

In black & white

Printer to the stars, Robin Bell is a traditionalist. And having spent 35 years perfecting his darkroom skills, he's happy to state that it's better than digital

WORDS Ailsa McWhinnie



NORMAN PARKINSON

WATCHING ROBIN BELL at work in the darkroom has more in common with observing a dancer than a black & white printer. In the red gloom, his hands caress the air above the paper, instinctively interpreting the reversed tones that are projected onto the baseboard. It's a skill that has been honed over a period of 35 years, many of which he has spent printing for the likes of Terry O'Neill, Norman Parkinson, Terence Donovan and Linda McCartney.

Now, to celebrate his 60th birthday, the Independent Photographers' Gallery in Battle, East Sussex is hosting an exhibition, entitled *Silver Footprint*, of

some 120 of Bell's favourite images he's printed over the past three and a half decades. That's quite a momentous research task. "Yes," agrees Bell. "It took me maybe... five minutes?"

He laughs, and admits to having a photographic memory when it comes to images that have struck him, and gone on to stand the test of time. "The actual compilation was probably 90 per cent done within an hour," he says. "Some guys appeared once with a roll of film, which just happened to have a fantastic image on it, and I've remembered it and picked it out, so the exhibition is everyone from amateurs to long-standing clients. It's very democratic."

Each image has a very specific reason for its inclusion, often more personal than aesthetic. Take the Norman Parkinson portrait of The Beatles, for example, which was taken at a time when Bell was a member of the Fab Four's fan club. He dressed like them and sported the same haircut. "One day, my father – who worked in publishing ☛

↑ The Beatles, 1963, by Norman Parkinson. "When I came to print for Parks, this image was among those I produced under his watchful supervision."

→ Brigitte Bardot by Terry O'Neill. "This picture of Bardot recently re-emerged from O'Neill's fantastic archive and immediately became a hot favourite."



TERRY O'NEILL



NORMAN PARKINSON

↑ Cardin hat over Paris, 1960, by Norman Parkinson “Apparently, having taken this photo, Parks was arrested for flying over Paris in this helicopter. All in the name of fashion.”

– came home with a print of that Beatles picture, which ‘Parks’ had signed for him. He gave it to my sister!”

To this day, Bell is incredulous. “But then, 30 years later, Parks came round with some pictures to print, one of which was that Beatles shot. So the personal, parental connections, and musical and cultural connections all provide a really good reason for including that picture in the exhibition.”

Before he exposed his first print, Bell had something of a colourful life. Railing against the authority of the school system led him to leave early and, although he was sent to a crammer (also attended by Martin Amis) he didn’t bother turning up for his French and German A levels, because “it was Holland Park in 1967, and would you have wanted to study with all that going on?” A brief stint training to be a chef followed, as did a trip to Spain, where he worked in bars and discos, and slept in a local graveyard. He finally returned home to England via a six-month stretch in a Swedish prison (“the inevitable cannabis”), and ended up sharing a flat with his sister and two of her fellow students – one of whom introduced him to a photographer. He ended up working for him and, because nearly all photographers in those days had their own darkrooms, Bell took his first steps into the world of printing.

“I was doing it without really having a clue about the nuances,” he admits. “But I suspect the guys I was printing for

“I impart a personal interpretation of an image”

didn’t really have a clue about nuances either. It was just a case of getting 25 8x6in plastic-coated packshots out for a press release. It was never about fine art.”

Despite how evidence might suggest the contrary, Bell is a surprisingly shy individual. This meant, however, that forging a career in the darkroom, while the photographers he worked for schmoozed the art directors and clients, suited him down to the ground. And, in spite of the numbers of photographers who have entrusted him with their precious negatives over the years, knowing he will interpret them in a way that hits just the right note, he still displays hints of self-doubt. “I almost feel like I’m borrowing it,” he concedes. “I’m borrowing this ‘gift’, and any time now it’s going to get whipped away from me.”

“I know that there are a lot of printers who are better than me,” he continues, in a matter-of-fact but self-effacing manner that might appear artificial in some, but comes across as entirely genuine in Bell’s case. With a twinkle in his eye, he adds, “I’m not giving them free press, but they know who they are!”

Bell describes his ‘real education’ as starting when he met Joe Andrews – or ‘Gypsy Joe’ – of Joe’s Basement fame. By this time it was the late 1970s, and the work available seemed infinite. It was Andrews’ work ethic that impressed Bell so greatly, and which remains with him until this day. “It was about getting the job done, no matter what it took – even if it meant staying up until two or three o’clock in the morning to finish it.”

Crucial to Bell’s development as a printer was reaching the stage where the technique side of things became second nature. Like a tennis player who doesn’t have to think about their grip of the racket, Bell only has to glance at a negative to know what its grade and base exposure is. And it’s not a rough estimate – it’s bang on, every time.

