

June 2019

Layer Cake



From a distance, the colours on the quayside give no sense of what the objects might be. As the zodiac pulls in to the elongated harbour of Probolinggi in East Java, a fisherman is weaving synthetic filaments into what turns out to be a huge rope. Eventually wrapped in massive coils, they look like giant iced doughnuts which even two wiry lads struggle to heave over the side of their boat. But it's the deft hand and foot work which holds my attention. Loose strings scatter like flowing water over rocks as they fall from the fisherman's grasp.

It seemed obvious from the start that the first image in this unfolding vignette was at close quarters emphasising texture and hinting at the squeak of these sinews as they become part of this expanding cord. It appeared that I had arrived when most of the local fishing fleet were in port along with the Bugis trade boats and their extended bows in serrated rows over our heads like ranks of pre colonial soldiers, prone and ready to fire their muskets.

There is something very special about arriving in a new country by sea, even if it was for a single day. Culture, landscape and politics emerge more slowly and on this occasion I had no specific agenda or brief, only to wander and observe. When I first started out as a news and current affairs photographer, there were always tight deadlines, and very little time to contemplate or fully experience what was happening around me. The job always came first; deciding what kit to use, the angle of the story, how best to take advantage of great light, natural compositions or others in the scene who might add value to the final image. Decisions had to be made quickly. Like preparing cloths for a polar winter or choosing the right lens or filter, there are many layers to consider and develop as you reach for the point where a great image can be realised.

And like a Jenga tower, sometimes one of the those layers gets pulled out from under prompting change or adaptation to avoid the inevitable fall. Often in post production, layers and masks play important roles in helping conjure those elements which go missing temporarily when converting the three dimensional world to two dimensional viewing.

The determination and effort we often put into rendering many of the scenes around us in sharp focus can be detrimental to what we perceive as the best outcome. This was never an issue for the illustrious f.64 group, a gathering of such luminaries as Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham and Ansel Adams in 1932, hell bent on overturning what they perceived as the manipulated soft focus, art photography of Pictorialism. Sharpness and realism was all. Early examples of documentary, travel and fashion photography followed pretty much the same line until we got bored of what could understandably be considered to be too perfect and not close to reality at all. Layers became almost imperceptible.



The move towards imperfection or at least a blurring of compositional and aesthetic rules seen clearly in reportage from 1940s and 1950s appealed to me hugely when starting out as a young photojournalist. It was a reality I saw more often than not, later on my own travels - the vibrant energy of urban life, the cacophony and exuberance of rural festivals and the raggedness of nature caught in a storm or under threat from human intervention.

Capturing each one of these themes relies on being both an observer and a participant, the prospect of which can seem desperately hard to manage and yet wonderfully animated at the same time. I have found this dichotomy trawling the souks of Marrakech, dodging clouds of colour powder during Holi in India or coming to terms with the inexorable onslaught of tourism affecting fragile landscapes. Look no further than our own recently UNESCO adorned Cumbrian Hills or Iceland's nature Instagram influencers.





Returning to Greenland last winter re-established some sort of equilibrium in my mind of how I approach my own photography. I imagine that polar nights and the simple life of an Inuit working dog bring perspective and self belief. The dogs begin to howl again. They are long, drawn out melancholic laments which somehow exacerbate the cold seeping through layers of clothing I have just spent 15 mins struggling to put on. I would like to think that they are howling at the moon but there is none, only the beginnings of what might be a second showing of the aurora borealis in two days. And it didn't disappoint. Green, red, purple and pink shower down through the arctic atmosphere as if the gods themselves are sowing the fields of planet earth. Minus 17 degrees doesn't seem to be all that bad when you have this kind of a light show swirling above your head. After an hour of image making, I simply lie on the ground and just let it wash over me. Sea ice has moved in overnight. There are only a few hours sleep before I am dusting snow off the tripod, donning crampons and heading out to the shoreline once more. That precious tint of pre-dawn stretches across still water, iceberg and sky. Unlike the tropics, it takes a gloriously long time for this palette to develop. Creaks and groans emanate from the ice buildup and watching intently, its possible to see the landscape in front of me breathing. Just a simple case then of working through the layers of my vision to find a soul in the story I am trying to tell, right ? Well, maybe not that simple