

Being colour blind, Chris Friel can sometimes be hesitant of his hues but, as *Carol Cooper* finds out on meeting the sound-man-cum-photographer, that doesn't matter when you dwell in the smudgy borderlands between dreams and reality

# BLURRED BOUNDARIES



“I couldn’t, with confidence, shoot a straight sunset and get the colours right. My kids say to me, ‘that’s bright pink, you idiot’.”

Ten years ago, having escaped London with his wife and kids to stay in a friend’s country cottage, Chris Friel, then a sound recordist-cum-painter, was transfixed by a photograph of a sheep hanging above a fireplace, a work by the late, great landscape photographer Fay Godwin. Friel found himself staring at it night after night. What did the sheep say to him? Seems to have said something about how boundaries are there to be blurred – boundaries between subject and setting, land and sky – between painting and photography.

Friel’s a charming but reluctant interviewee. Though he’s had photography commissions and exhibitions – at London’s South Bank Centre, on Santiago’s subway, at European arts festivals and projected onto the walls of the Royal Festival Hall to name a few – his light’s firmly tucked under a bushel. Nonetheless, his photographs are garnering praise and attention for his stunning

use of techniques such as multiple exposure and long exposure with ICM (intentional camera movement). He kind of drifted into photography, just as his images can appear to drift in and out of focus, or reality, or sometimes as if the beholder is shifting in and out of consciousness – one reviewer asks ‘is this what dreams look like?’.

He didn’t go to art school; he actually studied medicine but never practiced it. That’s interesting, I interject, “not really” he replies, mortified that anything about him should be found interesting. But there’s plenty. For one thing, he’s red/green colour blind, so when he started out in photography he was too unsure of himself to move beyond monochrome, now his images revel in the full rainbow range from blood reds to shimmering pale golds. Modest as ever he claims, “my colour balance is all over the shop, I couldn’t, with confidence, shoot a straight sunset and get the

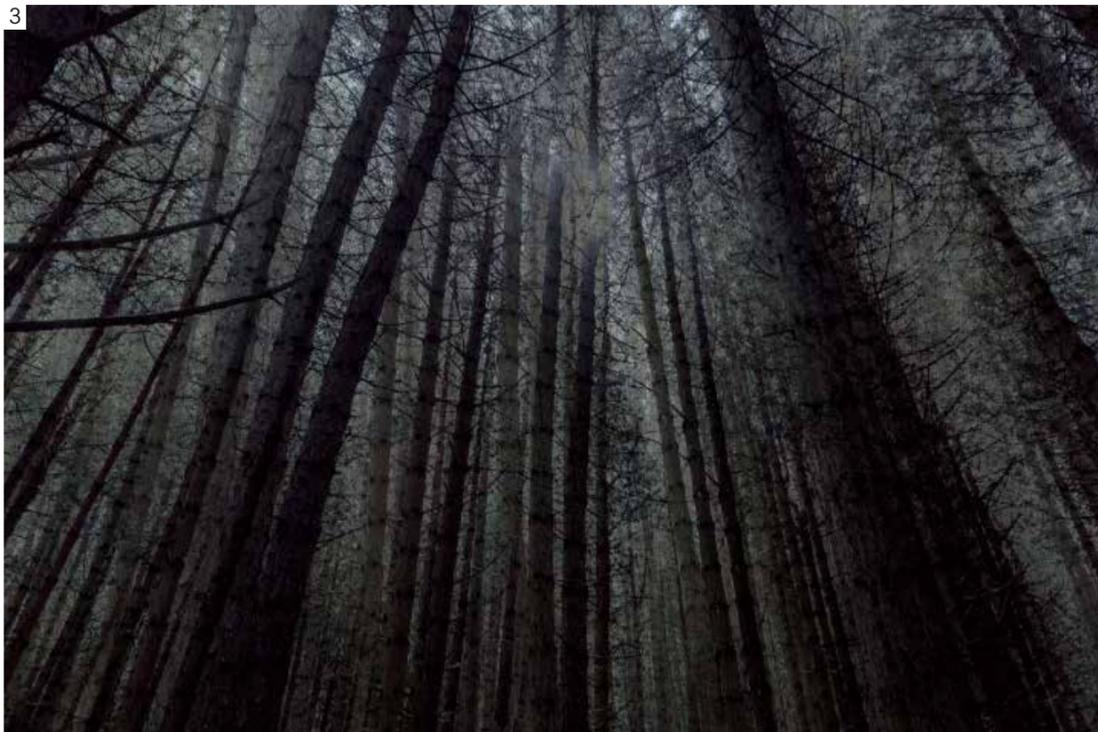
colours right. My kids say to me, ‘that’s bright pink, you idiot’. I can’t see purples or blues too well, so that’s why I did black and white, but then I realised that with long exposure or motion photography the colour balance is messed up anyway, so I should make the most of it.”

