

## **Artist Questionnaire: The Caravan Gallery**

### **IG: Which artists/photographers do you particularly respect?**

There are many, mostly in the social documentary field. A few photographers that come to mind are Henri Cartier-Bresson, Tom Wood *All Zones Off Peak*, Martin Parr, Ken Grant *The Close Season*, John Davies, Paul Trevor (note the Mersey connection!), Daniel Meadows (of Free Photographic Omnibus fame), Tony Ray-Jones; We love Side Gallery and Amber Films - must give Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen a special mention. Stephen Gill *Hackney Wick*, Josef Koudelka. We could go on endlessly here! Recently watched a great film about the little known Vivian Maier.

Other artists we admire include Richard Wentworth, George Shaw, Erwin Wurm, Grayson Perry, Alfred Wallis, John Dargan and Sam Dargan, Phil Illingworth, Natalie Dowse, David Leefe Kendon, Sadie Tierney.

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

Because it's an ideal medium for recording everyday life and it's so democratic. You don't have to know anything about photography to be able to relate to a photograph, although, of course, pictures can be appreciated on many levels. We were early adopters of digital photography and take a huge number of photos on a regular basis - we never go anywhere without our cameras. When you travel as much as we do and are often pushed for time it's useful to be able to check we've got the shots we want there and then. We often revisit places to see how they've changed and show our findings in a series of photographs.

Both of us work in other media too - Jan has a background in Fine Art and has a long track record of exhibiting collages, drawings and installations in solo and group shows in the UK and abroad. Chris used to work in stained glass and made frames for Jan's work.

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

We initially set up The Caravan Gallery in 2000 to take art to people and places other galleries can't easily reach. We'd won a commission through Art Space Portsmouth to exhibit on Southsea seafront over a bank holiday weekend to celebrate the new millennium. It turned out to be a very long weekend as we're still going 15 years later! After our initial outing we created opportunities and accepted invitations to travel around Britain and beyond making work in response to the places we visited. We've exhibited everywhere from an Asda car park in Liverpool to designer Paul Smith's Space in Tokyo. In other words we like to mix things up a bit!

Our little yellow caravan is a welcoming social space where people feel free to share their own opinions and observations about where they live. We decided to capitalise on this by devising our Pride of Place Project model. Typically we take over a space like an empty shop for a month and work with local people to create an exhibition - cum-reverse visitor information centre (where the visitors provide the information) exploring the characteristics of wherever we happen to be.

Our current Pride of Place Project Tour consists of three interwoven strands - a prestigious gallery exhibition, a participatory project and a local caravan tour - in six different cities. Accustomed as we are to connecting with extremely diverse audiences we feel we are well placed to encourage people to step out of their comfort zone and experience art in unfamiliar settings.

We've amassed a huge archive of images and published many books and postcards since we set up The Caravan Gallery. *extraordinary* is a significant landmark for us as it represents a distillation of our interests and observations over the last fifteen years.

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

We're interested in leisure, landscape and lifestyle and how these are represented in the media. We have always been inspired and intrigued by tourist information and the language of advertising and marketing. The dream versus the reality is an enduring theme in our work, as is maverick activity and DIY culture. We're very interested in people power and community initiatives. Our studio is rammed with a dazzling array of the ephemera we've collected on our travels - postcards, tourist brochures, ancient Innovations catalogues, bizarre souvenirs, found handwritten notes, travel books and magazines covering every imaginable niche interest.

Other influences include *Father Ted*, *The League of Gentlemen* - and more recently - *Inside Number 9*. We admire filmmakers such as Patrick Keiller *Robinson in Space* and Pilgrim Films / Heavenly Films and St Etienne who have made some fascinating work about London *What Have You Done Today Mervyn Day?*, and with whom we collaborated on a project called *The Other South Bank*. *Gallivant* by Andrew Kötting is also our kind of film.

We are, of course, very interested in architecture, regeneration, the built environment and natural environment and where these overlap. Juxtapositions - r us!

### **IG: The work in the exhibition has been created over 15 years and must carry with it a huge number of stories. Do you have any particular highlights to note, for example a place you've visited or person you have met?**

We'll never forget stumbling upon that Afghan hound in a shellsuit in Sheffield. We've only ever seen one of those! Apparently it had outfits in tartan and Burberry too and used to take advantage of priority seats on the bus. It's amazing how we can piece together a whole scenario based on snippets of information different people provide

about our photos.

Whenever we're on the road with The Caravan Gallery you can guarantee we'll meet local characters with a big C. In Liverpool we made friends with Pete the Fish who cooked fish out of the Mersey in the back of his Transit van in a pub car park. He did a roaring trade swapping meals for beer. In Sunderland we met the legendary Dave the Rave, 'world famous in the north east'. Each of them made significant contributions to various Pride of Place Projects.

**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?**

We have been using Panasonic Lumix cameras for many years. We were first attracted by features such as image stabilization (handy for drive by shooting from van windows) and ability to capture decent images in low light. Another really useful feature is the flip out screen which is great for making pictures involving awkward angles. Panasonic now provide us with cameras from the Lumix G range which are perfect for street photography because you can create fantastic quality still images and video using unobtrusive equipment.

**IG: What plans do you have for future projects?**

You can't possibly get bored or run out of material doing what we do so we'll just carry on. We're working on putting together a Scottish Pride of Place Project Tour and are planning more collaborations and international work. We've made several trips to Australia and have various leads to follow up.

**IG: Do you have any recommended reading to further contextualise your work?**

We do like a bit of psychogeography and books about travel, tourism, popular culture and identity. Books in our unwieldy collection include:

*The Art of Travel* Alain de Botton

*Bicycle Diaries* David Byrne

*The Age of Absurdity* Michael Foley - our image is on the cover!

*Watching the English* Kate Fox

*A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain* Owen Hatherley

*English Journey* JB Priestly

*Park and Ride* Miranda Sawyer

*London Orbital* Iain Sinclair

*You Can Find Inspiration in Everything* Paul Smith

*Wanderlust - A History of Walking* Rebecca Solnit

*A Dream of England: Landscape - Photography and the Tourist's Gaze* John Taylor

*The Kingdom by The Sea* Paul Theroux

Also enjoy listening to Simon Armitage's poetry and documentaries by Cerys Matthews...