

Contemporary Photography

A collection of the best of new Contemporary
Photography from the UK and around the world



Issue 92
October 2023

THE RPS
ROYAL
PHOTOGRAPHIC
SOCIETY



© Jakub Knap

Front cover
© Maria Falconer FRPS

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Contemporary Photography

Contemporary Group ethos - Photography that conveys ideas, stimulates thought and encourages interpretation; photographs 'about' rather than 'of'.

This publication is produced by the Contemporary Group of the Royal Photographic Society.

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Editor Paul Ashley ARPS
Designer Christine Pinnington LRPS
Proof Reader Ann Cameron

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Paul Ashley (Editor),
59 Gilbert Road, Cambridge CB4 3NZ
paultheashley@gmail.com

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Deadline for the January 2024 issue is 1 December 2023.

Editorial

On 24 February 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine, turning local, national, European and global certainties on their head. As I write, 18 months of war have passed, with no end in sight. The devastation is unimaginable to those of us in more secure places. So is it insensitive to ask, with a professionally self-absorbed mind, how photography can convey the excitement, the human theatre, the spectacle? I hope you can see that the key phrase here is 'self-absorbed'. Take away the inward look and ask instead how photography can respond to the needs of others: lucidly and graphically explaining the reality of events, human stories and effects. At the onset of such a cataclysm the need may be for reportage, penetrating the "fog of war" just by being there. Later, there is time to develop an understanding that behind the headlines there are both broad themes and local, individual stories to be communicated.

Maria Falconer and Paul Hill travelled to Ukraine with one aim: to cast the light of their photographic talent on how one group of people, professional dancers, have responded to war and attempted to support their country. As a dancer and dance photographer herself, Maria had no need to win the confidence of those she worked with, nor to understand their profession. The results of their work are both moving and, in their context, disturbing – as they should be.

Jakub Knap has looked at the other end of the human story of Ukraine: those who left as refugees and have settled, for the moment, in the UK. As a photographer I believe, in theory, that a picture is worth a thousand words, but here the stillness of his portraits is illuminated by the written stories of uprooting and flight.

Marc Lathuillière gives a voice to those in another conflict; he also, literally, gives faces to those who are faceless in their struggle to defend their lands and communities from conflict in Colombia. Both words and pictures are important to them as well. Katya Leblond uses few words, but they are important. They are counterparts to her inner feelings expressed in small groups of images centred on the loss of an idyllic upbringing.

Loss and death are not hidden but to the fore in Subhodeep Roy's studies of the burning ghats of Varanasi. They suggest that combining a spiritual task (liberating the soul of the deceased) with a supremely practical solution to dealing with the consequences of death is a way to help the left-behind cope with their loss.

Paul Ashley ARPS, Editor

How Do You Dance in a War Zone?

Maria Falconer FRPS and Paul Hill FRPS

In March 2022 I dropped into an online conversation hosted by Dance Base in Edinburgh. It was part of their Catalytic Conversions series, a platform for international dance professionals to connect and explore contemporary issues. One of the speakers was Ukrainian dancer and choreographer Viktor Ruban, and given that Russia had just invaded Ukraine, the conversation naturally turned to this atrocity.

When I first posed the question to Viktor “how do you dance in a war zone?”, I really wasn’t prepared for his response. The enormity of the question took him a little by surprise and after a brief attempt to provide a simple explanation for such a complex event, he neatly batted it back to me with an invitation to visit Ukraine to see for myself. The resulting exhibition is the culmination of two trips to Ukraine (Lviv and Kyiv) by two photographic artists, myself Maria Falconer, and my partner Paul Hill, in collaboration with Viktor Ruban, sound artist Grigory Semenchuk and an amazing group of Ukrainian contemporary dance artists.

Often when people think of dance, they imagine something rather poetic involving arabesques and pirouettes. But this notion couldn’t be more at odds to the stark form of resistance presented by the Ukrainian dance community.

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Here we found the powerful medium of dance operating in the most extraordinary and unexpected ways. During our time in Ukraine, we witnessed professional dancers performing live on stage in theatres doubling up as bomb shelters and refugee centres. We observed performers using movement and dance to express their emotional, psychological, and visceral reactions to the Russian invasion, and we saw local dance organisations providing support to the wider community. Dance therapists work with traumatised soldiers recently returned from the front line, and professional dancers practice military drills as they train to become soldiers. We visited a dance school whose upper floor had been converted into an international fund-raising centre to raise money to buy boots, uniforms, and weapons for the military.

