

# Through The Lens

THE JADE PROFILE: CHRISTOPHER JOHN BALL - PHOTOGRAPHER - ENGLAND



**C**hristopher John Ball, Chris to his wide circle of friends and colleagues, is a widely exhibited and published, London based, fine arts photographer and lecturer who describes himself as an artist who uses lens-based media and text. His work can be found in many public and private collections and is displayed on the pages of several prominent international on-line galleries. Chris's images have been showcased in a number of Italian, Hong Kong SAR, British and mainland Chinese publications. He has also been interviewed and filmed working for television programmes shown in Europe, the USA and Great Britain.

He was born in Blackburn, Lancashire, in 1960 and has been working professionally for twenty-eight years - exhibiting for the last twenty of these. Like many towns in Lancashire, Blackburn owed its initial prosperity to the cotton industry, but as this began to decline in the 1930s, through the importation of cheaper cotton from India, the people of Blackburn had to look to other industries. Although it would be hard today to find many people still employed in the once thriving cotton industry, visitors to the town can still find many relics from its rich past - the most obvious example being the Leeds and Liverpool canal. A few of the surviving mills that line sections of this historic canal have been restored as working 'heritage' museums. Today this once busy trade

thoroughfare is used mainly for pleasure. With its proud heritage behind it Blackburn has, over recent years, developed a thriving artistic community - though this can, at times, be somewhat 'conservative' in its outlook.

Chris attended St Wilfrid's Church of England High School. Not coming from an artistic background he initially wanted to become a vet. However this worthwhile ambition ended abruptly when he came to the realisation that he would be unable to bring himself to put a sick or injured animal to sleep. With a disability to his left leg he couldn't take part in sports and instead had to stand out in the cold during games lessons, or sit on the benches. In an attempt to stave off boredom he often found himself drifting off into a world of his own, or sneaking a book to read during these periods. He also developed something of a knack for storytelling and other pupils, finding themselves relegated to the sidelines or the benches, were soon mesmerised by the stories he'd made up on the spur of the moment. These stories later became scripts for imaginary films and Chris soon found himself seriously considering becoming a filmmaker. However, as he soon discovered, film making is an expensive business. Yet, his fleeting film making notion had brought him into contact with photography, and at St Wilfrid's he had the good fortune come under the tutelage of Mr Jefferson, the art teacher. As an art teacher Jefferson encouraged his students to look and think beyond the conventional. He championed new techniques and refused to pigeon-hole art and artists within a conservative box. It was Jefferson who loaned Chris his first camera and encouraged him in his endeavours by setting up a darkroom at the school.

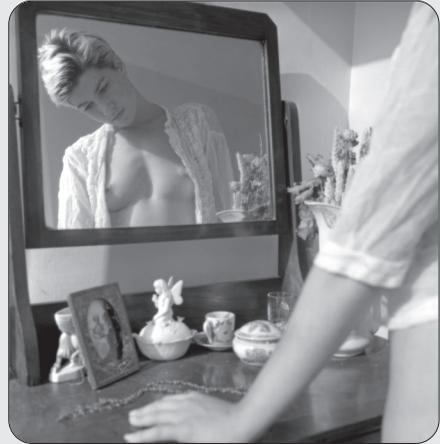
Chris's first subjects were inspired by 'punk' and 'new wave' films and music, and the writing of Jean Paul Sartre. Perhaps typically for a teenager, full of angst, anger and rebellion, he felt drawn to producing images which reflected his perception of the deep sense of isolation and loneliness of the human condition. His work at this time featured industrial landscapes, which often included a single, isolated figure. He is the first to admit it was all experimental and rather hit and miss, as he blundered along, with some of his accidents passing for good photographs. He loved the way film director Sergi Leone (perhaps best remembered for his Spaghetti Westerns with the likes of Clint Eastwood, Eli Wallach and Lee Van Cleef) used the Cinemascope screen, and with this in mind he cropped his photographs to produce a 2.35:1 ratio print that mimicked Cinemascope. At the same time he combined the gritty 'soot and whitewash' style prints of Bill Brandt with the Cinemascope format. And thus began to experiment with and develop his own style.

Unfortunately Jefferson's enlightened, open-minded views did not extend to the Careers Officer. Chris signed on to attend the Sixth Form, fully intending to go on to University to study film and photography. However, this ambition changed after his first meeting with the Careers Officer in his first term at Sixth Form. On being asked by the officer, during a careers interview, what his career goals were, Chris explained his love of film and photography and his desire to

pursue it as a profession. He then waited while the officer leafed through several books, leaflets and pamphlets, in anticipation of hearing advice on the options available to him.

