View from the Chair

By the time you read this we shall be within striking distance of Concerning Photography, 16 – 17 May 2015 at Sheffield Hallam University. It promises to be an excellent weekend, and I hope that those of you who have booked thoroughly enjoy it. If you haven’t booked and you feel tempted, I am sure that there will be places available, although probably not at the dinner on Saturday.

The AGM in March was not well-attended as we would have liked. Pete James, the Curator of Photography Collections, was unable to speak or show us the Collections because he was taken ill shortly before the meeting. With staff cuts at the Birmingham Central Library there was no one available to take his place. I hadn’t been to the new Library before; it’s a splendid building and the room we had was excellent. There were two exhibitions available for members to see and several took advantage of the opportunity. I was delighted to be able to award Anne Crabbe FRPS a certificate and badge acknowledging her eight years plus of voluntary service for the RPS. This is a relatively new scheme introduced by the RPS for volunteers.

It has recently come to my notice that our Editor, Patricia Ann Ruddle has also been awarded a certificate for twelve years voluntary service to the RPS. In fact, Patricia’s contribution to the Society far exceeds that number of years. Our congratulations and thanks to both Anne and Patricia.

You may be aware that the Contemporary Group will be responsible for the RPS Photobook Exhibition 2016, which will be an Open and International Exhibition with a probable showing in London. The rules and entry forms will be available in due course.

Best wishes
Avril

Cover: Photomontage XVII, 2009-2010 © Melinda Gibson

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If you wish to submit articles for the Journal, please send all copy and images on disc to: Patricia Ann Ruddle, 28 Malvern Avenue, York, YO26 5SG. patriciaruddle@btinternet.com

Text should be in Microsoft Word and images are preferred in TIFF format, 300 dpi, file size guideline 10-20Mb. Images are also acceptable as high quality JPEGs, file size guideline 3-6Mb. For other formats, please contact the Editor. Large image files may be supplied on disc or by use of on-line large file transfer facilities. Unless requested, discs will not be returned.


Contemporary Group ethos - Photography that conveys ideas, stimulates thought and encourages interpretation; photographs ‘about’ rather than ‘of’.
“A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know.”

No answer was possible when I was asked several days ago “who’s your favourite photographer?” Our tastes and influences change continually; new photographers are always cropping up and old ones being exposed. However, when giving the question more thought, I remembered who was my ‘first’ photographer, the one whose work acted as catalyst, opening my eyes to what can be photographed other than holiday sunsets.

My initial grounding in photography came from a subscription to the Time Life Library of Photography. Do you remember those stunning silver-covered, black-bound volumes produced on different photographic techniques and genres? Through these books I discovered Diane Arbus, (1923-1971), the American photographer renowned for her portraits of those living on the fringes of society. Perhaps it was due to the adolescent angst that I was experiencing during those early years, when one feels alienated from family, or sees oneself different from what is considered normal. I didn’t know at the time that Arbus’ pictures were controversial. Her images, primarily square-format, head-on, confrontational, frequently with flash have been criticised for putting subjects in a negative light. Yet I was attracted to her photographs of society’s marginalised people because she perceived them as having value; the act of photographing them bestowed dignity. Arbus was able to portray the extraordinary as ordinary, and indeed, she made ordinary subjects seem extraordinary and often surreal when she captured them in everyday situations. It was Arbus’ strength to subvert what we believe to be ‘real’. Or acceptable.

Photography can do this. It seemingly represents the truth, but in reality it’s only a secret about another secret.

For more quotes by Diane Arbus see: http://www.johnpaulcaponigro.com/blog/12400/30-quotes-by-photographer-diane-arbus/

Patricia Ann Ruddle, Editor

September 2011 was an intense time of creativity and experimentation for me. As an artist in residence on Halsnoy, I had challenged myself to create work that would break away from my usual methodology and subject. I also wanted to create work that was more reactive and urgent, hence not shooting on a 4x5 film camera as I had been doing the past few years.

Halsnoy is a tiny island in the fjords of Norway and the remit of this beautiful residency was to be allowed freedom, time and space in creating the type of work that would mean something to me without any curatorial or commercial pressures.