The collaboration between the military and dance communities was remarkable, particularly in Kyiv, where dancers train volunteer soldiers in movement skills required for combat, such as dropping to the ground with ease and stealth, rolling with a rifle, and coordinating simultaneous mental and physical tasks. And in return, the military teach dancers how to fight.

Participating dancers were invited to respond to the question “how do you dance in a war zone?” not with words, but through language of the body and movement. Each location used was chosen by the dancer for its pertinence to their individual experience of the Russian invasion.

See: mariafalconer.co.uk and hillonphotography.co.uk



Larysa

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Larysa



Mariya



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Mariya



Soldiers



Christina



Viktor



Taiysia

Varanasi: A Place Where Death Is Celebrated

Shubhodeep Roy

Varanasi, the ancient city nestled on the banks of the Ganges River, has long been hailed as a site of pilgrimage for Hindus. Within its boundaries lies a unique perspective on the relationship between life and death - one that diverges from the conventional view. In Varanasi death is not feared or shunned; instead, it is celebrated as an integral part of the human experience, making the city a fascinating destination that challenges our understanding of mortality.

At the heart of this perspective are the cremation ghats. These open-air cremation grounds, perpetually enveloped in the flickering flames of funeral pyres, embody the eternal cycle of life and death. Death is not hidden or kept behind closed doors; it is embraced openly, and the fires burn ceaselessly, a constant reminder of life's transience.

Enhancing this profound connection with mortality is the sacred Ganges River. Hindus believe that the waters of the Ganges possess purifying properties and that being cremated and immersed in its holy waters in Varanasi leads to liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Along the bustling ghats, the immersion of ashes and the performance of rituals and ceremonies create an atmosphere that blurs the boundaries between the living and the dead.

Varanasi's allure as a spiritual pilgrimage site is reinforced by the belief that dying within its boundaries grants liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Elderly and terminally ill individuals arrive in Varanasi, seeking solace in its hospices and homes for the dying, patiently awaiting their final journey. This unique tradition exemplifies the city's harmonious acceptance of the inevitable end, where death is not feared, but rather seen as a gateway to a higher realm.

The remarkable relationship between life and death in Varanasi prompts introspection on the fleeting nature of our existence. The vibrant tapestry of bustling life alongside the rituals and ceremonies of death serves as a constant reminder of the impermanence of all things. Varanasi invites visitors to contemplate their own mortality, offering a profound opportunity for personal reflection and a renewed appreciation for the preciousness of life. It celebrates the circle of life, teaching us that in death, we find not an end, but a transformative beginning.

I shall come back and keep coming back to Varanasi, so that I can sit beside the Ganges, and absorb this serenity, and because nowhere else on earth do fire and water receive such celebration as in Varanasi. I was amazed by the secrets that this ancient city still holds.



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Cremation at the Ghats of Varanasi



Devotee



Ganga Aarti



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Eternal Flame



Passage to Heaven



Salvation

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Devotion



Life along the Ganges



Peace

Persistence: 'Road of Life'

Jakub Knap

My photographs are a collaboration with Ukrainian families who have sought refuge in England due to the devastating impacts of war. These families, each bearing a unique narrative, embarked on a traumatic journey to find comfort and security in an unfamiliar country. I shed light on their stories, presenting a collection of portraits and interviews that explain not only the families as a whole but also the defiance of individuals who have fled their homeland. I also incorporate archival images from the period leading up to and during the war, offering glimpses into their cherished memories of home. By shedding light on the human side of conflict and displacement, my photography aims to foster empathy, understanding, and action, ultimately contributing to the collective efforts of building a more peaceful world.

See: jakubknap.co.uk

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Natalia



Natalia's daughter

Natalia

We moved to England on the 11th of July 2022. Natalia worked as a professional video editor at a TV channel, right in the centre of Ukraine, and it was her favourite job. Her life was stable until the war began. After losing her job, Natalia made a difficult decision to leave her country. "It was scary to leave Ukraine, to stand at the train station waiting for the train while hearing sirens. There were a lot of people at the station. My child was one and a half years old at that time, and she cried all the time. It was very difficult." She was in Warsaw, Poland for two months trying to resolve visa issues in order to be able to travel to England. After obtaining the visa and arriving in the UK, she was greeted by her hosts who were very kind and helpful. "They took care of me and my daughter. I miss my family and friends. I miss the culture, the mentality because they are close and familiar to me. I miss my house, cat, and dog."