Imagine then, Chris's horror and surprise when told that 'with the good 'O' level results he'd achieved the previous year' he would make a good trainee Legal Executive. Chris's reply was, "Do legal executives make many films or take many photographs?" He was then told, in no uncertain terms, that he should pursue a more 'realistic' career path. "Well somebody has to produce film and take photographs - why not me?" He was bluntly informed that he was in Blackburn, not Hollywood, and should be realistic. Chris couldn't understand it - given that leaflets for careers in 'forestry' were being handed out in Blackburn of all places, and that there were photographic studios in the town, why was pursuing a career in photography any less viable or plausible than one in forestry?! After a few very choice words directed at his career advisor Chris walked out of school and knocked on the door of every photographic studio in the town looking for an apprenticeship. His approach proved successful - but the post he wanted wouldn't become vacant for six months. With a spring in his step and an air of triumph, Chris returned to the school to inform his erstwhile careers advisor. To tied himself over he got a job in the office at the Cherry Tree Engineering Company - just across the road from his home. He found the office environment dull and boring, and was glad when the time came to leave to take up the photography post.

But he was to be disappointed with the style of photography at the studio, where he quickly realised he



wasn't at all interested in wedding photography. One good thing he took from the experience was the opportunity the studio offered for him to get his hands wet and dirty producing photographic prints in a professional darkroom.

Various other jobs in photography - including a spell as the photographer for Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery - followed, each of which afforded Chris the opportunity to increase his knowledge and hone his skills.

He enjoyed his time at the museum, where the work included photographing exhibits and imagery for reproduction in museum publications, posters and postcards. Here he was very much left to his own devices and took the chance to set up a darkroom to experiment with his own images. With a wry smile he acknowledges that Blackburn's tax payers (if any are reading this) will learn how they subsidised his creative experiments!

In time Chris became increasingly disillusioned with commercial photography and longed to pursue the more creative opportunities that the medium offered. He started to exhibit his work in local galleries and during the 1980s helped set up Action Factory Community Arts - an organisation devoted to promoting the arts within the community of Lancashire, and empowering disadvantaged members of the community with the skills to produce art in various mediums and to exhibit their work to a wider audience.

In the mid 1980s Chris produced a major exhibition based on his home town, entitled 'Blackburn - a town and its people'. It was widely exhibited and acclaimed, the funding having been provided by The Arts Council and Blackburn Borough Council. Photographs from that exhibition can be found on his website.

Even though he loathed wedding-style photography, he quickly realised it was the lifeblood of every high street studio. However, even then he turned this dislike to his own advantage. Photographers often undertake two or three weddings a day. Often rushing off to the next, having barely completed the first, because the bride had arrived late or some other hold up had occurred. This often led to unhappy clients. Chris decided that if he had to do weddings, then he'd do one on a day and turn this to his advantage by making that his unique selling point and being able to charge more for the service. It worked.



He also did the obligatory portraits including an old aggressive, practically blind poodle with extremely sharp teeth which, despite the blindness, seemed to be able to find its target with no problem - Chris's arm. But on the plus side, he lightened up his days by setting up and running a small model agency and a studio that other photographers could hire along with the models. It was this that first aroused his interest in the female form as a subject. He was so disappointed at the images produced by those hiring his studio that he decided he could do better. Chris believes that one of the things that sets apart good photography of the female form is a lack of fear of the subject. A viewer can tell straight away when the photographer is 'afraid' of women - especially naked women - because there is a lack of direction which shows in the work. Simply having a beautiful person in front of the lens is not enough to produce a good image, the photographer has to be able to direct the model and he can't do that if he is afraid of her.

Today Chris advises any aspiring artist intending to take up the fine art nude or erotic genre to fully question their motivation. If it is only a means to an end - to see naked flesh close up - then be forewarned, models have an uncanny knack of being able to see right through 'impostors'.

After a brief spell running his own studio and agency Chris's health took a downturn and this gave him pause to reflect and rethink his life and direction and to reconsider some form of further education. Given that he'd already acquired a high degree of photographic competence he didn't want to undertake a 'how to' style photographic course and so settled on a Photographic Studies course at the University of Derby, where, under the guidance of world-renowned fine art photographers John Blakemore, Richard Sadler and Olivier Richon, he was able to pursue an academic path and study philosophical approaches to art and language alongside fine art photographic techniques. At Derby he finally found a sympathetic home from where he could pursue his love of photography as an art form. In the summer of



1991 he gained a BA (Hons), in Photographic Studies. Moving to London he later attended Thames Valley University and in 1994 was awarded an MA, in Cultural Studies.

