

## **Interview Gareth McConnell Interviewed and Charlotte Cotton**

(From the book by Celia Davies (editor). 2004. *Gareth McConnell*. Steidl. Göttingen.)

### **Charlotte Cotton: The earliest of your photographs in this book date from 1995. What is the significance of this as the starting point of what you wanted to show here?**

Gareth McConnell: The book begins with a series of work called Antisocial Behaviour (Parts I and II). The first part shows the physical scars on men's bodies from punishment beatings in Northern Ireland, so inflicted wounds, and the second part shows the self-inflicted wounds of IV drug use. I was studying for a BA in photography at the West Surrey College of Art and Design at the time and the punishment beating photographs, I think, reflect the fact that when I moved to England I saw my homeland as an immediate source of material for my work. I think it was the time for me to try to comment politically. I later came to realise that I wasn't in a position to do that well, because I had more than a degree of ignorance about the subject and that my work is more about trying to make sense of my position and identity, even when dealing with a politicised subject. I can see how much I have changed since I made this work and I am uncomfortable with it because I was especially uncomfortable with myself at that time. All the same I feel it still stands as the beginnings of me communicating through photography.

### **When you look at your photographs do you see them as a diary, a record of your states of mind?**

To an extent. The difference between the punishment beatings in Part I and the self-inflicted wounds of Part II, is that I have no direct experience of punishment beatings. Violence has played some role in my life, but drug use was very much part of it. I knew the people in Part II personally, whereas I had to find the men shown in Part I. At that time, I was still very much captivated by the fantasy and romance of drug culture. There were many things that I was looking for and felt that I had found there, such as a perception of autonomy, of omniscience and most prized of all a sense of tranquility and belonging. In my arrogance I never dreamt that what I show in the photographs would eventually become my reality. My experience has since been that the vast majority of IV users appear to go this way: body, mind and spirit decimated in the pursuit of pleasure, even when that pleasure becomes rooted solely in the relief of pain. This work is important to include here because I had a very positive critical response to it, it engaged people and I don't honestly know if I would have carried on taking photographs if it wasn't for the support that I was given at this stage.

### **From West Surrey College of Art and Design, you went on to study for an MA in photography at the RCA, London, in 1997-9. What work did you make during this time?**

There are a number of series in this book that I made while I was at the Royal College, but the only one I made in England was the Survivors series. There's no reason to go through the individual stories of these men, but each of them were associates of mine who were just existing, as opposed to living, at the time I photographed them. Most of the work I made during that period was done in Northern Ireland. My time in London was really about getting and using drugs, but then I would go home to Ulster to produce work and during these periods I would simultaneously slow it down to a maintenance level. The way I look at this now is that these were the times when I opened up, and that even for just a week, or two weeks at a time, I came alive again. It gave me a real sensitivity, as if I could very clearly see things. When I look at these photographs they startle me because they were the moments when the outside world really touched me and I was able to engage with it. My consciousness had been raised sufficiently for me to be able to photograph.

**Another series made at this time was the Albert Bar photographs. What was so special about this place? Why did you want to photograph there?**

This is a Loyalist bar in my hometown. The Good Friday Agreement was coming into effect when the photographs were taken, in Spring 1999, and the paroling of political prisoners had begun. For the patrons of the bar these events undoubtedly held an immediate significance to their lives while I found that my own relationship was more ambiguous, more distanced. This raised questions for me about the nature of cultural identity and indeed my own lack of it. So, on the one hand it was about photographing a very particular historical and political moment and, on the other, about me trying to figure out my own status within it.

**Is that also true of the series on abstractions of political murals in Belfast you were also working on at this time? They feel like very sensory experiences, and I wonder what, in retrospect you think this work was about for you?**

I've been photographing them for over five years now, and while a lot has changed for me over this period, including my relationship to Northern Ireland, my basic motivation for photographing the murals in this way remains the same: this has been an attempt to go beyond their political rhetoric in search of something more absolute, more aesthetic, more peaceful even. For all the violence and separation and injustice the murals can refer to, the causes that they serve are ultimately about hope and betterment - and what is there without hope after all? Through politics and religion there is always a utopian aspiration towards peace, freedom and serenity, but things seem to get messy and confused - the murals being a perfect example of these distortions.

