

Artist Questionnaire

IG: Which artists/photographers do you particularly respect?

Paul Strand was the first photographer to wow me. I saw a show of his when I first started college and his quiet and intimate portraits affected me emotionally. Someone said that he seemed to make portraits without the aid of a camera and I suppose I try and work in a similar way. Tom Wood is another photographer I enjoy. I think there is a gentleness in his and Paul Strand's work that appeals to me.

IG: Why do you choose photography as your artistic medium?

I love the social interaction, it gives me an excuse to meet people, talk to people, dip into their lives. I used to consider myself shy but I think the act of photography forced me to overcome that shyness. I like trying to process my thoughts and emotions through photography and seeing what come out at the other end.

IG: Why did you choose to do this project? What was the trigger?

Sport has played an important part in my life, as a youngster it was what defined me. I was Paul and I played football. Of course I wanted to play professionally and put a lot of time and effort trying to realise that dream but did not make it.

When London was awarded the games all those years ago it dawned on me that a lot of the athletes that would eventually compete in the games would only just be starting their careers; I was interested in seeing how promising youngsters would cope in the intense world of elite sport and to see who would make it to the Olympic and Paralympic games.

IG: What are your main influences and how have they influenced your work?

I think my experience's influence my work. I try to be a human being first and a photographer second and photograph things that concern me or make me smile.

IG: At what point did you decide it would be a good idea to give the young athletes notebooks/journals to record their thoughts and feelings?

Quite early really. Photographing them once a year meant I only had a limited amount of time with them so I wanted to find a way of keeping a dialogue going.

I also wanted to get a feel of what it was like for them outside of competition, the repetitive nature of training, the lows of failure and injury. I wanted to encourage them to write in a creative way and to try and reveal something of their psychological make up in the hope that this would inform / affect the way I photographed.

IG: Can you explain the process of composing a portrait; did you ask the athletes to pose? How did you choose the setting for each portrait?

Sports halls are particularly difficult to photograph in, with very little natural light, they are bland, featureless, functional places. Or so I thought. Getting to the venue early usually meant that I could eventually find a nice space to make the portrait and I began to enjoy the challenge, using the colour and form to underpin the photographs.

I did not have a preconceived idea as to how I was going to photograph people when I met up with them. As much as I admire the rigid approach that many photographers use in time-lapse photography, I'm just too ill disciplined to work that way. Besides, each year was a different venue, confidence may have been up or down and I wanted to respond to what was happening on that day. The photographs were a collaboration between the sitter and me. I would try and let them find a way of presenting themselves. I tried to keep intervention down to a minimum.

IG: Do you consider yourself strictly a portrait photographer?

No! One thing about working on a project for so long is that you really yearn to do something completely different. I have been dabbling with a bit of landscape photography in my work with The Bradford Grid and really enjoying the results. The only thing is though is that I tend to photograph my landscapes' in a portrait style.

IG: Some of our visitors will be interested in the technical aspects of your project. What equipment did you use? And did it affect the way that you worked and the project outcome?

I have to say that I am not the greatest technician and tend to use everything in the simplest way possible. Most of the shots for this project were taken on a medium format camera (Bronica SQA 6cm x 6cm) and most under natural/available light.

I also used a large format camera (Wista 5 x 4) for the book cover shot and the image that won the Taylor Wessing National Portrait Prize as well as a couple of others. All images were shot on Portra 400 film.

I think people respond positively to medium and large format cameras. The connection between the intrusive world of the paparazzi photographer and the digital SLR has in my opinion made people a little wary of being photographed in that way. I can make eye contact and reassure the sitter when photographing with both my film cameras.

IG: Do you have any recommended reading to further contextualise the project?

Paul Strand 'The world on my doorstep'
Tom Wood 'People' and 'All zones off peak'
Rineke Dijkstra 'Portraits'

IG: What plans do you have for future projects?

Have been commissioned to photograph Jazz Festivals in Northern Europe over the summer for an exhibition to be shown next year. I am excited and nervous at the prospect of making something interesting out of a subject I know little about, but have been given pretty much free reign to interpret it how I want.

I will also be continuing work for The Bradford Grid and then try and find another medium to long-term project.