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Saturday 9 June 2012

amateur Photographer

THE WORLD'S NO.1 WEEKLY PHOTO MAGAZINE

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The power of black & white

Toby Deveson's raw and honest black & white photographs portray life simply but beautifully. **Gemma Padley** talks to him about his working processes and the enduring power of black & white film

TOBY Deveson is on a mission – a mission he has been on for many years and one that he is still committed to. This mission is to champion the importance of film processes and to keep the medium firmly in people's minds. Ever since he was given a Nikkormat 35mm camera with a 24mm lens for his 18th birthday, Toby has dedicated himself to the art of black & white film photography. Using Kodak T-Max 400 film and the same camera and lens since he started taking pictures, Toby has travelled to countries such as India, Bulgaria, Canada, Romania and Italy, photographing everything

from the landscapes he passed through to children playing along dusty lanes, bustling street scenes and religious festivals. In an era of digital imaging, Toby's aim is to do all he can to keep film photography alive and flourishing.

As he puts the finishing touches to his first solo exhibition in London for 20 years, Toby reflects on what black & white photography means to him. 'Black & white film was what photographers used originally,' says Toby, who lives in London and works as a freelance television camera operator. 'It was the entry point for photographers

who wanted to experiment and learn about the craft of photography. I love the tones, contrast and grain. The photographers I admired include Josef Koudelka, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Sebastião Salgado and Mario Giacomelli. I was drawn to the timelessness and strength of their images.'

AN EYE FOR BLACK & WHITE

Toby believes that black & white 'strips' the image down to its most basic components, revealing the geometry of composition, texture, atmosphere and tone – elements

Above: River Yamuna, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, India, March 2011



'The absence of colour allows the viewer to connect with the fundamentals of the image'



Top left: Barbara,
Piemonte, Italy,
April 1995

Left: River Yamuna,
Vrindavan, Uttar
Pradesh, India,
March 2011



Above: Holi Festival, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, India, March 2011

Left: Holi Festival, Banke Bihari, Vrindavan, India, March 2011

he believes are crucial for an image's success. The 'ambiguity' of black & white imagery became apparent to him after he returned from a trip to India to photograph Holi, the festival of colour, last year. 'Some people asked me, "How could you take images in black & white of a festival that is all about colour?" But shooting in black & white allowed me to concentrate on people's emotions. The absence of colour allows the viewer to connect with the fundamentals of the image and the story the photographer is trying to tell. The purity of emotions is, I believe, far greater in black & white, whether the images are taken in a war zone, are simple portraits or landscapes.

'It is important to have your own style,' he adds. 'Black & white suits my taste and style as an artist. I've always been drawn to it because it's the way I see.'

The ability to see in black & white is a skill that can be learned and honed, says Toby. 'You can train yourself to see shapes and textures that will have impact,' he says. 'I also think there's a lot of benefit in studying other photographers' work to find out what you like and don't like, and to ask yourself why. Ultimately, it's about being able to self-critique your work. Photography is, after all, a journey of self-discovery and self-expression.'

SHOOTING APPROACH

There is an affecting immediacy to Toby's work, and many of his images are taken close up to his subjects with a wideangle lens to accentuate the feeling of being among the action. 'The 24mm lens triggered a lifelong passion for me,' says Toby. 'I still use it to this day for every photograph I take. I find it a flexible lens and I like the viewpoint it gives.' Toby makes sure he has the image exactly how he wants in-camera and, where possible, places himself in the middle of the action. 'Just a slight change in the height or angle you shoot from can drastically change a picture,' he adds. 'I think it's important to be involved in what you're photographing. You have to pour your heart and soul into the picture.'

PRINTING EYE

Photographers often talk about having an 'eye' for a picture or developing their 'compositional eye', but there is also such a thing as a 'printing eye', says Toby – in other words, training your eye to refine how you print an image in the darkroom.

