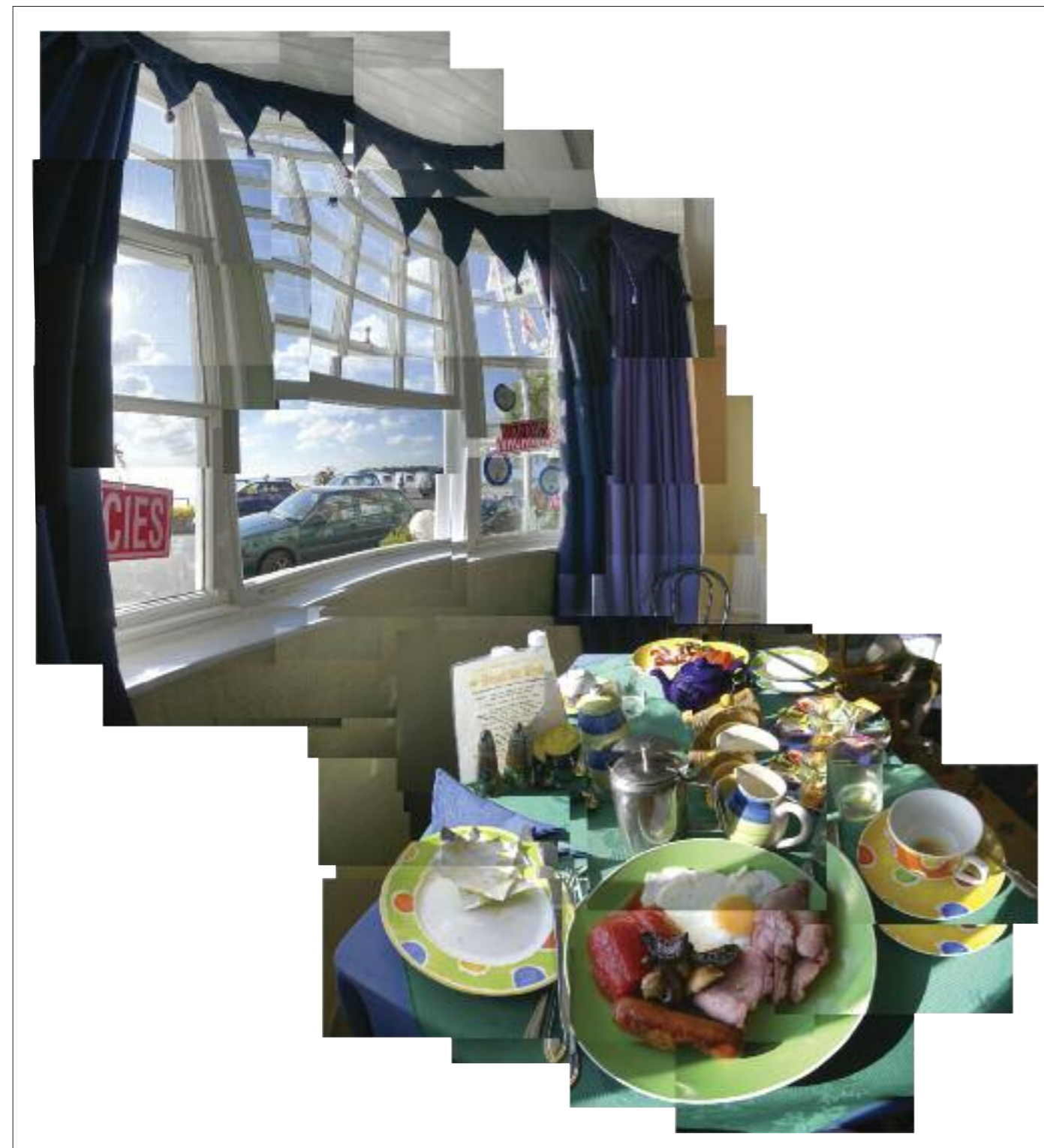


PICTURES ON PAGES

It's not a matter of whether the photobook will replace the shoebox as a method of storing and showing photographs, but when, says Michael Hallett FRPS, as he takes a look at how the new medium impacts on his own practice



Above: Breakfast at Avie's, Weymouth. August 24, 2006

Born on Portland and brought up in Weymouth, I have perhaps reasons enough to return to the seaside and photograph the things that evoke my earliest memories. So, on one level, my *Seaside* project is pure self indulgence. At the same time however, it is an

ongoing intellectual exercise, playing with ideas, images and light; analogous to sketchbooks filled by artists and craftspeople through the centuries.

