

Keith Greenough Photography 3: Your Own Portfolio

Project five: an impartial view

For project five the student is asked to document a subject in as objective a manner as possible without skewing the presentation to a particular point of view. I decided to explore the question of impartiality in relation to one of my ongoing projects *Portraits in Context*. In this way I hoped to examine the issues raised by the project and at the same time undertake a valuable critique of a major project I am working on.

Portraits In Context is an ongoing series of portraits of women. It is concerned with the dialogue between the subject and the environment in which they are depicted. Each portrait was made within a particular landscape setting chosen by the subject as a place with which she has a special connection. In this way the landscape not only functions as the stage set for the portrait but also adds special contextual meaning derived from its psychological connection to the subject.

The women are all friends and fellow photographers, who work in the landscape genre. They have a particular awareness of the physical environment around them. Some are drawn to the natural landscape others to urban spaces. All have special places they return to time and again. By choosing to include only women, I have added another layer of meaning to the work drawing attention to the question of gender in photography and what Liz Wells has called “the relative absence of British women who had become well known as landscape photographers...” (1)

I have made eight portraits so far. This has involved travelling to Scotland (twice), Surrey, East London, Devon, South London, the New Forest and Nottinghamshire. My aim throughout has been to represent my subjects as they are, using a fairly deadpan objective style. With this in mind I have used a consistent process throughout:

- The portraits were made with a 5x4 camera with Kodak Portra 400 film. Using a large format camera slows down the process of making the portraits and adds a sense of gravitas emphasising the importance of the sitting;
- The portraits are full length;
- The subjects face the viewer frontally and are placed centrally within the frame, either standing or seated;
- The subjects were given little direction other than not to smile, to relax and to look into the lens of the camera;
- The light was generally even and subdued. This was difficult to control as in some of the settings the natural daylight conditions were brighter than I would have liked, but for the most part I think I succeeded in this aim. I tried wherever possible to shoot in the early mornings or evenings, but this was not always possible;
- The photographers decided what to wear with no input from me;
- Colour features in the clothing and in the background but the nature of the lighting and the characteristics of the film have resulted in a relatively subdued palette;

A contact sheet of the eight portraits is shown in attachment one.

The brief for this project refers to the how a portrait is 'loaded with possibilities and interpretations' and specifically references John Berger's essay 'The Suit and the Photograph' to illustrate this point (2). Berger's essay is about the early 20th century portraiture of August Sander, whose dispassionate style has been a major influence on many contemporary portrait photographers. In effect Berger's proposition is that even the most everyday article of clothing such as a suit and the way it is worn is loaded with political connotations. He points out that the farmers, photographed by Sander wearing suits, look gauche and out of place in this mode of dress which was an invention of the bourgeoisie. The suits on the farmers rather than hiding their social class underline and emphasise it.

Interestingly others have questioned the impartiality and objectivity of Sander's photographic survey of the German People. Susan Sontag takes the view that *'Sander's social sample is unusually, conscientiously broad.... [But]... his eclectic style gives him away...Unselfconsciously; Sander adjusted his style to the social rank of the person he was photographing. Professionals and the rich tend to be photographed indoors, without props. They speak for themselves. Labourers and derelicts are usually photographed in a setting which speaks for them – as if they could not be assumed to have the kinds of separate identities normally achieved in the upper and middle classes'* (3).

More generally, Allan Sekula pointed to on the inherent difficulty, even impossibility, of a truly objective approach when he commented that *'we...need to grasp how photography constructs an imaginary world and passes it off as reality'* (4). In his view all photography is a construction and either consciously or unconsciously represents the ideological position of the author.

With these critical considerations in mind I went on to analyse my 'Landscape in Mind' portraits from the standpoint of objectivity/impartiality.

The first thing to be said is that whilst my approach to making the portraits was intended to produce an objective view of my subjects (to represent them as they are), picturing them in their chosen landscapes immediately undermines the impartiality of the work. The viewer is invited to consider the psychological link between the sitter and the background. Of course this was my intention but it is important for me to understand how this limits objectivity.

A second issue relates to the editing of the photographs and the selection of the final images to include in the series. I generally made about six photographs of each subject and in most cases we made two sets in two different settings (albeit in the same general location chosen by the subject). In a previous project (Project nine: change, see <http://photo-graph.org/2013/11/23/project-9-change/>) I demonstrated how in one such set of portraits there are subtle changes to lighting and the expression of the sitter. By deciding to select one image over another I am in effect choosing how to represent the subject and am again introducing an editorial bias.

