

In Conversation with Valda Bailey

*How long have you been behind the camera and
what made you first pick one up?*

I remember first being excited by the artistic possibilities of photography when I was about 14. I have been creatively driven for as long as I can remember and grew up with the idea of being a graphic designer. In the end, I pursued other avenues, but creativity was ever at the fore. I messed around with a camera for a few years—a Canon AE-1 and a Cokin starburst filter were the pinnacle of my creative endeavours back then. I converted our downstairs loo into a darkroom and really became involved with it for a time. I still recall the sense of wonder at seeing a print slowly materialize before my eyes.

I put the camera aside in my late teens in favour of painting, but my interest resumed about seven or eight years ago when I purchased my first serious DSLR.

*Of the many available art forms, can you describe
how photography best represents your artistic vision?*

Photography is just another tool to express my creativity. Despite the many years I dedicated trying to learn to paint, I was never able to produce results that lived up to my expectation. That's not to say I am delighted with what I produce with my camera (far from it!) but the results I get are a closer approximation of what I am

hoping for. Who knows? If I had dedicated the same amount of time to my painting that I have to my photography, then maybe I would be proficient by now. I do, however, like the immediacy of photography and its portability.

I am discovering that a photograph can be whatever one wants it to be, and I find that tremendously exciting. What I really enjoy about being creative with a camera is the ability to manipulate shape and light through intentional camera movement (ICM) and multiple exposures. Photoshop doesn't really enthrall me; being behind the camera and being surprised and delighted by what I see is what inspires me.

Tell us about your creative process: do you set out to create a body of work, or do you feel that it finds you?

I certainly try to set out without any preconceived notions. My husband and I travel quite a lot, and I enjoy the spontaneity and surprise of seeing new places for the first time. I realize the other—and possibly more respected—alternative is a quiet, contemplative approach whereby you get to know your subject intimately, and I appreciate there is much to commend this way of working.

When I visit a location, my objective is to produce enough work to place in a gallery on my website, and if I need to return to fulfill this aim, then I will do so (if logistically possible). There are places close to home that I find interesting and return to on a regular basis; I suppose that's a sort of open-ended project that rumbles on slowly.

The work in this portfolio is from your Abstracts From the No. 8 Bus collection, which is quite obviously scenes from riding the bus: what drew you in about what you saw, so much so that you

made this series? Was it intentional, or created from a "I didn't really recognize it might look this way in camera"-type moment?

I was out with two friends in London: street photographer Tim Allen and Doug Chinnery. We had been ambling around Shoreditch looking for inspiration, but the insistent drizzle was starting to get us all down. We decided to jump on a bus and go down to Covent Garden instead. In true London tradition, its progress in the wet weather was ponderously slow and I started shooting the shiny pavements out of the window. My attention then turned to the condensation on the windows and the vibrant shapes and colours of the neon signs outside. I took a few shots and got quite excited by the way they were being rendered so I continued shooting for the rest of the journey. Which is a long-winded way of saying, no, I did not set out to take these images. It was serendipity and some lucky observation.

The No. 8 Bus series is a bit of a departure from your incredible fine art photography. Since you are known for creating beautiful images from multiple exposures and intentional camera motion, what was your process for these photographs?

Thank you very much for interviewing me and featuring them here.

They were taken with my little NEX-7 with a kit lens. The weather was dreary and it was a dark November afternoon; I think the shutter speed was around 1/25 sec. I was less transfixed on super sharpness than I was on capturing the rich colours and beautiful patterns on the glass. They were all raw images so I employed a little basic post-processing in Lightroom to bring up the contrast and colour.

Your name (and work) has often been referenced alongside Chris Friel, Michael Kenna, and Bill Schwab: on average, it seems that there are fewer well-known female photographers than their male counterparts. Why do you think this is?

It's an honour to be mentioned in the same paragraph as those people—I don't honestly think it's a common occurrence! I can perhaps understand reference to Chris Friel because he has been instrumental in the development of my work.

I think it would be hard to dispute your suggestion regarding the disproportionate ratio of male to female photographers. Is it reasonable to suggest that maybe women's creative energies are taken up with raising children for a good few years? Times are changing, clearly, but I look around at my friends with young families and a huge amount of time is (quite rightly) devoted to their well-being.

Maybe there is more to it than that—could it be that women are slightly intimidated by the technology, I wonder? And yet, the disparity was similar when I was learning about analog photography back in the mid-'70s; very few women seemed to be involved.

When I used to paint, the ratio of women to men was reversed, and they were mostly women well into their 50's and beyond, so possibly the above observation about raising children has some credence.

Who are the photographers who have inspired you the most, and how has their work affected your photography?

