

A photograph of a person in an orange jacket and helmet pushing through a narrow, tree-lined waterway. The person is positioned in the middle ground, facing away from the camera. The water is dark and reflects the surrounding trees and sky. The trees are bare, suggesting a late autumn or winter setting. The overall mood is somber and focused.

Immersed.

Jeff Hicks

PHO750: Final Major Project

Fig. 1: Hicks 2023. *Pushing through. Finnberry, East Stour, Ashford.*

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Introduction

My practice is focused on documenting the life of the River Stour, as it follows its course through Kent. The river insidiously determines so many areas of our lives. Where we can travel. Where we can live and work. I joined a field team at The Environment Agency (EA) a year ago and have recorded this from the inside perspective afforded me by that role.

The EA works to manage and tame the river on its journey. The work is relentless and mostly hidden from view. I'm tasked with specific locations on the river to manage flow and flood and am required to access places that are prohibited to the public. Offered an insight from that unique viewpoint. My methodology has become influenced by this structure to my working day, and the constraints on my location.

In previous modules, there was an element of experimentation that I have further explored and pursued in this module. I've continued to use vintage cameras and unproved techniques, alongside more accessible digital options. I've also explored an element of moving imagery to complement the otherwise static representation of flowing water.

My work places me at the centre of this story, in a personal and participatory manner and allows me to tell it from an inside perspective. I've captured an element of myself in my images. Sometimes it's a glimpse of my boot, or shadow, on the water surface or river bank but sometimes it's just the results of my work.



Fig. 2: Hicks 2022. *Autumn blockage. East Stour, Badmünstereifel Rd, Ashford.*



Fig. 3: Hicks 2022. *Untitled*.



Fig. 4: Hicks 2023. *Prevailing. East Stour, Sevington, Ashford.*



Fig. 5: Hicks 2023. *Untitled*.



Fig. 6: Hicks 2023. *The Stonar Cut. Cut Bridge, Ramsgate Rd, Sandwich.*



Fig. 7: Hicks 2023. *Knee Deep. River Dour, Crabble Hill, Dover.*



Fig. 8: Hicks 2022. *Untitled*.



Fig. 9: Hicks 2023. *Expanse. Great Stour, Back Sand Point, Sandwich.*



Fig. 10: Hicks 2023. *Self-portrait. East Stour, Flood St, Mersham.*



Fig. 11: Hicks 2023. *Silence*. *White Bridge, Nargate St, Littlebourne*.



