

December 2017

## A Face in the Crowd

Beagles are everywhere, on the backs of my legs, crawling under my armpits and I've just noticed a glob of saliva running down the front of the filter, presumably one especially enthusiastic puppy trying to be helpful by cleaning my lens. Maybe it was not such a good idea to lie on the ground on first meeting. My initial request for a portrait on the phone with the huntsman had not started well. He was convinced I was a newspaper photographer planning to portray country sports in a negative way. My portrait was simply part of a series of connections to landscape. My assurance led to a formal invitation to his kennels. That said, he remained wary and with an expression never much beyond disdain.

Now I was eating dirt and his canines running amok, I wasn't holding out much hope of a usable portrait. But sometimes out of chaos comes clarity and this portrait proved to be one of the keystone images.

In hot pursuit of the environmental portrait, I have, perhaps naively, often relied on the notion that everyone is a viable and willing subject. Putting people in front of the camera is never easy for either parties. Connecting them to their environment is just as challenging and likely to add considerable value to both the image and the story behind the subject.



I'm not especially enthusiastic about being on the opposing end myself but occasionally relent if for no other reason to get a feel of what the sitter experiences - awkwardness, self-consciousness, nerves, terror ? I would have imagined that in the current crazed world of selfie-dom, it would be so much easier to make portraits given the enthusiasm of folk to appear before the lens, but that doesn't appear to be the case. The selfie in all its glory says little about the subject or their surroundings other than, 'look at me'!



I have heard landscape photographers talk often about making a portrait, digging deep to reveal colour, texture and character. Sometimes the drama of weather allows for a swift resolution but typically it takes hours or even days to render the spirit of that landscape. Photographing people in their environment requires an equal amount of patience, stealth and curiosity. It has the potential of telling many stories at the same time. In many ways, making direct contact with the person allows you into their world, permission which is not always given easily.

A few weeks ago I visited the National Portrait Gallery to see the new crop of winners and riders in the Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait competition. Despite its standing of respectability among the plethora of competitions that now vie for our attention, I feel that, with a few exceptions, many of the submitted images continued to adhere to a formulaic NPG style of

portraiture which for me remains decidedly unadventurous. I had those moments of contemplation desperately wanting to find their soul but failed to see why they were deemed powerful, meaningful or enlightening. There is no doubt that the competition has begun to break the bounds of its traditional studio portraiture and ventured into the great outdoors. Most memorable was 'Huntress with Buck' by David Chancellor in 2010. This image is both beautiful and controversial and was part of a bigger story he was pursuing about Hunters and the Hunted. He commented after his win that, "The aim is always to be detached. In reality that's rarely possible, but I do hope I can observe without an agenda and without the necessity to shout."

This year's winning image by César Dezfuli of a 16 year old migrant staring hauntingly and directly at the camera is undoubtedly arresting and justifiably topical but like many others is sparse on composition and in need of a long written explanation. One newspaper review comment put it succinctly; Teenager? Tick; Looking miserable? Tick; Migrant? Tick. A little harsh maybe.

The ordinary and the familiar can be a foundation for a great image. Another review was a little more balanced, 'Perhaps, when the images deliver such harrowing stories, familiarity and simplicity is the comfort we need.'

Ever since I was finagled into perfecting my paradiddles and crashing cymbals as part of the percussive background to The Dambusters in the military band at school, I have been fascinated with drums. I moved on to playing in a teenage pub band churning out classics from Fleetwood Mac, Bad Company and the Eagles (our Hotel California was particularly good!), and after what seems like a minnenial gap, I have switched to Congas and Djembe looking to master the rhythms of salsa, samba, merengue. Musical rhythm has helped calm my nerves when travelling in a new country or passing through unfamiliar terrain.

Having recently caught up on a recent BBC series of of programmes about handmade crafts, I was reminded of an encounter in backstreets of Kolkata; In many towns and cities in India, whole streets are devoted to selling the same product. One such street resounded with the sweet rhythm of Tabla. Now this was my kind of place ! I must have spent several hours over the next two days dipping in and out of the shops, talking to the owners who were naturally keen to show off their wares. Outside, hand drawn rickshaws and monsoon rains sped on by playing an equally important role in the composition of the portraits I was creating inside.

With the blaring taxi cab horns, hammering rain, and tac, tac of the tabla, it summed up so many of the elements which make up the creative process in environmental portraiture. It also conjured up the spirit of Matt Lucas's stage hypnotist Kenny Craig calling out, 'Look into my eyes, look into my eyes, the eyes, the eyes, not around the eyes, don't look around my eyes, look into my eyes, you're under.

