



INTERVIEW

All pictures © Chris Friel

SECOND SIGHT

When a colour-blind painter turns his hand to black & white photography, the results are bound to be interesting. **Chris Friel** talks to Elizabeth Roberts about experimentation, childcare and the delights of discovery.



◀ Elizabeth Roberts: In 2006 two major events happened in your life – you turned from painting to photography and you moved from London to the Kent coast. Since then you have gained a reputation for some of the most hauntingly beautiful photographic imagery – can you say how this came about?

Chris Friel: The relocation to Kent was for the reasons of having young children. The switch from painting to photography was just a result of chance. I bought a camera to document some paintings for an exhibition and was excited about the possibilities of digital. I experimented with various early Canon cameras, but it was the release of the Panasonic L1 with live view that really got me interested, and I haven't painted since.

ER: Your early work (*People 1&2*) was black & white but you later turned to colour, and you use camera movement to create abstract

landscapes. Some of these techniques seem to be developing in the black & white work – was this where it began?

CF: My early work was all black & white because I am red/green colour-blind so the idea of colour photography was all rather daunting. I am continually experimenting with various ways to interpret a scene. My rather naïve late discovery of fast prime lenses got me interested in selective focus in images, which led to the use of tilt-shift lenses, followed by the use of camera movement – and recently the use of multiple exposure photography. These different techniques are all with the same aim of trying to interpret a scene rather than just represent it.

ER: People have seen influences in your work as coming from such well known names as Fay Godwin, Bill Brandt and Harry Callahan – and you cite other photographers – were you knowledgeable about



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photography through painting or did this interest develop when you started taking pictures yourself?

CF: I am ashamed to say that I had no real knowledge of photography prior to picking up a camera. The first photo that I consciously admired was of a single sheep taken by Fay Godwin. I saw it hanging in a friend's house long before I picked up a camera, and spent many nights trying to analyse why I liked it. I still haven't worked it out.

The joy of the internet is the ability to access work from photographers around the world. I am currently obsessed by the work of Antoine D'agata. I saw a show of his in Ukraine last year and it bowled me over. But my photographic obsessions change weekly

depending on what links people send me and random discoveries. Having said that, a lot of my influences are still painters. My interest in the potential of photography probably comes from my painterly background.

ER: It seems, in *People*, that you have a strong sense of narrative – is this something you consciously work at?

CF: Not consciously. In order to clarify my thoughts I just Googled the definition of 'narrative photography' and came across the work of Lisa McCord. I'd never seen her work before. She takes photos I can only dream of. >









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< ER: The pictures shown here (*from People*) seem to capture the essence of childhood – is this something that particularly interests you?

CF: The emphasis on childhood has more to do with childcare responsibilities than anything else, and the tendency for children to be less self-conscious around a camera.

ER: The pictures are intimate – do you just photograph the people who are close to you?

CF: Generally yes.

ER: Your stark compositions are a cross between conventional and unconventional – can you say more about this?

CF: My lack of any formal photographic training probably means I have no real idea of conventional composition. I just take photos that appeal to me, and if anyone else likes them that is a bonus.

ER: In painting, the subject is generally static – but your photography frequently describes movement – is this deliberate?

CF: Yes and no. The exterior shots are all caught on the fly so invariably there is movement, especially where children are concerned. I also like movement in an otherwise static landscape.

ER: The sea – and the use of horizons – figures a lot in this work. Did the move to the coast influence your work to a great extent?

CF: I'm sure it did. If I was still living in London most of my photos would probably be from Hyde Park. My current location in Kent is rather flat and featureless for a landscape photographer, but it has a good horizon. Most of my early images were taken a couple of minutes from my house, hence the preponderance of sea horizons.

▶ To see more of Chris Friel's work visit chrisfriel.co.uk