Fig. 12: Hicks 2023. *Minesweeper wreck. Stonar Cut, Ramsgate Rd, Sandwich.*

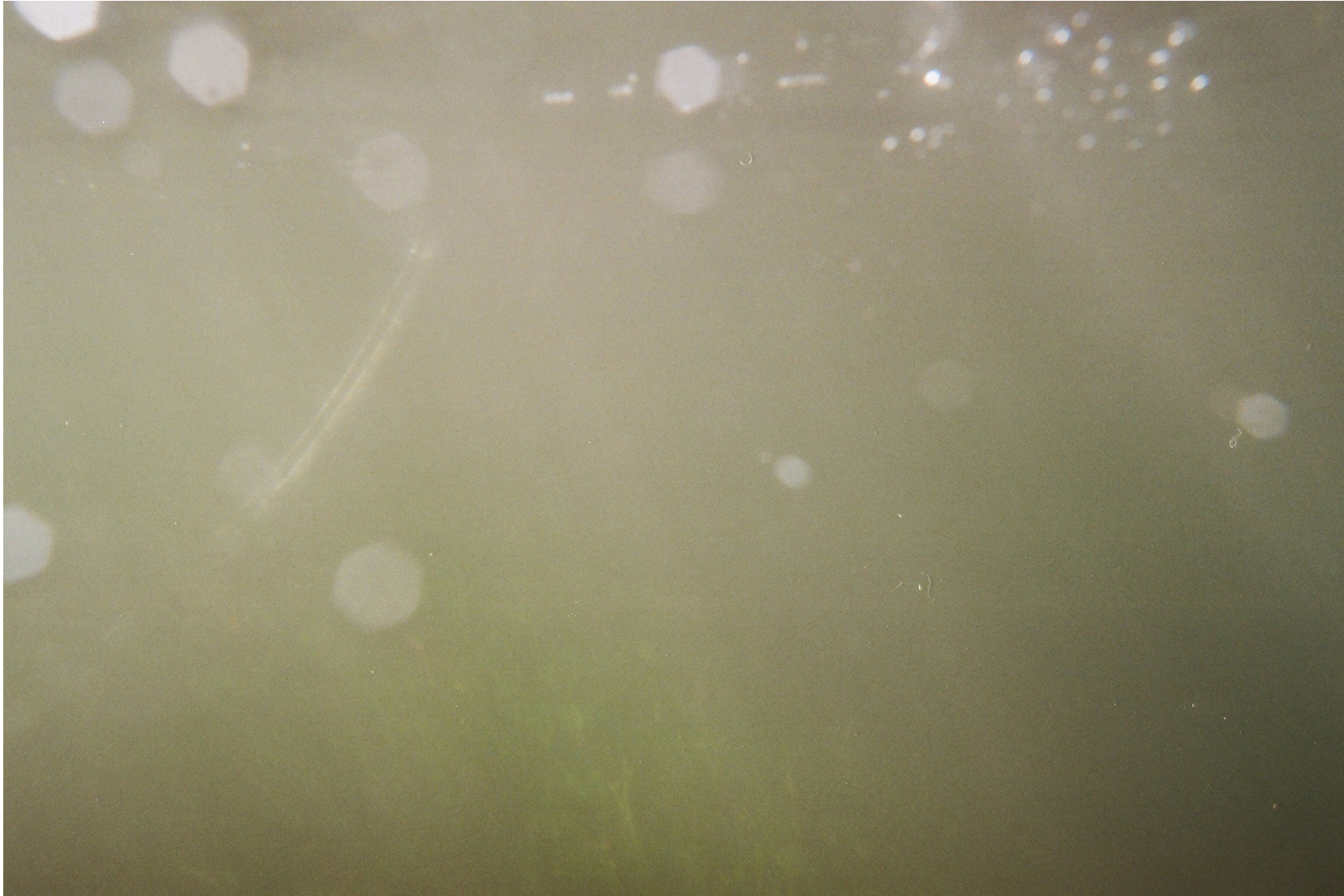


Fig. 13: Hicks 2023. *Scythe. River Dour, Crabble Hill, Dover.*



Fig. 14: Hicks 2023. *Untitled*.



Fig. 15: Hicks 2023. *Untitled*.



Fig. 16: Hicks 2023. *Release. Stonar Cut, Ramsgate Road, Sandwich.*



Fig. 17: Hicks 2023. *Sea Purslane*. *Broadsalts, Sandwich*.



Fig. 1: Hicks 2023. *Pushing through. Finnberry, East Stour, Ashford.*



Fig. 18: Hicks 2023. *Restricted access. Sluice, Great Stour, Reach 9, Sandwich Town Tidal Defence.*



Fig. 19: Hicks 2023. 50%. *Great Stour, Kingsmead, Canterbury.*



Fig. 20: Hicks 2023. *Desilting. Sluice, Great Stour, Reach 9, Sandwich Town Tidal Defence.*



Fig. 21: Hicks 2023. *Suspended deposition #1-4. East Stour, Aldington flood storage reservoir, Ashford.*



Fig. 22: Hicks 2023. *Suspended deposition #1-25. East Stour, Aldington flood storage reservoir, Ashford.*



The Exhibition

Jeff Hicks

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Fig. 23: Hicks 2023. *Untitled*.

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Fig. 24: Hicks 2023. *Untitled*.



Fig. 25: Hicks 2023. *Untitled*.

Location & Invitees

I held an afternoon viewing on Sunday 5 November in a small gallery in Folkestone. Although it felt personally exposing, it allowed me to directly interact with visitors and better disseminate my work.

Promoted with a Facebook event page directed at, local artists, creatives, and photographers as well as my peers. A targeted email invited Industry professionals, curators, and executives from the local creative foundation. Situated in the heart of the Creative Quarter, the gallery provided the ideal location, with lots of footfall, attracting walk-in visitors too.