**There's another element of your work here from this time that concentrates on the interior of one uninhabited building, The Undertakers.**

What initially attracted me was a sense of peacefulness and clarity, something I had also found in the Albert Bar. I didn't look back at these photographs for over a year after I had taken them. It was a moment when imagination and abstract thought didn't get in the way of a more clear and distinct intuition.

**I sense that there are two main ways that you work. There are those series where you have consciously developed an idea that holds the subjects closely to a particular place or state of mind. And then there are also those bodies of work that are, I suppose, the 'Nirvanas' of photography, made quickly, by-passing your conscious mind, where the meaning of the work comes later, after the photograph has been taken.**

It's certainly the case with the The First Man To Remember My Name, which must have been made in less than half an hour. It was only sometime later that I realised that every photograph we made that day gave something and needed to be seen together like they are here. An example of another approach - of working on a tightly controlled series would be Institutions, which I have been shooting since 2001. Here I very much knew what I wanted and set about casting and photographing. There is nothing spontaneous in the concept of this work. I would explain to the person concerned what I was doing and make an arrangement to meet. From that point, we would work closely together using the space and light available to arrive at the final image. This could involve long periods of time and minute adjustments in regard to light, position and framing. The success relies in the total co-operation of the sitter. Some of the people here I have photographed time and time again and no doubt will continue to do so. With either way of working, looking at the contact sheets is always a mixture of surprise and disappointment. I don't think you ever really know, no matter how you are working, what is there in the print until you see it. Often, I live with the work for a while and allow the pictures to grow on me so that an idea of how to develop a series or approach can accumulate.

**I haven't seen the photographs in the Boxers series before now. I sense that these are not professional boxers, but men who aspire to some sort of strength**

**and identity that comes out of physical training.**

That's absolutely right, none of the men represented here are boxers as such, so the title refers more to the dream or aspiration than to reality. The setting is a makeshift boxing gym above a bar in Bournemouth. The men in the photographs are from all over Europe and for whatever reasons have come to live in the area. I was training in the gym myself so I felt we had shared reasons for being there, perhaps of defining masculinity, for the purpose of security or self-esteem. Personally speaking, I wanted to get tough on the outside because I felt so tender and raw internally, a physical solution to a spiritual condition.

**From this work onwards, there's a very definite sense of a style and approach emerging, a preferred way of staging a portrait using available light and 6x7 medium format camera.**

Around the time of this work, I was awarded a commission to photograph the residents of Quay Foyer in Poole who are sixteen to twenty-five year olds living in subsidised housing. This was my first major project after an eighteen-month period of not even owning a camera. I think this is where I find the rhythm again, and that's also apparent in the portraits I have made of young people in Ibiza.

**Many of your portraits are of people you know, friends and acquaintances - in interior settings or in their rooms or homes - but some of them are of complete strangers. Is there a difference in the way you approach the two?**

In a way they are the same because often when I am photographing strangers I feel I know them because what I am photographing is my connection to their experience - the things I have been through and the way I have lived my life. With the Ibiza photographs, I had been there in my early twenties and I wanted to go back to see people who were seemingly aspiring to the same things that I had wanted. It was quite cathartic for me, to see that it was both an amazing place and time of life, but that it also had a fragility to it... a fragility that had not been exclusive to me.

**Looking at all these photographs now, do you feel you have made a very substantial body of work over the last eight years?**

Some days more than others. A lot of the time it doesn't feel like I have done enough. When I look at this edit I realise how much I've changed. I recognise that these photographs and indeed the process of photography is a means of communication which means a great deal to me and that makes me feel more certain about the conditions or subjects that are going to push me to make work in the future.