
THE BRILLIANCE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Saturday 23rd and Sunday 24th May 2009

by *Leslie Parkinson*

What a wonderful weekend this turned out to be and full credit must be given to the Committee of the RPS Contemporary Group for all their hard work behind the scenes over the past months.

Saturday opened with an informative talk by **Gerry Badger**, a well known photo historian and critic, on major post World War 2 photographers.. He showed a variety of photographers' work including Martin Parr, Paul Graham, Chris Killip, Richard Billingham and Jem Southam. He also introduced us to the work of less known European photographers based in Czechoslovakia, Spain and Italy.

The second speaker was **Stephen Gill** who is based in Hackney. Stephen explained how being overwhelmed by the variety of subject matter in London, he had chosen to concentrate on "themes" such as trolleys, commuters on train journeys, people wearing fluorescent yellow safety coats and more recently discarded betting slips. It was interesting to see how he developed an idea and the captions he gave to the images. More recently Stephen has been involved in photographing around Hackney, noting the changes due to the development of the site for the Olympics. Stephen has also experimented with incorporating pressed flowers picked from the site of the photographs as well as burying photographs in the soil and observing the various stages of deterioration which occurs. His work provided plenty of food for thought and it was encouraging to see a young photographer full of ideas and energy.

John Blakemore was the third speaker and he showed us some of his beautiful tulip photographs as well as images taken more recently around his home and garden entitled Domestic Spaces. John has been looking at glass and reflections and the affect of light falling on surfaces. He has photographed through his windows, both inside and out and experimented with prisms. He also shared with us his passion for handmade books and how they offer a unique and personal approach to photography.

The title of **Richard Sadler's** talk was "From Today Photography is Dead" which looked at how, since its introduction, photography has been used by painters. Of course, we are all familiar with the saying "from today painting is dead" applied when photography was invented. However, Richard suggested that photography had allowed more freedom to painters as they were no longer required to paint "true" portraits and landscapes, the camera could record the exact images. He also suggested that the work of the pointillist and impressionist painters related to the grain, and more recently, pixels, in a photographic image.

The second day of the conference was opened by **Bill Jackson** who outlined his wide and varied career. Bill started by making collections of images, hairdressers, hospital workers and people in the theatre using film. Bill is an avid collector and has an interest in archaeology, anatomy and mapping and this begins to show in his work particularly when he switched to using multimedia. Bill showed us examples of his complicated and intriguing work using initially collage and then later on the computer and video. He has also scanned as many as 200 items to make one piece of work, that's dedication for you. Bill suggested to us that by using digital technology we suffer "sensory deprivation" as we no longer handle or engage with film, paper or chemicals.

More recently, Bill has been photographing assembled paper dress patterns, hanging from fishing line, entitled "Imaginary People". He has also been photographing scrunched up torn white tissue paper suspended from fishing wire and meat hooks. For these images, he uses long exposures to capture any slight movement in the "mobile". I found these images very beautiful and quite surreal. Bill is now experimenting with night photography using very long exposures to find out how the camera records when we cannot see.

I found Bill's talk fascinating, he never stops experimenting and continually pushes the boundaries of conventional photography.

The subject of **Daniel Meadow's** talk was "Pictures that talk – photo-documentary in the multimedia age". Daniel is well known for the work he did in a project entitled Photobus in the 1970s, where he travelled around in a double-decker bus taking peoples portraits, 958 in total! 25 years later he advertised in local papers to see where the people were now and how they had changed. He has also produced photographs for magazines and newspapers such as the Sunday Express and New Society. Daniel moved to digital a few years ago and began digital storytelling, working for the BBC for five years on a project entitled "Capture Wales". It was apparent to me that Daniel enjoys engaging with people, trying to show what makes them "tick" and believes in making and presenting stories honestly.

Peter Kennard showed us how photomontage had influenced his work, in particular the work of Hannah Hoch and John Heartfield. He explained how two photographs by juxtaposition and montage could create a third. Peter has worked on poster campaigns for CND producing a very original version of Constable's Haywain! Peter then incorporated drawing, painting and newsprint into his photographs. He subsequently experimented with scanning objects and then working on the image, distressing it and using different textures in an effort to break out of the conventional straight image. He has recently produced images challenging the Iraq war. Peter is now involved in making installations.

Paul Hill started as a reporter and believes in the important of photo essays which communicate through having a narrative. He has produced work for The Observer, Guardian and Telegraph magazines. He believes black and white images remove us from the real world of colour and three dimensions and it is up to the photographer to choose the frame of what to include in the image. Paul decided to go into teaching and finds it much more liberating, as there is no editor to conform to. He now works in colour and he showed us some of his more recent work following the death of his wife in 2006 entitled Corridor of Uncertainty. The photographs gave us all an insight into his grief and how he is coming to terms with it.