[Find out more about my exhibition here >>](#)



Fig. 26: Hicks 2023. *Untitled*.

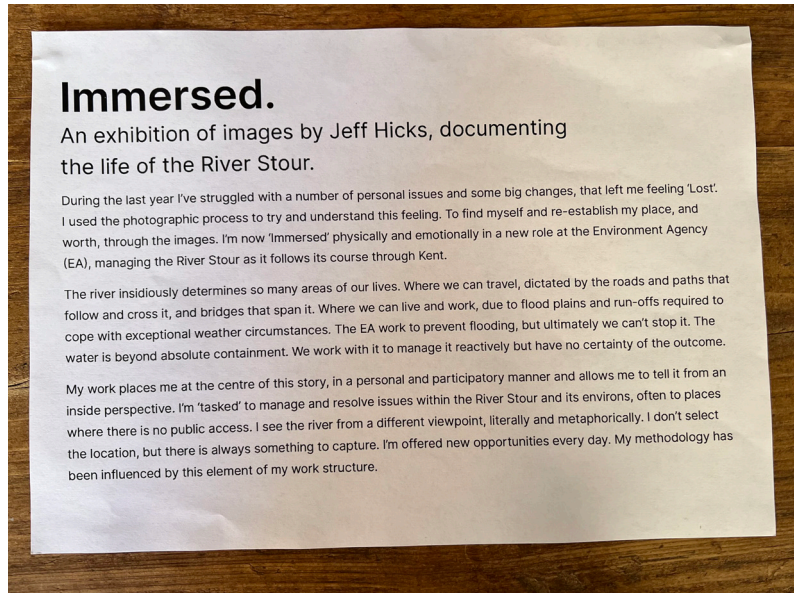


Fig. 27: Hicks 2023. *Untitled.*



Fig. 28: Hicks 2023. *Untitled.*

Immersive Experience

A short introduction to the work was displayed, with photographs selected from my work-to-date. A moving image projected onto the gallery window, gave a hint to passers-by of the up-coming event, serving as extra promotion. During the event, continuous water sounds were played in the background to complete the immersive experience.

[Find out more about my exhibition here >>](#)

“And he then succeeds in conveying his expansive, outward looking, open ended engagement with the world photographically.”

(Dr. Patten Smith, photographer and exhibition visitor).



Fig. 29: Hicks 2023. *Untitled*

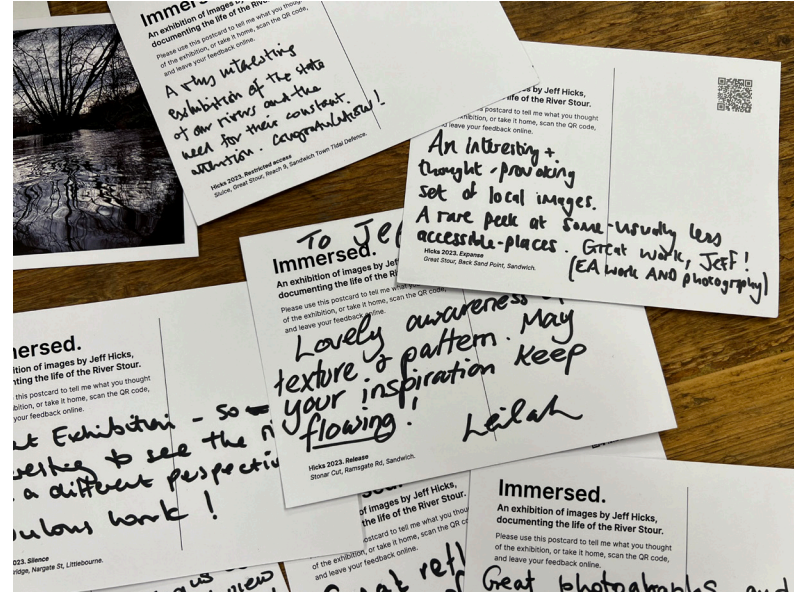


Fig. 30: Hicks 2023. *Untitled*

Feedback

I captured feedback by designing postcards featuring my images. These offered space for instant comment which could be left at the exhibition. They also carried a QR code that links to a feedback form on my website, for visitors who preferred to keep the postcard and comment later (figs. 28, 29, 30).

