

In their own words:

Murray Ballard

*This Q&A was produced alongside the exhibition *The Project of Immortality*, shown at Impressions Gallery from 10 June to 17 September 2011.*

IG: Which artists/photographers do you particularly respect?

MB: Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, Jim Goldberg, Rob Hornstra, Mark Power, Alec Soth, Paul Graham, Julian Germain, Simon Norfolk... I could write a very long list. I guess I'm drawn to work routed in the documentary genre, but the sort made primarily for books and the gallery wall. What I really respect about these photographers is that they've all got established careers, but continually develop and experiment from project to project. When I began *The Prospect of Immortality* my approach was heavily inspired by Broomberg and Chanarin's early work, *Ghetto* and *Mr. Mkhize*, and you look at what they're doing now and it's very different - it's a massive progression and I'm fascinated to see what they come up with next.

I'm also impressed by the amount of work some of these photographers produce - someone like Rob Hornstra just doesn't seem to stop! I respect that commitment and drive. He's also come up with some fantastic ideas on how to fund the production of new work and how to put it out in the world.

I like the idea of having a career not dissimilar to someone like Julian Germain. He works in such a variety of ways: his projects range from personal work like *For every minute you are angry...* - his intimate portrait of an elderly widowed gentlemen living in a small terraced house in Portsmouth, which is probably my all time favourite photobook - to his collaborations with Brazilian street children and his work with found photographs as one of the editors of the magazine 'Useful Photography'.

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

MB: I suppose the moment I chose photography as a medium goes back to college when I was doing my art foundation. I was making lots of short films, but I was constantly frustrated with the way they turned out - I needed actors, props, lighting... all this made me very dependent on my friends for help. Basically I was trying to achieve a level of production way beyond my skills and budget, which of course in hindsight seems ridiculous - it's possible to make great films with limited resources, but I couldn't see that then.

One day in the college library I came across a book by Jeff Wall, I'd never seen his work before, but the picture, *An Eviction* 1988, stopped me in my tracks. At that time I had no real knowledge of photography, and this photograph was unlike anything I'd seen before; it looked like the establishing shot of a feature film, with a moment of action taking up a small portion of the frame. As the title, *An Eviction*, suggests, a couple are being evicted from their home by two police officers - I remember sitting and staring at the picture for a long time, dreaming up the story which could have gone before and after that moment.

It was really that picture that got me interested in photography and made me realise that a single image could tell a story and actually be the finished piece of work. Part of the appeal was also that photography seemed so much simpler. I liked the fact that I could go out on my own and make something relatively quickly. Of course I soon learnt that photography was not a simple medium at all, it was full of its own complexities and its ability to tell stories was also very limited. Now I'm constantly trying to combat that by using text and sound to increase the narrative in my work.

IG: What are your main influences and how have they influenced your work? (This could include events, places and art movements as well as filmmakers and artists)

MB: The first artist I remember really affecting me was Eduardo Paolozzi. I was probably about fifteen when my art teacher showed me his work for the first time and it made a big impression. I was really into sculpture then and I made several pieces of work inspired by him. I still revisit Paolozzi's work on a regular basis and whenever I'm in London I always try to find an excuse to travel via Tottenham Court Road tube station where his murals cover the walls.

When I was at school I was drawn to the work of the Futurists and Constructivists I used to spend hours drawing from the sculptures of Umberto Boccioni and Naum Gabo. Looking back I was probably drawn to their work because of my interest in

science-fiction and films like Blade Runner and Star Wars. In fact, I've never thought about it until now, but all this has probably got a lot to do with why I've been photographing cryonics for the past five years.

More recently I have to admit my interests have become a bit 'photo-centric', and I could do with spending more time looking at other artists and filmmakers. The last exhibition I saw that got me really excited was Jim Goldberg's Open See at The Photographers Gallery. I came out of that exhibition feeling liberated; anything seemed possible. I love the directness and rawness of Goldberg's work, the variety of formats he uses and the collaborative relationship he has with his subjects.

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

MB: It's a long story, but I'll try and keep it as short as possible. Basically it grew out of a project I was doing in 2006 during my second year of university. One of the tutors set us a project where we had to make a piece of work in response to an extract from Anne Michaels book Fugitive Pieces. For those unfamiliar with the book it's written in a very poetic style with two first person narratives: the first is told from the perspective of a young boy who has survived the murder of his Jewish family by the Nazis in Poland - the most prominent theme in the book is death, from a child's point of view. I liked the book, but found it difficult to respond to it in any meaningful way.

I started reading Susan Sontag's book, On Photography, particularly the chapters where she explores the relationship between photography and death. I ended up going off on a complete tangent and I became interested in the idea that photography is a way of preserving something, of stopping a moment in time and preventing it from essentially disappearing or 'dying'. It was then I started my own little project about subjects that mimicked photography's inherent ability as a tool of preservation.

I drew up a list which included: taxidermists, embalmers, Egyptian mummies, restorers, museum specimens and most importantly, although I didn't know it then, cryogenic preservation. I had no real knowledge about cryonics at the time, although I was aware of the idea from books and films, but I didn't think it actually existed. Like many people I had some vague notion that Walt Disney had been cryopreserved, but that was about the extent of my knowledge. Incidentally I've since found out that Walt Disney was not cryopreserved, it's an urban myth, he was cremated two days after his death.