Each day was a day of unearthing new images, as I chose a different road or dirt track to walk along, to discover the edges of the island by walking through forests and farms. I did not have a plan, a narrative or a subject; I wanted to be influenced by Halsnoy, its play of light, battering rain and its seclusion.

Ed. Note: Brijesh was the first winner of the annual RPS Joan Wakelin Award.

For more information about him and the making of the book Halsnoy Tales see: http://parchai.com/brijesh-patel/fine-art-photography/ He will be a guest speaker at this year’s RPS Scottish Region Dunfermline Weekend May 16-17. http://www.rps.org/events/2015/may/16/dunfermline-spring-weekend
Evacuees of World War II: With a Label on My Coat

Anne Crabbe FRPS

Ed’s story

I was seven or eight. Somebody said we’d declared war and we all had to sit very quiet while they had the old wireless on and twiddled the old knobs. I went with my mother and two smaller sisters to Tankerton, near Whitstable on the Kent coast. There were children from all round; they virtually bundled everyone away at that period. We went by train and then bus. We kept driving round this area - I can see it now - and dropping them off in ones and twos, but my mother wouldn’t be split up. I think we were virtually the last family on the bus and we were dropped off at this big house.

It had got a massive garden and it ran down to the sea with a nice swimming house at the bottom as you went out to the beach. We’d got our own chauffeur and if Mother happened to say to the maid that she was going to walk into town or anything, when we went to the side door there was the chauffeur waiting for us; I mean, we’d never been in a car before, and driven into town.

There was just one elderly lady on her own. We’d very rarely see her, perhaps when we were hustled upstairs or passed her dining room. We had all our meals with the maids and the cook and that down in the kitchen. Mother couldn’t stand it because, well in those days the cook and the maids, they’d all got their own jobs to do. They wouldn’t let Mother do anything, not even in the kitchen.

We didn’t know anyone else there and didn’t play with anybody. We used to play in the garden and the gardener would shout at us and Mother would take us down to the beach or she’d take us into town. We were right up in the attic and she had to go down to the basement to fetch a jug of water for us to wash.

She couldn’t stand it and we came home by train. I remember Dad coming down to fetch us and we went.

Editor Note: For more of Anne’s stories and photographs of those evacuated during the war see her Blurb book with the above title: http://www.blurb.com/b/4085222-evacuees-of-world-war-ii

Ed has no childhood photographs.
Images of Community: Sandford Millenium Green

Michael Woodhead ARPS

These images are about the making of a Devon village green.

The project came from a plan to provide a safe walking link between the villages of Sandford and Crediton. National Millennium Greens funding helped to make both the path and a permanent green and open space close to the village. Volunteers worked to clear and plant the space, and unpaid local people have maintained it for the past 12 years. It is open to everyone, and owned and managed by a residents’ trust.

The Green’s features now include ponds, hazel and willow coppices, an orchard of local apple varieties, a herb garden, a cob shelter, an open events area and an arboretum of native trees. The orchard provides cooking, dessert and cider apples for local use. The willows have become decorative structures. Volunteers meet for regular work days to tackle seasonal maintenance jobs.

The whole space is planned and managed to encourage wildlife, and the resulting informality gives the Green a deeply peaceful atmosphere, unlike most conventionally designed public parks and gardens.

The images express ideas of sharing and contributing for common benefit. They speak of work for community value without conventional direction or hierarchy, done for its own sake.

It might be objected that we do not actually see the people who have achieved this result. But I feel there is no need. You know them by what they have made. They look just like the rest of us.
Made Objects 2012

Tim West FRPS

With two small children at primary school.
A record of things we enjoyed making together.
Objects made at home to take to school.
Objects brought home from school.

Marking a momentous year
The Queen’s Diamond Jubilee.
The Olympic Games in London.
The excitement of Easter and Christmas.

Now stored away in the loft.
Their value to memory unseen now.
To be recovered in the future.
To recollect those simple pleasures.