To gain further insight I thought it would be useful to examine one of the portraits in greater detail. The portrait overleaf is of Paddy Howe. It was made in a location close to Paddy's home in the Blackdown Hills of Devon.



Paddy Howe, Clayhidon Turbary November 2013
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First I will look at the literal (denotative) description of the portrait. Paddy is of mature age. She is standing centrally in the frame. She is pictured full length. She has a relaxed posture with her hands in the pockets of her jacket. She is taking her weight on her left leg, which is straight. Her right leg is slightly bent. She looks directly at the viewer and seems to have a hint of a smile on her face (Paddy maintained this expression throughout the sitting). She has medium length blonde hair and is wearing glasses. She is wearing wellington boots, jeans, a brown roll neck sweater and a very colourful jacket with what looks like a hood. She is standing on what looks like a path and is surrounded by trees, leaves and golden autumn colours. The horizon is not visible. Most if not all of these are statements of objective fact.

At a connotative level however I read much more into this image. Her relaxed posture and facial expression seems to me to suggest someone who is confident, easy going and content. Her brightly coloured jacket seems to support this view. Her boots and jeans show her to be someone who is happy to be out in the landscape and is not afraid of getting muddy. Because I know she chose the location the link between the colours of the landscape and her jacket is strengthened. It seems that she is someone who has an interest in colour in her photographic work. Also the nature of the landscape suggests that she might be more interested in the intimate landscape rather than large vistas.

In fact my reading of Paddy is not far from my personal impressions of her during the time we spent together (Indeed it was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that we know one another). Paddy is a painter as well as a photographer. She explained to me that she has lots of secret places she likes to visit in the hills around her home and that she is intrigued by nuances of colour. She is a relaxed and easygoing person and very considerate of others. She has done a lot of work helping the homeless and is very involved with her local church.

Of course another person's reading of the portrait might be altogether different. What the above deconstruction of the portrait confirms however is that the interpretation of the portraits will inevitably be subjective and will depend on how a particular viewer interprets the signs within the frame.

The inclusion of the caption alongside the image raises a further issue in relation to objectivity. In 'Portraits in Context' I have decided to include captions with the name of the person, the place where the portrait was made and when it was made. Including the name the subject was a conscious decision. I want the portraits to be seen as a series of portraits of individuals and not (as in the case of Sander) a series of portraits of 'types'.

Despite my wish to present them as individuals, by showing the portraits as a series I inevitably invite comparisons between them, which will influence how a viewer might interpret the portraits. Looking at the contact sheet of portraits, a number of observations are immediately apparent. The fact that certain of the photographers have chosen the natural landscape and others urban environments clearly stands out, as do the differences between the open landscapes and the intimate woodland scenes. The clothing of the photographers differs. One is wearing a dress. Some are wearing outdoor clothing. Others seem to be in everyday clothes. Some look relaxed others look tense and uncertain. One is seated and the rest are standing (this was Gill's choice as she was not really comfortable standing in the location chosen). There is an apparent range of ages. And so on. The list is fairly endless demonstrating the power of the series to engage the imagination and enquiring mind of the viewer. All of this adds to the subjectivity of the viewer's interpretation of the portraits. Additionally my deliberate choice of including only women opens up the issue of gender, and, I hope, the question of why there are relatively few well-known women landscape photographers. This choice represents an ideological point of view.

So it can be seen that whilst my aim was to be objective in the way in which my subjects are portrayed in reality interpretation of the work is unlikely to be so. Subjectivity is introduced by me the photographer through the choice of location (background); the editing process for selecting the final images for presentation; the expression, posture and clothing of the subjects in the selected images; and the decision to present the work as a series. In any event irrespective of my intent to produce an object impartial view, each viewer will bring their own subjectivity to bear when interpreting the images.

- (1) Wells L. (2011) *Land Matters* New York: Tauris, pp 186
- (2) Berger J. (1980) *The Suit and the Photograph* in *About Looking* London: Bloomsbury
- (3) Sontag S. (1979) *On Photography* London: Penguin Books, pp 60
- (4) Sekula A. (1983) *Reading and archive: photography between labour and capital* in *Visual Culture: the reader* London: Sage