As stated earlier, Chris had a burning desire to produce better images than those he'd seen emerge from other photographers using his studio. He also wanted to 'kick out' at those at University who frowned on the naked form as a subject matter - his rebellious streak surfacing again. These reasons soon gave way however to a realisation that this was his the subject of choice. One where he could combine his love of a series of images -inspired by cinematic narrative and direction - with the creative issues of representation. The female form dominated because, for the most part, men tend not to have the confidence to offer themselves as models. Women, Chris discovered, have a greater inner confidence about their bodies and he soon found himself in





the enviable position of having more female friends than male ones.

Chris's photography covers many genres, from social documentary to landscape, but he finds himself drawn towards the human body as a source of inspiration - as such he is perhaps now best known for his erotic images. As a genre 'the nude' has had a long tradition among artists, but

was, especially from the late 1970s onwards, frowned upon as a subject matter and became politically incorrect. This was especially true in the UK and America and this view was initially generated from, and promulgated from within political and academic circles, whose ill-conceived notions of political correctness often defied logic. Such was the weight given to theories of political correctness that many artists, photographers in particular, were reluctant to create, or felt intimidated if they produced, images that involved the nude - particularly if the nude in question was female - and it became ever more difficult to have such work exhibited. Whilst still in evidence today, such attacks have lessened somewhat as a healthier outlook replaces the politically correct brand of 'New Puritanism'. Yet, artists still have to be on their guard, as today it is intolerant religious groups who have taken up the baton of censorship. It was in part to address such concerns that Chris co-founded, with the artist Paul Woods, the 'Association of Erotic Artists'.

The pair wanted to create a body that could 'shout out' for the individual artist in a democratic manner. They are pleased that the rapidly expanding Association is run by its members and that new members cannot just simply join, but have to be voted in by the existing membership. A collective is able to achieve far more, and have a more powerful voice, than an individual artist working on his own. Membership to the Association is adjudged on merit alone, without consideration of race, gender or sexual orientation.

Chris is pleased that he has achieved a level of success with his fine art nudes with females who appreciate his sensual, non-sexist approach. He has found that more than 70% of the comments and e-mails he receives about his images are from women. His work is also exhibited, by invitation, on websites run by women for women. Chris feels that the attraction to his work by this audience vindicates his work, and serves to validate his approach to the erotic genre. Indeed, although he has used professional models in the past, the majority of his subjects are women who, having seen his work, have volunteered themselves as models. Chris prefers to use the amateur, or aspiring models, he discovers on his travels around London, or who approach





him after being recommended by models he has previously worked with. It is Chris's view that some professional models can be far too precious, or have been trained to pose in a certain way - often in the clichéd 'glamour' style, whereas amateur models are far more open to experimentation and appear less concerned with their looks.

He is firmly against censorship, as one would expect, believing that images produced by consenting adults for consenting adults should not be censored. However, on a personal level he feels that some of the more 'extreme' sado-masochist images are questionable, those where females are portrayed as submissive and objectified. He does not include all s&m imagery or the relationships they portray in this way, just small minority which should be viewed with caution and opened up to question.

Although playwriting is now taking up more and more of his creative time and energies, photography is still his foremost medium of artistic expression - he thinks, breathes, consumes and dreams it. Photography has a magic and erotic charge that he finds hard to explain. If he could, he would probably write more than he photographs because he is above all a storyteller and firmly believes that photography has its own grammar and vocabulary which can be used to construct a narrative.

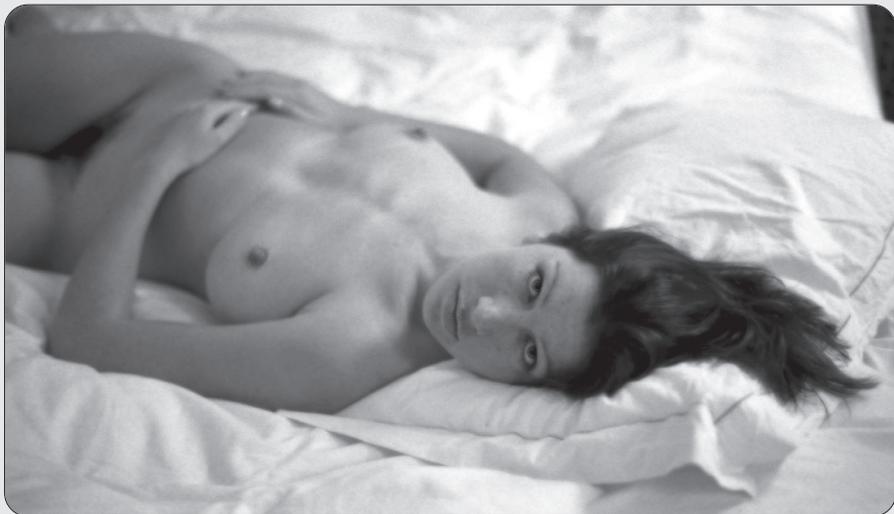
Chris's erotic imagery is perhaps best described as Romantic in the Kantian sense of the sublime and it is fair to say that, as with all his work in other genres, he takes a somewhat 'academic' approach to image creation. He rarely produces single images, and instead creates images in series - creating in effect, a photographic narrative - often displaying them in handmade book form. Examples can be found on his website.

