

Biography

Richard Mark Dobson

1963 Born in Bingley, Bradford, West Yorkshire to parents, John Barry Dobson and Kathleen Mary Foster. I was born in a cottage besides Cottingley Bridge, Bingley, in a 17th Century property that was used by the Republican Chief of the Roundheads, Oliver Cromwell.

1969-1973

Attended Christ Church Church of England Primary School, Bent Lane, Colne, Lancashire. A school with only 4 classrooms. It was an intimate, nurturing experience with head teacher Mr Frank Royal, inspiring us all. Wonderful memories of play, dance, kissing catchers and soccer and cricket on the summer field of buttercups. If I had one chance to return to any part of my past life, it would without doubt, be back to this school. To these years. As an artist I draw ideas and inspiration from the wonderful childhood memories of this time, this place. I will return to Colne and Nelson and Burnley one day, to commit to personal photographic projects. Something deeply personal. Something I have to do.

1974 A year at Edge End Secondary School. A profoundly miserable year. If Christ Church was heavenly, Edge End was Hell. It was the edge of Hell. It felt like the end. Miserable violent kids. Vandalism was rife. Violence against teachers and fellow students, commonplace. Edge End was the epitome of all that was wrong with England in the mid 1970's. I became a deeply unhappy child during the year I spent there. I was hoping for a way out. One day I got one, when my Father announced a year later we would be emigrating to South Africa.

To further embellish upon my grim view of things during this bleak year, I present here the very first post I wrote in a series of posts that are in essence a personal diary of my life. I call the ongoing series, The Pros and Cons of Hitchhiking.

(Notes)

The Pros & Cons of Hitchhiking Part 1

I hated England at the time. Or more precisely I hated school. It was 1974. The previous year, I had been attending a primary school with 4 classrooms. It was an intimate and wonderful environment. There were just 6 teachers. It was one big happy family. We were all very content. We loved our school, we loved our teachers. Then the following year, secondary school, all that intimacy when out of the window. It was hell. Nasty brutish kids, miserable teachers, a forlorn and often violent place. Dreary corridors, vandalized classrooms! At week 4 I was thrown in an icy canal in full winter regalia with fishing rod in hand by three yobs from this very school. Yeah it was about 3 stops removed from borstel.

So when my Father decided to take us out of a rain soaked and depressing Lancashire, and fly us half way around the world as new immigrants to the blue skies of South Africa, I was giddy with relief and excitement.

As our flight to South Africa took off from the rain splashed runway of

Heathrow airport on the morning of January 15th 1975, lifting up through the floor of grey clouds, I remember clearly, slumping back in my seat and visualizing those miserable kids probing the cold, dreary dark winter morning. An army of anemic, sallow children marching through the damp grey streets towards that God awful school, and I recall with fondness the wave of absolute joy that swept through me! Knowing that with every second of flight I was putting another mile distance between myself and that hell hole. Heading to Africa! Goodness I thought, it does not get much better than this!!!!

Little did I know however that this 'escape' to sunnier climes was going to set in motion a chain of events and a thought process that I think is at the root of my 'confusion' today.'

Ends.

In retrospect, I will return to this school. To time worn memories. To reflect on where I began. Where I went. Where I am today.

1975

Emigrated to South Africa. Beginning of a big, bold, life changing chapter. Leaving England behind had a profound and unsettling affect on me. Hey there was lots of sunshine. It was all about the big outdoors. But there was also the tyranny of apartheid.

Yes, the new life in S Africa filled my head with all sorts of conflicting impressions. It was a startling time. Brimming with nouveaux stimulus. African stimulus. Irreplaceable input.

At first it was all exciting, different and exotic. But as I grew into my teens I began to feel a strong 'disconnect'. I became fully aware of how the mechanism of apartheid where all pervasive. How the tentacles of the state wrapped around you in the most innocuous of ways. As my revolt against the doctrines of the Afrikaaner state intensified, I felt the push and pull of allegiance to my adopted country South Africa and that of the home country England.

