

In Conversation with Doug Chinnery

Tell us about yourself: how long have you been behind the camera and what made you first pick one up?

I have used a camera for almost as long as I can remember, although most of my early photographs were not very memorable! I was given one of those wonderfully simple Kodak Brownies when I was around seven years old, and I happily cut people's heads off and tilted the world's horizons with it, burning through rolls and rolls of film. It did its job though, and engaged me with the magic of making pictures. Then, when I was eleven, my stepfather gave me a Russian TLR Lubitel medium format camera and spent time teaching me the basics of aperture, shutter speed, and ISO. That was a pivotal time for me and I really began to fall in love with photography.

Do you remember the moment when you realized that photography was the medium that worked for you?

I think, for me, it was a case of admitting defeat. I wanted so much to paint watercolours. I loved the medium, the ways the colours merged and flowed on the paper and created dreamy, abstract pictures that lacked definition. I

spent years trying to master the technique, but frankly, I was rubbish at it. (In fact, the only report card from which I can still remember the exact wording from my school days was from my art teacher, who wrote, “Doug’s art is mediocre at best.” I was highly delighted with this because it was the first time I had come across the word mediocre and thought it sounded wonderful. The dictionary soon put me right.)

My watercolour kit languishes still in the loft of our house. I can’t bear to be parted from it, but I know I will never be a painter. However, I found through my love of photography I could express my creativity. The day I put away the paints was the day the camera became my new medium.

Who were your early influences? Outside of photography, what are your creative influences? Where do you look for new sources of ideas for your work?

I would love to be able to say I was deeply influenced in my youth by painters, artists, and photographers. But I wasn’t. I have to hold my hands up and say that while I am not at all “arty,” I love art. I now spend a lot of time looking at the work of painters and photographers, but I grew up in a household where art wasn’t important, and I was educated in a school where art was dismissed in an hour a week. I was barely aware of it. I think this is why I can’t do what I consider art-speak: I don’t get all deep and meaningful about pictures as some can. I just don’t speak that language.

On reflection, though, my earliest influences would have been the outdoors. I grew up in the fields of rural Essex in the east of England, where I spent my youth in fields and woodlands. That is still the main subject of my work.

As I have grown older, I have become very aware of the work of others. I believe it is good—vital, in fact—to immerse ourselves in the creativity of others. Not to necessarily copy or mimic, but to be inspired and motivated by their work to help us develop our own vision. I count as a particular influencer of what I do an amazingly creative and innovative British photographer, Chris Friel, who showed me the importance of not caring what others think of my work and the liberation that comes from breaking the so-called rules that others try to impose on us. He first introduced me to intentional camera movement techniques. I also am in awe of the work of another British photographer, Valda Bailey, a former student of mine who is now so far ahead of me in terms of creativity and ability that it is a joy to see. I think she is one of the most amazing and talented photographers working in the world today—her work constantly astounds me, crossing the boundaries between photography and art.

In contrast with photographers like Chris and Valda, I also admire Michael Kenna, whose work is very different. I love his simplicity of style, his minimalist approach, and—as a lover of the square format myself—his use of the Hasselblad's square frame.

The photographs in this portfolio are from your Dales in Snow series, a departure from your intentional camera motion (ICM) work: what was it about these particular scenes that made you want to photograph literally and not in the abstract?

I have a thing about sharpness in that I think sharpness is overrated. I like blur, diffusion, softness. I find that landscapes with front-to-back-sharpness reveal everything in an instant. We see every clearly-defined detail and the brain is able to assess it all in a fraction of a second. Very beautiful, no doubt, but it leaves little to the imagination. The stimulation hits you in a rush and then is over. I am drawn to images that conceal—where things are left ambiguous. I like images where details are left for the viewers to decide for themselves, where they can fill in the story of the image and decide what is happening—and where they can discover things, sometimes after looking at the image many times. These pictures hold my attention and interest for much longer. I don't tire of them. For me, I find that classic landscapes are fine on a photographic calendar, but at the end of May, I am looking eagerly forward to tearing off that page and seeing June! Whereas with less definition, when done well, I can look at an image for a lifetime. This is what drives my ICM work.

