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The Newsletter of the Royal Photographic Society Contemporary Group



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Editor, Romney Tansley ARPS

Design & Layout, Ken Holland ARPS

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Text in Word format

Images in jpg format at or near to a 2Mb maximum (no watermarks or virtual frames please)

[Guidance for Contributors to Concept](#)

Front cover: Tessa Mills FRPS



Editorial

You've taken that winning image. It came in for high praise from the camera club judge. Or perhaps it received a spate of likes and admiring comments when you posted it on Facebook. Even so, you realise that the job's not really done. Deep down you know that the concept is one you should try to turn into a more substantial body of work.

How do we assemble a body of work in which each picture makes its own distinctive contribution, which coheres in a meaningful way, and of which it can be said that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts? This of course is the challenge that we as 'contemporary' photographers are faced with on a daily basis.

In this issue we are treated to the work of three photographers who accepted this challenge in very different ways, with very different kinds of subject matter and with very different results.

The first two, Paul Ashley LRPS and Adrian Hough LRPS, used their work as a route to achieving an ARPS.

Paul fell under the spell of what he discovered when he visited a once thriving industrial concern in Blaenau Ffestiniog, North Wales. Slate quarrying reigned supreme in the area from the eighteenth century until the nineteen-fifties. Paul pictures what he found in the disused shell of the workshops, constructed from the very slate that they quarried. We see the heavily rusted remains of railway lines and ancient machinery, allowing us to reimagine what it might have been like in its heyday.

Adrian Hough was similarly bewitched, on a visit, by urban life as he discovered it in Nuuk the capital city of Greenland. His panel sub-titled, The Incongruity of Existence, contrasts 'the rock (and some ice) with the precariousness of nature and the transience of the products of human habitation'. The four pictures we feature from the panel, and others taken on the same trip, amply convey that sense of life lived on the edge, both literally and metaphorically.

How do we cope at a time of profound loss? How do we begin the painful process of reassembling a life in the aftermath? Our third photographer, Tessa Mills FRPS, the Chair of the Contemporary assessment panel, shows us how one person's photographic practice can help. 'Suddenly faced with trying to rediscover who, and what I was', she has created a set of images which she says, use 'visual metaphors to discover my personal world'. In photographs taken alongside a local canal, she includes her recognizable presence within each of them, in the form of her clearly identifiable shadow. Here is photography used not only as a tool of representation but a means of personal healing.

Finally it is good to be able to include in this issue a report by Tom Owens ARPS on the East Anglia group, which has happily survived lockdown, and also to have a first report by Steff Hutchinson from the Contemporary & Documentary Central Group.

Romney Tansley ARPS



View from the Chair

It's now almost a year and a half since the scourge of the pandemic hit us, fourteen months since the first UK lockdown, and still it dominates our lives. It is all too easy to get mired in the current situation, but I tend to be optimistic, my glass is always half full.

Looking Forward

We have to look forward. Our President, Simon Hill HonFRPS, and the Board of Trustees have over recent months created a Strategic Plan for the RPS entitled Photography for Everyone. If you haven't read the document, please take some time to do so as I am convinced that this is key to the future of the Society.

Key to that plan are three pillars encapsulated in the statement - Our Mission is, "To bring inspiration, creativity and connection through photography to people of all ages and backgrounds." I have highlighted the key words as they are shown in the strategic plan. If you look at the plan you will see that each pillar is underpinned by seven programmes, and I am certain that we can actively support as many programmes as is feasible. I will be discussing how we can commit to that with our Committee. If you have any suggestions as to how we can deliver at any level, please let me know at contemporary@rps.org

Zooming Along

As I've mentioned before, Zoom has presented us with opportunities to meet in geographical, pan-geographical and mixed disciplinary groups to share our work. I find that stimulating especially as it provides our more remote members to join in the discussions, and I suggest it will stay in place post emergency.

Our monthly talks are now planned until October as I recently said in a broadcast message to you all. Most of our talks are free and where we've had to charge, to cover costs, you can join for less than the cost of a cup of tea, I'd love to see more of you on the calls.

Getting Out

I do hope that when circumstances permit you can meet up and enjoy the community that we belong to. Perhaps this will happen before my next meander through my brain.

Until then stay safe and enjoy your photography.

Alan Cameron LRPS



My Road to ARPS

Paul Ashley ARPS

I achieved my 'L' in 2014, and although I saw no reason not to go to the next level, I had no immediate incentive to do so. I was pleased with what I'd done, but well aware that I had plenty of room to improve, and no particular concept of what project to apply with. Early in 2020 though, I was spending the weekend with a friend in north Wales. We visited Blaenau Ffestiniog, where I had a notion to take photos in the town, showing the hills and spoil heaps looming over the terraced streets. My friend had other ideas though, and from the car park set off up the steep hill, out of town. We marched through the quarry and on to the top of the hill. There we found the remains of the slate works. Once inside the buildings, I knew I had to record its memory – what it had been, what it was now and what it would become. By the end of the day, I also knew I would be back, and that it could be the looked-for basis of an Associate panel.



