



Travels in a Strange Land : Dark Spaces

Matt Botwood

Foreword by Rob Hudson

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www.mattbotwood.com

Foreword

There's a passage in Rob Cowan's book *Common Ground* that immediately reminded me of *Travels in a Strange Land : Dark Places*. He describes how in a darkening *holloway* near to his home "Thin trees somehow blacker than the inky air, pressed inwards." It's that strangeness of night, where our vision changes, nearly becomes black and white, and perhaps is the closest we can come to actually seeing as a photographic negative.

I'm sure many landscape photographers are familiar with this given our habit for searching for the early morning or late evening light. We're probably one of the groups of people most likely to confront a dark landscape. Not that it's something we are habituated to explore photographically, our aim is to get through the dark, probably as quickly as possible. It's an odd omission perhaps more understandable if we appreciate the almost insurmountable difficulty in representing the night in photography. Especially the night away from the illuminated streets that other genres of photography have happily explored. But there are photographers beginning to explore the dark landscape, whether in Awoiska van der Molan's compelling and hypnotic work "Sequester", my own Mametz Wood series, Paul Gaffney's new and ongoing "Stray" and, of course Matt Botwood's *Travels in a Strange Land* and his earlier incursion to the nether world of trees "Into the Darkness".

Maybe this is something we can't represent conventionally at present, limited as we are by the capabilities of our cameras in the darkness. But even if a camera could 'see' in the dark, it wouldn't necessarily represent our vision, or our experience. This is where the photographer or artist needs to step in, to find a way for us to see, even if not actually illustrating the object they are exploring.

For most photographers (and for me in my earlier days) this would be a big leap, an act of imagination with a camera, something that is perceived to be so wedded to reality as to be almost indistinguishable.

If I was to be purely binary in my opinion I could say that landscape photography as a constructed paradigm and landscape photography as a subject or vehicle for creative exploration are two different things. They are not. However whereas the former is hidebound by 'rules', and searches for a consensual agreement about what makes a successful image; the latter becomes somewhat liberated by the act of exploration. Even so the two coexist, intermingle and are far closer to each other than we might imagine. They can even exist within the same photographer, I personally have moved from one sphere to the other, Matt moves freely between the two, and I know of many others equally capable of doing so. I'm not about to claim that imagination doesn't exist in

representational photography, but maybe that it is less recognised. The photograph, after all, is never reality.

So the goal is to express experiences or subjects in new ways in order to allow a wider audience to recognise them. 'Newness' isn't the point, but is a necessary result of saying the unsaid. As WB Yeats said "The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper."

The question is whether we think photography can aspire to being a different form to that of being descriptive. The photograph is inherently strange, and that's something that gets too easily forgotten in the modern world where we see so many. Whereas so many confuse alternative techniques themselves with artistic liberation, Matt understands that they are only a route to opening our eyes and don't intrinsically contain any more art or meaning than any other form of photograph. That higher form that so many photographers aspire to isn't achieved by mimicry of 'painterly' techniques but needs to contain something far more important than clever wizardry, it requires the human input of the recognition of what has been until now unsaid and the discovery of ways to express it. If we have ambitions for photography to tell us something about what it is to be human, then that answer isn't confined to either 'simple' representation or in the simple deployment of technique.

One of humanity's unique defining characteristics is the ability to imagine. To ignore this in photography constrains our ability to express a fundamental part of what it is to be us. And if we ignore what it is to be an imaginative human, how do we expect our work to relate to fellow imaginative humans?

How do we express the imaginative through photography, a medium perceived to be limited by a unique relationship to reality? More so, how do we let the viewer know that this is what we are doing? These are important questions for those willing to trespass beyond the widely accepted edges of photographic art. One route is the route Matt uses here, the use of allusion; a visual form of what in literary circles would be termed the metaphor.

