

PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION

There will be an opportunity to see early prints from The Royal Photographic Society's Collection – ranging from 1845 to 1940 – in an exhibition in October. The show contrasts the work of the pioneers, including staging and multiple negatives to make composite prints, with outstanding work from the DI Group membership where cameras and computers are used to develop exciting images and art. Jim Buckley, former editor of DIGIT, explains how he compiled the exhibition and even ended up curating it.



easier now with imaging software. I showed him the *DIGIT* front cover from Summer 2009, Issue 42, which I was preparing with *A Red Boat* by Brian Beany FRPS. Is that a photograph? It's like a Turner painting, he exclaimed. What about an exhibition of Old and New at our local arts centre, Riverhouse Barn? And so it began. I thought I would merely be the catalyst, bringing together the Collection prints and modern DI Group work, but when I asked who would curate such an important exhibition everyone looked at me! And so, nearly two years on - and some frustrating days and sleepless nights later - *The Art of Photography: from Plate Camera to Computer* opens on 6 October.

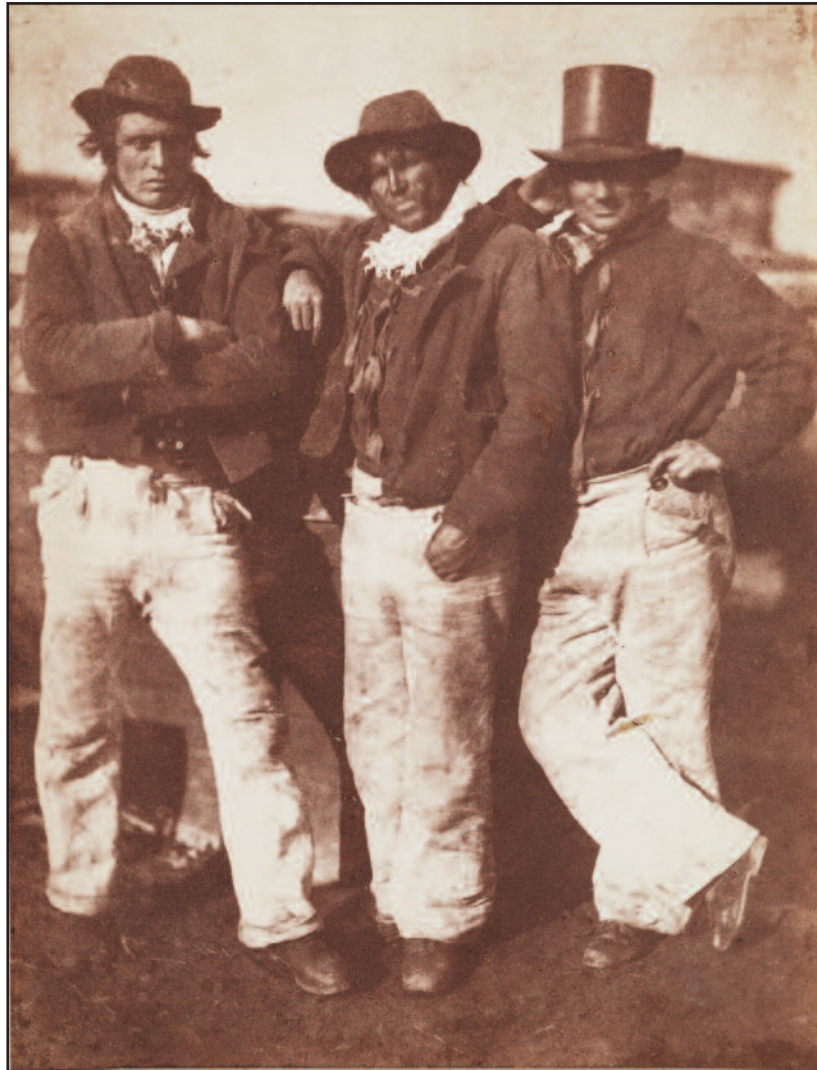
Consumer digital cameras and easy access to imaging software have led to greater public awareness and debate about the use of manipulation in everything from airbrushed models on magazine covers to celebrity and political set-ups. As this exhibition, and the associated Lecture and Workshop show, the debate about truth and illusion in photography is rather older.



