

Ideas man

Photographer-film-maker crosses borders with masterful storytelling

GENEVIEVE LONG

There's no way to succinctly describe Tim Hetherington. You could call him a photo-journalist, but that leaves out his work as a film-maker. You could say he's a writer, but that's a narrow definition of his prowess as a storyteller using multimedia.

In a way, the London native who transplanted himself to New York is a perfect example of new trends in journalism. But don't tell Hetherington that – he's worked hard to not be put into a category.

"I like ideas," says Mr Hetherington. "I'm not interested in being relegated into the shoebox of photographers, into an art gallery, the way

that photographers are taught to be mainstream discussion."

He seems to be succeeding so far at being hard to pin down. Hetherington is a successful photographer-film-maker with a new book *Long Story Bit by Bit: Liberia Retold*. He also has a feature-length documentary about a platoon of US Airborne soldiers in Afghanistan due out in May next year that he made with his *Vanity Fair* colleague Sebastian Junger. He'll also have an accompanying book of photographs that have barely been seen.

One photograph from his time in Afghanistan of a weary soldier resting, already garnered him the 2007 World Press Photo of the Year.

Hetherington and Junger's projects are the fruits of one

year of going back and forth to Afghanistan, documenting the lives of the troops there. He says the documentary doesn't have a political theme, though.

"It's a story of loss of innocence – it's a portrait of young men at war," he says. "It's also a commentary on the counter-insurgency war."

His documentary and book are being eagerly anticipated, but Hetherington hasn't let success go to his head. After 12 years of hard work in the field, he stays close to the basics.

"The best pictures are honest images," says Mr Hetherington. "Images tell us about the world and about ourselves in many different ways and in many different layers."

He also doesn't get far in a conversation without floating an idea or concept, and sometimes they are in his head for months or years.

"[If] I have what I think is a good idea and it excites me, I'll let it rattle around like a pea in the tin can upstairs," he jokes. Sometimes the ideas work. "It's about the process. You've got these photographers that have styles – the old mantra was you have to have a style. You can be identified in the marketplace and sold and packaged. Actually I'm just into the ideas."

Hetherington's book on Liberia is proof of this absence



of a defined style. The book is full of sweeping images shot on film (not digital), and is far more than a set of photographs.

The lucid images include a range of things from abandoned buildings, to forests, to striking portrait shots. They are all dense with history and information. Beneath many of the pictures are captions detailing historical incidents in that place. The captions are

also cross-referenced to related pages within the book. The unusual style is a testament to Hetherington's way of communicating on multiple levels.

"Understanding that places exist not in a moment as photography presents them, but also in history was really important to me," says Mr Hetherington about his Liberia book. "I wanted to reveal through photography this kind of history of Liberia so

it made sense to have these timeline captions."

Ultimately, he feels his work as a photographer will continue to take him places – literally.

"You can always write your article about the war from the safety of the capital," he says. "But you can't do that as a photographer. The point of an image is that you have to be there, and that means that you have to experience and see."

The lion in winter

THE MARSH PRIZE 2009

MICHAEL PARASKOS

The Marsh Award for Public Sculpture is an annual prize made by the Public Monuments and Sculpture Association to works of public sculpture that are judged original, creative and appropriate to their locations. This year's winners certainly fulfil all three criteria, with the prizes awarded by Boris Johnson at the Whitechapel Gallery last week going to Jaume Plensa for his piece *Dream in St Helens, Merseyside*, and Hsiao-Chi Tsai and Kimiya Yoshikawa for *The Lion* located on the edge of London's Chinatown. As one of the judges I might be biased in saying this, but both are great works of public art.

Plensa's *Dream* has already gained a lot of publicity having featured on Channel 4's *Big Art* programme last year. Unusually it was commissioned by a local community group from the former mining village in which it is located, rather than the usual arts administrators appointed by the Arts Council. This has given the whole commissioning process a criterion that is often lacking from public art projects, namely that the work is a quality piece in terms of its artistry and not just an attempt to use public art as surrogate social work. As Plensa's original design was rejected by the commissioners in favour of the superior work that has now been erected we have good evidence that when ordinary people are given a say in this process they do not inevitably go for things that are conservative or kitsch.

They can have more sense than professional art officers. In this case they rejected the idea of a giant pith helmet that would have sat on top of an old mine head, and went instead for a 20-metre high child's head, made of a pearly white concrete flecked with crystals that glisten in the sunlight. It is an aston-

ishing sight that outshines in terms of aesthetic quality Anthony Gormley's *Angel of the North* across the Pennines in Gateshead. It should make St Helens an important stop-off point for art tourists visiting Liverpool.

