

# IN CONVERSATION WITH Paul Wakefield

An inspiration to many of his contemporaries, Paul Wakefield reveals why subtlety and empathy are at the core of his images

Interview by Anna Bonita Evans

Tucked away in a small loft in a Victorian semi-detached behind the livelier streets of Brixton, there's a microcosm of some of the most exotic corners of the world. As I climb the stairs, I come face to face with primitively carved wooden masks and beguiling, unusual figurines; all artistically displayed along my ascent to Paul Wakefield's studio. Given the nature of the entrance, it is surprising to find his workspace has little decoration; the minimalist and pure white attic conversion is modest. As we begin to chat and look through Paul's portfolio, it is obvious here is a man who understands: understands himself, his subject and what he is looking for in his work. It is refreshing to find out, however, that his first experience of picking up a camera was one many people can relate to.

Recalling his introduction to photography, Paul confesses, 'It was a complete disaster! I was about 12 and living in Hong Kong. As an avid bird watcher and nature lover, I was fascinated by a troop of monkeys living in some trees down the road. One day, I borrowed my dad's Zeiss – he was a keen amateur snapper and a complete gadget fiend – and I took a few pictures. When I got the film back I didn't get a thing – not a single monkey on the whole roll, and virtually nothing in focus.'

While attending an English boarding school, Paul developed an interest in the sciences but on leaving chose to go to art college, 'I did my foundation course in Bournemouth. It offered art history and that was when I got really keen on the early nineteenth century landscape painters, like Caspar David Friedrich,' a German Romantic artist known for his mesmeric, turbulent and evocative landscapes.

Friedrich's aesthetic was instrumental in influencing Paul's photographic style: 'I love the way he looked at things: his colour palette wasn't garish at all, and his use of flat, dull and subtle light really appealed to me; even though I had grown up in a relatively sunny country, I wasn't particularly drawn to those bright light conditions.' Paul considers the soft lighting that characterises many of his pictures to be an extremely important element, helping to bring out subtleties he wants to emphasise in the landscape.

Although he went on to do a three-year photography degree, Paul tells me he learned most by teaching himself: 'I looked at all kinds of photography books. I worked hard at deconstructing the photographs, to work out why one picture worked and another one didn't. I still think that is the best way to learn because it makes you seriously think about it, to consider how the photographer approaches a subject and how they decide to capture the





previous spread  
Birling Gap,  
Sussex, England

opposite  
Abraham Lake,  
Alberta, Canada

left top  
Torridon, Highland,  
Scotland

left bottom  
Fjallsárlón, Iceland

image.' This active engagement and early disciplined visual analysis helped hone Paul's eye but now it seems to have percolated into his subconscious, as on location he tries to work as spontaneously and intuitively as possible.

Paul feels his photographic approach is not an overly formulated process, but a natural and emotive reaction to what he sees, 'I have obviously got a certain stylistic approach, but it is pretty instinctive. I do work quite quickly; it is more an emotional response and observation, which goes straight to my brain – I believe if you think about it too much then you've missed it.' When working on personal projects, Paul prefers 'an unrestricted, uncomplicated and contemplative time, where I can literally lose myself.'

His modus operandi shouldn't, however, be mistaken for aimless wandering. It has purpose, and requires complete assiduity. 'I've got to be totally receptive to everything around me. I tend to concentrate in quite a rigid way, and by rigid I mean I am really focused on what is going on in front of me, so I want as few interruptions as possible. For me, it is all about the association you have with your subject – nothing should come between it.' Paul adds, 'I photograph fairly regular landscapes, but what I see is some interest or wonder in them that I think is amazing, and will make a wonderful image. I only know when I have succeeded in a photograph when I look at it afterwards and think: yes, that is what I saw and felt.'

Paul's emotional connection to the landscape is encapsulated in the physicality found in his images, partly due to his decision to leave in the anomalies, such as a random rock or leaf, as

well as his use of limitless depth of field: no particular element of Paul's images automatically take precedence. Coming from the traditional topographical viewpoint, Paul's aim is not to prettify or sanitise the landscape into a 'nice picture' but to guide viewers toward a particular thought.

When asked why photography intrigues him, Paul enthusiastically reveals, 'It's like a vinyl record – a piece of magic. You've got this equipment, which you need to know how to operate but you don't have to bother yourself with the intricacies of it, and you pass light through a lens on to a piece of chemical coated plastic, and this incredible thing happens! It is all about the uncertainty and a sense of continual discovery. I also love the landscape – the actual topography of it – and find it incredible that I can miraculously take it away with me, but I haven't done any damage.'

Paul's fascination with the landscape goes beyond photography: a collection of exquisite landscape fragments beautifully arranged on top of his plan-chest invite a closer look. Like ancient totems signifying nature's power and beauty, this intimate selection is testament to Paul's keen eye and empathy. Picking up a pebble, gunmetal in colour and with intricate striations, he reveals, 'It's these things I would part with last; they haven't got any monetary value but I'd be miffed if I lost a favourite stone – you can get another pebble but it won't be the same one and you won't get that memory.' As he goes on to talk about his forthcoming projects, I wonder about the new generation of photographers this master of his craft may inspire. ■

right  
Grand Escalante  
National Monument,  
Utah, USA



To see more of  
Paul's work, go to  
[paulwakefield.co.uk](http://paulwakefield.co.uk)