Max

The second day of the war I left my family to help. There was no public transport and I had to get to a given location but someone stopped and dropped me off. The next day, I grabbed my stuff, got ready and went to a military checkpoint. The city is empty. We became the defence of Kyiv. One of our tasks was to go to a hill and defend it. I became commander and had 10 soldiers with me. After repeatedly carrying heavy artillery, I started to feel pain in my hip until it was destroyed. I couldn't fight anymore, and there are others, younger and more energetic men who can replace me. I had my hip replaced in the hospital, but at the same time, my friend was there, also injured. They barely managed to fix him up. The hospitals have almost no medical supplies. I had to retire, and then in February 2023, I was given permission to return to my family and finally see them.



Max

Iryna

A lot of work and earning money for our children. It was a good life. We had a plan for the future - to travel, and it was time to spend more time together with my husband Max, children, and relatives. About 3 months before the chaos started, I got a new job as a general manager in an international company. Early in the morning, we woke up to explosions. Max's brother called to inform us that the war had started and advised us to take the children and leave the city. I looked outside and saw people moving quickly and packing their belongings. Traffic jams were everywhere. After watching the news, we heard our president making an announcement that the war had begun and urging all of us to stay strong and stay safe. The war started, and it was a dreadful and terrifying time. I can't imagine what can happen in this country. It feels like you've lost your life. We were looking for shelter, sleeping in underground car parks. "It's unfair." Another country is taking away our freedom. We lived in a village near Kyiv for a month and found a support page from the UK, thinking it would be much safer there. The village was not safe for us, our car had no fuel, but after finding fuel, we headed west and reached Varash, where we stayed for two weeks. After that, we travelled to Poland, where we received assistance from a company in Krakow. Every day we lived in fear of explosions. It took us 50 days to obtain visas, but in the end, we got them. In Poland, our children were anxious, but once we moved to the UK, they calmed down. There were so many changes in such a short time. In general, I miss our country because it is my birthplace. I miss my relatives and friends. I miss Ukrainian communication in Ukraine, I want to hear my own language again. I miss Ukrainian food, I miss our nature.



Max, Iryna and family



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Max, Iryna and family from archive



Max and Iryna's children

Thanks to the support of the British people, my kids and wife were in a safe country, while I was defending our motherland - Ukraine. It was paramount for me to know, my family is protected.

Thank you for that!

Thank you for being on the bright side, on the side of good!

Together we will win and overcome evil!

I believe our kids will live in a better and more peaceful world.

Max

10/05/2023

La Brise Emporte Les Maux

Katya Leblond

La Brise Emporte Les Maux (the breeze takes away evils) is about the impact of a forgotten past event on the construction of personality. The photographs, in pastel tones, have a dreamlike quality. They speak of my birthplace, Brittany. It's a place to which I was very attached when I was young. It's a way for me to belong to something when the family is deconstructed. I also represent my special bond with nature, which reassures me in the face of human beings, a complex element of understanding in my eyes. Loneliness is something I seek to highlight in my photographs, but also, through video, a rougher mode of expression: video is the key to understanding. It breaks the magic of the images. Full of aberrations, I scream out my malaise.

See: katyaleblondphotographe.com
and [@katya_lbd](https://www.instagram.com/katya_lbd)

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Aude à la nature





Cercle sans fin, à qui la faute, Te perdre pour mieux retrouver



Le corps est une memoire que seul le temps comprends





*Bretonne en papier,
Feuille emportée par la brise
Rien pour se rattraper*

*Bretonne sur papier,
Le pied est posé*

Luces Distantes

Marc Lathuillière

Interlacing creation and resistance, *Luces Distances* (distant enlightenments) is an alliance Marc Lathuillière has developed with Afro-descendant communities of Urabá, an area of deforestation and armed conflict over land control in northern Colombia, on the border with Panama. The process integrates three vital elements: visualisation of their struggle, protection of their lives, empowerment of their structures. They feed a constant co-invention of new media of environmental resistance associating photographs, films, writings, social networks and performative forms.