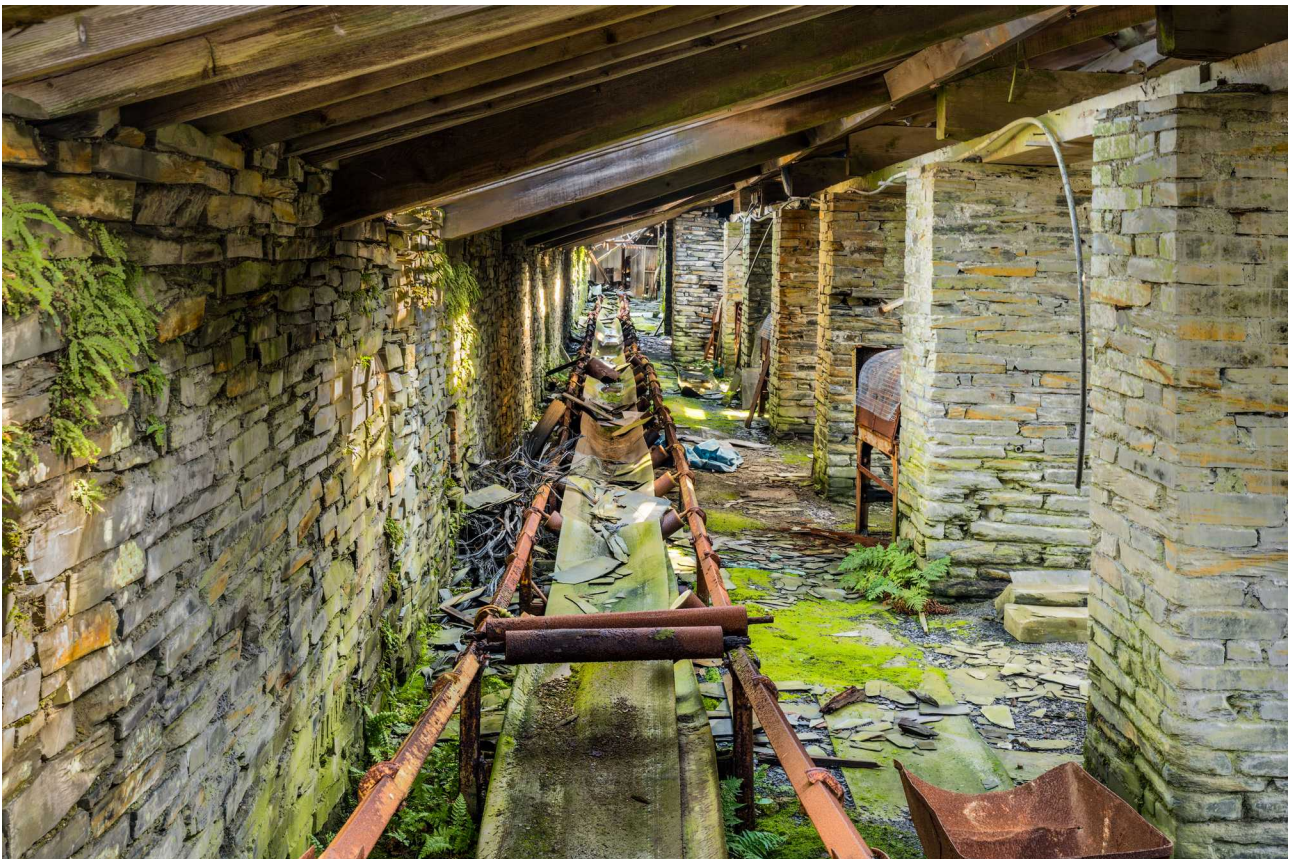


Over the next eight months I made four return visits, in dull grey and gloriously sunny weather, taking well over 1,000 shots, of which 373 remain. After the first two trips I was unsure which RPS category to apply for – Visual Art or Contemporary - so submitted a rough panel to RPS for advice. The response was clear: Contemporary. That gave me the focus I needed. I returned in September for two more days, with a good idea of the photos I was missing, and how I was going to take them. Later in the year I asked for 1-to-1 advice from RPS. That led me to rewrite my statement of intent, change a number of images, and then submit my prints. On 21 April 2021 my panel was approved – and I was happy.



So how did my panel evolve between my first visit through to submission?

Places of industrial decay have always attracted me, and the combination with the cavernous interiors, sculptural machinery and desolate location drew me immediately. I could have photographed in monochrome but chose colour from the outset. I shoot in colour by default, but have come to respect those who avoid it. Composition requires you to manage shape, orientation, placement, texture, tone, meaning, lighting and colour. All except the last two are typically closely related: get one right and you often find the others fall into place as well. Lighting, however essential, can be a distraction, so that is the challenge of monochrome photography: balancing the physical structure of your scene with its meaning and the lighting. Colour can be just one element too many, and one that may also be unrelated to the primary composition. A small brightly coloured food wrapper, however irrelevant in the scene, can draw the eye like a magnet. More fundamentally, an object coloured contrastingly from other elements can change the overall image balance dramatically. Far simpler to leave it out and shoot in mono. I envy those who compose well in colour.





Here, though, the orange rust, the green vegetation and the grey slate created a palette that was integral to the scene and what I wanted to show in it – I thought I could work with it. The images were processed in Lightroom (with occasional excursions to Photoshop). My initial versions boosted colour saturation and 'clarity' to high levels. After living with them for a while, and after I received the initial advice from RPS, which commented on the high colour, I pulled it all back. The final versions had little direct colour enhancement other than a boost to orange 'luminance', but relied more on contrast management. Most of the images were shot using long exposures, exposure bracketing, and the HDR-merge tool. This brought out the shadow areas with no loss of colour richness. 'Clarity' and 'sharpening' were set to zero in Lightroom, but my images were all run through Topaz Sharpen AI before printing – frankly it does a far better job than my own manual sharpening.



The structure of my panel was settled fairly early on as well, but added different levels of meaning as time went by. In the final version I wanted to depict a number of journeys from the top of the panel downwards and inwards: a physical journey from the outside mountainside through the open interior to the inner workshops; a journey in time of progressive disintegration; a journey of scale from wide view to close up; a journey of colour from dominant green and grey to dominant rust. Most of these notions were in my head when I made my last visit. I had headings for shots I wanted to take: 'distance view', 'closed-off view', 'machines', 'close-up'.