MADE OBJECT VII (2012)
The Crocodile

MADE OBJECT III (2012)
The Robot
MADE OBJECT X (2012)
The Tubes

MADE OBJECT II (2012)
Easter Hat
Rocket to the Park  
Maria Falconer

‘Oh that’s exciting, where are you going? Are you going to the moon?’  
‘Oh no’ she said, ‘I’m going to the park!’

Welcome to a world where fantasy and reality co-exist, where sofas become mountains and dogs can fly.  
This project began in Oct 2014 and I believe it to be no coincidence that I had just completed an MA in Photographic Studies at the University of Westminster. Although I benefited enormously from the MA, it was an incredibly intense course, and I think it likely that Rocket to the Park came into existence - to some degree - both as a result of, and as a reaction to that experience.

Much of my previous work has been staged/constructed with careful consideration and planning given to all aspects of each image. In Rocket to the Park I worked spontaneously and used an iPhone camera. The process of letting go much of the control proved to be both enchanting and rewarding.  
In certain situations the iPhone aesthetic can be noisy, out of focus, colourful and unpredictable, thereby producing images that are a long way from accurate representations of reality (whatever that might be). So the medium lends itself to make-belief, encouraging our suspension of disbelief and drawing us into the magical world created by two young siblings in their environment.

The presentation of the work was also influenced by the aesthetic. Approximately 40 snapshot-sized images, roughly guillotined were ‘haphazardly’ arranged on a vibrant background.

And so we are invited to visit a place where anything is possible. Where fantasy becomes reality, a wolf trots obediently alongside a pushchair, ghosts enjoy tea and cake, and where the only way to travel is to make a rocket in your bedroom and fly it to the park.

Ed. Note: Images were exhibited at the 2015 FORMAT International Photography Festival.  
http://www.mariafalconer.co.uk/
These images were taken at the Inversnaid Photography Centre over a period of time, during annual trips every April, when a group of us met to exchange ideas and use its excellent darkrooms.

The house was built as a hunting lodge in 1790 for the Earls of Montrose. It is situated in the Trossachs National Park, overlooking Loch Lomond. I attended courses by well-known photographers, but at the same time it was good just to spend time there, doing what I loved most – working in the landscape. When the weather was not right, or the midges too bad, there was the opportunity to use the house for interiors or still life images.

I learned an enormous amount from the owners André Goulancourt and Linda Middleton, and from my friends as well. These photographs are from a handmade book that I produced at a tribute to those times.
The Influence of Iron in British Architecture

Jim Hampson ARPS

As a Consulting Engineer, periods of technological development, which changed the direction of architecture, have always intrigued me. A few years ago I decided to explore the influence of the use of iron in architecture.

Iron became popular in the late eighteenth century when timber sections became scarce. It was used with wide diversity including complete building facades as well as in individual elements. ‘All-iron’ facades did not become universally popular.

Industrialists then produced iron for building structures allowing stone to be reintroduced, this time only for cosmetic purposes. The image showing the three-bay window illustrates stone being used as a cladding material and in this case the iron structure is concealed. Larger windows were now possible, which was a previous limitation of load bearing stone. The concept became the precursor for curtain walling and the facades of modern times.

The iron era finally ended when steel, with its improved structural properties, became commercially viable. In a period of about a century, iron played a significant part in our heritage, and the experience of its use influenced building design of modern times.