[Find out more about the feedback here >>](#)

Critical Review of Practice

Jeff Hicks

PHO750: Final Major Project

Fig. 31: Hicks 2023. *Suspended deposition #22. East Stour, Aldington flood storage reservoir, Ashford.*

Immersed

I've recently struggled with a number of personal issues and some big changes, that left me feeling 'Lost' and lacking direction. During previous modules, I used the photographic process to try and understand this feeling. To find myself and re-establish my place, and worth, through the images.

During a previous module, I discovered the work of American photographer Douglas Huebler. In 1971, he produced *Variable Piece #70* (fig. 32). He set up his camera at a road crossing, closed his eyes, and listened. When the traffic noise subsided, he knew that the pedestrians would be crossing, and pressed the shutter. By doing this, he had removed the visual stimulus and left the composition and content of the photograph to chance.

Huebler's work resonated with me in his proposed intention to "*attempt to photographically document... the existence of everyone alive*" (cited in Palmer 2017:110). During that earlier module, I created a set of images where I adopted a similar methodology to photographically document my existence. Prove that I still had some worth, even when the fixed points in my life had been taken away (fig. 33).

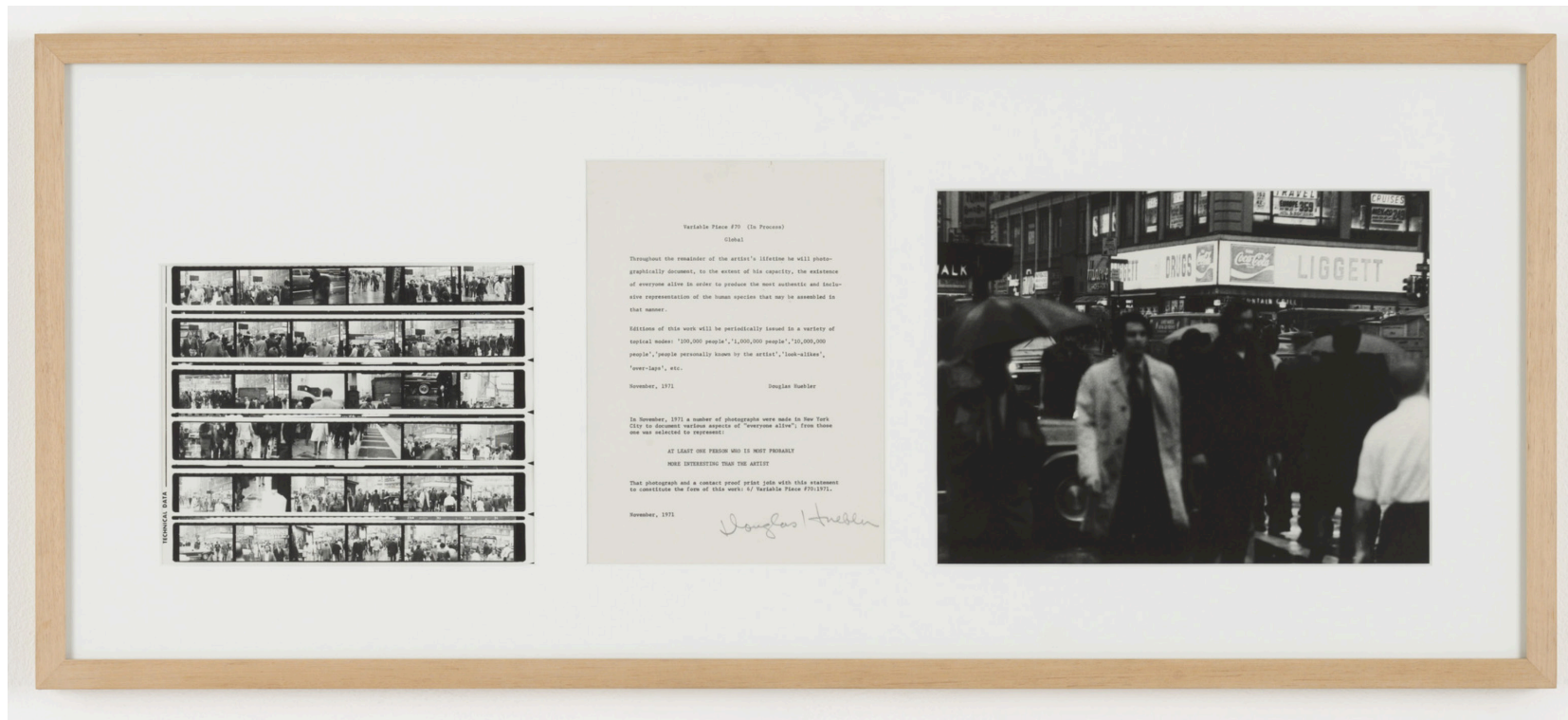


Fig. 32: Huebler 1971. *Variable Piece #70*



Fig. 33: Hicks 2022. *Calm.*

My role at the EA became vital in re-establishing my confidence - I found a position where I felt safe as part of a team. But my colleagues and I were fighting a battle every day in controlling the water. I was fighting my own battle to maintain the security that I'd found in my new team. I came to understand that the water will never surrender and that my images had a dark, foreboding feel to them. Subconsciously, I'd begun to document my own war. My fight within myself to find security and stability, while battling the water that threatened to invade. My images had changed and begun to reflect that narrative (fig. 34).



Fig. 34: Hicks 2023. *Trenches*.



There was an element of psychogeography affecting my mood and therefore my photographic work and methodology. During the dark winter months, the river and its surroundings reinforced my feelings of conflict - of being at war. When this was tempered by the gradual arrival of summer and its warmth and light, my mood lifted too, and entering the water to work became a pleasure.

Now secure and more settled in my role at the EA, I'm 'Immersed' physically and emotionally (fig. 10). Chest-deep in the river, working with my colleagues. Absorbed in my work. It's become a symbiotic relationship. The river needs me and I need the river.

