2016. *In Flagrate Two*.

Killip's image of an old man sitting on a wall: *In Flagrate Two* (fig. 12), speaks volumes about the man himself. Seated on a wall outside his home, his front door key held firmly in one hand.

The viewer can imagine his life. Living alone, the roughly stitched repair to his coat pocket, the snapped shoe laces, just long enough to tie through two eyelets, the stains on his trousers. Testament to the life he's lived, and telling us that those who had cared for him, are now gone.

Conclusion

Roberts (2023) says of his body of work: We English “The resulting images are an intentionally lyrical rendering of a pastoral England, where beauty is found in the mundane and in the exploration of the relationship between people and place, and in our connections to the landscapes around us”. Roberts has put into words what I now understand about my work - that I have found myself and my connection to the landscape.

During this module I’ve explored that connection and it’s importance in re-establishing my self-worth. In the battle for myself and the environment. I have made changes to my practice, influenced not just by practicality, but also my research. I’ve come to understand the importance of a body of work following the same narrative, in order to better communicate it’s intention. And I’ve realised that sometimes photographic manipulation is important in order to achieve this end.

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Figure 3: Mendel 2015. *João Peira de Araújo.*

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Figure 5: McCullin 2017, *Somerset Landscape.*

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Figure 11: Hicks 2023. *Security.*

Figure 12: Killip 2016. *In Flagrante Two.*

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