

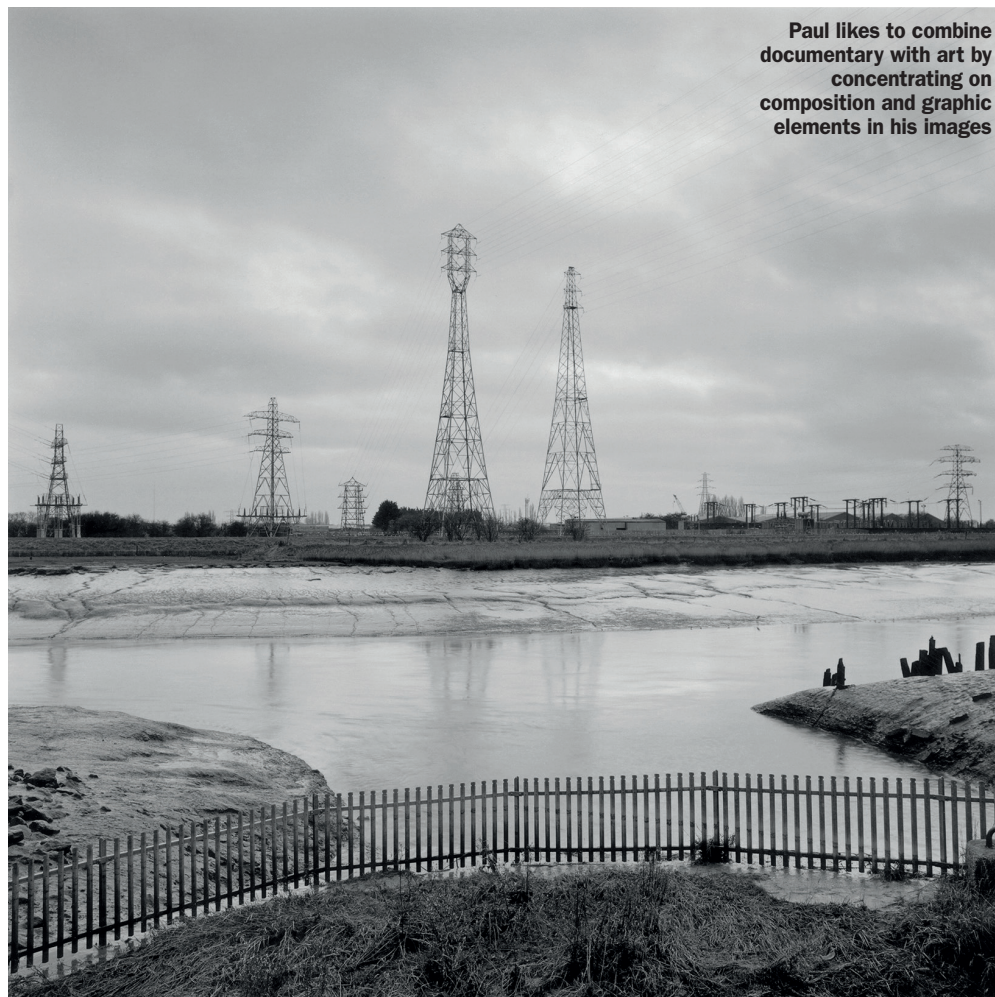
An absolute lack of melodrama

Avoiding the whiz-bangs of popular photography, Paul Hart aims instead for slow photography, that's made slowly and intended to be enjoyed slowly. He talks to **Damien Demolder** about his book, *Reclaimed*

Most landscape photographers enjoy a bit of drama and excitement. To find this they head to the Lake District, the Peak District, the Scottish Highlands or the tall bits of Wales where the bumpy surface of the Earth provides pointy summits, gushing waterfalls and curvaceous hillsides. One can hardly blame them, as in these stunning locations it's hard to fail to come home with something worth looking at. Black & white photographer Paul Hart however is drawn to a very different type of topography, and has spent the past ten years

recording the flat, muddy, green and brown Fens region in the east of England. There are hardly any rocks in this area, let alone mountains – only almost-static canals and waterways with no waterfalls other than the water leaking through ancient lock gates. There are certainly no hills as most of the land lies just above or below sea level. It's a man-made, or man-reclaimed, long plain of drained marsh inland of The Wash that stretches between Lincoln and Cambridge, and which has become an arable heartland of England. The project around the Fens has produced a

Paul likes to combine documentary with art by concentrating on composition and graphic elements in his images



One of the benefits of working slowly, says Paul, is getting to spend more time in interesting places

series of books; *Farmed, Drained*, and the latest one, *Reclaimed*.

'It's great to take pictures in a place that hasn't had very much attention,' says Paul, 'and it was a little bit of a challenge to do something a bit different in a place that isn't very naturally attractive – or very natural, for that matter. The Fens are flat and muddy, which is why other photographers don't really shoot there, but I like that it's different and I like that it's a challenge. I've got more and more into that idea since I started.'

