

# MIDDLEBROOK



**IT'S NOT ALL GLITZ...**



**...AND GLAMOUR**



**Straight-talking pro MARTIN MIDDLEBROOK asks us to sympathise with the unglamorous reality of hard-working pros who will do any assignment to pay the bills, but then blows it with talk of basking in the heat of the south of France enjoying a large beer for lunch**



This year I have photographed a door and a fireplace, a skin care conference and a man dressed as a banana – oh, and one dressed as a strawberry. I have also

exhibited at the British Museum and am laying out a book on my Afghanistan project. I have redesigned my website and written

10 articles, and I also work as a consultant to an advertising agency. I took myself off to Mumbai to gather images that might form part of a new humanitarian project, but that are presently just being used to fill the pages of articles I have to write.

It's not all glitz and glamour, not everyone is Nick Knight or Rankin, so most of us grab what we can to fulfil our lives creatively and to pay the mortgage. This is our reality. So my gripe,

my bitch, is this: it's not how it used to be. Hell, what am I saying? I don't really remember how it used to be, but they tell me it was splendid and fine – how lovely!

#### **WHERE'S THE CASH?**

There are too many photographers and too few budgets; the maths are simple, and so you have to think a little laterally about how you might continue to make a living. Everyone says you

need a website, so you do that. But it's not enough. Get a blog and a Facebook page too, but you probably need to sell the kids to produce that vanity coffee table book – a giveaway that will bring you no work, but massage your sensitive soul. You had better get your head around convergence as well, it's coming for sure, they keep telling you; so HD is your latest upgrade, and Final Cut Pro.

However, you are spread too thinly, you can't do any of it well – some of it you can't do at all – and all the time, what you get paid for this work is tumbling out of control because some upstart is offering to photograph weddings for £150. You can't compete with that, what with the mortgage and the camera upgrade you have just taken, and your legal obligation to feed the kids and not use them as collateral against your misguided investments. As circles go, it's becoming harder to square.

It gets harder, too, to remind ourselves why we do this; that old creativity chestnut looks a little worn out when you are photographing a man dressed as a banana and, if I am honest, the fireplace shoot didn't rock my boat.

## FOLLIES

The wonder of the human condition is the unquenchable desire to put yourself through it all, again and again, even though common sense says you are just stabbing yourself in the eye. So I am off to Provence to continue a personal project on bullfighting that I began about six years ago. Another self-financed folly that will swell my portfolio and make me feel good for a while, but won't bring me the adulation of Sebastião Salgado, just an infected mosquito bite.

## BUGGERED IF I KNOW

So why do we do it? Why do we still have faith in it all? Why do we risk so much, often for so little? Well, I'm buggered if I know, but I think it's something to do with not really wanting a proper job. We insist that nothing will kill our 'very being' more swiftly and efficiently than a harassed daily commute and a tyrannical boss; we believe that somehow our skills should provide us with a life outside of that little loop, that we deserve it, that we are somehow superior people – but, of course, we are not!

We couldn't hack corporate life if we tried, so we capitulate and swim like swans; all grace and splendid beauty above the surface, but a frantic, negligent paddle below. And I should know, I have been eking out that little parody for longer than I can remember, always on the edge of glory, or an abyss. The worst part is this: every time I think I can't do it any more, something amazing drops from the sky like candy and somehow



**“The equation is as follows: Banana suit + foreign travel + skin care + social media (yawn) + no daily commute + earning just enough to live = A damn happy life!”**

**Martin Middlebrook**



Above top to bottom: Man dressed as a banana with his sidekick; Bullfighting in Provence from Martin's personal project. Previous page: Photographing paint drying.

Three shoots for the price of one:  
Product photography from  
the skin care conference.

“Photographing a variety of professors of dermatology describing in graphic detail various skin conditions that would make the Elephant Man look a picture of health is not a career highlight...”

Martin Middlebrook

hoodwinks me into another 12 months of scratching and searching. “What an idiot,” I say to myself, but my alter ego responds instantly: “What else are you going to do, thicko?”

## HAMSTERS

So resignation has become my future and within the constraints of that depressing parameter I concentrate on every positive I can find. I try very hard to turn them into money from which I can invest more of my future in hope and opportunity – oh, and uncertainty. So the circle of life continues. I don’t suppose we are very different from those corporate hamsters turning that endless wheel of ‘permanent and pensionable’.

I have always broken down my work into various parts: the bits I love that make me feel good and provide a little prestige, the work that I have to do to pay the bills, and the fun that fills the holes but pays nothing at all. The sum of these parts usually suffices and some years I am blissfully happy; I’ve learnt to accept the swings and roundabouts because some days I am on a rocket ship to the stars.