The content and nature of my images have changed. I've embraced the colour and the beauty which has begun to emerge in my images. There's a softness to them, tempered by a sense of awe at the river's power and dominance. A constant variable!

Fig. 10: Hicks 2023. *Self-portrait. East Stour, Flood St, Mersham.*



Fig. 35: Bellamoli 2021. *Toward & Into 27*

German photographer, Chiara Bellamoli, produced a photographic project 'Toward and Into' (fig. 35), which like my own, is centred around a river.

Shot within the landscape of the Rhine, her project seeks to recreate the experience of flowing, both physically and emotionally. Alongside her images of the river and submerged subjects, Bellamoli uses fabric, hair and skin, and the pattern of folds and creases found in them, to recreate and represent those found in the water.

Her images evoke a rhythm by replicating and mimicking the continuous, movement of the river, tempting and drawing the viewer 'Toward and Into' the water. Surreal and peaceful, they suggest a sense of calmness.

When location and weather align, I'm offered a window into this same beauty and stillness. My images reflect Bellamoli's narrative but go beyond. They not only capture the surface of the water, and what's beneath, but they delve deeper into the river, and from that submerged perspective, transport the viewer into my element. Offering a connectivity with the river that they might otherwise not find.

“it represents a temporary escape from contemporary life: from a reality which emphasizes individualism, productivity and sense of control to a parallel one of contemplation, surrender and sense of belonging to a whole. From a dimension that is mostly detached from its natural surroundings, to a more essential and sensorial one.”

(Chiara Bellamoli).

Unique viewpoint

My role within the EA requires me to access specific locations. I am tasked to manage and resolve issues within the River Stour and its environs. Often in places where there is no public access. I see the river from a different viewpoint, literally and metaphorically. I visit areas requiring attention, not chosen for their aesthetic. I find myself in places that are unseen by many. Sometimes gentle and peaceful, sometimes more aggressive, almost brutal (fig. 36). I have embraced this forced structure of my working day and it has become a vital element of my methodology for this body of work.

In 2010, award-winning photographer, Yang Wan Preston embarked on a vast four-year project titled: 'Mother River'. The idea for the work was conceived when she was living in Yorkshire and thinking about her home in China. Her unique vision was to capture the river of her motherland without any sentimentality.