His *Travels in a Strange Land : Dark Places* series disrupts reality via the use of the photographic negative. The negative image introduces a note of cognitive dissonance, it makes it more difficult to recognise reality forcing us to engage in a different way to that of the recognisable positive image. We're forced to interpret the images rather than merely 'read' them. This is immediately unsettling. What are we looking at in this *Strange Land*? It is us who are forced to rely on our imaginations to make sense of this place. Our response to these photographs says as much about us as it does about the images themselves because

they often reveal an unexpected interpretation, one we probably didn't expect to make when looking at what is, after all, 'just' a landscape.

We can't be quite sure what we are looking at, because the negative renders everything, at best, half seen or otherwise imagined. We're remaking a new world from almost childlike beginnings and perhaps rediscovering some of that early innocence.

In doing so we're also questioning and developing our relationship with the landscape itself. Whilst most landscape photography is celebratory, *Travels in a Strange Land : Dark Places* plays with the human need for comfort within the landscape whilst also reflecting the (possibly imagined) fears of the dangers within. It's a far more emotionally honest approach to landscape photography than is usually found within the genre.

When Matt shows us these images our fears and imaginations come to the fore. These images are playing on the Jungian psychoanalytical archetype; the idea that we carry within our collective unconscious memories that are inherited from our earliest human ancestors. Whether the theory is true or not doesn't really matter because we feel it's true when looking at these photographs. We're reaching deep inside ourselves into our own *Strange Land*.

The way we see, portray and interact with the landscape is in many ways a social construct - it is learned rather than an essential characteristic. We sublimate our fears by celebrating beauty, charm and tranquility when the truth of the natural world is far from so benign. While it's arguably a good thing that the UK is free of large carnivorous predators that may harm or devour us, some such as George Monbiot would suggest that this is artificial and is limiting our relationship with the countryside. In short, he'd suggest we desire the thrill of the truly wild, that it makes us feel fully alive. In this *Strange Land* we can peer into the possibilities, at least safe in the knowledge we won't end up as dinner for a hairy beast!

I'd draw another analogy with childhood; that of the fairytale, where the knowledge that we're safe in reality adds a peculiar enjoyment to the witnessing of evil tales. As Philip Wheelwright explains, "Myth is the expression of a profound sense of togetherness of feeling and of action and of wholeness of living". Make no mistake Matt has created a mythological landscape.

Its power is that it is derived from reality, which is a universal truth of photography. He hasn't stepped outside any photographic boundaries, this isn't a Photoshop creation. It was there all along; we simply couldn't see it before he drew our attention to it by

disrupting our perspective through a portrayal in the form of the photographic negative.

The land is greater than ourselves, it is natural to feel a mixture of apprehension and fear, when we first confront it, that subsides to excitement and wonder as it becomes more familiar. The changing seasons remind us of time passing, they are at once a joy and a reminder of our mortality, our insignificance. And yet we feel free in nature in ways that can rarely be found elsewhere. We can feel free of time pressure, workaday worries and the trivia we use to cover the cracks in order to avoid thinking too deeply. We feel alive and in the moment, it's contradictory, immersive and necessary.

Who hasn't sometimes sought the comfort of the darker corners, the cooling shade of the riverbank on a hot day, the sheltering overhang of a tree, the sunken otherworld of the holloway, the tangled bed of the thicket? To early humans the cave would have been a place of safety and retreat from the dangers of the wild.

The most common fear of all is of the dark. The photographic negative here plays with this. Ghosts have a habit of filling emptiness. We are haunted by apparitions, by memories or imaginings. And in the most ancient of places in the boles and roots of trees there might exist a memory from beyond our remembering, memories and imaginings that have outlived our short lives, cosseted by their immemorial hosts.

There's also a rhythmic quality to some of these images, they mesmerise, maybe even hypnotise, all the better to enter a strange new world. To quote poet Emily Wilson, there's a "deep embroidered quiet". The cleverest part of *Dark Places* for me is the way it plays with both our need or desire for shelter and comfort within the landscape and the fears of what may lie within. It's a duality that is all too familiar.