It was a chance conversation with Peter Scott, a close friend who has a wide knowledge of art and now gives his time as a volunteer guide at the London Tate museums. Increasing interest from the museums in photography as art has led to some stunning exhibitions, including prints from the Society's Collection. I explained that reality and illusion - the RPS' theme for 2009 - with image manipulation had been used by creative photographers from the beginning. It was just a lot

Above: Soldiers of the Sky, 1940 by Nickolas Muray FRPS by generous permission of Mimi Muray, daughter of the photographer and Manager of the Muray Archive, Utah, USA.

Right: Flying Legends 2009 by Ron Gafney LRPS
Sometimes it works the other way. Nickolas Muray's composite print is probably a model taken in the studio with lights, set against a projected background of the repeated aircraft image; or a second negative over-printed on to the sky photograph to which the aircraft have been added. Other than darkening of the background and sky using imaging software, Ron Gafney's shot is pretty much straight. The remarkable coincidence is that, in the modern shot from a flying display with a real pilot, the aircraft and flying suit date from 1940.



Left: Newhaven Fishermen, about 1845 by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson. This is the earliest print in the exhibition. The challenge was to find a complementary modern image.

Austin Thomas generously gave permission for me to use an image from the Fellowship panel of his late father, Barrie Thomas FRPS. Did I succeed in finding a complement? Come and see at the exhibition.

Dr Adi Sethna's widow, in consultation with Peter Clarke FRPS, has also allowed us to use one of his striking images based on a Salvador Dali painting.

Hopefully, one day soon these two greats will feature in the permanent Collection of the Society.

The emphasis now moved to the venue. The Robert Phillips gallery at the Riverhouse Barn in Walton-on-Thames, Surrey is a lovely space with natural light and moveable screens slung from the ceiling. Susan Segal, the founder and Director of Riverhouse, stressed that she did not want a crowded display: these prints have got to breathe - not easy to achieve whilst showing over 60 prints, some of which we decided to have made bigger and flush mount on foam board to provide variety from the black frames. Nor did I want a one-for-one contrast of specific old and new images unless there was a compelling reason. Fortunately, I had space to devote a whole wall to modern prints.

I knew of course that I wouldn't be having the original prints from the Collection and The National Media Museum and the licensing authority, The Science and Society Picture Library, naturally wanted quality assurance on the printing. It was therefore a tremendous bonus when regular supporter of the DI Group, Permajet, offered to make the large prints needed of the historic images (and some modern ones) for us from digital files provided by the National Media Museum.

In discussion with the Riverhouse Barn Gallery a programme of events started to be formulated around the exhibition. With the theme of Reality and Illusion, and following the very successful day

With the enthusiastic support of the President, Rosemary Wilman HonFRPS - who on occasion had to apply a little Presidential elbow to make some things happen - and DI Group members I started the journey.

The Society's Collection is now housed at the National Media Museum in Bradford where Bob Gates ARPS was doing some research: he generously agreed to comb the Collection for some suitable prints. They were a revelation for me. But, as it turned out, intellectual property rights complications prevented me using some beautiful photographs. Fortunately we did manage to get permission to use thirty. Although some copyright holders excluded themselves by asking for high fees for reproduction in the exhibition two, Mimi Muray and Janet Stenner (see page 1 and page 5) were immediately generous and supportive in waiving any fee for, respectively, their father's and grandfather's work.

John Long ARPS now drew up a list of possible modern prints which might either contrast or complement the Collection photographs from his work with Alex Dufty LRPS on the DI Group exhibitions over the past couple of years. Members were usually happy to donate window mounted prints to fit the standard RPS black wood frames measuring 40 x 50 cm which the Society has made available for the exhibition.

Exhibition and Event Programme

Wednesday 6 - Sunday 24 October: Exhibition open to public.

Free entry throughout. Cafe Bar serving snacks

Gallery open: Wednesday to Saturday 1102 - 3822=Sunday 1100 - 1430

Saturday 9 October: Noon: Formal Opening by President, RPS

Tuesday 12 October: 1800 to 2000 Private View- by ticket

2000 My Life in Photo journalism

Peter Nicholls, Senior Photographer *The Times*

- by ticket £8 from Riverhouse Barn

Sunday 17 October 1000 - 1600 Steve Caplin: Reality and Illusion

- by ticket £25 including lunch

More information and tickets from Riverhouse Barn:

Telephone: 01932 253354

Email: boxoffice@riverhousebarn.co.uk

which I organised at Smethwick last year, Steve Caplin was an obvious choice for a workshop. Steve will present a thought-provoking and challenging session linked to the exhibition, and a Photoshop workshop. He is a specialist in digital imaging and Photoshop special techniques, creating satirical montages for the newspapers and an author of several books including *How to Cheat in Photoshop* and *Art and Design in Photoshop*. He will cover the ethics of photographic manipulation with current and historical examples with a detailed presentation on imaging techniques for photographers in the afternoon. He's even contributed a satirical montage to the exhibition from recent work for the Radio Times.



