

1.1/ The Making of reveal

Rationale/overview/ methodology/ conclusions

Reveal is a documentary photography project set in Bristol between the years 2000 and 2002. It features 36 young people from all walks of life aged 16 to 22 years old. I asked each participant to think of how they wished to represent themselves in terms of the photographic portrait, and to think in terms of locations that revealed aspects of their lives they wished to record for posterity. Colour photographs were taken at the same time as the portraits, as observations by me, based on what was discussed, and shown to me by the participants. My aim was to create an historical document about young people in Bristol at this time of changes in young peoples lives. This means the photographs are taken as evidence, and held as such by the participants for their own lifetimes, to be viewed in the future as a slice of their lives they have helped create. Each participant was given a set of their pictures, and is informed on how the pictures are used. At all times, the privacy of the participants is respected, and they know the photographs are not used for any purpose without prior consent.

Methodology

I approached the participants, either through locally based charity Multi-A, or independently, and explained through earlier examples, some of the ways others have chosen to represent themselves. I asked people to think of the set of photographs like a time capsule, one which they can look back at in the future and say that the pictures have captured this period of their lives. After a week or two to allow the participants to think of how they wished to proceed, I made contact again to discuss ideas, and fix times and dates for the shoot. The photographic work took place in one or two sessions, lasting between two and four hours, depending on travel etc.

In addition to the two black and white portraits, I made two colour photographs as observations based on things said or shown to me by the participants. I tried to include the participants in this process, by talking to them about certain possessions, particularities, or everyday scenes they witness. The photographic work was made on a 5x4 inch camera, the black and white and colour photographs shot on negative film. The participants were encouraged to look at the ground glass while the photographs were being made, to see the compositions, and to experience the camera side of the photographic process. I explained the technical aspects of the shoot, involving the participant in as much detail as I saw response to such information. Some people had art training, some people had photographic experience and brought their cameras and photographed the whole process. Some people were not interested in the technical side, and some had no artistic experience, and were shy about looking through the camera, doing so with trepidation.

The black and white photographs were produced traditionally as contact prints, and the colour prints were made digitally on a photo quality ink jet printer with long lasting inks. These were sent to the participants within a week of the shoot, so the ideas were still fresh in their minds. These were not the final presentation of the work, and the participants knew this, they were just work prints. Further contact is made if and when the pictures are used for any purpose, be it editorially, or in exhibition formats.

Context of proposed work

The work has many different connotations and levels, depending on how far one is to delve into a work of such complexity.

On an individual basis, each set of photographs means something different to each participant. The universal theme is one of an historical document they can refer to as their lives progress, or a record of an interesting collaboration that enabled them to capture and record a time of their life they would not have the means or the inclination to do for themselves. I tried to install this as a start point, but individuals were free to take their photographs beyond this point into something personal. Each person is presenting themselves in locations that show who they are in a context- in areas they are comfortable, or places they enjoy at this time in their lives. I tried to make each participant aware of the various levels to the project. This usually resulted in some self insight as to who they are, and how they see themselves, and how they can present themselves in the context of the project, with an understanding that many people will see their pictures. The photograph, on this level, acts as evidence, for them, and for the viewer of such work.

In a broader sense, the completed work offers the opportunity for comparisons to be made. This can take the form of comparisons based on the number of ways we as humans seem to classify each other. Those who classify others in terms of difference, will look at the differences in the sets of photographs, those who classify others in terms of similarities will find those similarities through the photographs.

It is an important part of the work that the photographs are presented without added text narrative or captions. Only an introduction to the work as a whole is provided, not individual information about each photograph or person, only names. In this way, narrative is encouraged, but is based on information supplied in the photographs in purely visual terms. Here we see the importance of the colour photographs, as these are a way of guiding the viewer into looking at the one individual's set as a whole, rather than each portrait as an individual photograph expressing one idea.

I tried to link the set of four photographs together, by selecting certain objects in the background of the portraits, for example, with objects represented in colour later, in a slightly different context. There is no intention towards malice or irony, but more an attempt to link certain pictures in certain ways that allow questions to be asked as to the reasons for inclusion, ultimately leading to the viewer's own narrative construction.

Further to this lack of provided text narrative, is the opportunity for the viewers to question their narrative. This adds another level to the project, one of self examination by the viewer, given a set of evidence from which they can make their own conclusions. I am under no illusions that everyone will go through this process, but it is there, and has happened already.