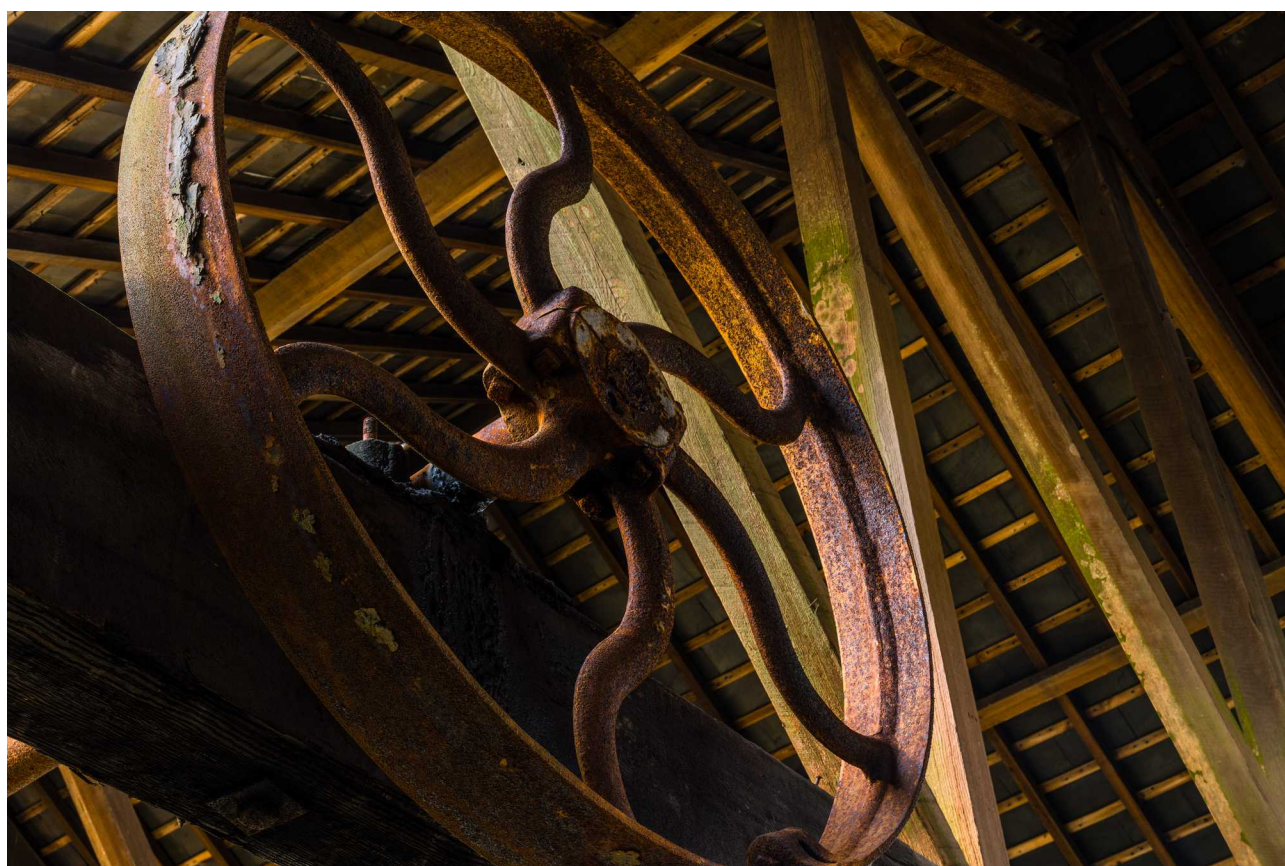


The idea of *Ozymandias* and the notion of fallen greatness struck me from the beginning. Blaenau Ffestiniog is proud of its history, but you are reminded throughout the town of what it once was – and is no longer. The first drafts of my statement of intent dwelt heavily on both Shelley's and Smith's poems – it was so poetic as to be unintelligible in relation to my panel, as was made clear in my 1-to-1 advice session! So I rewrote it (no more Shelley), telling observers exactly what I wanted them to observe, without scope for misunderstanding.



A challenging question I was asked in the 1-to-1 session was how my images show the photographer's personal eye or view: what made them *my* photographs, and not anyone else's? In assembling the final panel, I concluded it was partly in the use of low or unusual viewpoints for the machinery, and partly in the use of different sight lines, so that the eye is intentionally drawn in different directions in the scene. This remains a question I haven't answered to my own satisfaction though!











Hanging Plan



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Statement of intent

Blaenau Ffestiniog was once the slate capital of the world. Now the quarries are mostly abandoned, as are the works high on the grey hills above the town where slates were cut. My project reflects on the collapse and decay of the workshops and machines that were once so powerful.

My hanging plan follows a sequence both of exploration of the workshops, and of the weathering and disintegration of the machinery and buildings. I entered (top left) from the bleak hillside, by the doorway through which wagons once carried cut slates to the stockyards. The vast open space inside is crossed by tracks that reach to every corner. Their gentle horizontal curves are matched by the spindly vegetation that colonises the broken floor, swaying up to the light from the broken (slate) roof.

From one end of the dark roof space to the other extends the now motionless millwork that once powered the works. Following this to its source, I found the motor that once drove it, now just a shell. In smaller workshops are the heavy saws, the milling machines and the lathes, coated in rust, and looted for any valuable copper wiring.

Ultimately the metal rusts and turns to dust, dropping to the floor, and to the bottom of my hanging plan; the roof beams rot and fall in; the slates are stripped and shatter in the storms. I thought of Shelley's 'Ozymandias', but it is the poem of the same title by his friend Horace Smith that seems more appropriate.

'..... some Hunter may express
Wonder like ours, when thro' the wilderness
Where London stood, holding the Wolf in chace,
He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess
What powerful but unrecorded race
Once dwelt in that annihilated place.'



East Anglia Report

Tom Owens ARPS

Our last meeting was on Thursday 6th May, Meeting dates are always agreed at the end of the previous meeting. The next is on 3rd June. Our very small group normally meet on a Thursday at 1400 via Zoom invitation.

