



It is an unusually hot afternoon and Christopher John Ball sits in the bright sun in the garden at the Chelsea Arts Club looking perfectly cool in a dark maroon shirt and black jacket. He has sparkling intense eyes behind round John Lennon glasses and by way of introduction he sings a line from the Beatles' song, "10,000 holes in Blackburn, Lancashire."

body image

PHOTOGRAPHY | CHRISTOPHER JOHN BALL WORDS | CLIFFORD THURLOW

THAT'S WHERE he's from, Blackburn, in the North of England, and although he has clung on to the burred inflections of his working class roots, he took, as we might say, the long and winding road south to London to make his name as a photographer. He slings his jacket over a chair and as he sips a pint of John Smith's bitter in his expression I can see him visualising me, not sitting there in the shade of a magnolia tree, but as a finished print of the scene.

When Chris was at school and professed his ambition to be a photographer, the career's master laughed. Smart kid like this with fanciful ideas. Get an education and a good job in an office. The adviser, he would come to learn, gives the advice he needs to hear himself. Chris dropped out of school and did that thing the young and determined do: he went knocking on doors and kept on knocking until someone said, okay, let's see what you can do mixing chemicals down in the darkroom.

It was the best apprenticeship he could have had, mining away in the dark,



learning the business from the bottom up. When they put a camera in his hands he went out to shoot commercial and industrial projects, interesting because holding a camera has a tactile appeal, in one way an end in itself, in another, the next step along the way.

With a portfolio to show, he got a place at Derby University and did a degree in Photographic Studies under the great British landscape photographer John

Blakemore. It was at college where Chris Ball first started to think about body image, in the nude as an art form, but also in the philosophical aspect of photography. He read Camus and Sartre and began to recognize that how we see ourselves, how we are objectified by the camera lens, is an existentialist rationale. Born with a damaged hip, Chris Ball walks with a limp which does, if anything, give him an air of mystery and allure. Do you need a touch of suffering to empathise with others? He shrugs off the notion. We are what we are, he says. "If I can explain it this way: my leg doesn't bother me, but I despise me shoe."

Even before university, Chris Ball joined Action Factory, a group providing opportunities for underprivileged kids in community art projects. Today in spite of his work load he finds time to pass on his skills as a tutor at various London colleges and acts as external moderator in photographic exams, putting back into photography what the profession has given him. "I feel blessed. I am doing exactly what I want to be doing," he says. "How many men can say that?"

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A robin lands on the arm of Chris Ball's chair and gazes at the sparkle in his glasses. We mourn the lack of starlings, once a common sight in London, the explosion in the number of pigeons. As the robin loses interest and flies away, Chris Ball fixes me with a passionate stare.

He has been reminded of something Albert Camus wrote, that how when you see something in a certain light, the light instantly changes and the moment is gone. It is what Camus calls the epiphany moment, a moment of oneness, of perfection. "A photographer wants others to see what he sees," he says. "In this respect, photography and all art are forms of self-portraiture. Even when you are taking a nude of a beautiful woman, you are putting yourself in the picture, you are taking control of the objectification of that individual and then asking others to see what you see."

He pauses for me to take that in. "When I see something that interests me," he then adds, "I see it in black and white. I see the print before I press the shutter. We don't 'take' photos, we 'make' them. You are pre-visualising and composing. It is a construct, like a painting."

Chris Ball's favourite narrative device is the series of photographs. He will shoot a nude in a derelict building, "the nakedness of the model set in the nakedness of the derelict resonate a certain magnetism for me."

Why a nude woman? Isn't this pure voyeurism? "On the contrary," he says. "I see it as romantic. The juxtaposition creates a sense of awe; awe in the Kantian sense." He's deadly serious. Philosophy for Chris Ball is at the heart of his work. He sees in photography a strong link to literature. "Writers do not invent the words, only how to put them together," he explains.

"Photography is the same, an arrangement of mise-en-scène."

It comes as no surprise that Chris Ball has developed this concept to co-write with Dean Sipling *Throwing Stones*, staged at London's Greenwich Playhouse in 2005. The play uses blow ups of photographic images to further the narrative, as scenes in themselves, not solely as an illustration to the dialogue. This is fringe theatre at its best, experimental, vaguely existentialist, but "thoroughly watchable and believable," according to Barbara Lewis in *The Stage*.

Christopher John Ball's many interests ultimately create one pattern that led him to co-found with Paul Woods the Association of Erotic Artists, a group that organises exhibitions and liaises with the media to give a combined voice to those working in the world of erotica. "With the rise of fundamentalist Islam and neo-puritanical Christianity we are in danger of backsliding into suppression and censorship," he says. "It doesn't matter to me if people want to believe in a Sky God. That's their right. But we are totally against anyone interfering with our right to produce the art form that motivates us."

The Association of Erotic Artists is spreading its wings internationally and members will be flying into London this autumn to man the stand and show their work at the Erotic Exhibition in Olympia.

"Do you want me to send you a ticket?" he asks.
"Absolutely."

Chris Ball comes to his feet and as he goes to the bar to buy another round, the robin lands back again on the arm of his chair.

More of Chris Ball's images at www.newnudemag.com

