Paul Graham and Gerry Badger – in conversation

On the release of Does Yellow Run Forever? - "an intimate, personal photo series" - Paul Graham talks to Gerry Badger exclusively for BJP

BJP — 24 March 2015
Paul Graham, one of the most prolific and respected photographers in the UK, showed no sign of slowing down last year. His eagerly awaited photo book Does Yellow Run Forever? was published by Mack Books, with an accompanying exhibition at the Pace/MacGill Gallery in New York.

Graham describes Does Yellow Run Forever? as “a modest, intimate body of work, with personal, enigmatic photographs.” The series comprises of three sets of photographs, each relating to the other; rainbows from Western Ireland, a sleeping dreamer, and gold stores in the United States. It touches “the ephemeral question of what we seek and value in life – love, wealth, beauty, clear-eyed reality or an inner dream world?”

On the release of the photobook, Graham talked to the renowned photography and architecture critic Gerry Badger for BJP, about ‘straight’ photography, becoming an adopted America, and a life of publishing.

Gerry Badger (GB) – Your last three books – the so called American Trilogy of American Night, a shimmer of possibility, and The Present – have firmly established you as one of the leading contemporary photographers worldwide. Indeed, a shimmer of possibility was rightly voted the best photobook of the last fifteen years, and the trilogy is a major achievement in the history of photography, never mind the
photobook. What were your thoughts and aims in following that? Were you daunted or stimulated?

**Paul Graham (PG)** – Well, thanks for the compliment, very happy to hear you respect the American work. Yes, there were three bodies of work, so it ended up being referred to as a ‘Trilogy’ which could sound somewhat pompous or schematic. But the truth is that, only in the midst of it did it become clearer in its scope. When the first book came out – American Night, with those over-exposed white images – some people doubtless thought I’d lost it, but then through a shimmer of possibility and The Present a bigger picture became clear. Anyways – your question, how does one follow on from that? Well, it’s not so hard to figure out, with Does Yellow Run Forever? I hunkered down to make a modest, intimate body of work, with personal, enigmatic photographs. It seemed the right thing after a 12-year odyssey, to work in a quieter way. It’s also fun to fly in the face of it all – to chase rainbows and make images of my partner, to try to find the ‘gold at the end of the rainbow’. I mean it’s delightfully silly – what next, kittens and puppies?

**GB** – You have often talked about taking and blending a two-tiered approach to the medium, the old form/content duality, if you like – one part of the work’s meaning that’s focused on subject-matter, such as the social fracture of America; and one part that’s focused upon the nature of photography itself, for example the nature of the photographic moment. The press release of Does Yellow Run Forever? seems to focus upon the content side of things, ‘explaining’ the book’s meaning in advance. Are you exploring a particular aspect of the medium’s nature here, or is everything tightly blended?

**PG** – Yes, it’s true I’ve been attracted to a dual approach – it’s less of a strategy, and more something that keeps photography alive for me. Like yourself, Gerry, I love photography passionately, and want to feel it’s a vital and viable medium for today, not an historic artefact. So I struggle to make images that excite me by both exploring the world and the medium itself. I don’t wish to explain this work away, but I think we mentioned already that this work approaches head-on some clichés: photographs of Rainbows! and here’s one of my Girlfriend! Any thinking person will be aware of the dumb ridiculousness of that proposition, but in fact, the surprise is the depth you can find in something that seems so superficial – dreams, love, hope, magical wonders versus the clear-eyed reality. The alchemy you can work with a few basic elements.

**GB** – It seems to me that Yellow is dealing with the duality between specificity and enigma in photography. When I saw the book I immediately thought of a favourite aphorism by Walker Evans – he said that photography should deal with structure and coherence, but also ‘paradox and play and oxymoron’. I liked that because when I first came across it I had no idea what an oxymoron was, except perhaps a bull-necked football supporter. But do you feel Evans’ notion applies to Yellow?
PG – Yes, that’s true, the specific and the enigmatic, entwined. Rainbows are spectral phenomena, very real but very magical, and it is, of course, playful to literally chase them. Then, the fact is that they are all in Ireland – a place where I have a long history of working since the early 1980s and the darker days of The Troubles; now, a sort of peace has arrived there. How wonderful. Or perhaps they allude to Irish emigration to America, where they found their gold on the other shore of the Atlantic. ‘The gold at the end of the rainbow’ as the famous Irish myth goes, here seems to be these Gold shops that popped up everywhere in the US in the gold-price boom of recent years. Is that really what we chase in our lives? How tawdry. Mix into the fact that I personally emigrated to America too, 12 years ago, and it’s enigmatic, playful, but also biographical too.

GB – Can you say something about your approach to bookmaking? How was Does Yellow Run Forever? conceived? Do you shoot first, perhaps with a vague idea, see what you have and then develop it from there? Or do you take today’s project-oriented approach, planning every last detail in advance, even before you shoot. In other words, are you a phenomenological or a conceptual photographer? Or perhaps a bit of both?