Thanks to this burgeoning skill, Bell’s first major breakthrough in terms of providing fine-art printing occurred when he gained photographer Clive Arrowsmith as a client. Another fortuitous episode came in the form of Prince Andrew’s budding interest in photography. The fourth in line to the throne didn’t come to Bell for his black & white printing – but he did frequent Gene Nocon’s darkroom, which was nearby. “Gene was a brilliant printer, a great expert – and a really nice guy. But the whole thing started pissing off his regular clients, because the security guards wouldn’t let them through the door when Prince Andrew was there. It was a great source of work,” he smiles, ◀



ERIK HOLMOYVIK

Kannesteinen, Vagsoy, 2004 by Eirik Holmoyvik. Described by Bell as "photographic perfection".

"because, on the recommendation of Clive, people like Alistair Morrison and Terence Donovan came to me."

While, inevitably, Bell has had to ride the digital storm in recent years, the changes it has wrought on the way he works are more positive than negative. He describes one period during the 1980s as being "like a conveyor belt" in terms of his output and workload. This was after he had left the umbrella of Joe's Basement and had set up on his own – having taken the majority of his clients with him. "I once had to get 80 20x16in prints out in an afternoon," he recalls. "It was a Terence Donovan shoot for

Saatchi. I shudder to think what they must look like now, as the fix would have been exhausted very quickly, and they weren't exactly toned in selenium – but I had to hit all of them first time."

Nowadays, however, any sort of mass churning-out of prints is carried out digitally, which frees up Bell to concentrate on the more considered side of the work he loves – producing prints for photographers' archives, portfolios and exhibitions. This suits him just fine, and you won't hear him wailing about the fact that things ain't what they used to be. "In a way, digital has done me an enormous favour – although my quality

of life may have been diminished financially, certainly creatively it has been enhanced enormously because digital has taken all the dross work away. My work now means I deal in tonal qualities, meaningful depth – and I'm imparting a personal interpretation of the image which is, I hope, my signature."

In the realm of the black & white printer, however, personal interpretation isn't everything – something Bell is only too happy to concede. "Every single client is different, and their expectations are different. Some have printed the work themselves already, so have a set idea of how that picture should look. ◀



SILVERFOOT

↑ "The Sunday Times Magazine has been a great source of work for me. I remembered this story about 'Snowbirds' by Simon Roberts. This is a holiday camp in Florida for ol' folks from the colder northern states of the USA. These guys evidently know how to enjoy the latter parts of their lives – at least while at camp. It could only happen in the States, couldn't it?"

But most negatives speak for themselves." Bell is thinking in particular of two bodies of work he is currently printing. The first is for music photographer Kevin Cummins, and is all 1980s grit, grain and contrast, while the second is for an exhibition of Lee Miller's war photography. "These will be the optimum quiet, tonal prints, with all the information in there – it's not about finding drama that doesn't exist."

The added challenge is that Bell's prints have to match those of Carole Callow, who is the printer for the Lee Miller archive. "She has a beautiful way of printing, so I try to think what she would do – to the point where, when she and I print half an exhibition each, we can't really tell whose is whose."

It is this variation in approaches that, for Bell, cements his belief in the silver gelatin black & white print, but he expresses regret that it isn't still a

fundamental part of the photographer's education. "Nowadays fewer and fewer people know what a print is – what quality is. I know digital printing is of a peerless quality, but it's a different animal. Those things are being lost to us now, and there's a kind of soul missing in the aspects of life where the only criterion is speed, where you want to get the thing done and dusted and out. I've yet to hear someone say that a digital print has soul."

"I'm not going to do the PC thing and say they're just different – I think black & white printing is better. I'm going to sound really old-fashioned, but there's a mellowness to the black & white print, because there's not the same obsession with cleaning things up, correcting 'life', deleting 'faults' and wiping things out simply because they don't suit."

Hearing Bell speak so passionately about the darkroom printing process, it's

hard to imagine him doing anything else. It's a subject he stumbles over, too. "Do you know how grateful I am that I did discover this?" he says, almost awestruck. "I can't imagine what else I could be good at. I may well have been a painter and decorator, or perhaps a lorry driver. And as for training to be a chef – who'd want to work in a kitchen? I'd much rather work in a small, smelly, chemical-ridden darkroom!"

"Or perhaps I could have been in a band, but I'd have had to be the rhythm guitarist in the background – someone who has rock star pretensions but doesn't like the spotlight." And what better analogy for Bell's life and success as a black & white printer could there be? ■

● Silver Footprint is at the Independent Photographers' Gallery, Battle, East Sussex from 12 May until 20 June. For more information, visit www.ipgbattle.com.