Anyway, coincidentally at the same time as I was photographing taxidermists and embalmers I came across an article in The Guardian newspaper about a French man, Remy Martinot, who had attempted to preserve his parents in industrial freezers in the

cellar of his chateau - the news was that his 'experiment' had come to an end because the freezers had broken down and the bodies had started to thaw. Consequently the French courts ordered they were cremated. The article mentioned the idea of 'cryonics' and I started researching the subject on the internet.

I found that this was something that people were actually doing for real. Initially it looked like it was only happening in America, but then I stumbled upon a message board for a group in the UK. They were planning a meeting in Peacehaven, Sussex. I couldn't believe it, I thought this idea only existed in the realms of science fiction and here it was right on my doorstep, a twenty minute drive down the coast from Brighton where I was studying. Fortunately the man organising the meeting, Alan Sinclair, who I have now come to know well, had left his phone number for people to contact him, so I called it, and sure enough got through to Alan. He answered my questions and agreed to a meeting at his house. A few days later I went along as a nervous student and sat in his lounge with a cup of tea while he and his wife Sylvia told me all about cryonics. I then came along to one of his meetings and it grew from there, I've now made five trips to the USA, three to Russia, one to Germany and to France to visit Remy Martinot.

IG: How do you approach a project/what is your methodology?

Serendipity, but that's not really a methodology.

This project has been a constant learning process, not only with regards to the subject, but also with my understanding of photography as a medium. I started this project in 2006 as a student and I've spent a lot of time figuring out how the medium works. A lot of this is very basic stuff like how to compose pictures or how to sequence them in a way that adds meaning - all these things you absorb and they become part of your instinctive methodology.

The next project I do will inevitably have a greater preconceived methodology because I have a better understanding of the medium and the type of work I want to make. I'll also inevitably be thinking more about the final product at an earlier stage, that wasn't the case with my cryonics work, I wasn't really trying to resolve it until the opportunity to show the work at Impressions came up.

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 use a large-format field camera, which due to the way it works has a big affect on the way I take photographs. For a start the camera is mounted on a tripod, which slows the whole process down, unlike a traditional camera you can't just point and shoot. Every photograph is taken on a sheet of 5x4 inch film, which is very expensive, by the time you've had it processed each picture costs about £8, so you can't take hundreds of pictures and edit them down at a later date. Although it's not good for my bank balance I actually like the discipline this imposes, it focuses the mind and forces you to do most of your 'editing' at the time rather than later on a computer screen.

IG: How do you view the relationship between yourself, the photographer, and the subject? Do you want to remain objective or do you allow for subjectivity? To what level do you interact with the people have photographed for The Prospect of Immortality?

MB: I certainly try to remain objective and interfere as little as possible with my subject. I prefer to let events unfold. I am not interested in staging photographs - I'm a documentary photographer. The camera I use has an impact because it's a slow process and I quite often have to ask people to pause for a moment whilst I take a picture. Occasionally I will direct the people being photographed, but only in order to achieve a more satisfying composition. Of course it's impossible to be completely objective - the very act of taking a photograph is subjective to some extent.

I would also say the large-format camera helps to create a more objective, dare I say, 'democratic image'. Unlike other camera formats I can produce large-scale prints rich in detail and information, most of the time I tend to avoid using selective focus, which means the whole image is sharp, and in that way it gives equal importance to everything in the picture, so you're not telling the viewer where to look - essentially it's a viewing experience closer to how we see with our eyes in reality.

IG: This show has been five years in the making 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?

In April 2009 I made my first trip to Russia, I had organised a packed schedule which involved spending six out of eight nights on trains - I thought this would be a great way to save time and money on hotel bills. On the fifth night I traveled from Moscow to Voronezh to meet a cryonicist who was conducting experiments with rats to see how they were affected by cooling to sub-zero temperatures. Unfortunately I was put in a cabin with three very drunk Russians, who kept me awake all night, by the time I

arrived at the cryonicists house I was absolutely exhausted. He gave me a warm welcome and said before I took any photographs it was important we got to know each other. He then proceeded to usher me into a pitch-black room where he sat me down for a two hour Chinese tea ceremony under candlelight.

IG: Do you have any personal interest in being cryonically preserved?

At the moment I have made no arrangements to be cryonically preserved. I came back from a two week trip in America a few years ago quite excited by the idea, but I didn't act on it. I guess I'm undecided. My main problem is I find it hard to shift the idea that we as humans have our moment in time and then we die and the earth is left for future generations. But as a cryonicist once said to me, "you need to be cryonically preserved in order to finish your photography project."

IG: Do you have any recommended reading to further contextualise the project? (Either generally recommended books for people to look into in their own time or books we could include on the reading table.)

The Prospect of Immortality by Robert Ettinger
Ending Aging by Aubrey de Grey
Engines of Creation - The Coming Era of Nanotechnology by Eric Drexler
The Singularity is Near by Ray Kurzweil
An Optimist's Tour of the Future by Mark Stevenson
How to Live Forever or Die Trying by Bryan Appleyard
The Scientific Conquest of Death - Essays on Infinite Lifespans - published by The Immortality Institute 2004

IG: What plan do you have for future projects?

At the moment I'm working on my first commission with Elliot Hammer, a graphic designer, the working title is: How to Genetically Modify a Tomato and Some Vegetables. We're going beyond the laboratory doors of the John Innes Centre - Europe's largest research centre in the field of plant science and microbiology. We're working with 3 scientists who are conducting experiments using genetic modification technology. In September, as part of the British Science Festival, we will present our findings.