The three communities in which the project was initiated in 2020 - La Madre Unión, Pueblo Nuevo and Camelias - belong to a constellation of fifty 'Humanitarian and Biodiversity Zones'. Enclaves forbidden to any arms-bearers, they are a form of pacifist structure chosen by these descendants of maroons with the help of the Colombian human rights organization Justicia Y Paz. It is a fragile and courageous strategy to resist armed groups that have been taking their lands for the last 25 years, forcibly displacing villages, and clearing jungle and wetlands to develop livestock farming as well as banana, oil palm and coca plantations. Hosting 11% of the species of birds of the planet, Urabá remains one of most humid and bio-diverse areas on earth.

To express their eco-resistance, the first photographic series of the project, in 2020, attempted to present the villagers not as isolated and recognizable individuals, but as members of human and non-human collectives: notably in the 'environmental portraits' of the *Cuerpos Y Plantas* (Body and Plants) series, polyptychs combining photos of parts of their body, plants they chose to represent them and texts handwritten on textiles.

Since 2022, the project has focused on the Biodiversity Zone of La Madre Unión, whose leaders Hector Perez and Digna Castaño invited Lathuillière to help their budding agro-environmental association, a response to dangers on their land and lives that had become pressing, urging them to speak out. The artist replied to this request with an empowerment of their group, renamed Guardianes Madre Árbol (Guardians of Mother Tree), working on the co-design of its identity (logo, clothing, capacity building...) and on its media and artistic visibility. This birth is recounted in a documentary fiction - in which they wear calabash masks before removing them, daring to speak openly.

See: www.lathuilliere.com



Soy del Territorio de La
Madre Unión.
Mi alias "E".
Mi pelo que tanto quiero
me produce de deseso
al gobierno le exigo.
Lo primero que me tiene
Mi Tierra que tanto
quiero.
Le pido este árbol de
Guamo que me represente.

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Alias E

I am from the Madre Unión territory.

I call myself "E".

My hair, which I love so much, drives me
to despair.

From the government, I demand first of
all that it returns my land,
which I love so much.

I ask the ice cream bean tree to represent
me.



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SOY DEL TERRITORIO
DE LA MADRE UNIÓN,
ZONA DE BIODIVERSIDAD.
MÍ NOMBRE ES: ALICIA.
ME IDENTIFICO COMO UN ARBOL
DE PERA. NO PUEDO SER
FOTOGRAFIA EN UN IMAGEN
DONDE SE PUEDE RECONOCER
MÍ ROSTRO O IDENTIDAD..
LEVAMOS MÁS DE 5 AÑOS
EXIGIENDOLE AL GOBIERNO
QUE NOS ENTREGEN NUESTRAS
TIERRAS PARA SI PODER
VIVIR MEJOR....
SOY UNA BOCA Y QUIERO
SONREIR LIBRE Y EN PAZ.

Alias Alicia

I am from La Madre Unión territory,
Biodiversity Zone.

My name is: Alicia.

I identify myself with the rose apple tree.

I cannot be photographed in an image
where my face or identity would be recognized.

For more than five years we've been demanding
from the government the return of our land,
so that we can live better.

I am a mouth,
and I want to smile free and in peace.



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Naci y vivo en la zona
humanitaria de Pueblo Nuevo
Mi nombre es "AMOR"
Llevo esta mascara para prot-
eger mi identidad y mi vida.
Con esta hoja de Yarema me
identifico como parte de mi -
Territorio.
Y quiero enviar este mensaje al
estado porque:

- * No nos apoya
- * No nos da seguridad
- * No nos protege, ni nos da protección
- * No hay un Centro de salud
- * Poca educación y oportunidades
en cuanto a todo etc.

Alias Amor

I was born and I live in the Pueblo Nuevo Humanitarian Zone.

My name is "Love".

I am wearing this mask to protect my identity and my life.

With this snakewood leaf, I identify myself as part of my territory.

And I want to send this message to the State, because:

- It does not support us
- Does not make us safe
- Does not protect us
- There is no health center
- Limited education and opportunities in general...



"SOY DEL TERRITORIO
DE LA MADRE UNIÓN
MI ALIAS. ES LUCHA-
DOR DE TROYA."