'It's one thing taking the pictures, but quite another printing them,' says Toby. 'When I'm out photographing, I don't know how the final prints will look. If you're shooting in a fast-paced environment, for example, it's a case

PRINTING THE IMAGES

IN THE early days, Toby set up his own darkroom in a 'damp basement' and 'was soon addicted to the alchemy of intoxicating smells and mysterious light'. Over the years, he has had various darkrooms in the places he's lived and three years ago he decided to set up a dedicated darkroom again. He uses a Durst M670 BW enlarger. 'I print my own photographs and never crop them,' says Toby. 'I'm meticulous about keeping my negatives in order.'

'I like to keep things simple. For me, it's about having tools I can rely on so I know what the result is going to be. That's why I use the same camera and lens, and the same chemicals. I've tried several different types of chemicals and papers over the years, and it's a case of finding the ones you like and feel comfortable with. I use Kodak HC-110 film developer, then rinse with plenty of water and fix with Ilford Hypam. For the prints, I use Agfa Neutol WA developer, then a standard stop bath, either Kodak, Ilford or own brand, and Ilford Hypam again to fix. The paper I use is Fomatone 532, a warm fibre-based paper. I used to use Kodak Ektalure, but Kodak stopped making this so I had to find an alternative. I have reprinted any old images that were printed on the defunct paper.'

Once he has developed the films, Toby makes contact sheets – a necessary, albeit mundane job, he says. 'Making the contact sheets is a bit of a chore, but you have to do it to know which images you want to print,' he says. 'I'll make test strips [to work out the exposure time for the print]. I don't make notes, although I probably should, but 90% of the time I will know what I have to do to get a print right. It usually takes about three attempts to make a print, and there are no hard and fast rules. I tend to work quite instinctively. Once I have the final print, I will scan it with a standard flatbed scanner and use Photoshop to bring the scan as close to the final print as possible. From there, I take full advantage of the digital world using emails, websites, Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and other tools to showcase and disseminate my work.'



Left: Gemma, Piemonte, Italy, August 1993



Above: Roman, Neam, Moldavia, Romania, September 1992

Below: Galata, near Iasi, Romania, April 1992



'Digital technologies are fantastic, but to me there is something extra special about an analogue print'

of reacting to something and there isn't time [to contemplate how you might make the print]. I like to draw the eye to part of an image and then to something else,' he continues. 'Each image is, to me, its own self-contained inner world. It's about taking the eye on a journey around the image. This is something you can do at the printing stage by bringing out certain parts of the scene, albeit subtly.'

WORKING ON THE NEGATIVES

Choosing not to scan his negatives, Toby makes his prints in the wet darkroom, scanning the prints later (see page 29). 'To my mind, scanning a negative is a waste of time,' he says. 'If you're already working [with film] and have access to a darkroom, why not make the print? I don't believe you can create that beautiful analogue feel when scanning and working on a negative digitally. Digital technologies are fantastic, but to me there is something extra special about an analogue print.'

Every negative requires a slightly different level of care and attention. Although each negative is printed differently, there are certain things he will do when making a print that are universal. 'I tend to slightly darken the corners of the image,' he says. 'I'll usually need to hold back a little on the faces and may burn in the sky a little. I'll

make a test strip, then an almost full-sized print, which I'll study to decide what areas need dodging and burning. There is no such thing as a perfect negative. All images need a degree of dodging and burning. I love the journey of producing a final print and would not want to forego any part of it. I am also a control freak and would not trust anyone else with my negatives. Printing an image in the darkroom is a powerful and ultimately hugely rewarding experience. The frustrations, effort and time required to get to the print, from loading the film to touching up the final print with a tiny paintbrush, are all worthwhile.'

For a time, the future of film looked uncertain, says Toby. With most photographers opting to shoot digitally, he feared for its future. But, he says, things are picking up. 'People seem interested in finding out about the origins of photography,' he says. 'We're in an exciting and revolutionary time photographically, and I think it's important for photographers to be aware of past practitioners who have worked with film, and the lessons we can learn from them in terms of film and darkroom techniques. It's not a case of longing for the good old days. It's about embracing and celebrating all that photography has to offer, drawing on and learning from what has gone before.' **AP**

To see more images by Toby, visit his website at www.tobydeveson.com