For more information see: http://www.jimhampsonphotography.com/p84677089
Two things struck me the first time I saw this group of pictures. It reinforced my view that Launchbury is the same sensitive photographer and contemplative observer that he has always been, and that this body of work extends his observations into the whole question of colour. Recently, I happened across Chris Killip’s book Here Comes Everybody. Although slightly further out into the wind-swept Atlantic seaboard of both Ireland and Scotland. For myself, I had been drawn to Killip’s book and its cover, of a small boat and man rowing towards a jetty, and, knowing in my heart of hearts that my own output was moribund and indecisive, I simply said to myself “Why of course! Just get out there and take some pictures and stop gazing at your navel.” Although my current project is the Norfolk of my youth, like those of Killip and Launchbury, it too is the product of the on-going visit, the long-term view and the recording of continued and savoured emotions over a long gestation of time. And, as the creative process is a form of a very singular kind of sensitive use of its potential is to be applauded; yet there is a danger that it can meander into aspects of pictorialism. The suffused sunsets and the moon rising over the monoliths of Callanish readily illustrate this. Yet there is another side to his work that I find touching. There is a series of pictures at precisely the same site wherein the grouped figures stand huddled against the wind, taking readings, judging a break in the clouds, awaiting the ensuing moment, and in this process they acknowledge the wonder of it all. Within a radius of six miles there are no less than six sacred sites to be found. Whereas I can readily acknowledge indebtedness to Fay Godwin, where only the stones predominate, it is in the observation of varying groups of people in that enclosure that affords me the greatest satisfaction. This is equally true in other images for, like Godwin, Launchbury is not a chronicler of people in a landscape setting, yet nevertheless he is acutely aware of their presence within the landscape. There are elements here that I first encountered in his Cumbrian Coast Revisited essays, and in this regard, Launchbury, a most English of photographers, owes a great deal to an American influence stretching back to Paul Strand. This in turn leads to the distilled vision of Edward Weston and the American Group f/64 which gave impetus to the likes of Minor White, Harry Callahan and Paul Caponigro, and ultimately the sparse renderings of the New Topographics photographers, such as Lewis Baltz. Yet it is well to remember that of all these individuals, it is only Baltz who works within a similar manner to Launchbury - through the use of the finest film he can find and a miniature camera. True, the classical purists of Cartier-Bresson in Europe took a differing line, one that centred on fine art and the fleeting image, which was above all greatly influenced by the impressionists and Vuillard, who themselves owed a great deal to the field camera and its ground-glass screen. For all of them the ground-glass screen, of the larger format, through to the full rectangle of the Leica’s optical viewfinder, meant that the use of the standard lens was an essential part of the purity of vision and design within a rectangle. It once took the trouble, during one of my own Hebridean essays, to locate and find the ‘precise’ location where Paul Strand had worked. I tried to establish his most-used focal length. With my reflex miniature, variable
focal length, tripod-based camera, and with careful juxtaposition of the elements in the viewfinder and careful adjustment of the height of the lens, while comparing the image to that in Strand’s book Tir A’Mhurain, I could then adjust the focal length so that the edges of his photograph coincided exactly with the width seen in my viewfinder. On three separate instances the results were the same. For the 35mm format the focal length was in fact a medium telephoto – no less than 70mm. So Strand had no fancy array of lenses but just one with a focal length greater than a standard lens.) Thus it is that a similar way of working exists in Launchbury’s way of working and that, as in the Group f/64, the approach is to adopt materials and methods that allow the camera to be part of the creative method – careful monitoring of light followed later by precise development to control the tonal scale – all of these things are the basis for the rendering of tonal scale. In American large-format work this came to be known as the Zone System, with each value being measured, recorded and developed accordingly by marking up the film carrier with label and notes. The negative was of paramount importance as was the exposure, time and temperature of the development. Now in the twenty-first century this no longer applies and the bulk of photography exists without a negative, usually in colour. The computer screen replaces the ground-glass screen; the adjustment of values is made through the auto white balance in the camera and through the sliding adjustments on the monitor screen.

So this particular series of essays has a new dimension to consider. Above all, it begs the question as to whether the addition of colour is a positive choice. From the very outset I have to say – with reservations – just as the days of the considered negative are numbered, by the same token, we currently live in what can only be described as the ‘age of colour’. We see through our own eyes in values of colour; painters have always painted in colour. We watch colour films and television every day. With regard to the photographic image, the use of colour is only recent with the pioneering photographs and working methods of Joel Meyerowitz, Stephen Shore and William Eggleston. These realities should not restrict the other elements of the ‘expressive photograph’, for matters of exposure, density, tonal value and colour itself can all be vital elements of the expressive context. Overall, I feel that this work admirably affords a fresh insight to some of these issues. I
am drawn again and again to a similar response of my own to this landscape and yet, in the process, Launchbury has brought a very personal viewpoint to bear through his continued journeys. The incongruity of the beautiful landscape with the sheer detritus of the abandoned cars, rusting boats and handwritten signs all adds to this feeling. I feel that this is essentially ‘work-in-progress’ and I greatly look forward to the next chapter.