"NO PUEDO HABIAR, AUN
TENIENDO VOZ. MAS PUEDO
PENSAR, Y NO PODER ACTUAR
ME HAN HERIDO DE MUER-
TE. CONDENANDOME AL SILEN-
CIO AUN TENIENDO VIDA."

"LE PIDO AL ARBOL DE TOTUMO
QUE ME DE UN FRUTO, PARA
QUE ME REPRESENTÉ. ATRAVES
DE MI MASCARA, EN NUESTRA
ZONA DE BIODIVERSIDAD."

Alias Luchador de Troya

I am from the the Madre Unión territory.
My alias is Trojan Fighter.

I cannot speak, although I have a voice,
and if I can think, I cannot act,
They have wounded me to death,
condemning me to silence,
although I am alive.

I ask the calabash tree to give me a fruit so
that it can represent me as a mask.
In our biodiversity zone.



Guardianes Madre Árbol



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"In the end, it must be the whole of the earth, all the faces and all the livings that protest against violence, it is necessary that insurrection itself is made world in order for the minorities to haunt the oppressor, for these minorities to be everywhere and nowhere, in the sweet pea, the bamboos, in water, in hands, mouths and arms. In his assemblage, Lathuilière is then able to produce a collective body that is composed of human forces, voices of justice and poetry, of animal forces, of the presence of plants, and of the powers of the earth. In that the artist himself is only an intercessor, a spokesman in the literal sense of the word."

Fares Chalabi, philosopher

Years Like Water, by Nadia Sablin

Book Review by Alan Cameron ARPS

Some documentary photobooks open up new worlds and cultures. *Years Like Water* is firmly in this group along with notable collections such as Salgado's *Workers* and Li Zhensheng's often horrific *Red-Color News Soldier*.

Sablin presents the reader with a fascinating narrative set in the village of Alekhovshchina, (home to her grandparents) combining change and development as children grow within the stagnation of village life. On one side we see the young people behaving much as they do in many communities, growing from childish play through the dawning of sexuality, prom dances and on to (possibly unplanned) parenthood and early marriage. On the other side middle aged parents cope with raising a family in straitened times, but getting some release by attending dances in the local hall, just as their own parents will have done.

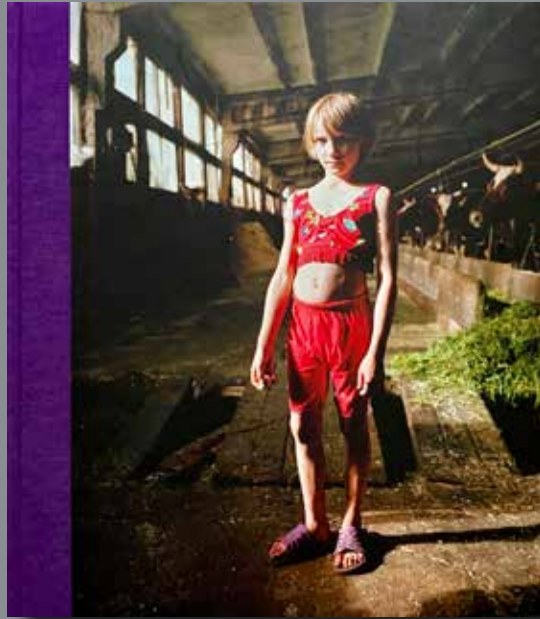
Alekhovshchina is a six hour bus journey from St Petersburg, and is only one among many other villages scattered across that vast country. *Years Like Water* helped me realise how huge Russia is and how neglect and isolation can affect people. This little community is so like the rural Ireland I knew of the 1950s and 60s or like the South Uist of Strand's *Tir A'Mhurain*: full of proud people with limited resources, cut off and remote from the centres of power.

I enjoyed navigating a fascinating saltatory journey of specific lives within the linear story, using the thumbnails in the index to identify individuals. My favourite is Vika Ivanova who features on the cover as a child, and as a married woman in the penultimate image. What comes across is the inner strength of the young women and their mothers, while the men seem less capable.

The life choices for the young are stark. Irish rural poverty could be escaped either by education (church controlled) or by leaving for the UK or USA. In modern Russia, with its tanked economy and its tightly controlled education and media, options to escape are limited. Emigration is not easy and is expensive, but joining Vladimir's army is a common way out of rural poverty for young men. Sadly, the painfully young Alyosha Savelyev looks lost wearing parts of his uniform: in one image he wears his dress shirt and, in another, he sports his cap and vest whilst sitting on his bed with childish pictures behind him. One wonders what 2022 brought for him and his family.

