



THIS IS THE ELUSIVE FELLOWSHIP

Recently The Society elected 11 new Fellows. Fellowship Board Chair Michael Hallett FRPS considers the impact and diversity of their work in the context of recent trends

In a recent article (*The Elusive Fellowship*, *RPS Journal*, Sept 2009, pp422-425) I made the point that, while the requirements for Fellowship were demanding and rigorous, they were nonetheless achievable. It has been said that Fellowship criteria are difficult to define, and I agree with this. At a recent two-day meeting in Bath, the Fellowship Board considered 14 applications, and recommended that

Council accord 11 of them The Society's highest Distinction of Fellowship. Four of these were from the Contemporary Panel, three from Applied, two from Visual Art, and two from Nature.

Having been central to mainstream photography for at least a decade, the impact of the digital process on the medium is immense. The visual implications of this are evident in these successful applications. When

historians come to consider our current practice within the context of broader photographic history, they may be surprised at what a blanket effect image manipulation has had on The Society's Distinctions. They should be cautioned to consider this in a longer time frame, as this may not be reflective of precisely where we are with the collective medium. Potential applicants should also be cautioned that any apparent current style or direction does not constitute the only successful route to Fellowship.

The process of Fellowship assessment is held in camera. It has been discussed elsewhere, but is summarised here. Applicants submit a portfolio of 20 prints or transparencies, or an illustrated book, to one

of the specialist panels for consideration. The panel views the work, discusses its merits in relation to the criteria laid down, and comes to a decision. If the submission receives the support of the panel, it is forwarded to the Fellowship Board, which moderates work put forward to most of the specialist panels, with the exception of the Research, Education and Application of Photography and Science panels, as explained in the *Distinction Handbook*.

The Chair of the panel putting forward the work introduces the application to the Board, and argues the case for Fellowship. Having considered this, along with the applicant's statement and the work itself, the Board engages in rigorous discussion, taking whatever time is

Top: Carol Tipping FRPS: *Persephone*.
Above: Christine Westgate FRPS, from her submission, *Ivy and Alzheimer's*.

Above: Simon Croft FRPS: *Lviv Ballet*.



Above: Penelope Duns FRPS: Robe, from her series, Wine Tasting.

necessary to come to a conclusion. It will then either make a recommendation to Council to award a Fellowship, or will reject the application. Applications that fail at either stage receive appropriate feedback.

Just as seeing the Grand Canyon or a rugby match on television doesn't have the same veracity or impact as actually being there, single images reproduced in magazines don't have the visual impact that a Fellowship assumes when hung and viewed under correct lighting conditions. Be assured, all these Fellowships have that impact.

Carol Tipping FRPS' thought provoking body of photographs uses Pre-Raphaelite paintings as a point of reference. This is an edited version of her statement of

intent: "The editor of *Digital Photographer* magazine invited me to re-create a series of well-known paintings using photography. I was excited by the technical challenge. A salmon that a neighbour caught and asked me to photograph became a mermaid's tail, and that manipulation was the most intriguing of my experience so far. I was inspired by Pre-Raphaelite paintings, which are romantic, emotionally evocative and illustrate the nature of femininity."

Joseph Yeung FRPS uses image manipulation to create his unique style. As with other candidates who have achieved Fellowship, his work shows a particular visual signature. An expanded statement of 300 words - rather than the normal 150 - is a requirement of the



Contemporary Panel - contributing to the storyline in a manner similar to the extended caption, and Yeung's statement is reproduced in full: "Being a predominantly Buddhist country, China is home to ancient Buddhist temples of great historical value. But when I travelled to some of the areas that were most deeply affected by the Sichuan Earthquake of May 2008, I was deeply shocked to witness the destruction wrought on these timeless places of worship.

"I saw fallen Buddha statues litter the ruins, as if their clay bodies had borne the brunt of the natural disaster alongside humans. And even though Bodhisattvas are themselves enlightened and liberated Buddhists, they had freely chosen to face the horrors of the disaster in

order to free its victims from suffering. Setting aside their own casualties, they offered prayers for the salvation and rebirth of the lost in the midst of the ruins. These scenes moved me to capture the fallen statues in a series of photographs entitled *Earthquake, Damage and Rebirth*.

"Throughout this series, themes of Buddhist salvation are interwoven into the tragedy of the Quake. The photos breathe life and humanity into the Buddha, illustrating his great capacity for love and mercy. In sacrificing their golden bodies, the fallen statues mark a poignant symbol of the strength and resilience found deep within each of us, by which we can stand firm against the merciless hand of nature, to

Above: Thomas Hanahoe FRPS: Heron with Nest Material, from his Nature submission, Birds of Great Britain.

Above left: The work of Trevor Morrisson FRPS, laid out for its Fellowship assessment. Photographed by Andy Moore LRPS.



Above: Joseph Yeung FRPS, from his series of photographs entitled *Earthquake, Damage and Rebirth*.

rise like a phoenix from the ashes.

"I offer a hopeful message through these photographs: in the face of natural disaster, we have the strength to gather power from every corner of the world in aid of those in need. Although the earthquake wrought destruction, death and chaos, we will triumph over these adversities, because it is within each and every one of us to become a Buddha. Life is gifted with the power of regeneration; together, we will cover the ruins and rebuild this beautiful province."