All new and cutting edge stuff with the latest Photoshop expertise and 'cheating' of course, but back in 1858 Henry Peach Robinson, who was a member of the then Photographic Society from its early days, was on a similar theme and also using brand new techniques to create impact. Tuberculosis, or consumption, was prevalent in Victorian times and many families had lost young people: it was not a taboo subject by any means and

Above: Top Gear Girls, 2010 or What if the Petrolheads were Birds? by Steve Caplin.

Below 150 years earlier: Fading Away by Henry Peach Robinson, 1858 a combination print from five negatives exposed onto a single sheet.



artists often illustrated the sadness and pain of death. We might find it a somewhat sentimental or maudlin presentation now but Robinson's photograph was a great commercial success and was shown at The Crystal Palace. But when, two years later, he revealed that the print was in fact a combination, made up of five separate negatives exposed onto one sheet, there was a storm of protest, even outrage. Ironically, his 'dying' model was a distinctly fine and healthy 14 year old! The photographer argued that it was impossible to take a satisfactory single photograph with the right lighting and poses and so had shot the interior and the figures separately. Given the limitations of long exposures and the lighting of such a scene, to say nothing of the models holding their poses for the lengthy shutter release needed, we can understand that. To complete the message that the photographer is seeking to convey he has inscribed a verse by Shelly on the mount.

By the way, Henry is also alleged to have told his new bride Selina that it was 'photography first, wife afterwards'. Nothing changes for photographer's spouses then!

In 1857 Oscar G Rejlander had already gone further with combination prints than Robinson and made his famous photograph, *The Two Ways of Life*. This mannered and moralistic print, featured in the Society's Staging, Manipulation and Photographic Truth theme last year as a test to see if we could do better today, is made from no less than 30 negatives. They were printed one after the other onto two sheets of albumen paper which were mounted to form a unified picture. I've got a large version of that in the exhibition. It too caused a scandal at the time - but more for the nudity than the technical combination of images.

Incidentally, the title of the exhibition - The Art of Photography - makes it clear that we are not here concentrating on techniques but on the impact of the finished print. And that's equally the case for the modern digital prints so I've avoided any detailed descriptions of how particular images were created. You'll have to come to Steve Caplin's workshop to learn more about that. For this exhibition it's the impact which the final image makes which counts.

In looking through the Collection images I was struck by a famous picture by Roger Fenton of the infamous Valley of the Shadow of Death from the Crimean War. Taken in 1855, and reproduced on page 4, this shot shows not the mangled bodies of horses and soldiers but an eerily still, shallow defile carpeted by canon balls in the aftermath of the disastrous charge against Russian guns by the Light Brigade. No doubt Fenton's cumbersome equipment and the limitations of the techniques of the day, and the access to the battle field possible for a photographer using a horse to pull his darkroom,

dictated to some extent the picture that he could make. But what a compelling picture which speaks volumes of the horror without actually showing the horror itself.

This caused me to think of the front pages of *The Times* newspaper with images from both conflict zones and natural disasters by Peter Nicholls who happens to live nearby. I emailed Peter. He was working in Afghanistan but readily agreed that we should meet up when he was home to go through his recent library to select something apt and suitable.

After training in photography, Peter worked on local newspapers and a provincial news agency before moving to Fleet Street in the late 80s where he worked for the UK's first colour daily, *Today*. He joined the Times in 1995 where he is now a senior photographer. Covering a whole host of themes, his most recent work is born of the 'war on terror' and has taken him to Iraq and Afghanistan, where he has been embedded with British and US troops, as well as operating unilaterally. He has also travelled extensively in Africa and many other strife-torn parts of the world to cover famine, floods and conflict, including the middle-east.

From a sequence of some of the most horrific photographs that I have seen, Peter has chosen one that avoids a direct view of the deaths of UN soldiers but shows the aftermath: a helmet, mud and blood and the corner of a military stretcher. It was a natural foil for Fenton's shot.