In the end it is our relationship with *Dark Spaces* that determines it's success, we have to look and to allow it to reflect upon ourselves. And that's what good art should do - challenge us to see afresh in order to reveal something whilst previously unsaid yet is still a recognisable experience. We can't rely upon conventional aesthetic judgment to disentangle this work, it becomes about us. It liberates us to see afresh and to ponder both what resides in the dark corners of the forest and what lies in the dark corners of our subconscious.

Rob Hudson

Introduction

While some people may think that all of their local landscapes have been discovered and photographed ad-nauseam, in this series I have sought out the landscapes of my imagination. However, these are not Photoshop creations but real places. Illuminating the dark spaces beneath rocks and trees by viewing them in negative I have unearthed a landscape previously unknown to me.

Through these images I have discovered new fantasy landscapes hidden within the detail of the natural world; including forests, valleys, caves, deserts and strange creatures lurking in the shadows. I have been transported to another land, one that is both strange and rather beautiful. While it has been tempting for me to give these images specific titles alluding to the things that I see, I have purposely avoided this to allow you to explore this new world and discover it for yourselves. What you find is limited only by your own imagination; it is not my role to stifle the creativity of a fertile mind.

The source locations for these images are diverse but all have something in common - they are indistinct, overlooked places that few people would give a second glance if they walked past. The edges of riverbanks, old farm tracks, sinkholes, scruffy bits of woodland, forestry plantations and uprooted trees all feature and I doubt many people have stopped at these specific spots to take pictures before. While many photographers continue to search for the next "undiscovered" landscape by travelling the globe to more and more exotic places, I have sought out a completely new world of unique landscapes on my doorstep.

Of the 150 images that make up this series (100 of which are in this book) the majority were captured only a few miles from my home in the Brecon Beacons. I often envy those who have lived in the same town or village all their life and feel truly connected with the places around them, but at the same time I believe that by being an outsider allows me to take a fresh look at the landscape untainted by my own personal history. I doubt if many of my neighbours would recognise their village or the National Park from these pictures, and that has been part of my aim in this series, to show that there are hidden landscapes all around us that are just waiting to be discovered.

Serendipity and experimentation both play a big part in my photography and are in part what makes it exciting for me. While searching for new images in this series I initially had few preconceptions about what I might discover until the images had been processed, just a vague idea of which locations might make fertile hunting grounds. Like a Victorian naturalist I would venture out into the landscape collecting samples, not knowing exactly what I had discovered until I returned home to investigate them in more detail. This

anticipation only fuelled my excitement further as this was a process of true discovery. After some months I became attuned to the world in which I was working and trained my eye to actively find new images in some of the most neglected places around me. The process of converting these to negatives was surprisingly transformative, retaining all of the original details of the scene but also revealing elements not immediately obvious to the naked eye. While you might recognise some of the source material in these images, I urge you to see beyond that into the new world in which I have immersed myself over the last year.

Drawn to both the natural world and photography from a relatively early age it was perhaps inevitable that I should focus on landscape photography. I enjoy the solitude of spending time alone in the hills, valleys and woodland of my adopted home in the heart of the Brecon Beacons, and capturing these places on camera is an important part of my exploration. However, while there are many square miles of National Park to explore I increasingly find myself staying closer to home with every project I pursue. Only by spending an extended period of time in a relatively small area do I feel that I really understand and appreciate the landscape around me.

Although I call myself a landscape photographer much of my work falls outside of what most people would perceive as traditional landscape imagery. Stamping my individuality on an image is an important part of the process. My aim is not just to say this is what the landscape looks like, but also uncover what secrets it might hide, how it makes me feel and how I want to make others feel about it.

This series is the result of over 18 months work. While producing this book is one way of bringing it to an end, for me this has just been the beginning of a new area of exploration. Each new project is part of the same continuous journey of discovery in my photography that I hope will continue into the future.

Matt Botwood