It mustn't be technique driven, though. Just blurring things or waving the camera around doesn't instantly make for a good image, nor is it the right thing to do for every subject. In the case of this series, I had tried ICM out in the Dales in the snow but it just wasn't working for me; however, as soon as I switched over to more conventional techniques, the images just clicked. Perhaps there is a little of Michael Kenna's simplicity influence in the pictures—square format, monochrome, and cloaked by the snow and thus removing distractions. It confirmed for me the need, not to slavishly work within a formula, but to adapt and use whatever technique works with the subject, weather, and light to make the most effective images.

*There is a graceful elegance to your compositions.
What do you look for when composing a photograph?*

I used to try and get as much of the landscape in to my images as I could—to try and show as much of the world to people as possible. In recent years, though, I have been drawn more and more to simplicity. I find myself looking to exclude as much as possible from the frame. I run my eye around the edges of the viewfinder, asking, “Is there anything here that isn’t absolutely essential to the image?” If there is, I try to exclude it. I like space, quietness, emptiness, room to breathe. I also find myself drawn to symmetry. It doesn’t occur too often in the natural world, but when I manage to track it down I love making the most of it with balanced compositions.

*Photographing snow certainly has its challenges:
what would you say to someone who is struggling—
technically and/or artistically—with this landscape?*

First, use a good tripod with snow feet that stay stable on the snow. Second, remember that you can’t trust your camera’s light meter; it sees the bright white snow, panics, and wants to tone it down to a nice grey colour. In aperture priority, expect to use at least a stop of positive exposure compensation (slow the shutter speed by a stop), and trust your histogram, not the light meter. If it is very cold, beware of frost building up on your lens or filters and also take care not to breathe too close to the camera as your breath will freeze on the screen and eye piece. All these things can get very frustrating.

But the technical aspects are far less important than the creative ones. Snow is a wonderful opportunity for

the landscape photographer. Scenes that don't work at other times of the year because they are too busy become simplified by a blanket of snow. I keep a notebook of such locations to visit as soon as snow falls here. Distractions are removed and beautiful graphic shapes such as bare winter trees stand out beautifully against it.

I aim for simplicity of composition. Consider using a long lens to isolate details in the landscape. Shoot down on to trees from high vantage points and other features so that they are framed by snow on hillsides. Shoot all day: don't let the golden hour obsessives tell you there are only a couple of hours a day to take photographs in the landscape. There is no such thing as bad light; just the wrong approach.

Do you research the places that you photograph, or do you prefer to be on-scene first and get a feel for the place? How do you find your sites?

I take a half and half approach. I do some research but I don't want to get to a location to take the images everyone else takes, so my preparation is more about getting to the location, parking, seeing where the sun rises and sets, and so on. I am not looking for tripod holes and viewpoints.

I will look at the images of others using Flickr and websites, but more to get a feel for the landscape and atmosphere of a location. I use [The Photographers Ephemeris](#) for sunrise and sunset times and locations, and Google Earth for satellite views of places. In the UK we have some of the finest maps in the world made by the Ordnance Survey; I subscribe to their Get-a-Map service, which gives me online access to all of their de-

tailed marking of the country and allows me to print map sections off to take with me. I use an online latitude/longitude finder to get coordinates for locations to input into my satellite navigation unit so I can drive to locations. For tides, I use the Aye Tides app on my iPhone, so I know if a visit to a beach is going to be ideal. All of these online resources make location research so much easier. I also find there are lots of very helpful photographers on Twitter who are willing to share intelligence on locations and I really appreciate their help and I try to be helpful in kind myself.

I want to be well prepared as I usually arrive a couple of hours before sunrise so I need to know where to go in the dark to get set up. I frequently make my best images long before sunrise.