This sense of being left behind by the world is well articulated in this fine intimate chronicle of rural Russia. Only time will tell whether things will get better for the people of Alekhovshchina.

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View from the Events Secretary

Mike Kitson LRPS

I am one of the newest additions to the committee of the Contemporary Photography SIG. And so, probably as I was still standing when the music stopped, I became the Events Secretary!

Firstly, a little about myself ... after six years, I'm a relative newcomer to the RPS. I was lucky enough to achieve my Licentiate distinction fairly early on, though Associateship is proving rather elusive so far! But I'll keep trying.

I classify myself as an outdoor photographer (whatever that may mean) with the additional clarification that "I don't do people". I also collect and make photobooks. My preferences, whether in taking or viewing, are towards images that make me think – something that asks or begs questions, or that is slightly out of the ordinary; so, anything from totally abstract through to monochrome landscapes. This is why I find contemporary photography so appealing – there are questions, and they don't necessarily have answers.

As my photography practice has progressed, I find working with concepts and projects to be far more stimulating than just single images. A purpose when going out with a camera means that I can avoid aimless wandering and the resulting frustration. Projects I have explored include dry stone walling competitions, a psychogeography of 'home', a view of a high street seen through shop window reflections and, recently, exploring the manmade aspect of the Lake District National Park, both historical and contemporary.

One of the added benefits of my role as Events Secretary is that I can explore and interact with photographers across the world. Our programme is designed to bring to your attention new photographers and their approaches. We refer to these sessions, all on Zoom, as 'in conversation' as opposed to a pure showing of images coupled with a one way talk.

As well as the conversational sessions we are also introducing member focused events, such as the forthcoming 'PechaKucha 10x30' and a brand new 'Contemporary Challenge'. It is through events like these that we can aid and inspire each other in our various practices.

If there is any particular photographer, project or approach that any of you would like to see included in the forthcoming programme then please let me know (see my contact details opposite).



© Mike Kitson LRPS

Committee and Contacts

Chair	Tom Owens ARPS contemporary@rps.org
Secretary	Tim Hancock ARPS contemporarysecretary@rps.org
Treasurer	Alan Cameron ARPS contemporarytreasurer@rps.org
Webmaster	Sean Goodhart ARPS contemporaryweb@rps.org
Postal portfolio	Duncan Unsworth duncan.unsworth100@gmail.com
Journal editor	Paul Ashley ARPS paultheashley@gmail.com
Concept editor	Vacancy concepteditor@rps.org
Events Secretary	Mike Kitson LRPS contemporaryevents@rps.org
North group organiser	Patricia Ruddle ARPS contemporaryne@btinternet.com
Eastern group organiser	Tom Owens ARPS contemporaryea@rps.org
Central group organiser	Steff Hutchinson ARPS info@steffhutchinson.co.uk
North West group organiser	Alan Cameron ARPS contemporarytreasurer@rps.org
South West group organiser	Adrian Hough ARPS contemporarysw@rps.org
Journal Layout Editor	Christine Pinnington LRPS photopinni@btinternet.com

Group meetings

The Contemporary Group continues to hold meetings online and, where possible in person. Keep an eye on the RPS website, Concept and the group Facebook page for forthcoming events.

Regional meetings

Contemporary East. Meetings are held online on the first Thursday of each month in the afternoons. The regional online exhibition 'Waldo' is now live: go to www.artsteps.com and search for 'Waldo'. Contact Tom Owens for more information.

Contemporary North. Meetings are held monthly live at Clements Hall, York, and online, on Saturdays. Contact Patricia Ruddle for more information or see the RPS website.

Contemporary South West. Meetings are held regularly, online and in person. Contact Adrian Hough for details.

Contemporary Northwest. Meetings are held both in person and online. Contact Alan Cameron for details.

Contemporary Central. Meetings are held jointly with the Documentary Group on the second Wednesday of the month at 7pm, online. Contact Steff Hutchinson for more information.

RPS Contemporary Group
rps.org/groups/contemporary

Contemporary Group Events
rps.org/events-listing/



Morning Saga
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