The path less travelled

'It isn't just that this area isn't well photographed that draws me to it. That was a motivation at first, but not so much now. I gravitate to places that aren't traditionally considered beauty spots. I like places that are a bit used and abused, and the layers of meaning and history that can be seen and drawn out of them. Years ago when I started shooting black & white seriously I made a book called *Truncated* about forests of trees in Derbyshire. Those trees were quite beautiful, and that beauty is what the pictures are about. But this project is different – there are more interpretations to be made when man's activities are a bit more prevalent in the landscape and I think that can make it more interesting. The weather is very important to me too, as it brings a range of conditions and atmospheres. I really like a bit of mist or fog as it can make a place look completely different and add extra interest to a scene.

'Places like the Lakes have views and pictures that are unavoidable – that we feel compelled to take. In the Fens though it isn't like that, but even so some things I find are obvious and attractive so I will shoot them. I don't just want to show the ugly, I want to show the beauty too.

I try to be quite open to everything as a subject. There are triggers – things that make me stop and look. One day as I was driving I noticed the light on a river looked beautiful so I stopped on a bridge to see if I could make a picture. Even though I mightn't shoot the thing that caught my attention in the first place it can lead to something else. I'll see one thing but that may not be the thing that I end up photographing. I try not to think too much about the process of how the composition

develops through different angles and positions. I try to let it just happen. One thing can lead to another, but sometimes it can also lead to nothing. What works and what doesn't is a bit visceral and I try to rely on my gut feelings. When working out how I'm going to shoot a certain scene I used to look through the camera all the time, but now I try to see it with my eyes instead and only look through the camera when I have a good idea of what I want to do. I physically walk around the scene and have a look at other viewpoints and angles to really explore an area before I decide.'

Slow and surely

'My photography is old-fashioned, slow photography. The slowness shapes what I do. Being slow gives me the time to look around and to be open. It isn't unusual in landscape photography to wait and take time. We wait for the weather to change, and sometimes it just gets worse. One of the benefits of this slow working is spending time in nice places. I can enjoy the wait if the place is nice and serene. Waiting next to an A road isn't always as enjoyable though.

'I like the lines you get in the Fens and the unnatural elements – this is a man-made and man-altered environment. Nature doesn't usually work in such straight lines but that is how canals, drainage channels and roads are made. My pictures are not solely about documenting a place, so I like to use a bit of composition and to include some graphic qualities.

That's important to my photography. Some pictures are a lot more "documentary", and others are more about the picture and making it interesting to look at. There is a difference between the informative and the sort of picture that is just nice to look at – and some pictures are a mixture of the two. Some people only really do one type so they are classed as a documentary photographer or a fine art photographer, but I like to mix it up a bit. I'm conscious of the difference when I'm shooting, and the weather can have an impact. Some scenes are a bit more "wow" and others are interesting from a historical angle. One approach isn't more relevant or important than the other and hopefully the two types of pictures complement each other, especially in a book. I think having the two



Above: Lines in the man-made, man-altered, environment are a big draw for Paul's camera

approaches makes the work more interesting in an exhibition or whenever people are looking at a sequence of images. Rather than everything running along at the same pace, this creates a bit of modulation.'

Lack of melodrama

In commentary on Paul's *Drained* series, photography critic Francis Hodgson explains that in Paul's images 'the absolute lack of melodrama demands slow looking and brings slow revelation'. There is little sensationalism in his pictures and he avoids the techniques, and subjects, that many other photographers use to grab the

attention of an audience. While this ideal is artistically honourable I wonder, without trying to draw attention, how Paul gets people to look at his pictures and to give those pictures the time they need.

'That's what has made my life so difficult really,' he jokes. 'It is hard, though, definitely. I'm surprised people do look at them, but they do. Maybe it's a bit of an antidote to pictures of the lion that is about to jump down your throat or the volcano erupting, as my pictures are subtle and subdued. That curtails my audience no doubt, but there are so many people doing melodramatic images. I don't know how many people see my pictures, how long

Top right: Paul says he gravitates to places that aren't considered beauty spots

Above right: Paul likes the way the landscape is more pared down and skeletal in the winter



they look at them, or why they look at them. The only measure I have is "likes" online but that's a bit basic.

'There is a small audience for my work when compared to wedding photography, but I keep the costs down as I do all the processing and printing myself. Once you are set-up you don't need to be upgrading all the time because the equipment lasts. The past couple of years have been very difficult, as it has been for anyone in the arts. I don't do any commercial work, so all my revenue comes from book and print sales.'

A man for one season

'I shoot in the winter and print in the summer. I do them separately as

they are very different processes and I like to get fully into one or the other. I like the way the landscape is more pared down in the winter, and more skeletal so you can see more. I like the environmental conditions too – that's the big draw for me. Black & white photography lends itself to that winter light. In the summer the contrast can make things visually confusing.