As with most of our meetings I update people with what I know of that is going on in the field of contemporary photography. At the last meeting we discussed my participation in the on-line festival put on by Photograd – a platform for UK photography graduates. Also up for discussion was my book review in the latest Journal as one of the group was one of the photographers in the book and it is fair to say that the review was a difficult one but had to reflect my perspective as a reviewer.

In the past we have been relatively active in exhibiting work in local galleries and the sequencing of serial lockdowns brings the topic of exhibiting up at more or less every meeting. The general consensus was that we needed to exhibit on-line but we also have a group blog that is not very well subscribed to and it was usually left to me to post content which does not really reflect group efforts so we settled on me setting up an Instagram account for members to tag with posts. It has only been set up for 24 hours at the time I'm writing this and our handle is @rpseacg. I now have to let our group know about this but we really need to settle on a theme so that at least posted content has some relevance to what we are about.

Progress on self-development was also on the agenda with Dr Paul Ashley ARPS progressing with his large format photography following an on-line tutorial that I gave back in February. The only thing holding us large formatters back at the moment though is wind and rain as the weather in these eastern parts has been fairly obnoxious for about the last 12 weeks or so.

Paul also updated us on his ARPS achievement based on his studies at the slate quarries of Blaenau Ffestiniog. We only number 6 in our small group but 4 of us hold an A and I'm looking forward to trying to get my mojo back by getting some headspace to research subject matter and locations to restart stalled projects.





Click on these links for more information...

[RPS Contemporary Group web page](#)

[Concept archive](#)

[Contemporary Photography archive](#)

[RPS Contemporary Face Book group](#)

[Contemporary NW Facebook group](#)

[RPS Contemporary Instagram page](#)

[Contemporary Group Exhibition 2020](#)



Greenland: My Route to a Contemporary ARPS

Revd Dr Adrian Hough ARPS

It was my wife Kathryn who decided that we should go to Greenland. One of her passions is long distance walking, preferably in wild country, and she wanted to walk the 'Arctic Circle Trail' which starts near the edge of the Greenland Icecap and ends on the west coast. The walk typically takes about ten days and passes through an area which is totally uninhabited. I flew out a week later than she did in order to give her time to get going and then spent my first six days in the capital and largest city of Nuuk (population c18,000) before flying north to Ilulissat (the third largest town with a population of c4800) for an eight day stay. My wife joined the plane en-route.

In passing it's worth noting that most of the population of 56,000 who live in Greenland, reside on the southwest coast and that there are no roads between the settlements most of which are many hundreds of miles apart. In an island over ten times the size of Great Britain the only transport is by sea or air. The daily wide-body flight from Copenhagen, which brings in the vast majority of visitors and air-freight, arrives at the former military airfield at Kangerlussuaq which has the only suitable long runway. Onward travel to the various final destinations is by thirty-nine seater twin turboprops. The principal attraction of Ilulissat lies in its Ice-fjord, a sixty kilometre long fjord full of icebergs all waiting to escape into the Atlantic, together with the whales that feed on the fish that gather in the area.

Before I travelled I had planned to direct my photography towards images that would enable me to put together a Panel to submit for an ARPS in Travel Photography (I'm a member of the Travel Group as well as the Contemporary Group). However, once in Nuuk I discovered that although a travel panel was eminently possible, there was also a highly significant issue concerning housing which would lend itself to either Documentary photography or Contemporary photography. Flat land is scarce in Greenland and when Nuuk started to expand from its 1960 population of just over one thousand the Danish Government felt that the solution lay in building blocks of flats. Flats are still built and have indeed become the answer to the housing crisis but the early ones were eminently unsuitable for accommodating people who had previously lived a nomadic existence and needed somewhere to, for example, dry their fish. Today, Greenland is an autonomous part of Denmark, albeit not within the European Union, and so can make its own decisions.





New flats under construction near the centre of Nuuk



A hut at Ilimanaq, on the other side of the ice-fjord from Ilulissat



The following week, and now located in Ilulissat, it became apparent that Landscape Photography (or more accurately Icescape Photography) was also a possibility. Just in case you are wondering, I wasn't equipped for serious photography of whales nor did I have the time or necessary skill. However, I did discover that Greenland provides a wonderful location for a wide range of photography, especially as it has not been visited a great deal and thereby become a clichéd destination as has happened with various other places around the world. This situation may change as two new runways are being built which will improve access and allow direct flights to both Nuuk and Ilulissat rather than having to change planes on arrival at Kangerlussuaq.

As a result of these developments and discoveries, I eventually arrived home with material suitable for submissions in about four different 'genres'. I know that many of us don't regard Contemporary Photography as a genre but rather as a way of photography which crosses the boundaries of all genres. I use the term here simply in the way the RPS uses it to describe submissions for distinctions.

I'm not claiming that they would all have been successful, only that the possibility existed. So I played around with the images. My instincts and interests lie somewhere in the interface between Contemporary and Travel so that was the direction in which I was heading. It was also the area where the images seemed to be the strongest but I couldn't get the concept right for a Contemporary Statement of Intent. I couldn't work out what my photographs were about rather than what they were of. This impasse was solved by the discovery that the bedrock in southwest Greenland is amongst the oldest rock in the earth's crust having formed some 3.7 billion years ago. It was this fact that led directly to the title for my Contemporary submission, namely 'Greenland – The Incongruity of Existence' contrasting the rock (and some ice) with the precariousness nature and the transience of the products of human habitation – primarily housing. I've appended the Statement below.





