Coming up for air

Stephen Gill’s photography reflects a wide range of interests, from birds, animals and music. Lowenna Waters speaks to this most contemporary of artists

I stumbled upon the work of Stephen Gill at a frenetically busy book fair at the Whitechapel Gallery, East London. He was holding a slide show and talk about his work, which introduced me to his diverse portfolio of photographs. He works as a professional photographer, and is internationally recognised, holding shows at The Photographers Gallery, the V&A, The National Portrait Gallery, the Victoria Miro and Haus Der Kunst to name but a few.

His passion was sparked after an unconventional education where he was able to take photographs and watch hours of art films. He gained an internship at Magnum and continued to work there, eventually setting up his own practice. He is articulate with the lens and has become well known for his multiple series’ of works in urban landscapes, particularly in Hackney Wick, the borough where he lives.

When he was very young, he used photography to indulge his interest in the natural world, and after moving to London, the relationship between the natural world and the urban landscape became a distinguishing theme within his work. “Originally my interest in photography stemmed from nature, birds and animals. Moving to London and living a quite full-on inner-city life left me craving nature. I think this is most apparent in the Hackney Wick series. Nature was kind of the driving force behind it and the contradictions of an intense dusty pace and the power of nature and the beauty of the surroundings.” He continues, “Londoners often talk about getting away, but for me, it was the desire not to leave or turn my back on London, but really to try to explore it, even though it is full of these contradictions.”

Another body of work that deals directly with this juxtaposition is the series ‘Birds’. “That series was almost like a visual game, but that theme was definitely there. It’s a body of work about birds, and that was the key subject but, in the end, the human element creeps in far much more and almost surrounds their presence. That was something I liked the idea of, stepping back and almost questioning
Questioning photography as a medium and becoming aware of its potential weaknesses is something that has affected Stephen’s method of conceptualisation for his more recent projects. “Photography is so often about self-control, wanting to convey or put across your thoughts: photographing how you imagine things to be rather than how they are. We all have these national visual identities and I think it is dangerous how they are carried over the years. Part of me is aware of photography’s weaknesses as well, and I try to diffuse this by stepping back and having less control whilst still steering a thought and whilst tuning down photography’s brilliant descriptive abilities. Now my photos have less visual information, and that information is replaced by a thought or a feeling about a subject.”

Some of the first bodies of work he produced were made whilst travelling through Poland and Croatia. There is a stark difference between these pictures and his early photographs of London, which he explains.

“Photographing in Croatia and Poland in the late 90s was loose, incredibly loose. Then jumping from that to very rigid description of members of the public listening to music, for me it was the beginning of me trying to dip my toe into photographing London. The only way I found possible was to choose subjects as narrow as people listening to music, or travelling by train or just the back of advertising billboards. It is so visually stimulating and overwhelming; your mind is just dancing all over the place.”

His photographs are unmistakeably hauntingly beautiful, and I wonder whether this is a consideration when composing a shot. He takes photographs that are appealing to him in some way, but never considers how others might judge the image. There is often a dichotomy between the subject of the image and its representation.

“For example, with the betting slips, they are a small visual protest against the proliferation of betting shops in economically deprived areas. But the resulting pictures are actually quite beautiful.” There is an element of social commentary or reportage to his work, exemplified in the images taken at the Sunday market in Hackney Wick. “It really was an eye opener; the market was not luxury shopping, it was survival and it was extreme. It was everything London is often described as; a melting pot for all these different nationalities. It was special. A lot of people really missed that market.” There is also an element of obsession in his work – he returned to that area three or four times a week for four years.

Unbeknown to Gill at the time, shortly after the production of the series, the whole market and area of...
London was to undergo serious construction and demolition: it is the site for the Olympics. “When I started that work, it wasn’t announced that it was the Olympic site. Now it has become even more strange because everything is deleted. It is quite bizarre now looking at them.”

Photography can be used as a record. I would never have known about that dynamic chaotic heart to Hackney if I had not come across his work. “I love that idea of photography’s ability, kind of turning a place inside out or scooping up some of East London, then dropping that in a book that then falls in the laps of different people. I really like that,” comments Gill.

I wonder if there is an element of photojournalism to his work. “I was interested in documentary and journalism when I was younger. Then I started to trust photographers and photography less, and to question their motivation and if they cared about the subject or is it about the individual. There are some people that make journalistic photographs that I think are really sincere, and I don’t know. I just think there are other ways – more sincere ways – of describing or relaying how you feel about something and making it feel more subjective, rather than saying ‘this is something set in stone’.” He expands upon this point; “I would love it one day for a newspaper to be brave enough not to do this kind of painting by numbers. I don’t think it will ever change. I think it would be so nice not to underestimate viewers of pictures.”

A dominating theme in Gill’s work is an awareness of decay, time passing, visual chaos and messiness. Gill comments, “I think visually for years I was turning my back on London. I found it so hard aesthetically to get my teeth into. Visual noise and chaos is quite a hard thing for me to photograph, despite wanting to.

“London is full of this sort of visual noise and I do think that as I got older, rather than excluding when composing a picture, I have started to include more and embrace more rather than try and make easy to read coherent images. The work was a reflection of the times that we live in, the speed and the chaos, and for me it kind of marries quite well with my old frame of mind at the time of making the work.”

“One of the downsides of photography,” he continues, “when talking about decay and deterioration, is its ability to capture signs of the past, peeling paint or a site where an old building once stood. In a way, I’ve been tempted to get away from that at times. For example, with the archaeology series, I was attempting to photograph suggestions rather than the past, photographing things that don’t exist yet; leaning the other way.”
In the recent Brighton Photography Biennale, Gill created a body of work. He added selected ephemera to the inside of his camera, creating an abstract effect. Objects added included false eyelashes, small creatures and ants, bones from fish he had caught, cooked and eaten on the marina, plants, seeds, rabbit droppings, marbles, fishing tackle, hairclips and small particles scooped from the ground. The work was created over an intense six week period.

“In a way I was working completely blind, because not only did I not know where the objects were landing in between shaking the camera, but also I didn’t process any of the film until the end, so I didn’t know what any of the pictures were going to look like at all. I love the idea of not knowing and exploring something thoroughly. I did process after about four weeks just to check the camera was working, but I didn’t actually check the pictures until the very end.”

His most recently published body of work is the haunting disorientating, claustrophobic aquatic series called “Coming Up For Air”, taken in Japan between 2008 and 2009. “It’s a reaction to something, turning everything down, turning information right down and this idea, this sense of a full-on intense world; photography usually does the opposite and often exaggerates things or amplifies them or enhances them, and turns everything up. I just wanted to make a body of work that does the opposite. Almost to the point where as a photograph I was thinking, if it was living, it would barely have a pulse.

“Also at the time I was visiting lots of aquariums in Japan, so this kind of aquatic world started to form in my head. I realised that when I was leaving aquariums, I was so tuned in to this aquatic world that I was actually photographing and seeing people in the same way that I was viewing the fish. It was again one of those bodies of work that just made itself.

“Again it’s quite intense, even though it seems quite quiet and poetic, and for me it is heavy, almost suffocating. This underwater world – I just love the idea that we see what we want to see, and once you tune your mind into something, that’s all you see. And for two years this underwater world was all that I was seeing.”

Gill’s collections flow through the place that they portray. One gets a sense of the man on his bicycle passing through an event and capturing it eloquently on film. His photographs are humanist and compassionate, whilst having a wry awareness of irony and a twinkle in their eyes. His photographs often pick up on the minutiae of life that could be overlooked, he comments. “We all absorb so many things but the great thing about a picture is it gives you the chance to stand and stare.”

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