

'ALTERED BY TIME' - OBSERVATIONS AND PRIMARY RESPONSE BY GUS WYLIE Hon FRPS

The first time I saw this group of pictures, following on the body of work produced over an extended period of time in Cumbria, I was struck by two things. Firstly, it reinforced my view that Keith is the same sensitive photographer and contemplative observer that he has always been and that this second body of work extends his observations into the whole question of colour. That being so (and ahead of seeing his final selection from this series of visits to the Western Isles of Lewis and Harris), I happened across a book by Chris Killip that stemmed from a similar premise, albeit slightly further out into the Atlantic and at a location where he and Koudelka had first observed the Annual Pilgrimage to St. Patrick's Mount. By association too, this had been the area wherein the great documentary American filmmaker Robert Flaherty had worked in the formative days of documentary film in the Thirties.

So, in many ways there are parallel links between the three of us: Killip, Launchbury and myself – that timeless sweep of the clouds in the wind-swept North West and the lonely promontories of gaeldom both in Ireland and Scotland. For myself, I had been motivated by a simple notion of the book and its cover, of a small boat and man rowing towards a jetty and, knowing in my heart of hearts that my own output was moribund and indecisive, I simply said to myself 'Why OF COURSE! Just get out there and take some pictures and stop gazing at your navel....' My current project is the Norfolk of my youth but, like those of Killip and Launchbury, are the product of the ongoing visit, the long term view and the recording of continued and savoured emotions over a long gestation period of time. But all these realities stem from a personalised approach to the subject, as does the response to their work and in the case of Killip I find them both frustrating and disappointing. Also, I find the whole assumption afforded to the work and the suggestion that Killip is 'one of the most influential photographers, curators and teachers ever to come out of the United Kingdom' to be little more than publishing hyperbole. His first book on his native Isle of Man was so directly derivative of Paul Strand as to make one gently smile, and his admirable work in the North East seems to continually re-appear as parts of other publications. In his latest book: 'HERE COMES EVERYBODY' he has abandoned his medium format ground glass screen in favour of the small camera and the chance meeting, often resorting to two or three images from the same incident, and invariably returns again and again to the same event.

In the case of Launchbury, this is also true, but in his case I do not feel he is repeating himself as much as simply using too many pictures when compiling his latest body of work. Whereas I fully appreciate the fact that these are culled over a substantial number of visits and over a long period of time, I look at them essentially as 'recent work'. These are, as a dear friend of mine in the Western Isles remarked to me about my own work, 'as the man by the stream panning for gold'. We often referred to the search for the elusive nuggets. Also, what about the content and approach? My major criticism centres on the fact that I feel he is somewhat (and unnecessarily) over-sensitive about his work and its value. For example, his natural affinity with Fay Godwin and Tony Ray-Jones are points well-made but, in my view, should be small aide-memoirs that are confined to his Introduction to the book, and I would have liked to have also seen a similar reference to James Ravillious and Ray Moore – in the visual sense – and I think he should consider this as a possibility when introducing the work.

To the work itself, I have enjoyed his parallel foray into colour, and his sensitive use of its potential is to be applauded. However, there is a side to his work that I find touching and I am always drawn to the 'quieter' side of his photography. Generally speaking, he is not formally a documenter of people and yet there are elements here that were first to be encountered in his Cumbrian essays, and in this regard this most English of photographers owes a great deal to an American influence that stretches as far back as that of Paul Strand. This in turn leads to the distilled vision of Edward Weston and the 'f64 School' of American photography which then gave impetus to the likes of Minor White, Callahan, Caponigro and thence on to their English counterparts like Ray Moore and Fay Godwin, aided and

abetted by the classical purism of Cartier-Bresson in Europe. For all of them the ground-glass screen of the larger format, through to the full rectangle of the optical viewfinder of the Leica, meant that the use of at least the standard lens was an essential part of the purity of vision. I once took the trouble, during one of my own Hebridean essays, to locate and find the PRECISE position from which Strand had worked, but with a variable focal length on a tripod based reflex miniature camera. By careful juxta-positioning of the elements in the viewfinder (telegraph poles, intersections of the skyline and a roof, careful adjustment of the height of the lens whilst comparing the image to that in Strand's book TIR A MHURAIN (The Land of the Bent Grass) I could then adjust the focal length so that the width of his photograph coincided exactly with the width offered in my viewfinder. On three separate instances the results were the same and for the 35mm format the focal length was in fact a medium telephoto – no less than 70mm. So Paul had no fancy array of lenses but just one, and with a focal length greater than a standard lens.

Thus it is that a similar way of working exists in the Launchbury way of working and that, as in the f64 School, the approach is to adopt materials and methods that allows the camera to be part of the creative method – careful monitoring of light followed later by precise development to control the tonal scale – all of these things are the basis for the rendering of tonal scale. In the American large format work this would come to be known as The Zone System, with each value being measured and recorded and then developed accordingly by marking up the film carrier with a label. So all of this way of considering the scene was to be found in THE NEGATIVE, but now this no longer applies save for a continuing search for the ever-dwindling numbers of suppliers of traditional film. The bulk of photography in the early decades of the twenty-first century is created without a negative at all and often very much in colour.

So this particular series of essays has a new dimension to consider and this has held considerable interest for me when seeing them for the first time. Above all, it begs the question as to whether the addition of colour is a positive choice and from the very outset I have to say – with reservations – that it is for, just as the days of the considered negative are numbered then, by the same token, we currently live in what can only be described as The Age of Colour. We see though our own eyes in values of colour, painters have always painted in colour, and we watch colour cinematography and television signals each and every day – and yet it is only just recently that this has come about since the pioneering essays and working methods of Joel Meyerowitz, Stephen Shore and William Eggleston. And yet, once again, just as this new age of Visual Colour is upon us then it has been historically swept away by the loss of the colour negative and in the process of that the long hours spent in the darkened room in the production of the image have given way to methods that no longer require it. In the early history of the medium the expression CAMERA OBSCURA derived from the Italian for a darkened room, whilst now we can adjust the image entirely in daylight. Gone too are the temperamental chemicals that produce the image in total darkness and too the sound of the ticking clock – all banished overnight.

Yet these realities should not restrict the other elements of The Expressive Photograph, for matters of exposure, density, tonal value and colour itself can all be vital elements of the expressive context. Overall, I feel this work admirably affords a fresh insight to some of these issues and I am drawn again and again to a similar response to my own in this landscape and yet, in the process, Launchbury has brought a very personal viewpoint to bear through his continued journeys. The incongruity of the beautiful landscape with the sheer detritus of the abandoned cars, rusting boats and handwritten signs – all adds to this feeling.

I greatly look forward to the next chapter.