

Artist's Questionnaire

IG: Which artists/photographers do you particularly admire?

RS: Artists: Brueghel, Velázquez, Rembrandt, Caravaggio, Goya, Max Ernst, Otto Dix, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Edward Hopper, and Norman Rockwell.

Photographers: Rodchenko, Edward Weston, Man Ray, Diane Arbus, Irving Penn, Andrea Gursky, and Simon Norfolk.

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

(This could include events, places and art movements as well as filmmakers and artists)

RS: There are many! Some influences include:

Russian Constructivism, Bauhaus, American Pop Art

Physical theatre and agitprop, Brecht, surrealism

R&B, reggae and punk

Film: Eisenstein, Busby Berkley, Pressburger, David Lean, Coppola, the Cohn Brothers, and the Danish film movement Dogme 95

IG: Do you see yourself as a historian or a photographer?

RS: I'm a photographer who is overwhelmed by history and the knowledge and curiosity it gives you.

IG: You've had an eventful working life, working with the music industry and experimental theatre, could you elaborate on this and how it has affected your photography?

RS: I was a young Mod in the ferment of the 1960s when I met and joined an underground theatre group called CAST. It changed my life and gave me confidence to just let my imagination go where it wanted. It turned out that that was art, culture, music and politics. My working life has taught me to enjoy mixing these things together. The idea of mix is very important to me.

IG: What inspired you to begin Hidden? What was the 'trigger'?

RS: There were several triggers. The initial one was reading Sheila Robotham's book Hidden from History about 30 years ago. I was also influenced by Marxist historians and writers including Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, and Chris Harman. I was driven by my anger at all the sheer lies and false information I hear and read every day in the 'media', and the outrageous distortion of history. When my commercial work started to dwindle, that gave me the push to start the Hidden project. I usually keep my political and work separate, but it felt right to combine them in Hidden.

IG: Can you briefly explain the production process of the Hidden photographs?

RS: I start research by reading, searching the web, and going to galleries. I then think about the 'palette' and the style in which I will shoot the image. After establishing that comes casting, which is very important in determining the strength of the image. Next comes costume, location, props...

On a practical level, once I have the idea for the subject, the production process is influenced by what kind of finances are available, and how many supporters and volunteers I may be able to call on. This determines the scope of the production.

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?

RS: Absolutely. I was persuaded to embrace digital technology by Adrian Hayes, who works with me on the Photoshop retouching required by Hidden. Working in this way makes doing ambitious ideas much more possible, because producing a digital tableau means we can shoot elements separately and combine them in the postproduction stage, saving time and money.

Sometimes there is confusion about this process. Although we use 'blue screen' and 'cut out' technology, I photograph every element that appears in the final image. There is no CGI (computer generated imagery) in these images. I was a commercial photographer for many years and am highly trained and experienced in studio lighting, and this is a very important aspect to the images. The atmosphere and experience of the real environment and the landscape is also invaluable to this project.

In terms of technical specifications, we started the project on 5x4" colour negative film that we then scanned to digital files. We often augment daylight with flash lighting and the studio work is all on flash - Elinchrom and ProPhoto. I rarely use tungsten light in stills.

At the moment I am shooting with Phase One digital backs on Hasselblad cameras and lenses to give us 70MB files. Once edited, I work with Adrian Hayes on a Mac using Photoshop. The postproduction phase is lengthy. Finished files are then sent via Dropbox to printers, and final prints can vary in size from A3 to the 5.5m wide prints that are on view at Impressions Gallery.

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

RS: Unbridled Spirits: Women in the English Revolution 1640-1660, by Stevie Davies

The World Turned Upside Down by Christopher Hill

A People's History of the World by Chris Harman

IG: What plans do you have for future projects?

RS: After working on the 'chamber epics' of Hidden for the last 2 years, this winter I'm scaling down to work on another great love: still life (vegetables and garlic in particular), using large format cameras.

Then next year I'll resume work on 'Hidden', a limitless project. Ideas I'm working on include the Peterloo Massacre of Manchester, 1819, when cavalry charged into a crowd of 60,000–80,000 that had gathered to demand the reform of parliamentary representation. Another is the story of Black abolitionists who worked to end slavery in the 19th century, such as Mary Prince, Phyllis Wheatley, Ottobah Cugoana and Olaudah Equiano. I've also been very inspired by Stevie Davis' book Unbridled Spirits: Women in the English Revolution 1640-1660, and am planning images about the seventeenth century witch trials in England.