

## Artist Questionnaire

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

**MP:** There are many, but top of the list would be my Magnum colleagues and friends Jim Goldberg, Trent Parke, Alec Soth and Donovan Wylie - all extraordinarily committed and creative people. And I have enormous respect for Martin Parr, both for his work over so many years, and for being the most generous man working in photography today.

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

**MP:** I trained as a painter. Then, soon after leaving college, I visited two key exhibitions. The first was a show of Mark Rothko's work; in order to get the most from his paintings it helped if you'd been trained in how to look at them, which I guess I had. The second exhibition was by Don McCullin, where I found a visitor was in tears, profoundly moved by the immediacy of the pictures. This 'democracy' of photography instantly appealed to me (and still does) and I knew then it was what I wanted to do. In those early days I wanted to change the world with my work, but now I'm much less idealistic, since I no longer believe photography can change very much at all. Now I'm happy with photography simply being what it is, which is fascinating enough.

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

**MP:** I'm an obsessive photobook collector, and they are a constant and profound influence on my work. I'm like a cook with a couple of thousand recipe books trying to prepare something new and original for dinner. Among the books I return to again and again are Stephen Shore's *Uncommon Places*, Joel Sternfeld's *American Prospects*, and Chris Killip's *In Flagrante*. These are all fairly obvious titles, but there are many others. My favourite book of last year was probably *Redheaded Peckerwood* by Christian Patterson, closely followed

by Watabe Yukichi's *A Criminal Investigation*, which both exemplify 'the book as object'. I also watch a lot of films and read a lot of books, but painfully slowly. I obsess a lot on tiny details.

**IG: What made you initially decide to photograph Poland and how have your perceptions of country changed during the course of making this project?**

**MP:** The work began as a group project instigated by Magnum: ten photographers, one sent to each of the ten countries that joined the European Union in 2004. I was lucky to be chosen for Poland, which was by far the biggest and most important of all those new members. It didn't take me long to realise that the single month I was supposed to spend there simply wasn't enough. I wasn't sure what exactly I wanted to do there, but I had a strong impression that it was something significant. And, having just finished a couple of other projects, I was ready to begin something else, so it was a case of *right place, right time*. Of course, over the past five years, I'm more familiar with the place; I've made some new friends and I even tried to learn a bit of Polish (easily forgotten!) so I didn't feel so hopeless. But, behind my camera, I tried to remain as detached as I could, since it was the only way I could make the work I wanted to make. While I might have started to have some understanding of *why* whatever I was looking at *looked like it did*, I was still a foreigner, a photographer from somewhere else, and that was constantly useful in my work.

**IG: This is the first time *The Sound of Two Songs* will be shown in the UK. Do you feel the work will be received and interpreted differently by UK audiences to visitors to the exhibition in Poland?**

**MP:** Probably, since the work received a lot of attention in Poland and opinion about it was split. But at least it got a reaction. I tried to be balanced in what I photographed, but some Poles were appalled that I made pictures of anything that wasn't brand new. One person even got angry that I'd photographed a tower block, even though there are tens of thousands strewn across the country. But, conversely, many others appreciated what I was trying to do, and

were happily surprised by the poignancy and beauty the pictures revealed in a landscape they had long since taken for granted.

In the UK I'm guessing there'll be interest from the many Poles who have settled here. But when all is said and done it's important to understand that I'm not trying to show an objective view; the work is not posing as what Poland *is*, and neither is it trying to define *what it looks like*. It's just one individual view, influenced by what I saw, the people I met, the doors that closed, and the others that opened.

**IG: How do you think your work might shapes people's perception of modern Poland?**

**MP:** Well, I'm not working for the tourist board, clearly, but I would hope that my respect and love for the place is infectious. It's truly a wonderful place to visit.

**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?**

**MP:** I use a 5"x4" plate camera. It's hefty, and comes with a big tripod and a dark cloth to disappear beneath. Such equipment, when used in public places, shouts out that there is a photographer present. You don't 'sneak' pictures in this way because everyone knows you are there.

It's resolution (it's quality) means that I can afford to keep a distance, because the details are still 'readable' in the final print. And although I'm defining the outer boundaries of what the viewer can see, perhaps what I like best about this method of working is the equality of the final picture surface. The 'landscapes' don't tell you exactly what to look at within the frame. Everything is sharp and therefore it could be argued that everything depicted is as important as everything else.

Another important factor in using this type of camera is the sheer cost; each exposure costs something in the region of £10. So, as you can imagine, this really concentrates the mind. As a result, I don't take that many pictures. But the discipline is something I enjoy.

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

**MP:** I love the novels of Olga Tokarczuk; she writes beautiful prose about very rural life.. Photographically, Jessica Backhaus's 'Jesus and the Cherries' is wonderful work (and the winner of my favourite book title in 2009). Norman Davies is one of the best writers on Polish history, despite being an Englishman.

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

**MP:** I'm in the midst of a new Polish project, provisionally titled *Mass*, about the Catholic Church in Krakow, where we are lucky enough to have a flat. It uses a number of different approaches, and is therefore quite a departure for me. It will be published later this year. I'm also working on a project in the Black Country, the area to the west of Birmingham, which will be shown in Walsall in July. It mixes stills with video and collected sounds, and investigates the thriving beauty and sex industries there. So that'll be sex and religion then!