Secondary school and bus stop at Qinngorput, a new settlement near Nuuk



A view to the west from Ilulissat



By now Covid restrictions had taken hold and at the time of writing none of the members of the Contemporary Southwest Group have actually seen physical versions of my many and various images. However, the pandemic did create the opportunity for official RPS one-to-one feedback and advice sessions through the use of Zoom and I availed myself of this service. The advice provided at my two sessions was both excellent and kind without being in any sense directive and I learnt a great deal in the process. There then followed the final cropping and the adjustment of tones to ensure that there was no mismatch between the different images. This was followed by the printing and search for artefacts, both digital and physical, especially those annoying bits of things which have a habit of creeping into the edge of an image rather than hiding away underneath the mount.

Of course, with all of the assessors bar one sitting at home and looking at the images digitally, I also had to upload high quality digital images for them to consider. In so doing, I re-cropped so that the uploaded image matched the visible mounted image rather than including all the bits which were printed but hidden under the edge of the mounts. I finally reached the point where I could not realistically do any more and sent the portfolio off with the courier and uploaded the images and paperwork.

Come the day there were fifty of us watching on Zoom. My own submission was the fifth for consideration and so by the time it came round I was very familiar with exactly how the process would proceed. The Assessors heard the Statement of Intent, then viewing the hanging plan before viewing the individual photographs. The process was then repeated. One assessor was physically at RPS House to check the quality of the physical images. However, there was one unexpected consequence of the assessors looking at the images individually rather than in the context of a panel of fifteen images as would have happened had they been able to meet in Bristol. My first image was of a block of flats and this was not what most people expect to see when they look at photographs about Greenland, especially as I had not needed to refer to them in my Statement of Intent. With this method the choice of image 01 may be more significant than if a panel was viewed solely as physical prints.

Finally, a few words on the images. The four illustrating this article are from my panel. Those following the statement of intent, illustrating icescape, travel and different aspects of housing, were in there at one point or another before I made the final selection. The



whole panel will be the subject of my Contemporary Group online talk on Monday 18th October in which I will expand on this article and take an in-depth examination of all the actual images which I used.

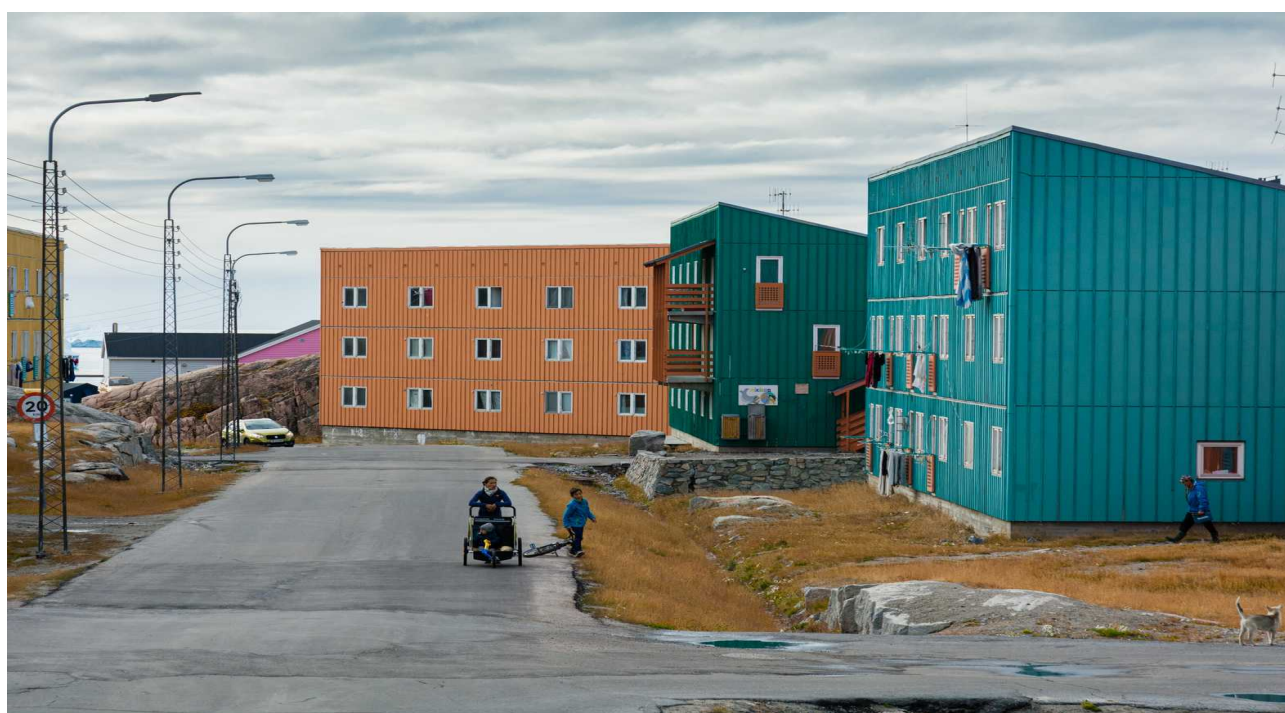
Statement of Intent

Greenland – The Incongruity of Existence

Greenland is the world's largest island, composed mainly of pre-Cambrian bedrock, some of the oldest in existence. It is covered by a large ice-cap with only the small, mountainous, coastal area becoming free of snow during the summer. It is a harsh and challenging place, with just 56,000 inhabitants who live primarily in the south-western coastal strip. In photographing this region I was struck by the way in which the buildings stand in marked contrast to the rough and ancient rock surrounding them as if placed onto its surface. Hemmed in between mountains and sea, human architecture can feel and appear transient irrespective of its age.

Unlike the bedrock, human presence in Greenland is transitory. Rock and ice provide a constant reminder that whilst the human population comes and goes, the island remains. Through juxtaposition of ancient rock and human habitation, these photographs illustrate this vital truth and provide a visual statement of incongruity and disparity; of permanence and mutability. My images capture the transience of human habitation in a land dominated by other facets of existence. They highlight the precariousness of life and demonstrate that buildings are mere scratches on the surface of reality. Despite the vibrant colours provided by the trappings of modern life, the underlying rock remains unchanged.







