

# MIDDLEBROOK



The view from my bedroom window in Malvern, most mornings.

## On the Inside Looking Out

**This month professional photographer MARTIN MIDDLEBROOK wonders if we have lost sight of the true value of our images and if we could do more to fight our corner before the photographs end up having all the utility of popcorn. During his musings he discovers that life is about to take him in an entirely new direction**



**Did you ever have the feeling that you got on the right train, but got off at the wrong stop? You had too many tequilas in the West End, stayed out too late, fell asleep on the Tube and woke up at Ealing Broadway instead of White City. That's how I feel about my photographic career.**

I have mentioned before that I work at an advertising agency one day a week. We pump out creative ideas, day in and day out. The guy who owns the agency loves his photography, so wherever we can, it will be part of the execution. Sometimes we shoot visuals, but if we are in a hurry, or have no budget, we buy cheap stock images that do the job for 'comping' just nicely, thank you. However, when we come to produce the final art work, the client often won't approve the budget for photography, or has fallen in love with the stock image, or, option three, we can't replicate the original image. After you have spent months of creative toing and froing to arrive at sign-off, that is just not acceptable. So at 1/10th of my daily fee, iStock becomes a little richer. Ugh, I am poacher turned gamekeeper, a turkey voting for Christmas. I have become an obscene metaphor!

I thought that I would be on the inside of the tent pissing out, as President Lyndon B. Johnson once said, but I am complicit in the whole wretched affair. Last year, my colleague and friend, Elizabeth Evans, and I launched *Great in Britain* – what we hoped would be an ongoing photographic archive of Britain at work. Like many people, we both live in a small and dying community, and hoped to be able to create a visual time capsule of what

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The view that will greet me most mornings from now on in Kabul, Afghanistan.

working Britain once looked like for future generations. We hoped it might inspire people to support their community. We are passionate about real Britain and environmental portraiture. The German photographer August Sander's project *Face of Our Time* was our inspiration and we naively imagined that one day we might gift it to the nation.

We spent 18 months building the project, photographing many subjects, from blacksmiths to canal boat builders. We hoped to have an annual exhibition and, Godspeed, a book. What we got was 'slammed'. There was so much cynicism built around 'rights grabbing' that no one with a picture worth posting bothered to submit it. Sure, we made plenty of innocent mistakes with our terms and conditions, which we quickly amended, but our intentions were pure. One amateur did send us a few okay shots, which were uploaded to the site. The moment he got this attribution though, he decided to turn pro and asked us to delete them from the site forever. How very philanthropic! Great in Britain is still breathing, but it is coughing up too, a very sad thought for those who had high hopes for it.

Earlier this year I went to India and photographed a bunch of what I saw as uplifting images which represented the true spirit of humanity. One evening I was invited to the home of a wealthy and intelligent Indian couple who were keen to view my portfolio as it grew. They had nothing good to say, nothing at all. According to them I was a deviant who misrepresented the intrinsic truth that India was a wealthy and successful country, full of people in suits, and a horizon pin-cushioned with skyscrapers." I expressed the alternative view: that DFID, the UK Government's Department for International Development, was thinking

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of discontinuing its funding of projects in India because the small minority with huge wealth were not using it to enhance the lives of those who had nothing, and that images such as mine actually went some way to persuading donor countries to continue their commitments. It fell on deaf ears and a stony silence ensued!

When we were editing the final exhibition for the Kabul International Conference last year, we arrived at 40 images, 38 of which showed amazing people, whose true human condition should be seen as a shining example to us all – to me in particular, if I'm honest. Two images, however, caused uproar. I recall being in a meeting with ministers in the Afghan capital as we tried to get these two images approved. One showed a heroin addict and the other the hand of a poor orphan who was begging.

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The kids I have fun with every day on the streets of Afghanistan.

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**Martin Middlebrook**

The exhibition was called *Faces of Hope* and in every sense it was imbued with that sentiment.

But world leaders were descending on the Afghan capital with a view to gifting billions of dollars in aid and a little poverty would help. Well, I'll be buggered if it didn't nearly cause an international incident. Grown men slammed tables, got up and walked out.