The more highly developed our skills, the more we need to continue this exploration. It is a continual



Left: The Cobb, Lyme Regis. October 23, 2005

searching and refinement, looking for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It's an unending journey, and if you ever feel you're getting there, you can be pretty sure you've lost your way completely.

Photo constructions

Put together as photo constructions, *Seaside* challenges traditional concepts of image making, with 21st century technologies providing a cutting edge alternative to the single exposure, single viewpoint that a photograph is able to offer.

Made using compact digital cameras, photo constructions consist of between three and 100 or more individual images, giving an angle of view between 180° and 360°. Rather than stitching and merging images into one another, individual photographs are placed over one another in layers.

The photographer and viewer become surrounded by the landscape, offering a more involved sensation of what it was like to be there than could be derived from a single photograph. These images see their subject from the inside looking out, extending an awareness of time and space.

The seaside

Seaside is based on a lifetime of experiences, which in turn have become fragments of an autobiography. My first recollection of the seaside must date from toward the end of WWII. We lived in Weymouth by the top end of the harbour, near where it meets the swannery. I grew up watching the fishing boats at anchor and the paddle steamers under repair in Cussons Boat Yard. My mother used to take me onto the beach through a gap in the barbed wire fencing, part of the fortifications along the South Coast.

Our visits to the sea and sand during the war years were a temporary normality, of building sandcastles on the beach and running in and out of the water. Carved out of a grown-up world that was strange and awesome, for a child they were idyllic. The seaside remains magical for me even today. Particularly for a local, it is a place that continues to demand respect.

With the war eventually over, the shops on the esplanade became Aladdin's caves of kitsch and tat. Closed and boarded up for the majority of the year,

they blossomed with anticipation from Easter onward, through the summer into an early autumn.

The Italian ice cream parlour was for me the best in the world, and remains so today. One of the highlights of my childhood was when Auntie Kathleen took me there for a knickerbocker glory, which cost 2/6d - in the days when that represented five weeks' pocket money. Perhaps this explains why giant ice cream cones are central to the iconography and vernacular of my photographic narrative.

The seaside is represented by a multitude of images: freshly made candy floss on a stick, kiss me quick hats, jellied eels and winkles, fish and chips, tea mashed in a giant teapot, instant coffee made with chicory. Perhaps it is this proliferation of the inconsequential that is so much wrapped up in being a holidaymaker enjoying a trip to the seaside.

Add to this the stacks of deckchairs, windbreaks and small boats and floats, along with the unpredictable weather, and you have the typically English summer. Sun burned or drenched with rain, the stoic English sit on the sands, 'enjoying' whatever weather is thrown at them. In a country where everybody lives within a day trip's distance of the seaside, everybody has their own interpretation of a day by the sea.

Influences

What are the influences? The photographic reality of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, and the more abstract qualities of Aaron Siskind; along with the textured vision of Paul Strand, and the attention to detail and craftsmanship of Irving Penn. The widescreen humanity of Sebastião Salgado, the eloquent eye of Robert Frank, and the Hungarian storytelling of Brassai, André Kertész and Martin Munkácsi. Perhaps less Tony Ray Jones and more Antony Armstrong Jones. The photo constructions are less Hockney's Joiners; more Picasso and Cubism with a little Beryl Cook thrown in. Increasingly, people appearing in the series seem to have a kinship with L S Lowry, while the skies are seen through the painterly eyes of Constable or Turner. For the photographic spread, Alexy Brodovitch, Marvin Israel and Tom Wolsey are key players.



Above: The donkeys on Weymouth sands. October 29, 2008

My Seaside project has been produced in forms for commercial exploitation including books, exhibitions, and photographic wallpaper, for arts, business and commerce. It may not provide a fortune, but it is economically viable. *Seaside Portfolio* is available through Blurb's online bookstall, and I am in discussion with a publisher about *Edges of England* – another incarnation of the project - with a view to bookshop distribution.