Apart from philosophy - the major influences on Chris's work have not been other photographers but rather filmmakers, painters and contemporary music - especially the directors Sergio Leone and Stanley Kubrick, the paintings of Munch and the music of Joy Division.

Possibly because of his disability and his own relationship to pain Chris tends not to create images with a bondage-pain-fetish theme. He also prefers to work in black and white

- although he is fully able to appreciate the aesthetic value of the work of other photographers who produce fine art colour images. For the most part Chris's images are produced using traditional monochromatic techniques, often selenium and/or gold toned for both archival and aesthetic reasons, and alternative processes such as cyanotypes and gum bichromates. His work often involves 'distressing' negatives by taking sand paper and/or household bleach to them! He also occasionally stains prints with tea, and some of his formulae for toning cyanotypes etc., have been published online. Of course today digital image making processes are warmly embraced by the majority of photographers and Chris





is no exception, and does not see the digital medium as a threat to film, but simply as another medium to be exploited creatively. He feels that digital has a different aesthetic when compared to conventional analogue processes. Just as with a painting, an artist can produce a different image with oils than from, say, watercolours; the photographic artist can also use either the conventional analogue or digital medium to create an image with a different look and feel, even though the subject may be the same.

With huge steps being taken in the improvement of print quality and longevity, and the addressing of archival concerns, Chris thinks that digital techniques open up new creative possibilities, whilst also addressing environmental concerns. Conventional photographic techniques can impact on the environment and the digital medium offers a cleaner, greener way forward.

Chris has now set up a digital darkroom, which he runs alongside traditional methods of image production and can see the day when the majority of his work will be digitally produced.

As a lecturer, Chris is a photographic evangelist; believing it to be the most democratic of art forms. He encourages his students to explore their emotional, subjective responses to the medium and by so doing bring something of themselves to the images they create. He believes that every photographic image should contain the 'signature' of the author. He enjoys teaching and bouncing ideas off others but - like so many artists in the UK - he also needs a regular income. Steady employment also helps fund his personal projects.

He gets a buzz from seeing gifted students at work. "Of course," he grins, narrowing his eyes, "if they get too good one has to really control ones desire to sabotage their work so as to minimise future competition!" Chris considers himself lucky to have had a number of gifted individuals in his classes and has tried to help them all he can, often against a background of parents who want their sons or daughters to undertake more lucrative careers than those in the arts.

In addition to his teaching and photographic work Chris also works in film and theatre. He has recently completed a

play 'Throwing Stones', co-written with Dean Sipling. 'Throwing Stones', directed by Anton Krause, will be premiered in July 2005 at the South London Theatre, and there are plans to take it to the Edinburgh Festival later in the year. Chris and Dean are now at work on two new pieces to be entitled 'An English Dead' (about Mallory and Irvine's ill-fated attempt on the summit of Mount Everest in June 1924) and 'Dancing at Tyburn'.

He has recently begun a work based on the Battle of Britain, told from the viewpoint of the girls who manned the ops, and who often heard the agonies of pilots being killed in battle. He has an interest in British history and is angered by Hollywood's theft of this nation's history in order to 'Americanise' it - as with the film 'U-571' where the capture of the Enigma device was depicted as an American adventure without a Briton in sight. "They've been stealing our history and writing the story of WWII from day one and it's about time it was countered," he comments vehemently. "I'd love to be remembered for writing a work that began the re-appropriation of British history."

Chris is also working with his partner - the writer and regular JADE contributor, Carrie White - on a variety of projects which will combine Carrie's narratives with his images. He also has a variety of photo book projects underway.

With so much in the pipeline the future looks very busy, but Chris wouldn't have it any other way. He was fortunate enough to discover at an early age a passion for a specific art form which has stayed with him through the years and which now enables him see through his creative vision. His work is of the highest quality and we wish him every success with his new creative ventures.

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