

## In their own words:

### Yan Preston

*This Q&A was produced alongside the exhibition Mother River, shown at Impressions Gallery from 31 March to 24 June 2017.*

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

I respect a lot. For example, Jem Southam, Joel Sternfield, Stephen Shore, Kate Mellor, Thomas Joshua Cooper, David Nash, and Marina Abramovic.

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

I suppose that photography has a very close relationship to reality ---- its status as a 'document' embeds its greatest power and challenge to a photographer and a viewer.

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

The project is a formal attempt to challenge of Yangtze The Mother River, which is understood by me as a mythic concept. Yangtze River is a physical river. But Yangtze as The Mother River of China is represented by celebratory images of a few selected places, such as the Three Gorges and the new cities. There is a strong hierarchy between images and places that are associated with The Mother River. But the reality along the river that I saw was different from these iconic images. That's why I wanted to photograph the river every 100 kilometres. There are no hierarchy between these equally spaced photo locations. And there are almost no iconic locations---all of them are vernacular landscapes. They are part of the river landscapes but not normally associated with the idea of The Mother River.

I'm aware that 'The Mother River' was a Chinese icon. For people outside of China, Yangtze perhaps is more like a window of the country. But there are also dominant ideas. If you search for 'Yangtze River' in both Google and Baidu (China's online search engine), you actually get very similar pictures: the Three Gorges, and the new cities. The Yangtze actually flows through huge and hugely diverse regions of China. I hope that my pictures can at least show some of these little-known aspects of the country.

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

You can see my influence from the list of artists that I respect. I think that I'm heavily influenced by the type of photography that is associated with the *New Topographics: Photograph of a Man-altered Landscape* and many artists that are related to this show. I describe them as 'mapping' photographers. They all allow certain degrees of 'objectivity' in their work. This might be a deadpan aesthetic which does not expose the artist's personal attitude. Or, it can be a certain method, which partially controls the artist's personal choice and prejudices. For example, Kate Mellor photographed the British coastline every 50 kilometres. And Jem Southam photographs sites of rock falls over many years. Time (and nature) itself becomes an active agent and part of the narrative.

**IG: The work in the exhibition has been created over 4 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?**

There are many moments and memories. I suppose that reaching the river source on the 16 November 2011 was a milestone. It's extremely remote and difficult. Very few people had been there. Reaching the river mouth was a magic moment too. It was on the 16 November 2013, two whole years after I reached the source. By then I felt that I really knew the river.

**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 used a large-format film camera (a Linhof Technika Classic and 5 by 4 inch colour negative films). It is clumsy and expensive. So for each expose I had to be very considered. There is no 'grab and shoot'. Almost every photo is produced from a reflective process. I couldn't see the result during the journeys. So I had to work quite conceptually – every photo was produced towards a central idea instead of a response towards previous pictures. I'm not sure how it affected the project outcome ---I only had this one outcome. It produced this outcome.

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

Any books by the above-mentioned photographers would be great. But the book *Landscape and Memory* by Simon Schama is particularly useful in understanding the mythic powers of rivers. And *Big Breasts, Wide Hips* by the Chinese writer Mo Yan is a powerful novel about village life along a small river in China.

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

I have just won the 1<sup>st</sup> Prize for the Syngenta Photography Award, which enables me to complete another long-term project *Forest*. This project observes China's urbanisation process via photographing the urban forestation. Basically it's all about new trees in new cities. So I'll be shooting that this year. Hopefully it'll be completed and published by next May.