Photobooks

Almost as old as photography itself, the first commercial photobook was produced as a part work by William Henry Fox Talbot. On June 29, 1844, the first instalment of *The Pencil of Nature* was printed by the Talbotype Manufacturing Establishment in Reading. Made up of five original calotypes, bound in paper wrappers, and printed with accompanying

letterpress texts, it was priced at 12 shillings and sold 274 copies. Many photographers today would be delighted with that level of sales!

Gerry Badger refers to the photobook as, 'somewhere between the novel and the film', which allows the notion of time passing, and storytelling as a major part of the construction. At its simplest, it is a book – with or without text – where the work's primary message is carried by photographs. It resides, says Badger, 'at a vital interstice between art and the mass medium, between the journeyman and the artist, between the aesthetic and the contextual'.

History

For the professional photographer/designer, the opportunity to self-produce books and other publications has been available since the late-1980s, when the arrival of the Mac Plus, early versions of

Photoshop, and the design packages of Pagemaker and Quark, heralded the beginnings of desktop publishing.

My own steep learning curve in this area provided an outcome in 1989, of a 24-page, full-colour travel brochure, with photographs stripped in by the printer. Over the next six years, as publishing editor of a small university press, my design skills were honed and expanded.

As the technology evolved, the photographer/designer would come to deliver the book to the publisher as a pdf file complete with pictures. With this direct link between the publisher and the photo creative, and resulting reduced production costs, came a new concept in publishing. The short-run photobook became accessible and achievable. But it was not to stop there....

At the turn of the millennium, everything was

moving onto a much broader canvas. While the digital camera seemed to change everything, in fact it changed very little, and photography retained its language and its craft. The new democratic era of photography meanwhile enables greater opportunities for sharing, from *Facebook* to websites, and from email attachments to the photobook.

The digital photobook

It is this last element which allows the photographic enthusiast to at last throw out the dusty old shoebox. The digital photobook is available in the high street and on the web. Various levels of default design are available, some good, some indifferent, but all providing the opportunity to share with a wider audience. There is something for everyone. According to Hewlett-Packard, within the next three years, 20% of all printed images will be in the form of photobooks and similar products.

Blurb is a company and a community that believes in books: making, reading, sharing and selling them. Flexible and smart enough to help anyone make a book – photographers, bloggers, artists, writers, travellers ... the list goes on – Blurb's bookstore and online marketing tools let you share, market and sell your books, and keep the entire markup to yourself.

Its community features empower socially connected groups to create books together. It has printed 90,000 unique titles in the past year alone, and is supported by *Photography.Book.Now*, an international, juried, self-published book competition: a celebration of the most creative and innovative photography books and the people behind them.

Blurb has recently moved to printing all its four colour book pages on HP Indigo digital printing presses. Nearly half of Blurb's customers are photographers and other creative professionals, who use it to create portfolios and client presentations, and to design and deliver professional quality books.

Professional photographer/designers these days use complex design programs on a daily basis, and Blurb offers pre-made templates for Adobe InDesign, as well as having developed guidelines and specifications for other programs.

As well as serious enthusiasts and professional creatives, Blurb would argue that it enables anyone to design, publish, share and sell bookshop quality books, and this is no idle boast. Blurb's BookSmart layout software is free. Compatible with Mac and PC, it includes features such as flexible containers, precision toolbars, gridlines for quick visual guidance, and the ability to save designed pages as custom layouts for reuse. It offers extended flexibility for advanced users, enabling further control in the customisation of book layouts, and how images are accessed, viewed and filtered.

The key to Blurb's success is that it offers both a web store and the creative controls for professionals to create high end books and, crucially for me, it delivers high levels of consistency and quality.

For the photographer, the book can be the ultimate in storytelling: enabling absolute editorial control over words and pictures, their placing and sequencing on the page, the use of scale, and of negative and positive space. It takes picture making into another dimension, with the subject matter limited only by your imagination.

Michael Hallett FRPS

For books ordered before 30 Nov, Blurb is offering RPS members £5 off your first book when you spend £15 or more. To get this offer, enter promo code: RPSOFFER09 when prompted. Blurb is unable to guarantee that books ordered after 30 Nov will be delivered in time for Christmas. Offer cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer. Valid once per unique user. www.blurb.com/uk

For details of Michael Hallett's Seaside Portfolio, go to www.blurb.com/bookstall and add in the title of the book.