Then, when I get to the location, I try to absorb the atmosphere of the place. I am trying to find a personal connection with it. This is not some deep meaningful thing, but I know I am going to respond to it in an emotional way. It might be awe-inspiring, quietly beautiful, frightening, or melancholy, and this might also be affected by how I feel at the time myself. I want people who look at my images to feel something of what I felt when I took the photo. I want to squeeze some of that atmosphere and emotion into the image, to give a sense of place.

There is so much talk around photographers "finding their vision": do you believe that you can actually find your vision, or do you feel that it finds you?

This is where I struggle to articulate since I don't participate in art-speak. I don't know what goes on in my head. I just work hard at it. I wonder if some people are really good

at art and have a natural instinct for it and have a vision that comes naturally. For me, I have had to work and work and work. I made a lot of rubbish. Still do. Every now and then I take a picture I like. I have found it has helped me to look at the work of artists and photographers I admire and to think about what it is I love about particular images. What is it that makes the shot so powerful, so moving, so strong and to learn from that.

Nowadays I find myself getting a *tingle*. As I move the camera around searching for a composition, I suddenly get a feeling that this is strong. Those images tend to work for me. Whether they work for others is something else.

What I have given up trying to find is a single way of looking at the world. My work is all over the place. I look at the work of others, which is in a single style, themed, and constant—so identifiable and I am envious. I would love to be like that, so that people could see an image of mine and know it is a “Chinnery,” like they do a “Kenna” or a “Brandt” or whatever. But I have resigned myself it is never going to happen. I am styleless. I just make pictures. I see some things one way and other things another. I can’t shoot everything in black and white. I can’t shoot everything in colour. I can’t shoot everything square. I can’t just do long exposures or ICM. I can’t just do blur or sharpness. I have to shoot the work as I see it and that varies depending on the subject, the light, the place, my mood and a whole load of variables. So my portfolio is a mess. And long may it remain that way.

Name your anarchy: which so-called photography “rule” do you regularly break, and why?

I break them all. I hate them all. It's my biggest gripe in photography that we think there are any. There are no photography police.

I read that you disagree with the notion that "it's all about the light"; for you, what's it all about?

For me it is all about composition. I regularly see amazing work shot in so-called bad or poor light that is effective because it is well composed. I also see massive amounts of very poor work shot in amazing light because the composition is so sterile and has no soul.

I think we ought to be obsessed with composition first, then with light second.

Photographers have a particular relationship to their gear in a way that most other artists do not; how do you think this affects both our process and our work?

Gear. I used to be obsessed with gear. I honestly thought if I had the right gear I would be a "proper" photographer. It is so easy to be so obsessed with gear that we can avoid making good photographs altogether. It's true that the finest photographers always say that it's not about the gear, that it's about the photographer. But then, of course, they have the best gear in the world, so it's all right for them! But what they are saying is true.

The sooner we get over thinking that megapixels have any meaning, that micro-contrast has any relevance whatsoever, that barrel distortion is of any consequence at all, the sooner we can get on and become better photographers. The camera is just a tool: it's the photograph that matters. Learn to use the camera

quickly—at most it should take a few days. Then spend a lifetime mastering composition and light. Never, ever read camera reviews or lens performance reviews. Ever.

Speaking of gear, tell us about yours. What's in Doug Chinnery's camera bag?

- Fuji X-Pro 1
- Fuji XE-2
- 18mm
- 24mm
- 35mm
- 56mm
- 60mm
- 18-55mm
- 55-200mm
- Lee Filter System
- Canon 5D MK3
- 100mm L Macro
- 45mm TS-E
- 24-70mm L
- Zero Imaging Pinhole
- Hasselblad 500C
- 40mm
- 80mm
- 120mm
- Yashica TLR
- Holga

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Doug Chinnery is a full-time teacher, writer and photographer. He runs photography workshops, leads tours for Light & Land, writes for several photography magazines and gives online webinars. He is based in the UK, where he lives near Sherwood Forest with his wife, Liz, and his dog, Stan.