Why do I mention all this? Well, firstly I have 1,500 words to write and it has been a dull month. Mostly, though, it's because no one forgets more often than me the value of what we do. I have become lost in my own misery, something I promised myself I would never do. I have questioned again and again where all the fun has gone. But as always in my life, just as I reach the bottom some unexpected inspiration swerves into view – as though heaven sent – that neatly provides a deeply appreciated lift. This month that thing became two things in a matter of hours, and the result

is that after much deliberation I am going to follow my dream after too many years of procrastination.

I have been reading a moving account in the *New York Times* by João Silva, the brilliant photojournalist and co-founder of the Bang Bang Club, about the horrific injuries he endured after stepping on a landmine in Afghanistan. What an inspiration; what an object lesson in appreciating that making images is a gift and that having the chance to change the world just a little makes it all worthwhile. He also laments how images are valued less and less, that criticism stings and that it's harder than ever to make a living and make a difference. Despite it all, however, he is adamant that the moment he is walking again, he will be right back to it.

I have always viewed photography in two ways: one is the simple journey we all make through life, and photography becomes a conduit for so many things along that linear 'travail', from self-development and self-expression, to simple soul enrichment. Legacy is right up there too and, with all its insidious sense of vanity, I have never underestimated what a driver this is for me – and many other photographers too. “If I can't be successful in this life, at least I have a second shot at the title after I am gone”, I ponder. I want to die knowing that I created work that, if nothing else, interested my children, but maybe changed the world a little too. An hour after reading Silva's compelling article I was contacted by Arte TV, a Franco-German Culture and Arts channel that is hugely popular across Europe. It was producing a documentary on 10 years of conflict in Afghanistan, a part of which included interviewing photographers who had worked there. The programme makers had chosen me. I was stunned and when they added that they had also interviewed Steve McCurry I fell off my bloody chair.

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The reason I am going to Kabul.

**“I have just rented out my house, my clients have been told I am leaving, I am knee-deep in tax and paperwork... in four weeks I shall be gone. Kabul will be my new station...” Martin Middlebrook**

“Would I choose my 10 favourite images from Afghanistan and talk about them?” they asked politely. It felt as though God had appeared and asked if I would like to know next week’s six winning lottery numbers, and the bonus ball to boot. In the 15 seconds it took me to reply, with all the hesitation that such fleeting opportunity provides, my mind was a whirl of possibility. “Come to London next week, we are flying over to see you specially; you can talk about anything you want,” they added.

On the train down I sat nervously with my laptop, narrowed down my edit and mused on what I might have to say about each image. In the studio, camera rolling, I had an epiphany. I could have talked forever about these pictures; why I took them, what they meant to me, the political or social narrative behind them. I could bore for England, and probably did. But I realised that if the interviewer had asked me to express my thoughts on my photographs of a man dressed as a banana, I would have just stared back at him blankly, dribbling slightly, with an absent and vaguely confused expression. As I continued to talk, my brain became a slot machine and just as the director said “cut” and the interview was finished, there was a massive ‘ker-ching’ in my head and the word ‘jackpot’ screamed out.

“What in God’s name am I doing living in Malvern, Worcestershire, when I could be living my dream, building my legacy and filling my soul

doing the stuff that makes me alive, that I am passionate about and that might just change the world a little?” No sooner had I finished proposing this rhetorical conundrum, the boomerang response cracked me on the back of the head and said: “Go East, Young Man and live your dreams.”

So as I type these final words, I have just rented out my house, my clients have been told I am leaving, I am knee-deep in tax and paperwork, my flight is not quite booked, but in four weeks I shall be gone. Kabul will be my new station for six months, and from there... who knows? Tripoli, Baghdad, Chingford – TBC, as I like to call it! But I know this one immutable truth, I am never going to die guessing. I will have no regrets, I will fill my boots and ring them dry, and if it doesn’t work out, that little monkey will be off my back and I will at least be at peace. But, most philosophically of all, I will put images back at the centre of my life and extol their value once more, and this will be quite enough for me, thank you. **PP**

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