

INTERVIEW WITH

STEWART WEIR

BY OLIVIER DUONG



Please tell us something about you, your life and interest etc. Put as much detail as you like and then we will start the questions.

I've always preferred the black and white image because this is how I prefer to see. However, colour has played a large part in my editorial and commercial work and it still has its place. Without doubt my image creation is an extension of my personality, emotional state, creative taste and vision that in turn communicates what I cannot speak. I'm often a passer by.. the scene will just 'speak to me'.

Over the years Ive produced several long term stories ranging from 2 to 10 years. Many stories will have taken from a few days to just a few weeks. Published internationally including National Geographic Traveller, Vogue (Brazil), The Times, The Sunday Times, The Daily Telegraph, The Sunday Telegraph, The Observer, Stern, Paris Match, Esquire, GQ, F1 Racing, Four Four Two, Stern, Le Figaro.

Also been commissioned to produce images for 40 books and have travelled extensively on assignments throughout Europe, Asia and North America. Published book (More Than Ninety Minutes 1997) received critical acclaim from both the sporting and photographic press. I offer bespoke one to one photo mentoring.



What inspired you to become a photographer?

I wanted to experience the world with travel. I never wanted to have any regrets and spend my life in an office doing dull stuff and becoming a person of routine and predictability.

What age are you and at what age did you start your journey as a photographer?

My first camera was a birthday present from my father when I was 15. It was a Pentax ME Super with a 50mm lens. I remember shooting quite a few rolls but was more interested in skateboarding and girls in those days. It wasn't until I was 31 that I gave up an office job to become a freelance photographer.

Would you mind sharing some of the things you feel helped you along the way with your photography, (lessons, workshops, books etc)....and also some of the things that may have hindered you that you overcame on this journey?

I have never been trained or done a course. Back in the early 90s there were courses but nothing like we have today. I read many books and would spend hours looking through photo magazines. I read





somewhere that a great way to learn how to appreciate light and composition was to study painters especially the Dutch masters of the 16th/17th centuries so that's what I did.

Do you feel photography enhances your life. If so, how?

I can go several weeks without taking a single image on a

camera but I'm shooting most days with my iPhone. Photography absolutely enhances my life because if I don't shoot I can get a little cranky. For me photography works as an escapism and a way to explain the world around me. It's a cliché but true.

If we are speaking specifically of

photographers, which are the ones of the past and present do you admire?

There are so many! Eugene Richards, Joel Meyerowitz, W Eugene Smith, Diane Arbus, Larry Towell etc. and in recent years Victor Cobo and of course Vivian Maier.



What purpose does photography serve for you?

I have yet to truly work this out. Without doubt I can never get true satisfaction from it because so few images work how I want them to work. Photography is a source of great satisfaction and frustration in equal measure. The golden era is behind us

I feel and so the days when photography were really appreciated are fading.

Whether my best days are behind me I'm not sure and I wake up everyday either motivated or frustrated and asking whether I'm still doing the right thing. Photography is a kind of nemesis for me I guess.. reaching but never quite arriving. That's the challenge

and the contradiction if that makes sense?

Do you do photography for hire or as an art form?

In the beginning for hire but now I'm teaching and doing workshops more often than not. In recent years I realized it's the challenge more than anything which inspires me. I



would rather work with a camera that pushes me so I can push it back than use a camera with all the bells and whistles that will rule me. Technology has rather dumbed down the whole process but that's a different story.

What do you do for work and how does photography fit into that?

Mostly teaching with the occasional print sale. I have a few book ideas I've been working on over the last few years but will save those for when I'm a little older and desperate for money!

What Genre' of photography are you most comfortable working in?

I'm happy to take on anything because every genre has its merits of the challenge. If I have the choice it's street portraits in a documentary style. I love photographing trees and woodlands which I've been doing over the last 6 years (slowly like a tree growing).

When you work, are you working on different series or just finding photos that fit the way you feel at the moment?

I think I have ADHD! I have a few projects going at the same time as well as revisiting older projects occasionally. I struggle with making a decision and sticking to it so to the outsider I probably appear to





be more than very disorganized. I have a problem with focusing on one project but don't beat myself up over it.

Can you describe a few of your trigger mechanisms that make you want to stop and shoot?

I think the longer you shoot the fussier you get. I feel I'm a collector of memories both personal and of places that I've found myself in by accident and by design. I may ignore a sunset but be entranced by a puddle of water.

What are your recurring themes?

People kissing or showing affection in public, trees and seagulls.

What is the distance to your subject you are most comfortable with while working?

Two to five yards (1.8 to 4.5 metres).

What is your favorite Focal Length or Field of View?

For most of my career and all the longer projects I've worked on the 28, 35 and 50mm are the most common focal lengths. After *The Fall* was shot using only 28mm.

Krung Thep was shot only using a 75mm (47mm approx. full frame equivalent). If I had to choose one focal length it would be 28mm.

What camera are you working with currently?

I'm using a Ricoh GR11 which has a 28mm (equivalent 35mm full frame) lens and also using a 21mm (equivalent 35mm full frame) adapter.

How do you see the relationship with your camera?

