

September 2020

Connections

I was looking for some inspiration on a dark morning recently whilst selecting images for a new series of greetings cards. I had promised myself a fresh marketing campaign. Sometimes this means trawling through Lightroom folders and keywords but I will often dive into my photographic book collection and discover themes and essays, light and colour as if for the first time. On this occasion, I wandered through the dusty hues of Raghubir Singh's sublime studies of everyday India followed by the mesmerising windows of faith from Kazuyoshi Nomachi's opus on Mecca. And finally I honed in on David Hockney's riot of colour from his '40 pix of my house with a video camera' - an honest, direct description of truly ordinary things with such exuberance, they lift the soul.

Next up was an appraisal of my instagram feed looking for the pictures which had clearly resonated with followers and curious fly-bys alike. Maybe I needed to breakdown the algorithms, target certain times of the day and create a more lively bunch of hashtags to raise my status in the hierarchy of likes ? I have trawled well meaning internet blogs and videos looking for signs that some of the changes and posts I have made would lead me to the feet of glorified influencers but to be honest, this dulled my senses. No doubt there are benefits to be had from a presence on this and other social media sites but much of it leaves me yearning even more for real time connections and relationships, a world we often seem to spend less time in at our peril. Its not that I am necessarily seeking an avalanche of praise and adulation but like many photographers, I like to think that what I photograph has some resonance beyond the process - Perhaps a reminder of the power and wonder of the natural world, or a reaffirmation that cultural ties and common ground still exist beyond the ethernet cable.





Part way through his long term project, Genesis, the celebrated photo journalist, Sebastião Salgado discussed his annoyance in having to move from film to digital which for him took away from the central message of his photography. He revelled in the simplicity of a camera and a story to be told. "What I want is to create a discussion about what is happening around the world and to provoke some debate with these pictures. Nothing more than this. I don't want people to look at them and appreciate the light and the palate of tones. I want them to look inside and see what the pictures represent, and the kind of people I photograph."

What still excites me about photography is the opportunity to engage with that physical world, to find out why a landscape draws attention, what drives or forces people to live in cities or rural backwaters and how religion, economics and leisure determine what we do with our time and energy when they are out there.

These are giant issues we probably all grapple with when starting a new project. So I will break them down into bite size pieces, a fishing community, a regional market, vernacular architecture, or simply a journey. Kolkata was my introduction to the extraordinary contradictions that make up the Indian subcontinent and I will always be grateful for these first three days of baptism. I had no brief and was gloriously overwhelmed by the cacophony of life in the city but I found a natural affinity and humility with the people and images just seemed to flow. Curiosity worked in both directions as it should do, so there was never a feeling that they were being exploited or I was taking advantage. Photographing for a volunteer charity in Mombasa meant organised meetings and events from women's health clinics to teaching english and sports in schools. The briefs were to give a sense of the experiences of both locals and volunteers. Commissioned work allows for structure and ordered purpose whereas a personal quest or wandering with intent gives me the freedom to be distracted, to build other stories around whatever other plans I might have had.

It was both this framework and the freedom to choose my subject matter which formed the basis of my early years as a freelance photographer. It all started with the red and yellow chinagraph making mincemeat out of my black and white contact sheets as images were summarily selected and dismissed. At first I dreaded these critique sessions. They were brutal but necessary. Gradually I became addicted to them. They would signify progress in my ability to tell stories and hone my skills as a communicator. If there was more red and yellow than black & white, it was back out on the street to



try again. Some of my subjects like the Tattoo parlour in Cwmbrân or the beer keg delivery men in Newport would welcome me back in and berate me in equal and friendly measures ! These were vital proving grounds for a young photo journalist like myself and took me into walks of life I might never have experienced. Although tempted, I never did get that tattoo

Ref.

River of Colour: The India of Raghubir Singh
Pilgrimage: Nomachi Kazuyoshi
Hockney On Art: Conversations with Paul Joyce
Sebastião Salgado: Genesis

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