'I always shoot black & white now. In the 1970s people classed black & white as "serious photography", but I just see it as different. It's very different from colour, and I've always liked the simplification. I do like colour images, but when I shoot colour it can be all about



the colour. The places I shoot aren't about colour – there isn't much colour in the Fens when I shoot them in the winter. I'm also used to working in black & white. I used to shoot more in colour years ago, when I photographed flowers, gardens and travel work commercially, but I've shot in black & white for a long time now. I've always been a film photographer too – I have a digital camera but I don't use it for serious work.

'In the darkroom I aim to achieve the best for each image. Some don't need very much work, and others need more, but I try to do as little manipulation as possible now. Some pictures you can print in a lot of different ways – those are usually very good pictures, and I wish there were more of them.'

Material benefits

'I've tried to simplify the materials I use as it's easy to get very caught up and distracted by trying different things. Since I've started the Fens project I've narrowed things down a lot so I don't have to think about that side of it. As much as possible

I stick with the same materials and methods, and that allows me more time to think about the picture.

'When I first started there was more choice and I tried a lot of different films and papers. I found what I liked and I stick with that now. I use Ilford warm-tone fibre based paper, and I like the traditional emulsions such as Pan F, FP4 and HP5. I chose between them according to the length of exposure I need, so I use HP5 if I'm handholding or if I have something



Above left: Paul likes to show the beauty of the Fens as well as its ugly side

Below: Processing your own film and making the prints encourages you to shoot less volume

moving in the frame – like a swan on a river.

'I shoot 6x6cm mostly, though I also shoot 6x7cm sometimes for a change. I don't like to crop as I prefer to see and compose in the camera so I shouldn't need to crop. I'd never crop a square shot into an oblong, but I will sometimes crop a 6x7cm frame to a square and be pleased with it. Then the next day I'll look at it and think that it was better the way it was. I can always see the bit I cropped off and the picture will always look cropped to me.

'I don't use filters on the lens when I'm shooting any more either. I used to use red, yellow and green filters but now I want a more natural look. Using filters changes the way things look and they can make a scene look unreal, and I don't want that. I get all the contrast changes I want in the printing now without having to use filters. I don't like looking at photographs that look strange and unnatural. Unbelievable images have exploded with digital photography, but I think a lot of digital photographers are now trying to get back to natural looks.'

Squares

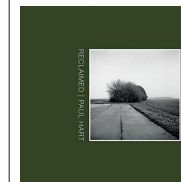
'I shoot with a Hasselblad 500CM, and 80mm and 50mm lenses. The quality is fantastic and I love it. The problem is that everything looks so amazing through the viewfinder that the final image can be a bit disappointing in comparison. I use the 80mm in the Fens because most things are quite far away, but the wideangle lens is also useful. For 6x7cm I use a Mamiya 7 II – the lenses are fantastic. When I was traveling more the Mamiya 7 II was great to take away, since it is reasonably light and easy to work with handheld.

'I used to shoot lots of 5x4, but not now. I used a 6x12 back on it too, but I stopped that when I simplified my kit. I stopped 5x4 as I wanted to be able to work quicker and to be a bit more mobile. I do miss it as there's nothing quite like seeing an image on the ground glass screen under a dark cloth.

'With digital cameras people can shoot masses and that's part and parcel of that way of working, but now I shoot fewer images per scene. I used to shoot a lot of options and

Above left: Paul works in mono as the places he shoots aren't about colour

Above right: Paul chooses materials according to the type of subject – choosing faster film for scenes with movement



Exclusive book discount

Readers can get a 20% discount and free UK shipping on Paul Hart's books *Reclaimed* and *Drained*. Simply order at www.dewilewis.com and use the code HART22 to save 20%.

alternatives, but I have to process the films – so I've tried to cut down on that. I spend more time looking and I talk to myself about what is working and what isn't until I find the right shot. It saves a lot of work afterwards. I just try to get everything right at the time I shoot so that there is less to do later on. When I shot 5x4 I couldn't run around shooting half a dozen viewpoints and that taught me to be more selective.'

Physical prints

'I like prints and books. I like a physical thing that you can put down and you know it's still there, and you can pick it up any time. With a digital image it disappears as soon as the screen is turned off. To me that's important, but I don't think it is so much for younger generations.

'Some pictures work well big and others work better small, but generally I have printed on 20x16in paper. Now though I'm beginning to favour smaller prints and have been using 16x12in paper to make a 10in square picture, and I really like that.

I'm not sure why I like this size so much, but there's something nice about getting up close to a print to look at it. On a practical level it makes a print that doesn't need much wall space, but also you get to see the whole picture in one go. With a big print it's harder to see the composition if the viewer isn't far enough away. How the viewer sees the picture is totally about the distance between them and the print so that's why a small print will always work.'

Advice for new photographers

'Do your own thing. People like to emulate what other photographers have done. You probably have to do that at first, but find the things you like – there's no point otherwise. The more I shoot, the more I learn. That seems to be the only thing that helps progress. You can't sit at home just thinking about it. It's very easy to read up on photography and to over-think it all, but you need to get out and do it. Take pictures as often as you can.'

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