Rediscovering my Personal World

Tessa Mills FRPS

For the last 2 years, as my husband came to the end of a long illness, I nursed him at home. After he died in February of this year, I was then suddenly faced with trying to rediscover who, and what I was, with regard to photography (and life as a whole!). In the short excursions that lock-down presented I began making images, using visual metaphors to rediscover my personal world.

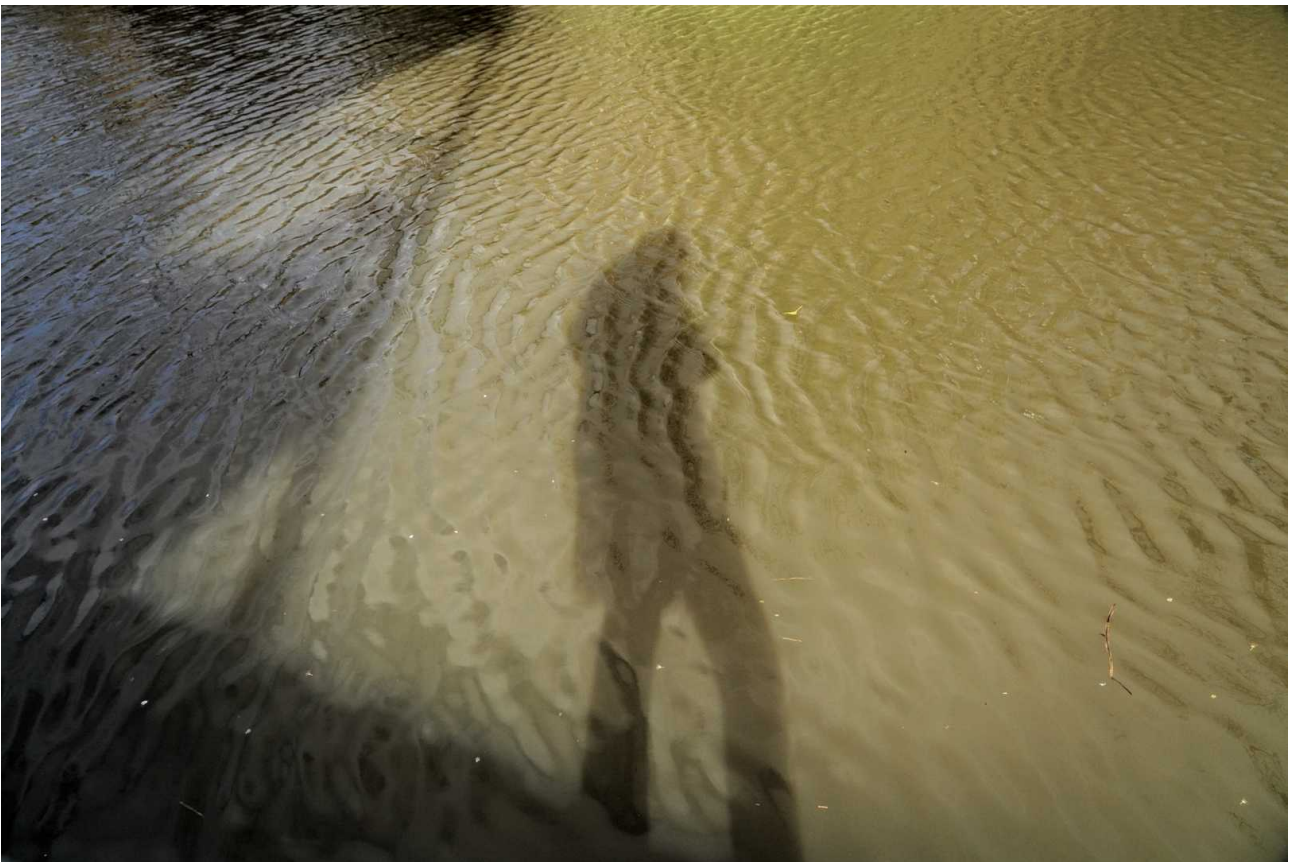
Overall, shadows confirm my physical presence and provide me with a visual exploration of the complications faced by my emotional chaos.

The Worcester canal offered a comfortably distorted reality that reflected the surface of my own world. This was a place that I needed to simplify to begin to find my own way. The harsh brick shadows resonate with barriers and difficulties.