Preston removed the visual incentive of location, by using Google Earth to precisely identify 100km sections of Asia's longest River, The Yangtze, from its source in the high plateaus of Tibet, until it reaches the East China Sea at Shanghai. She visited each dividing point, no matter how difficult to access or remote, to record it. The sequential and chronological order follows the river and the vast distance covered by the artist. The equally spaced photographic locations avoided the picturesque views and majestic concrete structures, used to manage the river, so frequently captured by photographers (fig. 37).

Preston's images required travelling through dangerous and remote terrain to reveal places, and people, rarely seen before. The grand scale of the project and the process of capturing it created a body of work that is intriguing and captivating. My work offers a diversity among the images, yet they are held together by the constant that is the river. The resulting set of images allows the viewer virtual access to places that would otherwise remain unseen, offering a glimpse into the work of the EA.



Fig. 36: Hicks 2023. *Untitled*.



Fig. 37: Preston 2010-14. Y49 4,800km from the river source.

Images everywhere

Swedish photographer, JH Engström, has lived and worked in many countries and believes that there is an image in every situation. There is no requirement to go to a special place - images can be seen everywhere. Engström also uses a variety of cameras and methodologies depending upon what he's trying to express and why, with no hierarchy within his choice.

When I am dispatched to a specific location, like Engström, I will always see an image and always find something to capture. I'm offered new opportunities every day. And like Engström, my choice of camera is dependent upon the situation, weather, and the work I'm tasked to do. There were occasions when an image presented itself and the only means to capture it, was on my phone. More robust and immediate, my phone has allowed me to take images that I otherwise would have missed and include an element of moving imagery which I used to great effect at my exhibition.

I've continued to use vintage cameras and unproved techniques, alongside the more accessible digital options. Working with older cameras, that I have restored, introduces an element of sustainability into my practice. My 1960s medium-format 6×9 Mamiya Press camera, offers expansive results, telling of the vastness of locations while maintaining great detail.

When working on river clearance, my underwater images were taken using a 43-year-old Nikonos IV-A. The fourth iteration of this underwater camera, it was originally designed by Jaques Cousteau. The outcome when using this camera is left to chance, as I'm unable to use the viewfinder when I'm holding the camera beneath the surface. The results are exciting and revealing - capturing life below the water without knowing if they will be in, or out, of focus or being sure of the precise content.

“I seldom go somewhere to photograph but rather photograph because you are somewhere”

(J H Engström).



Fig. 17: Hicks 2023. *Sea purslane. Broadsalts, Sandwich.*

Revealed in nature

German photographer, Andreas Gursky is known for his digitally manipulated photographs. His images examine consumer culture and busy contemporary life. His unique compositions result in dramatic images that fall between representation and abstraction.

Gursky's photographic style is known for its scale attention to detail and bold use of colour. His images often depict vast landscapes (fig. 38), comparable to my own expansive vistas (fig. 9). While his urban environments reveal the complexity and interconnectedness of the world around them - often manipulated and retouched to create repetitive, intricate patterns.

Gursky's image 'Montparnasse', contains multiple windows. Each differs slightly from the next, yet collectively they appear the same. Unlike Gursky, the repetition and pattern within my images are found in nature, and captured in camera - not manipulated. Each tiny leaf in 'Sea purslane' (fig. 17) is unique yet the resulting image appears repetitive and mosaic-like.



Fig. 38: Gursky 2018. *Rhine III*.



Fig. 9: Hicks 2023. *Expanse. Great Stour, Back Sand Point, Sandwich.*

“Loved this. Jeff’s job takes him to fascinating and beautiful places, and Jeff really notices - and thinks about - the minutiae of what he sees.”

(Dr. Patten Smith, photographer and exhibition visitor).

Embracing failure

The extreme conditions that Preston faced in her 'Mother River' project, also injected unpredictability into the outcomes. Weather conditions and the elements meant that the film was loaded back-to-front, and two locations were incorrectly identified. These were included in the final body of work as 'blank' or 'wrong' pictures, further adding to the 'performance' of the entire piece. I've continued to use film cameras for much of my work, but remote locations and diverse weather, create challenges when it comes to documenting my work.

