

Artist Questionnaire

IG: Which artists/photographers do you particularly respect?

Presently, it must be Rob Hornstra. Hornstra's book 101 Billionaires is one of my favourite books of the last few years. Aside from his photographs, Hornstra has managed to create a way of working that maximises and incorporates sponsorship and support from a wide range of social media. He is constantly publishing and collaborating with writers and artists of different medium. His ability to fund his projects and reward his supporters makes for an impressive and inclusive relationship between his work the wider world. One can only be impressed.

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

For as far back as I can remember I've been taking photographs. The real break through for me came after I left school, I attended a one year photography portfolio course in Sallynoggin College in Dublin, I still remember being shown a book of photographs by Eugene Richards called Cocaine True, Cocaine Blue and being fascinated by the access the photographer had to this blighted community in 1980's America. I had never seen work like this before and it some way I became fascinated and inspired with its potential. In many ways I still feel the same about photography today. For something so common in everyday life, I feel its abilities beyond the aesthetically pleasing are largely misunderstood. Photography's possibility to represent and to relay an idea are endless, and this keeps me motivated to continue making new work.

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

In 2008, I was awarded a commission from a government body to create a photographic piece of work within the Muslim community in a specific area in Dublin. While this work was received well, the fact that it was jurisdictionally bound was problematic and for me this was not representative of the Muslim Community as a whole. Following this commission I set off around Ireland to meet various different Muslim Communities in both rural and urban areas. I was interested to see the relationship between multifaith communities within rural Ireland, areas of Ireland where older more Catholic traditions

would be more prevalent. Perhaps you could say that one of the main reasons for making this work was ignorance and a lack of understanding. I always tend to make work on subjects that I largely know very little about. This way I learn as I go, and the project unfolds and develops accordingly.

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

The photographic topographies of the Bechers have for many years been very influential on my practice. I seem to relate to the formal constructed and organised nature of their work as visual documents. The works of the Dusseldorf school of photography continues to be influential in my work, in particular Thomas Struth and Candida Höfer.

At the moment I am fascinated, influenced and inspired by the book, *The Pond* by John Gossage. Gossage envisaged *The Pond* as a book from the outset, and its a medium he has continued to favour over exhibitions. With the designer Gabriele F Götz, he set out to create a narrative landscape. "In literature, landscape inevitably becomes the setting, the background to the story," he says. "It isn't easy to do with language – landscape just isn't a literary mode. But it's a natural photographic mode – in photography, the landscape can be the primary subject."

Personally, I love the book's simplicity and the quiet beauty of his photography, which at first can be a slow burner, but it is a body of work that I find myself drawn to over and over again, perhaps I like to think of my own work in a similar way.

IG: How did you select the locations for the project?

The selection of the locations began somewhat by chance. As I travelled around Ireland meeting with various communities, we would inevitably meet in one of these spaces and each time I would arrive in one, I would have that same sense of familiarity: this space reminds me of an office or warehousing unit I once worked in, or my local community centre when I was a child. Once I realised that the project's strength lay within the adaptive reuse of these spaces, I set out compiling a list of names and addresses of these places and aimed to attend every single one.

IG: Why did you choose to photograph the spaces when empty, do you think the works would invite a different reading if the spaces were occupied?

I feel that the spaces being empty allow the viewer the opportunity to investigate and engage with the image. For example, if we look at the image 'Dundalk', as a viewer you're drawn to the details on the shelves, the digital clock, the tin of Quality Street sweets, the old gas space heater. For me these are the details that familiarise the viewer to the space and therefore build an association with this space. The realisation that the spaces in question are used for Islamic prayer perhaps forces the viewer to examine their own preconceived ideas and understanding. This allows this wonderful engagement to occur between the viewer and the image.

If there were a Muslim person praying within this image, I think this is all the viewer would see and the interpretation of the image would perhaps be too literal, thus missing a more layered reading and allowing the viewer that small moment of self reflection.

IG: Did you face any barriers to the project; did anyone object to you photographing their prayer space?

Surprisingly no. I think that this answer says more about my own stereotypical views I may have held about the Islamic community at the beginning of this project. Each community I dealt with were delighted to be part of this project. However, there was a Mosque in the Midlands, in a town called Portlaois that I never managed to get access to. This particular Mosque had various committees and decision-making bodies in place that quite frankly sent my request for access around in circles for best part of a year. So, it wasn't that I was denied access; it was more of a failure of their own bureaucracy. Following the launch of the exhibition and the publication, I was told that they were very disappointed not to have been part of the project.

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?

As a photographer, I continue to use film. For me the process of making an image using film is very different to digital. Because with film you cannot instantly see the result,

more care and consideration is used when composing the image. This makes the process slower. It is this type of care that I hope is reflected in each image.

To this day, there is still a sense of excitement and satisfaction when I collect negatives from the print lab. There is just something about holding the negative up to the light to see if it is a good as you remember, and you just cant do that with digital.

Camera: Mamiya RB67 (Medium Format Film)

Lens: Mamiya 65mm

Film: Kodak Ektar 120 (100asa)

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

Susan Knight, *Where the Grass is Greener: Voices of Immigrant Women in Ireland*.

John Gossage, *The Pond*, Essay by Denise Sines

Robert Adams, *Why People Photograph*

Philip Gefter, *Photography after Frank*

Rob Hornstra, *101 Billionaires*

IG: What plans do you have for future projects?

At the moment I am currently working on a project looking at the global Trade Union movement. Similar in style to *Making Space* and without alluding directly to the human involvement, the work attempts to offset the very public persona of the mass solidarity movement to a more organised constructed thinking within in an environment which serves to envelop the true workings of a powerful few. Add your name to the mailing list at www.noelbowlerphoto.com to be kept up to date.