Of course I must mention Chris Friel; his work was instrumental in setting me on this creative path. I was

fully immersed in street photography until I saw one of his landscape images in a magazine. It was a pivotal moment; I had no idea that photography could produce such images. I found his work so captivating because it was created virtually entirely in camera.

Jay Maisel has also been a significant influence. I was lucky enough to attend his five-day workshop in New York several years ago, and I refer to his notes often. He teaches the importance of light, colour, and gesture, and it was certainly his use of shape and colour that drew me to his work in the first instance. He also made me realize the importance of studying art as well as photography. I would dearly love to go back for another five days, but I think it's unlikely to happen.

Other photographers whose work I greatly admire include Sarah Moon, Josef Koudelka, Susan Burnstine, Ernst Haas, Josef Sudek, Fay Godwin, Chris Tannock, and Andre Kertesz. I am also inspired daily by the work of my friends and contacts on Flickr.

Photography and words merge in some powerful ways; is there one quote that you feel sums up your photographic philosophy or vision? Something that regardless how many times you cite it or read it, still leaves you with a feeling of resonance?

I could cite any number of succinct one-liners: I have them come through daily on my Twitter feed in a valiant attempt to shore up my confidence.

I suppose the quotation by novelist William Faulkner resonates the most emphatically: "You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore." It's something I try to remind myself when I feel I am not waving but drowning (to extend the watery metaphor).

Matisse said “There are always flowers for those who want to see them.” There are numerous quotations about the importance of seeing and this is one of my favourites.

Your photography is obviously inspired by paintings; which artists have influenced your work?

There are many. Cezanne, Matisse, Klee, Rothko, Bonnard, Vuillard, Diebenkorn, Kandinsky, Morandi, Picasso, Van Gogh, Chagall, Mondrian, Frankenthaler: that’s a pretty impressive list, isn’t it? I should be able to pull something out of the hat with those influences!

I greatly admire black and white photographs—and indeed choose to have them on my wall—however, it is colour that drives me forward. The artists mentioned above all use colour in a wonderfully exciting way. This is one reason why I enjoy making images the way I do: I have much more freedom to play around with the colour sliders than a traditional landscape photographer does. I find it rewarding to try to create tension in an image by pushing the luminance or hue in unexpected directions.

What has been the greatest struggle (or struggles) in your creative process?

Almost certainly the confidence thing. I think it’s almost harder today with social media and influences coming in from all directions; some of the time I am happily plowing along with the feeling that my work has some merit, and then seemingly out of the blue, all that confidence appears to evaporate and I cannot see any integrity or value in the work I have produced. I know I am not alone in this, but I find it completely debilitating.

What advice would you offer to photographers who are seeking to find their own artistic vision, their own voice?

I do not believe it is something you should try to force. I don't think it can be forced. It has to be a slow evolution.

I have absorbed influences from many quarters over the years and still a multitude of uncertainties remain. Perhaps the only thing I can be sure about is what I do not want to photograph; I think this is how I propel myself along—slowly discarding styles and methods that do not appeal in the hope that some little glimmer of understanding will eventually remain. I certainly don't think artistic vision is something that is suddenly visited upon someone; it's an ongoing, ever-changing process.

On an average day, what's in Valda Bailey's camera bag? On days when you don't have "big gear," do you carry any type of camera in your purse or other tote?

I go out with as little as possible: a Canon 5DIII body, my 24-105mm and my 70-300mm zoom lenses, and the usual assemblage of batteries, memory cards, cloths, etc. I also use a Zacuto z-finder which is a device mainly used by film makers, I believe. It fits on the back of the LCD screen and gives me a 3x magnification. One of the frustrations of multiple exposure work is what appears to be working on the back of the camera very often proves not to be viable when viewed at home on my monitor. The 3x magnification at least gives me some idea if I am getting the images I want.

When I don't have my 5DIII, I either have a Sony A7R or my trusty iPhone, but I would say 85% of my images are taken with the 5DIII. This is largely because the 5DIII and

1Dx (at time of writing) are the only cameras that give the user the creative blending modes that I like to use. There is an app available for the A7R that offers similar modes, but it will only take a maximum of two exposures, whereas the Canon will allow me to take up to nine.

Photoshop will obviously sandwich layers together using different blend modes, but the results are very different to that which is achieved in camera.

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Valda Bailey grew up on the island of Jersey and now lives in the heart of East Sussex. Traditional landscape photography does not hold much fascination for her, but through the use of blur and abstraction she has found a new way to approach this genre. Valda enjoys pushing the boundaries of what photography can be by using multiple exposures and camera movement to help simplify and abstract the detail in a scene. Her images have minimal post-processing; she prefers to achieve the effect she wants in camera.

For more about Valda, go to valdabailey.co.uk.