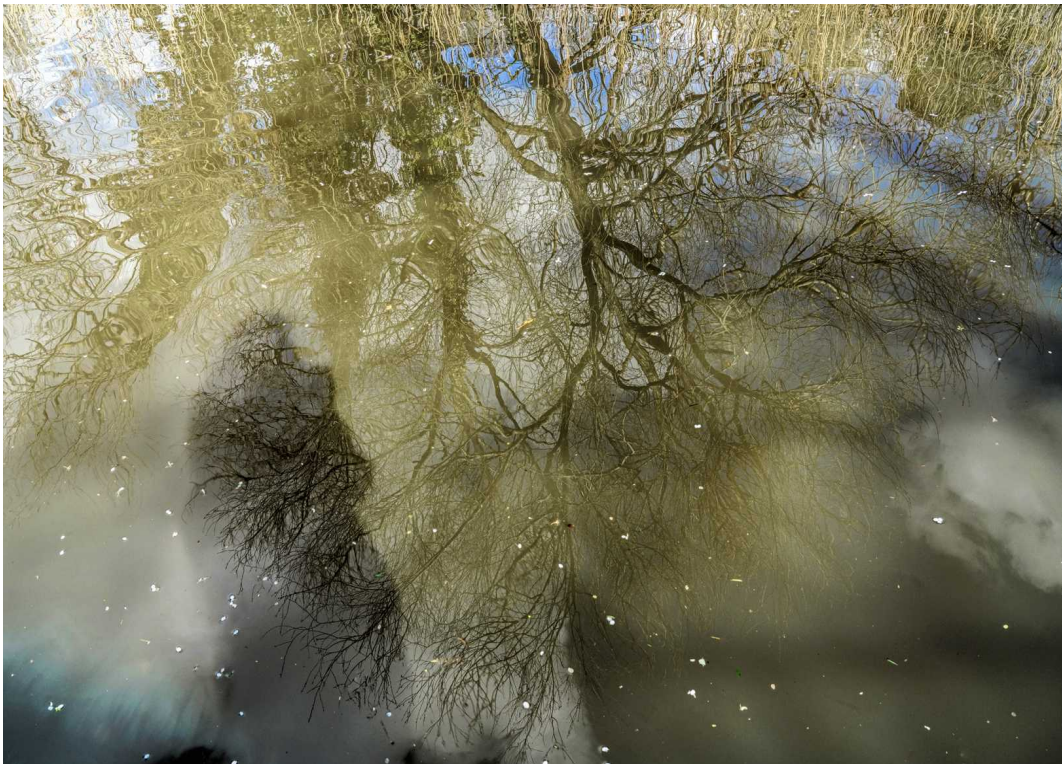
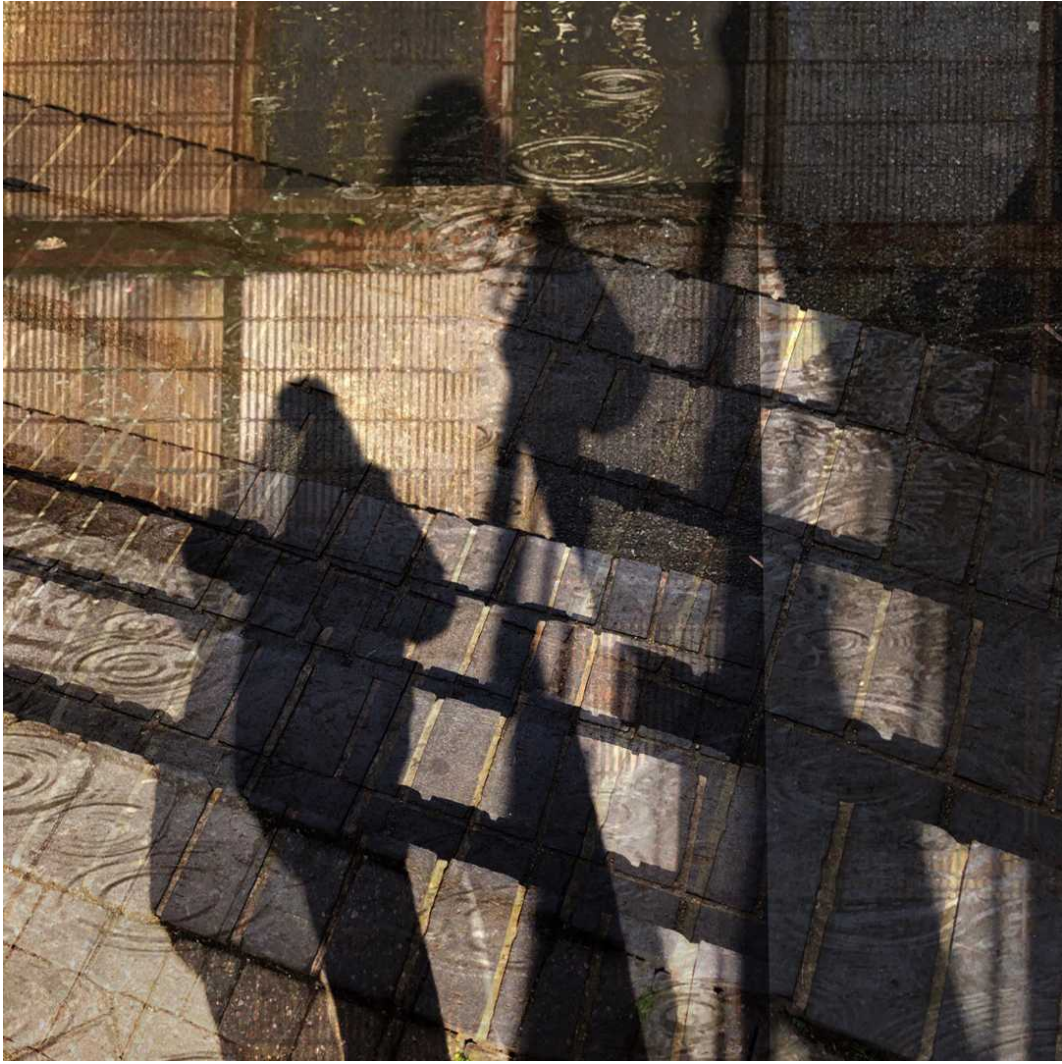
The last 3 images are made using an iPhone double exposure app (PhotoSplit). Here I am beginning to take back control and am finding a new creative purpose.