My personal favourite was also a winner. *The Lion* by Hsiao-Chi and Yoshikawa is located on the corner of Wardour Street and Shaftesbury Avenue, and is the representation of a Chinese dragon-lion. It is a real confection in bright orange, yellow, red and green, that smiles at you like a Cheshire



Great art is never ironic because an artist always means it

cat. Given that Hsiao-Chi and Yoshikawa normally produce abstract works, such as the sculpture now in production for Bury Art Gallery in Manchester, the form of *The Lion* is remarkably assured and avoids resembling the tawdry gateposts and tourist paraphernalia that mark the other boundaries of Chinatown.

It is a fun and irreverent piece, but *The Lion* is produced by artists who mean what they say through the work, and not by ironists trying to mock popular culture or show off how witty they are. Great art is never ironic because an artist always means it, even if that "it" is a six-metre high grinning lion made from day-glo plastic.

Michael Paraskos is a writer living in London.

THE ANTIDOTE – CLASSIC POETRY FOR MODERN LIFE

An extract from 'The Nightingale' by Coleridge

CHRISTOPHER NIELD

The Nightingale

No cloud, no relic of the sunken day
Distinguishes the West, no long thin slip
Of sullen light, no obscure trembling hues.
Come, we will rest on this old mossy bridge!
You see the glimmer of the stream beneath,
But hear no murmuring: it flows silently
O'er its soft bed of verdure. All is still,
A balmy night! and though the stars be dim,
Yet let us think upon the vernal showers
That gladden the green earth, and we shall find
A pleasure in the dimness of the stars.
And hark! the Nightingale begins its song,
"Most musical, most melancholy" bird!
A melancholy bird? Oh! idle thought!
In Nature there is nothing melancholy.

The Taoist yin yang symbol expresses the belief that every apparent duality can be balanced and reconciled: light and dark, male and female, heat and cold. This poem by Coleridge expresses a similar conviction. From darkness comes light;

from decay comes serenity, and from silence comes pouring forth the song of nature.

Coleridge opens the poem with a number of striking negations. Just count the "no's! The sonorous "o" sound tolls like a bell, creating a sombre atmosphere. There is no cloud, no relic of the sunken day, no hues... Even as the thought of light is planted in our heads, it is snatched away. The "trembling" throes of evening are extinguished and we find ourselves in the dark.

Are we afraid? We are in the hands of Coleridge, after all, master of the supernatural and author of the blood-curdling *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. At this point, we may think the poem should be called *The Nightmare*, not *The Nightingale*.

As if to reassure us, he invites us to "rest" with him on an "old mossy bridge". Autobiographically, he addresses his friend and rival Wordsworth and the poet's sister Dorothy, whom he walked and talked with each day in the Lake District, swapping poems and sharing dreams of democratic utopia – but the imaginative world of the poem transcends time. In form, it is a "conversation poem", marrying the formality of blank verse and the rhythms of daily speech, and it

brings us into their conversation even today.

Somehow the image of the "mossy bridge" is instinctively comforting. We sense the slow processes of nature that take place out of the corner of our eye, providing a radically different perspective to the jut and fret of our busy lives – granting us an acceptance of impermanence. Symbolically, the bridge also represents the threshold, beyond which – who knows?

Coleridge directs our attention to the stream below, the sole "glimmer". As well as taking the light away, he strips away all sound. The lines build to the stark summation: "All is still". We have reached the moment where the distractions of the day are left behind and we can breathe the calm.

Then "the nightingale begins its song". In the pitch black, its voice seems to arise from within us as much as the trees around. It is pure inspiration, the presence of the muse. From negation comes a song of absolute, carefree affirmation.

Coleridge's first thought is a fragment of poetry: "Most musical, most melancholy bird". This beautifully alliterative line is taken from Milton's *Il Penseroso* – a study of the spirit of sorrow. With charming irreverence, Coleridge dismisses this as "an idle thought". This is a wonderful example of how poetry helps to train our perceptions, and develop our character, even when we passionately disagree with it.

In a way, the poem is a protest against the

falsity of literary convention. Coleridge asks us to attend to what we really see, hear and feel. In another work, the "dimness of the stars" might symbolise the loss of faith, for instance, but Coleridge will have none of it. There is "pleasure" in this sight too. Enough of doom and gloom!

Coleridge states his naive Romantic creed: "In Nature there is nothing melancholy". The Romantics, rejecting the cold eye of the Enlightenment and what they saw as the destruction of the industrial revolution, turned to nature for renewal. Of them all, Coleridge was perhaps the most ambivalent – and knowing this, and the path of his tormented life, his bright assertion carries a touch of pathos.

The poem, which continues for another hundred lines, goes on to describe a mysterious woman gliding by the landscape's "pathways" and Coleridge's son laughing at the moon – before returning to the nightingale at the very end.

No matter how many times we say the words, there is something intensely refreshing about this "balmy" night-time scene, with its mossy bridge and silent flowing river – and of course the silvery sweet song in the darkness, telling us that there is always joy to be found, even in its opposite.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) was an English poet, critic and philosopher. Christopher Nield is a poet living in London.

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