I've encountered failures due to conditions and experimentation, but sometimes the outcome of these failures can be surprising and rewarding. An out-of-date roll of film created a soft pink bloom effect on the surface of the water, in the final image. This served to enhance the image and created a talking point for viewers at the exhibition. The fragile nature of the process is where the beauty of the images is born. Its uncontrollable and unpredictable nature is what is exciting and captivating.



Fig. 39: Hicks 2023. *Untitled*

Taken from the river

Two rolls of film were found to be blank due to processing, a loading error, or possibly out-of-date film. I fixed one roll to the river bed of the East Stour, near the source at Aldington, and left it there under the water for 8 weeks.

When I returned to retrieve the film, as I'd hoped, the blank surface was covered with tiny features and deposits from the water. I dried the film and laid it onto the lightbox to photograph the frames, but the light below was unable to penetrate the deposits and the results were dull.

I repeated this process, but this time lit the surface of the film from above, and was immediately rewarded for my risk-taking with a set of exciting images.

The river '*refused*' to give me photos, so I '*took*' photos from the river (figs. 39, 21).



Fig. 21: Hicks 2023. *Suspended deposition #11-14. East Stour, Aldington flood storage reservoir, Ashford.*

*“You don’t have to go looking for pictures. The material is generous.
You go out and the pictures are staring at you.”*

(Lee Friedlander).

A trace of me

The term “gonzo” was first used in 1970, by The Boston Globe magazine editor Bill Cardoso in connection with an article by Hunter S Thompson. He described Thompson’s article as “pure Gonzo journalism”. It’s a journalism style that is written without objectivity and often includes the reporter as part of the story. My images fall into this category as they report my personal experience and emotions, in contrast to traditional journalism. I’m part of this story, immersed in the river and in the images I make.

The work of Naoya Hatakeyama, particularly ‘River Series 2002-2004’, seeks to inform. His narrative, told from the inside, seeks to educate the viewer about the damage that man is doing to the environment. Taken knee-deep in rivers flowing through cities, his photographs are often displayed inverted to slow down the time taken in processing their content and interpret the message. Similarly, my photographic project aims to inform the public of the vital work of the EA subjectively, from my privileged position within. And like Hatakeyama, many of my abstract images require the viewer to take time to consider and understand the subject.

Lee Friedlander, an American photographer is known for his images of city streets and urban scenes. He seeks to capture the social landscape while playing with depth, shadows, and reflections in his images - often of himself. His work is characterised by his innovative use of framing, using natural features or architectural elements to draw the eye to the subject.

Like Friedlander, a trace of me exists in the images I make. A hint of my scythe under the water (fig. 13), my shadow on the autumnal bank (fig. 2), or a reflection of me, from a bridge or sluice gate, in the water below (fig. 6). Sometimes the only trace of me is the result of my work, but with the work of maintaining the river, I’m also ‘maintaining’ myself and continuing to build my self-worth.