Is it a friend, tool or whatever? There's a lot to be said about the photographer/camera relationship and I don't want to be too gear orientated here but how you bond is an essential element of the creative process. Over the years I've tried nearly every camera from film compacts to large format field cameras. My happiest relationships have been with a Leica M6 and the Rolleiflex f3.5 (Planar or Xenotar).

Are you self taught, educated or a little bit of both?

Self taught.

How do you feel about being photographed?

I would rather not!





Do you like to work by yourself or to have someone with you? Please explain why.

I rather work by myself. If I want to stand or sit somewhere for a few minutes or hours the last thing I want is to feel whoever I'm with would rather be somewhere else.

Do you listen to music while you are shooting? How do you feel the music enhances the visual experience?

I shot my Brighton Beach series (2000-2010) listening to the Foo Fighters mostly. Today I will listen either to Godspeed or Tool depending on the subject. Godspeed for nature and Tool for everything else I would say. I have no idea why music enhances the shooting experience but would say I feel it opens the creative channels.

Do you have a preference for images as an analog or as a digital state?

Without hesitation film. It is without doubt the more spiritually creative and rewarding journey. The not knowing and the need to wait adds greatly to the rewards. But the actual shooting process and the need to envisage and

therefore move into a deeper creative zone is why film rules for me. Unfortunately the economics of today's world means few pro photographers use film but it's not completely dead. I still shoot film but only for certain projects.

Where in the world are you located?

London

Where is your favorite place to work?

Afghanistan is by far the best place I have ever had the good fortune to visit and photograph. Tokyo and Bangkok were also fantastic places as was New York but I only had a few days there so another visit would be good!

My two favorite places that I can get to here is anywhere in the countryside or by the sea. London is a great place to shoot street images but I feel rather bored of London if that doesn't sound to mad?!

When you're feeling somewhat slow or lost, how do you find your way back to find inspiration to get working again?

This comes to us all at some point and I've certainly had my fair share of the doldrums.

Finding inspiration from others work, getting inspired to produce a story or series about a subject you feel strongly about is another positive reaction to inaction.

Another way around is to find another process or way of creating images. If you have never shot film buy a film camera. If you have never shot Pinhole photography buy a box with a hole in it! The way to find your inspiration can only come from within so the solution rather depends.

For me I accept I'm in a slow period and can go quite sometime without using a camera. I accept and when the time is right I go back out.

Do you exhibit your work in any form?

In the past I've had several exhibitions in the UK and been part of several group shows in the USA. It's not something I go out of my way to do but I may look into it at some future point. I find the whole process of research, emailing and calling to get a space that doesn't cost very frustrating. I don't feel I need to exhibit my work because I'm not really motivated by that. I see the process of exhibiting as organic growth and if/when the time comes it will just happen.



Do you go to exhibitions or do so on the web?

I love exhibitions and certainly would rather visit the real thing instead of viewing on the screen. Richard Avedon's show at Foam in Amsterdam (Photographs 1946-2004) is one of my most memorable. In recent years the joint William Klein and Dado Moriyama exhibition at the Tate in London stands out.

Do you collect other photographers work?

No but I've been tempted a few times. I'm more of a book collector.

How do you feel about the current state of photography?

Depressed but see it as the natural process of selection dictated by technology, social

change and accountants. Technology has always moved photography forwards (or backwards the older generation of photographers would argue). I'm sure Henri Cartier-Bresson would be shocked to see the state of photography but would also be energized by some of the artists we have today.

How satisfied are you in your current state of photography and

what would you like to improve upon?

I'm probably too old to change. At the early 50's stage of life time whilst still available is shrinking. What I want to do and what is financially viable are two completely different things.

Once upon a time a photographer could call round magazines, get the go ahead for a story, go off for a month (or several), come back and make money. That doesn't really happen anymore (like it used to) so my first love has all but disappeared.

I've moved from a feeling of needing the best gear to produce work to a place of being happy to be minimalist and after all photography is all about the content of the images rather than what manufacturers tell you that you must have.

If I have the option of a magic wand to improve it would be organization. Looking through some old contact sheets with no captions requires far too much time trying to work out when, what and where images were shot.

Can you describe how you judge the success or failure of your work?

If the image gives me goosebumps then it works for me. Whether it works for the viewer is down to them.

I'm not really concerned with pleasing anyone other than myself because at the end of the day for me it's always been my journey. I've just tried to produce an image that gives the viewer a sense of time and place for history to decide on whether the image is valid or not.

Is there a question that you would like to answer that I haven't asked?

Cant think of any..

If you would like to make a closing statement, we'd love to hear what you have to say.

If you have the option of buying \$5k of gear or going away for a 1 month shoot with that \$5k then go travel. To many of my students think that the latest gear is more important.

Always shoot for yourself first if you have the choice but for a paying gig the client should receive images that exceed their expectations. My work whilst black and white is also

rather eclectic and I do regret not specializing a little more. After a few years look back on your work to see how far you have come.

However, the ceiling can never be reached in this game unless you're gifted and choose the right breaks. If you don't get the breaks it doesn't matter because it's the journey this profession gives you which counts for everything.

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