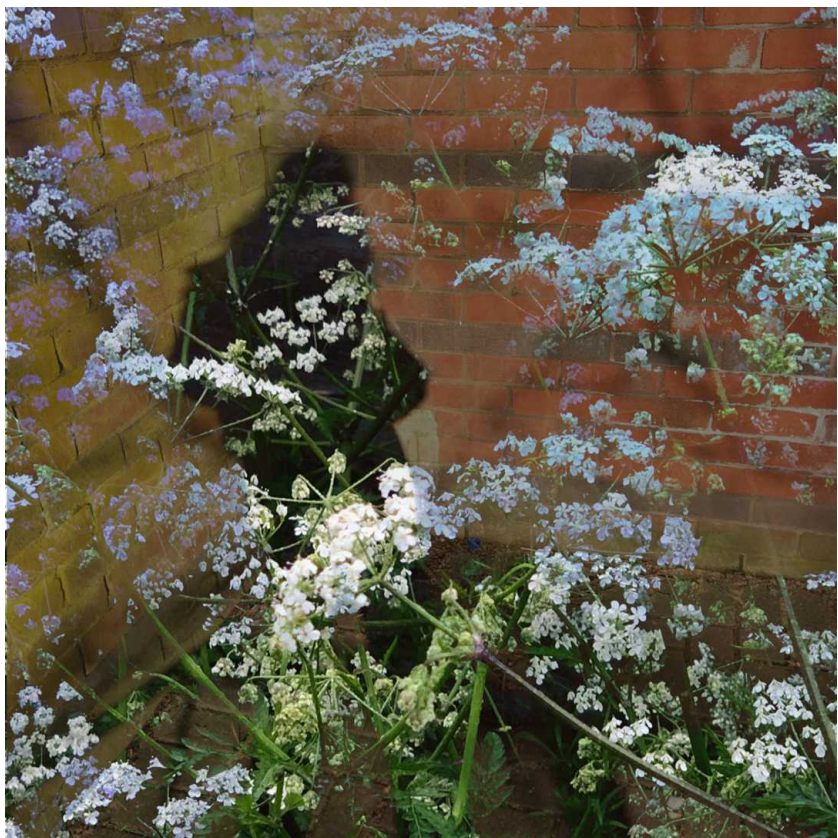
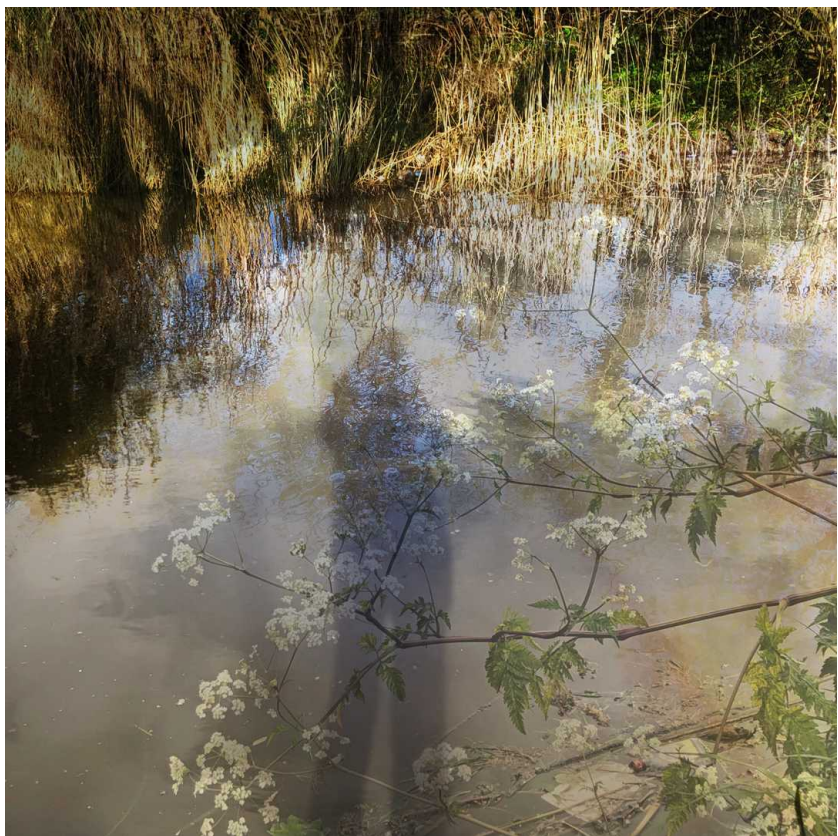


I have explained my images in a visual sense, but the process itself has helped me to accept my reality as a widow and a single person. Through the intuitive taking of images I explore what is important to me. The resulting graphic designs enable the satisfaction of reacquainting myself with the circular process of finding/taking/viewing images, and are proving to be scaffolding around which I can rediscover my creative life, and indeed my life as a whole.









Central Contemporary / Documentary Group report

Steff Hutchinson

At our recent meeting 6 of the participants shared the impact of the last year on their photography. Interestingly, the most common impacts were a change of normal location, as people were obviously restricted in where they could go, and a switch to mobile phones instead of/as well as more traditional cameras. Because of the restrictions, there was also a tendency to experiment with new ideas in order to carry on creating interesting images, and to revisit locations and subject matter with a more finely attuned sense of perception.

I shared my 'journey' from documenting my local nature reserve to images created in the same location using the BlendCamera app on an iPhone, which enables in-camera double (or multiple) exposures. The first of the three images is from late January, and is from my nature reserve project. The other two images were taken in early May using the app. They were then edited in Lightroom, printed onto canvas and stitched into with needle and thread, to add a human touch to what could be an automated process

Our next meeting is on Wednesday 9th June at 7pm, where those who have not yet shared the impact on their photographic practice will do so, and three other members have already offered to share current projects. The Tim Hetherington discussion has been postponed, probably until September.







What makes a Photograph stand out

I'm grabbed by images that are not too busy.
In general I'm drawn to clean lines, rich colours and graphic compositions
that are not muddled with too much going on at once.

My favourite works draw the eye to different points around the
photograph without immediately overwhelming the eye.
To me, imperfections, or things that may feel a little 'off',
are what often make the strongest photos.

Excessive retouching or overly polished images take away from the
integrity of a subject and dilute the authenticity and artistic perspective
involved in creating it.

Advice for New Photographers

Shoot often and with lots of different people.

Find your style, but don't be afraid to deviate or shift.

A strong body of work evolves over time
as the person grows personally and within their art.

Sara Zion
British Journal of Photography
Issue 7900





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