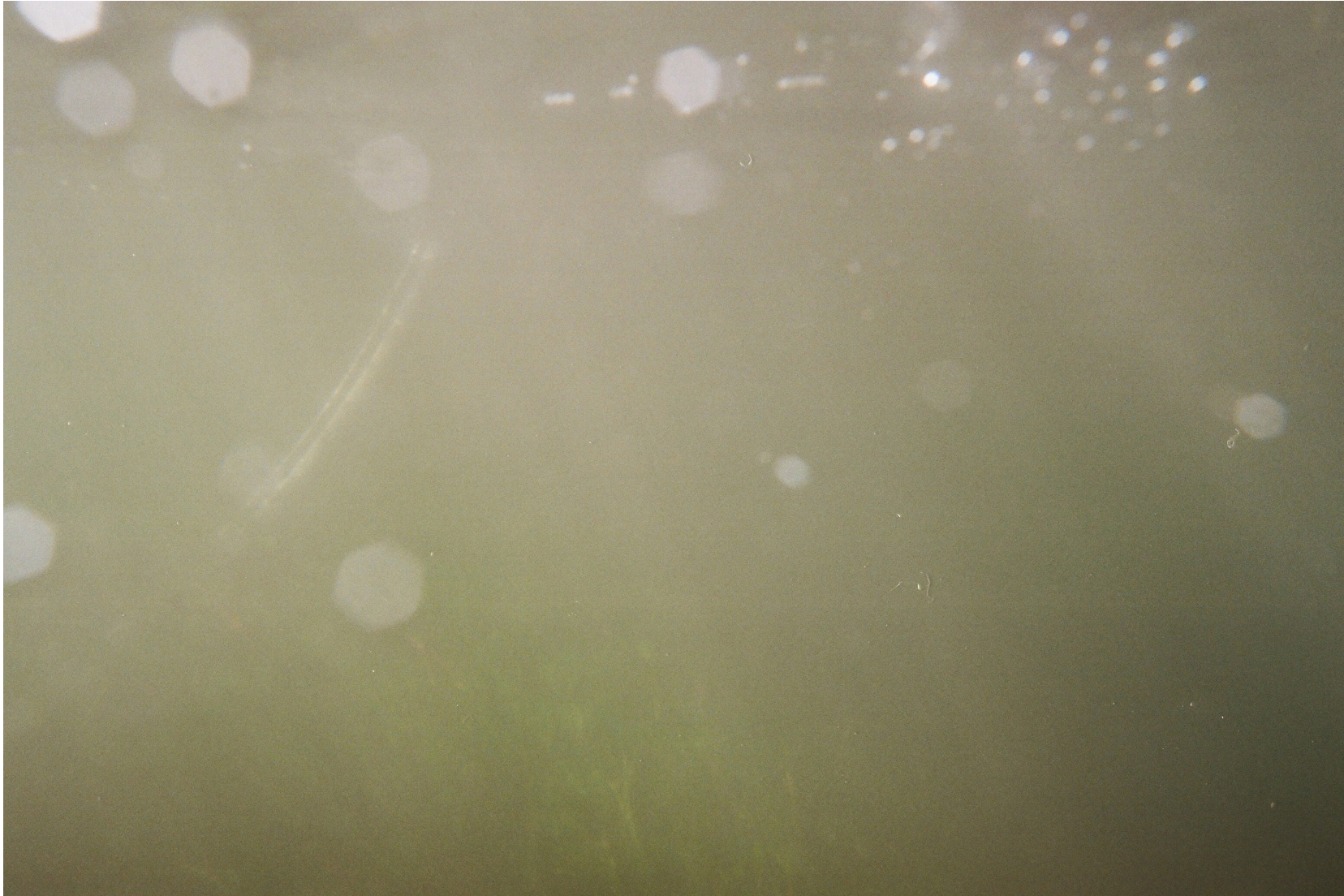


Fig. 13: Hicks 2023. *Scythe. River Dour, Crabble Hill, Dover.*

Outcome

The response, from the audience who visited my exhibition, was emotional and almost universally positive. I made an effort to engage with all those who attended, and many visitors commented that my presence and insight offered a dimension to the work that could otherwise have been missed.

The photographers and creatives understood the methodology and premise behind the images and appreciated the more subtle, abstract elements of the photographs. Visitors with no experience in 'reading' this type of work, saw beyond the surface and became more aware of the narrative within.

The outcome for me is that I have begun to look very differently at my work - not just at the importance of it practically. But by examining my surroundings and environment, and mostly my feelings, I've begun to develop a sense of pride. My exhibition offered visitors a glimpse into this personal progression, and I believe it was this, that provoked such an emotional response from them.

The public outcome has been a better understanding of the work of the EA in managing our waterways. This vital undertaking affects all areas of our lives but is often overlooked and certainly under-valued. Since the exhibition, I've been invited to share my work on the EA Intranet site, so that it will be accessed nationally by all employees. An exciting opportunity to further disseminate my work and a possible stepping stone to a different role within the EA in the future.

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Figure 19: Hicks 2023. *50%. Great Stour, Kingsmead, Canterbury.*

Figure 20: Hicks 2023. *Desilting. Sluice, Great Stour, Reach 9, Sandwich Town Tidal Defence.*

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