While Yeung's submission can be seen as fantasy storytelling with a moral, were it not for its deliberate manipulation of the integrity we have come to anticipate from the documentary image, it could also be seen as within a documentary idiom.

Simon Roberts FRPS' book, *We English* (Chris Boot, 2009), meanwhile, is documentary photography in its purest sense, with strong antecedents including Benjamin Stone, Tony Ray Jones, Martin Parr and John Davies. Roberts put this book forward for his Contemporary Fellowship application. It could be argued that there are additional hurdles to be overcome when submitting work in book form, in that, despite books tending to contain a much greater number of images than the 20 generally submitted at Fellowship, the stipulation that, 'all significant images must be of the required standard' is not lessened.

Roberts' high-profile body of work has its own website, at www.we-english.co.uk, and was in the public domain prior to being submitted for Fellowship. Chris Boot, its publisher, saw it as, '... the most significant contribution to the photography of England in recent years.' More recently, his work has been highlighted in

the *RPS Journal*, with the cover feature, *A Place Called Home* (December 2009/January 2010).

While differing in their approaches, both Yeung and Roberts fit well within The Society's understanding of Contemporary photography, which says that: 'The fundamental essence of a Contemporary submission is conception. The Panel attaches key importance to ideas, and favours work by photographers who, through their photographic image making, wish to explore, define, illustrate and evaluate contemporary issues or their own particular vision of the world.'

Christine Westgate FRPS directed her application to the Applied Panel. Also documentary in character, it shows the disturbing story of *Ivy and Alzheimer's*. This edited version of her statement expands on the story: 'As Ivy reaches her last years, she has been spirited away from society and the happy fulfilled life she once knew. She now lives in a residential home for people with dementia. These images portray Ivy as her independence diminishes and she negotiates a solitary and frightening experience ... Ivy is losing herself.' This emotive and very current topic has produced powerful and sensitive imagery, with the photographer ensuring the subject retains her dignity throughout.

Trevor Morrison FRPS produced a uniquely different application, and demonstrated a niche in the professional market. His edited statement shows that what looks deceptively simple requires a very high level of technical skill and expertise to make it effective. He explains, "My work is mainly with the British Army and those associated with the Armed Forces, and ranges from individual portraits to groups (small to 1000 plus). The portraits tend to be in the



Above: Simon Roberts FRPS: *Chelford Car Boot, Moat Hall Farm, Marthall, Cheshire, 13 July 2008*, from his book and FRPS submission, *We English*.

Old Master style, to accommodate the traditional historic uniforms. The vast majority of backdrops for the group images are superimposed as, for logistical and political reasons, it is not possible to take a group of soldiers to the cherished landscape. Normally, I capture the background in advance, both in sunny and dull conditions, later aligning the group with reference to light and shadow conditions in the previously photographed background.'

Originally published as a 12-page photo essay in *The Economist's Intelligent Life Magazine* (Autumn 2009), Simon Croft's submission is titled *Dancing the Night Away: The Russian Ballet Tradition in Lviv*.

"This looks behind the scenes at the Russian ballet in Ukraine", says Croft. "Lviv is a crossroads of cultures, having been at various times part of the Hapsburg, Russian, and Polish empires, and now fiercely independent Ukraine. The Lviv Opera Ballet is full of Viennese elegance, but is very much part of Russian ballet, with its dancers and teachers coming from the former Soviet Union ... The images concentrate not on the dance, but what is happening backstage, in training and at home."

Penelope Duns FRPS' body of work, *Wine Tasting*, could have fitted comfortably within several genres, although it fits particularly well within Contemporary. Her edited statement expands on the visual elegance of the photographs: 'This series is intended to express the sensual experience, sights, sounds, smell and taste of a wine tasting. I used to have my own vineyard, and have tasted professionally. The idea for the photographs came while I was drinking wine and listening to classical music. It occurred to me that, if

you can express images with music, why not tastes, sounds and smells with images? These photomontages are intended to convey feelings and expressions, rather than to give a purely visual record.'

Thomas Hanahoe FRPS' application, *Birds of Great Britain*, fulfilled the requirements of the Nature Panel, for which the reader is directed to The Society's *Distinction Handbook*. Hanahoe's statement is given here: 'In presenting this submission, I depict a variety of birds displaying behaviours typical of their species. It shows the birds undertaking a range of activities, including hovering, diving, nest building, hunting, carrying prey such as fish or insects, eating, and feeding their young. I have also tried to capture the elegance of their flight activity, as well as the harmony that birds display when they fly together with companions ... In each instance, the birds were wild and free.'

In that Fellowship criteria require a cohesive body of work that frequently interprets a theme, it is logical that photography's ability to tell a story is central to many of these applications. However, within that remit, photographers rarely show their skills over a wide spectrum, and there is an argument for demonstrating an element of breadth along with a degree of specialism. In order to maintain and expand the pre-eminence of our Distinctions within a global context, this is a discussion that will continue

Individually and collectively, the bodies of work presented here are distinctive in their particular aspect of the medium, and they demonstrate this with conviction. They show elegance, individuality, quality and commitment to the medium. This is the elusive Fellowship. Michael Hallett FRPS