PG – I’m a firm believer in working in the world as-it-is, and arriving at your ideas through that. It has to be a balance between the conscious mind struggling to rationalise, to make sense of it all, and the world itself, which doesn’t give a flying fig for your ideas concerning it. Too much of the former, and you end up with dry didactic work, illustrating an idea with no life. Too much of the latter and you end up with random snapshots that have no redeeming interest or substance. You gotta seek out the sweet spot.

GB – Does Yellow Run Forever? also exists as an exhibition. What are the problems, or differences, in taking the photographs off the page and putting them on the wall, and how have you gone about it in this instance?

PG – Of course the challenges are similar in some ways – book spreads and walls are not so different, but then again are unique in others: presence versus intimacy, scale vs dialogue, etc. It’s good to work with both of these in mind, and follow it to where it takes you. You’ll see the high/low positioning of Yellow in the book and on the walls in an exhibition. In a gallery you can activate the viewer’s experience, make them look up to see a Rainbow, or across/down to see the Gold Stores hung low at street level. If you have a supportive publisher, as Michael Mack certainly is, you can embrace the intimate aspect of the book and make something modest – personal but universal, in empathy with the content.

GB – You have always bemoaned the fact that many in the art world, or even in the photographic audience generally, do not really understand photography. I was talking recently to a young photographer who makes intelligent ‘straight’ photographs, and he was despairing at the attitude of most of his fellow students, who Photoshopped heavily, or constructed photographs, and so on, and jeered at him simply because ‘taking’ photographs was too ‘simple.’ I replied that such attitudes have always been the case
unfortunately. What do you feel about this, because it relates to what you have said in the past? And do you think things are improving?

PG – I’m feeling cautious here, because over the past few years I’ve been pushed forward as a spokesperson for straight photography, which I don’t wish to be. I just want to do my work! That is the best answer – if everyone out there working directly in the world made unarguably good work, then this discussion would be redundant. Anyway. Yes of course the pendulum swings back and forth – at the moment it’s a bit against pure photographs from the world, but it will come back. Steady hand on the tiller and all that. It’s true that some people in the contemporary art world simply do not understand the profound artistic territory that lays at the core of photography at its best, believing instead that it is merely ‘observational’, etc. Even some curators within the photographic community appear to have become tired of straight photography, it sometimes seems. That is partly their problem, but also our fault as photographers. We have to take a share of the blame here – there is just so much silly work out there – dumb ideas and clichéd ‘projects’. Of course, that is true of many media – film, books, painting and so on – so it’s not a unique problem, but we must call it out. I repeat: the answer is to make original intelligent work, from the heart and the brain, and a lot of these issues will just evaporate.

GB – Indeed they will. This is possibly a redundant question, but does utilising digital rather than film cameras make any fundamental difference to photography in any fundamental sense? I feel too many people get overly-exercised about this, like people who bang on so much about the ‘superiority’ of vinyl, they forget to actually listen to the music.

PG – I agree – too many people get over-exercised about this. Personally I couldn’t give a damn if the light in my camera is recorded by emulsion on gelatine, or a silicon chip. The real issue is what the heck you are pointing the camera at – what you have to say. That is the thing to get all steamed up about.

GB – John Gossage recently said that photographers can do what they like, because it’s ‘all fiction anyway’. Do you agree?

PG – Oh, John.

GB – I agree with him, it doesn’t necessarily mean an untruth. But moving quickly on, I’d like to ask you about American photography. I tend to you regard you as an American photographer, or at least an international figure rather than a British one these days. Certainly, you live in America, but more importantly, I feel that you have been a great influence upon American photography. You talk about the ‘social fracture’ of America, and that has been a feature of your work. It seems to me, partly as a result of you influence, and partly because the country is unusually unsure of itself at the moment, that American photography is particularly interesting at the moment. Young photographers (or ‘recently young’ photographers, as John Szarkowski quaintly put it)
such as Christian Patterson, Greg Halpern, Ray Meeks, and others, are making interesting work about the country, in all kinds of ways, straight or not. Telling stories seems a far better way of putting it than saying there’s a revival in ‘documentary’ photography. But what’s your perspective on recent American photography, and contemporary photography of ‘the world as-it-is’ generally?

PG – God damn, we need a better word than ‘documentary’! There has to be one. Perhaps you or John Gossage can spend some of that aphoristic energy on tackling that? ‘Documentary’ for me was a movement within photography in the 1930’s to 1960’s, and is long gone now. An historic artefact. We can’t simply use that to describe everyone who makes photographs in the world as-it-is. Is Robert Adams’ work documentary? Eggleston? Winogrand? Shore? Myself? It’s silly and unhelpful to label work that way, it’s so much more than that. OK. Rant over. Yes, I think there is good new work in the USA now and in Europe too – Tobias Zielony, Vanessa Winship, Donovan Wylie, etc, etc. I doubt that I can take credit whatsoever for any of that, but in any case, ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’ is a great truism. Rock on!