I can photograph architecture, PR and events, studio and weddings, photojournalism and abstract concepts – the bases are all covered, there is nothing at which I would turn

up my nose. I have taught myself to shoot it all because when you live in a tiny provincial market, which is where many of us work, you don’t have the privilege of picking and choosing your speciality, you are the jack of all trades, it’s how you survive. Somehow, I taught myself to write about it all as well and my musings keep me going too, which is why I find myself here, at 11.22am on Monday 4 July, committing 2,000 words on the reality of being a professional photographer in these most testing of times. So my week holds the following:

**Monday and Tuesday:** Finish this article, supply appropriate images.

**Wednesday:** Shoot concept images for an advertising agency pitch. It’s unpaid work, but holds the promise of winning the photographic account when the eagle has landed, which it surely will – I tell myself!

**Thursday:** My agency day and I consult on this and that. A weekly pay packet, but no concession to employment – I tell myself.

**Friday:** A heads-down day trying to attract new business – sell, sell, sell!

## FEAST OR FAMINE

So in this given week I have several days’ paid work, but the rest is activity that I hope leads to fame and fortune and a pocketful of bookings. The reality is that most weeks are like this; who am I kidding? All weeks are like this! It’s always feast or famine, never a steady flow of pleasing commissions or exciting projects that light my fire. When you get that call asking if you can photograph a door, a window, a fireplace and some coving, you feign gushing excitement; it’s the job you have always dreamed of. “Oh God, thank you for the chance. Let me buy that plasterboard and magnolia – the set will be ready in the blink of an eye.” The regret is almost immediate as you realise your living room is going to look like B&Q for the next three weeks and you spend every last second telling the kids not to touch anything.

The skin care conference wasn’t too peachy either. Photographing a variety of professors of dermatology describing in graphic detail various skin conditions that would make the Elephant Man look a picture of health is not a career highlight, but it was a classic example of how things have changed. In addition to photographing the conference, I was asked to bring studio lights and backdrops to photograph 40 staff members

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One of the highs of being a professional photographer: Martin's image of a market trader in Mumbai; collected as part of a planned humanitarian project.



and carry out product photography at the same time. It was effectively three shoots in one for the same bargain price. It's a form of theft when you think about it; each additional element reared its irritating head after the price had been agreed – theft by stealth. What are we to do? How to see it all?

Well, I see it this way: all these things are the parts that make up the sum, and the sum is that I go to Provence in a couple of weeks and indulge my photojournalism whimsy in 35°C heat and drink a *grande pression* for lunch, thanking my lucky stars that I don't have to go to work for a living. Heaven I tell you, heaven!

## CONSTANT REINVENTION

I wrote 12 months ago that each year I make my living in different, undreamt of ways. It will continue this way; each year it evolves and if I sit around thinking about it for too long, I will become coal. It's an annoying but immutable truth, so I presume that next year the bulk of my income will come from different sources once again. Sometimes this constant reinvention,

this endless self-development, drives me crazy; I do get a little weary of it all. But then I consider the following: while many of my friends have been commuting up and down the M5 these past two years, I have been to Afghanistan three times, exhibited several times in London, been published across many magazines, financed trips to India, France and the US and probably only worked about half the year. It's hard to gripe when you look at it like that.

## REALITY

The reality of a professional photographer has changed greatly over the past few years and for many of us has become a huge challenge. However, I am never going to walk away from this reality, but merely embrace and grow with it – what else can I do? I used to buy LPs that I would then record on to tape. Then CDs came along, at which point I negligently sold my record collection. I built my CD collection, which is now stored in my loft and I have bought nothing but downloads for the past six years. Soon all this will change again, I suppose, and

I will just have music streamed to me on demand. I did recently get drunk at a friend's house and we played Joni Mitchell's *Blue* album on LP and agreed that the sound was three-dimensional and amazing. But, of course, when I get on my flight to France my entire record collection will be coming with me as zeros and ones – something you can't do with LPs. Each of us digital converts – and that's all of us – are equally as responsible for our new reality as the bloke who will shoot that wedding for £150.

## EQUATIONS

If the sum of the parts means that we have an experiential existence, I will take that every time, thank you. None of us remembers the dull times, but we do remember the highlights, and being a photographer there are plenty of those along the way. The equation is as follows: Banana suit + foreign travel + skin care + social media (yawn) + no daily commute + earning just enough to live = A damn happy life! **PP**

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**NEXT MONTH – MARTIN MIDDLEBROOK REPORTS BACK ON HIS TRIP TO PROVENCE, WHERE HE CONTINUED HIS BULLFIGHTING PROJECT**