

INTERVIEW

HOW THE LAND LIES

All images © Paul Hart

When **Paul Hart** set out to photograph the Fens his aim was not only to describe the physical place but to comment on man's effect on it. The work sits between documentary and landscape and slips seamlessly into fine art. Elizabeth Roberts reports.





CANVILLE

When Paul Hart's book *Farmed* arrived in the office I unwrapped it with a certain sense of anticipation. His previous book, *Truncated*, also published by Dewi Lewis, had intrigued me with its uncompromising approach and its intense beauty. As I turned the pages of this new book I was both unprepared for and delighted by what I found, and felt it was time to discover more.

We meet for lunch in central London, a far cry from the landscape of Paul Hart's photographs. Bleak, desolate and unforgettably beautiful, they describe the reclaimed marshland of the Fens in East Anglia, now the site of intense agriculture. Unlike much traditional landscape photography they reveal the human side of the place – farm buildings, ploughed fields, isolated farmhouses, telegraph poles, wind turbines – all of which point to the effect of human habitation on what was once claimed by nature. 'Farming shapes the land,' Paul points out. 'As does the weather – and the people who live there. Nowadays, in that part of East Anglia, the

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farming doesn't seem to stop. Years ago, it slowed down in winter because there wasn't much to do except cut hedges and stuff like that, but now it just carries on throughout the year. Crops, and how they perform, are different, and machinery is much more sophisticated – it's the industrialisation of farming. I wanted to show something of this in *Farmed* but it's such a huge subject that I think it just touches on these things.'

I ask him about his childhood and he recalls his upbringing in the country, running wild, hunting small prey with a gun ('I didn't kill much!'), unsupervised and free to explore, learning independence and the ways of the countryside. He smiles wryly as we comment that it was

a childhood hardly repeatable today.

But this background gave him the knowledge and understanding – and love – of the countryside and nature that is without sentiment. His depictions follow a more documentary route than those of the traditional landscape artist – but they depart from pure documentary at a fundamental point. 'Although I take a documentary approach when I'm shooting, my interpretation in the darkroom is subjective – so it's certainly not a simple recording of a place and time,' he explains. 'There is a lot of mundanity in these landscapes, and it's a difficult line to tread – I didn't want to produce a series of mundane pictures but I did want to show that mundanity.' In terms of such photographic subject matter there are huge challenges to overcome but Paul has two key things that have helped him achieve his goal – his knowledge of the countryside and his ability as a printer.

Paul lives with his wife, Sarah, in an isolated location, some distance from the nearest town. 'There are a few months of the year when it's wonderful,' he comments. 'But the rest of the time it's a sea of mud.' There is a quiet, ironic humour here that reveals >



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◀ itself in the images too. The desolation that he perceives is not a dark view of nature but an evocation of the realities of country life. 'Having grown up in the country means that I don't have some kind of bucolic notion of it – rolling hills and sunsets – we've got to produce food and that's what it's being used for. Farmers naturally produce as much as possible – but the land can be exploited. There's probably more food produced per acre every year than there ever has been. That's why the landscape looks how it does,' he explains. 'That's what this book is about.'

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The hours Paul spends in the darkroom, meticulously printing, are the dividing line between his subject matter and the world of fine art. Beautiful as they are, viewed on screen or

printed in the book, nothing can compare to the silver prints that Paul hands me across the table in a print box. The subtlety of the printing is paramount to understanding the images. 'I think that this is a really important part of *Farmed*, the dichotomy between the subject matter that isn't attractive in any conventional way, and the beauty of the silver print – these two things working together is what I find interesting.'

As I go through the prints I begin to understand how Paul Hart has crossed the ▶



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CAULTON'S FARM

◀ line between landscape photography and fine art. The work is exquisite and yet grounded.

A long way from the conventional 'good light' of landscape photography, Paul chooses the worst weather conditions – mist, rain, cold – to capture his images. 'Photography is so much about excluding things rather than including them,' he says. 'What's important is what you choose to

show within the frame – and the weather conditions help with this. In the Fens, on a clear day, you can see for miles and sometimes that's too much.'

In the same way, his compositions are carefully achieved. I comment that the books needs time spent with it, that it draws you in slowly. 'Everything about *Farmed* is slow,' he agrees. 'How it's photographed – using large and medium

format and a tripod – and the work in the darkroom. So it stands to reason that the images seep into you slowly.'

But, once seeped in, these images stay with you, long after the book or the print have been left behind. They are images that speak of both nature and humankind, and their sometimes difficult relationship – and, at the same time, they celebrate this uncertain liaison.



READER OFFER

***FARMED* by Paul Hart is published by Dewi Lewis in hardback at £35 but is offered to *Black+White* readers at £30 with no charge for shipping in the UK. Use code **HART30** on checkout at dewilewis.com.**

Signed copies of *FARMED* are available direct from the artist at £35 with no charge for shipping in the UK. Visit paulhartphotography.com.

PRINT SALES

Silver gelatin prints from *Farmed* by Paul Hart are available from the Photographers' Gallery Print Sales at thephotographersgallery.org.uk.