### The Jessops serendipity

So how come he didn’t pursue medicine? “I wanted to be a popstar,” he admits. “I went on tour for a few years, that failed, then I started writing music for films and TV and ended up doing sound recording, eventually on location. He’s been travelling the world as a freelance sound recordist on TV documentaries for 15 years now, working about half the year. When his kids, now 11, 12 and 28, were little he wanted to be at home more and decided to paint. He became, in his forties, that rare entity – a successful artist. “I took up painting ▶

Page 4 Mountain  
Pages 56/57 Wire  
1 From the Heads collection  
2 Oare Marshes  
3 Blue





1/2 From the Hands collection  
3 From the Wood collection  
4 From the Tree collection  
5 Test shot for artwork  
on the album *The  
End of Silence* by  
Matthew Herbert





“It’s southeast England, it’s tedious. It’s probably why I do blurry photography, to try to make it interesting.”

*Wild Horses*

in a sort of ridiculous manner,” he deadpans, “as I was a bit older and cheeky I managed to get an agent and made a little money, it was great, then the agent turned to drugs and went to New York and my next agent wasn’t quite so successful...”

Then, in 2006, he “slipped into photography by chance”, purely because he happened to buy a camera in Jessops. He hasn’t painted since. “I like the quick turnaround of photography. I get bored easily and painting is solitary, you don’t leave the house, you do two shows a year and you’ve no idea if you’re barking up the wrong tree till the opening night when you find out nobody likes you.”

Another interesting facet of Friel’s work is that he abores editing, achieving everything in-camera. He uses a Canon 5D Mark III, which has a multiple exposure function and, if he does any post at all, he’ll spend about five minutes on Adobe Lightroom. He often uses a tilt-shift lens,

which allows you to control perspective and home in on a particular detail of the composition, blurring the rest – much like the filter of consciousness. This results in the mesmerising sense of gaze he creates. “Gaze is very selective,” he muses, “your brain doesn’t work like an Ansel Adams still where everything is in sharp focus.”

### Camera obscura

His enviable work-life balance means he works roughly a month on, a month off. While away on a job he doesn’t photograph seriously as there’s no time to do it properly. When he’s home, an idyllic beachside location in Whitstable, Kent, he takes pictures every day. Lots of them. You have to when working in-camera. “I used to take about 1,000 a day, now I take a few hundred and if I don’t get a series of ten out of those I’m annoyed. It sounds pretentious to say I go into a zone, but I suppose I

do, I don’t move from a particular spot till I’ve achieved what I want.” He’s been photographing his Whitstable beach for years, but claims the Kentish countryside doesn’t inspire him. “It’s southeast England, it’s tedious. It’s probably why I do blurry photography to try to make it interesting, if I lived on the west coast of Scotland I’d probably keep the camera still.”

I ask him about his goals as a photographer; he says in his typical que-sera-sera way. “I’d love more commissions, but I also like doing sound recording. I like the balance.” Friel is all about balance – his work-life ratio, his compositions, even his largely vertical, economical, all lower-case emails have a poised visual elegance, his last to me being:

*carol  
thanks  
best  
cf* 