I had soon inveigled Peter into giving me a panel of photographs from his recent work and pressed him into giving the talk after the private View on Tuesday 12 October - see box on page 2 for details of tickets. The ethical dilemmas of a life in photojournalism against a background of his photographs will offer a fascinating evening.

It was only subsequently in researching some of the photographs that I realised that my long-held simplistic view of the Fenton print was seriously misplaced. This is not the site of the Light Brigade charge and those much more expert than me have debated whether or not Roger Fenton arranged the canon balls on the road and whether any personal risk was involved. Certainly there are two versions of this photograph, with and without the canon balls on the main roadway, - see <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/09/25/>



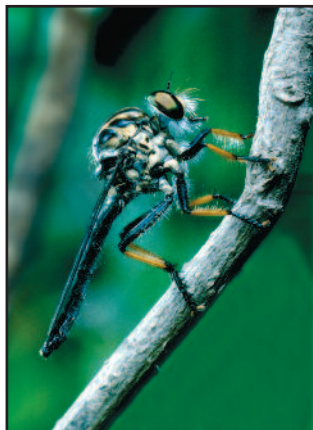
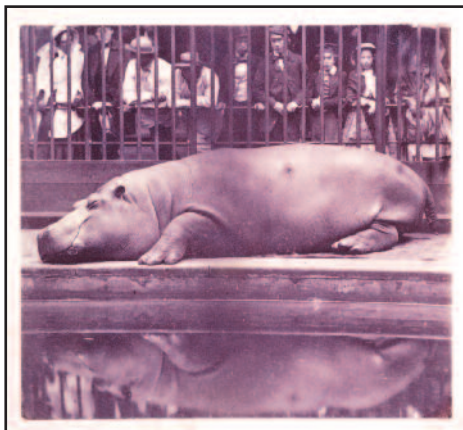
Above top: The Valley of the Shadow of Death by Roger Fenton, 1855.

Above: After an attack on an Italian UN patrol, Afganistan, 2010 by Peter Nicholls

which-came-first-the-chicken-or-the-egg-part-one/ to read one version of this particular Reality and Illusion debate.

By contrast Peter Nicholls' shot is not staged and relies on a superb sense of viewpoint, timing and a little cropping - and not a little personal bravery. Although I was able to select from only a fraction of the Society's Collection, I did not see many natural history pictures. But here's an animal picture that begged to be included. A chat on Skype with Tony Healy in Sydney and I soon had a complementary modern image to give me Little and Large. The hippo may have weighed 3,000 kg and measured 5 metres whilst Tony's tiny fly with is shot with a macro lens to provide life-sized reproduction.

Far Left: The Hippopotomus at the Zoological gardens, 1852 by Count de Montizon
Left: Robber Fly by Tony Healy ARPS





Left: The Relief Boat about 1911 by Francis James Mortimer
Below left: Stairs to Chapter House, Wells, 1900 by Frederick Henry Evans reproduced by generous permission of Mrs Janet Stenner, the photographer's granddaughter

- bunch of people. Thank you to the many who helped but whom I have not been able to mention by name.
 I've also learned just a little about how to put together an exhibition with such precious photographs and how to prepare and display the information material for it.
 Would I take this on again? I think you should ask my wife that question!
 I look forward to seeing some of you at the exhibition between 6 and 24 October.

Originally I had imagined that my challenge would be selecting from the Collection. After all, it is the Society's Collection so presumably digital versions of all the prints would be available to me. It was a little more complicated. In the end, I had to use what I could have but since everything in the Collection is superb that didn't matter. It has resulted in some photographers being represented more than once but those greats surely deserve that.

For the modern prints, however, the available space meant I had to limit myself to single examples from the thirty DI Group members included. Because, on the whole, I wanted recent digital images, I took careful note of some that I saw when helping to put up the DI Group print entries for the selection at Smethwick in April. Others I was able to 'borrow' from the Society's International Print Exhibition. Members have donated their prints and mounts - some making specially large ink jet copies for me - and I hope that they may find a permanent place in perhaps a touring exhibition, or at Fenton House or the National Media Museum.

The past two years have opened my eyes to some splendid photography from a century ago and more; and reinforced my view that DI Group members are an amazingly talented - and generous



Above: Contemporary Dance by Peter Hemment LRPS
Below: Sweetcorn, 2010 by Alan Cross LRPS