For further reading:
Launchbury, Keith: http://www.blurb.co.uk/b/5971796-the-western-isles-of-harris-and-lewis
Launchbury, Keith: http://www.blurb.com/b/4234026-cumbrian-coast-revisited
Songbook Alec Soth
Book Review by Brian Steptoe FRPS

27.28.5cm, 144 pages, 73 photographs, tritone printed, green canvas padded cover, published by MACK, January 2015

Alec Soth has said that he sees this as his most important photobook of the British viewer. We see activities that perhaps fill otherwise rather empty lives. Then we are brought up with a bang by an execution scene from Huntsville prison.

How was Soth able to find all these happenings? We may recall that best photographers are adept at getting luck on their side and being in a position to capture the luck when it happens. H. David Hurn.

An extensive interview with Alec Soth was published in the March 2015 issue of the British Journal of Photography.

The first major UK exhibition of Alec Soth’s work, including Songbook, will be held at the Media Space, London in Autumn 2015.

Concerning Photography weekend: Sheffield Hallam University. Speakers are Paul Reas, Melanie Manchot, Chris Coakin, Melinda Gibson, Zelida Cheater, Peter Mitchell and Liz Hingley. See RPS website for speaker details and suggested hotel: www.rps.org/special-interest-groups/contemporary/about/concerning-photography

Contact April Harris avrillharris@blueyonder.co.uk for reservations and bookings.

16-17 May
Contemporary North East meeting. Venue to be confirmed. Contact Patricia A Ruddle ARPS, patriciaruddle@btinternet.com, tel. 01904 783850

20 June
Contemporary East Anglia meetings. These will be in the Ipswich and Cambridge areas when arranged. The project underway is the The Ipswich Waterfront Development. Contact Tom Owens ARPS, tom@tjowens.com.

2 July to 31 March 2016
1DL tel 01449 612229

1 September
Conceptual and Contemporary Distinction Assessments for ARPS and FRPS. Fenton House, Bath. Applicants and observers may attend the Assessments. ARPS enquiries arps@rps.org
FRPS enquiries frps@rps.org

15 September
Contemporary Scotland. The Group will be holding a meeting at the Edinburgh Photographic Society in order to re-launch the Group. This is an opportunity to have your views heard and acted upon. An Open Picture Forum will be held for all to contribute - please bring your pictures.

Contact David Fells LIRPS david.fells@btinternet.com

21 July to 8 June
Contemporary North West meeting. Days Inn, Charnock Richard Services. M6 between J27 and 28. Starting at 1 pm and finishing at 4 pm. Contact Rod Fry rod@rodfry.eclipse.co.uk Tel. 01803 844721

7 June
Contemporary South West meeting. In Dartington, Totnes, South Devon. Starting at 10.30 am and finishing at 4 pm. Contact Rod Fry rod@rodfry.eclipse.co.uk Tel. 01803 844721

8 June
Contemporary North West meeting. Days Inn, Charnock Richard Services. M6 between J27 and 28. Starting at 7.30, this evening will be devoted to looking at members’ own work. Come along and show us what you are doing, and get feedback. See what everybody else is doing, and have your chance to comment. An evening for new ideas, inspiration and learning. New members are very welcome, with or without work.

Contact Ian Maxwell mail@ihmaxwell.com or tel 01524 770278

15 September
Contemporary South West meeting. In Dartington, Totnes, South Devon. Starting at 10.30 am and finishing at 4 pm. Contact Rod Fry rod@rodfry.eclipse.co.uk Tel. 01803 844721
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Liz is one of the speakers at Concerning Photography, Sheffield Hallam University, 16-17 May 2015
The front cover photo is by Melinda Gibson, who is also a speaker at Concerning Photography

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