A strong reoccurring memory 'flashbang' is that of the acrid diesel smoke that would belch from the exhaust of our school bus. I would always sit by the window on the right side, just behind the rear wheel, the point where the pipe would protrude, and I would watch the smoke pour out, spew upwards and flutter and fragment into wisps of grey...I would watch this entranced and think 'this is not good! This is not good for me. For the earth. This is man made pollution. We are polluters. We are harmful for the planet!

1984-1985

A year in London. A fabulous chapter. Reconnecting with my land of birth. London inspired me, awakened to some degree my interest in the arts. I spent a lot of time in art galleries. I loved looking at Hogarth. I felt a deep connection to England and this chapter in British history. Possibly I'm a reincarnate from Hogarthian London!

1985

Enrolled at the Johannesburg College of Art for a Graphic design course. I felt inwardly that I had a creative calling. Graphic design and

illustration felt more 'useful' than a fine art degree. I had always painted from photographs. I loved album art. I guess deep down I loved Pop Art too. I was not a very good student. I found sitting down to render things out in pencil or paint increasingly difficult as I became an ever more hyperactive young man. Graphic design seemed so desk bound. I abandoned my studies, late 1985, and decided to return to England. For good!

1986-1989

In London odd jobbing, I bought a Pentax ME Super camera. Forever dissatisfied with lousy prints until I eventually bought a roll of fujichrome slide film. Writing my memoirs, a series I call The Pro's and Cons of Hitchhiking, I wrote added the following;

(notes)

The Pros & Cons of Hitchhiking Part 13

The Birth of Photography.

For 2 weeks during the summer of '86, Paul Pearce my flat mate at Priory Rd and I took a trip to Dubrovnik and Split. Needless to say when I got back and collected a few fat envelopes of prints from the WH Smith high-street photo kiosk I was mildly satisfied with the pics. Say 3 out 10 prints were spared the bin. Things were improving I thought, but the photo bug still didn't bite. I was just like everyone else. You know, look at the prints once, and then bury them in a drawer somewhere to be left and forgotten. Life carried on at Le Croissant shop. Then one day for a reason I still cannot remember, I decided to buy a roll of Fujichrome slide film. Guess I was just curious, and liked the idea of mailing the roll off for processing. It took me almost two months to finish the 36 frames, with the last 5 snapped when Ingrid and I took a stroll across Hampstead Heath one late autumn afternoon. By 4pm the sun was very low in the sky and as we crunched our way along a path of fallen leaves, the golden sunlight was splashing iridescent all over the grove of trees before us. Click, click, click, click, click.

A month later the processed film arrived back in a little green box. I had thoughtfully bought a small slide viewer. A palm sized pyramid shaped receptacle with an eye piece at one end and a frosted base at the other. I dropped a slide into the viewer through the little slot on one side. Lifting it up towards the skylight, I looked through the lens.

What happened next was the revelation! The hallelujah moment! That second in time when God, the Universe, Destiny, my calling aligned. I stared at the image for a long while. It was so crisp, the colours deep and saturated, the effect somehow was as if I was looking at a magnificent stained glass window. It was more than just an image of trees and sunlight. It was a jewel. A sparkling, shimmering artefact of light, space and time caught on a sliver of celluloid, the most gorgeous 2 dimensional representation of our 3 dimensional world I had ever seen. I was blown away. I was hypnotized. I was hooked!!!

My addiction to photography exploded, and I would be out most weekends snapping away. Heck I'd set off to places like Guildford for a weekend imagining I was on assignment for National Geographic. While checking into

a small B&B for the night I would be pretending this was going on an expense account and yes I was here getting paid to wander about taking pics.

Then one day while wandering along the South Bank, just in front of the Royal Festival Hall I saw what appeared to be a PRO-fessional photographer. He had a bunch of lights and an assistant and a very fancy looking camera. I hung around. The photographer later hopped in a taxi and left his assistant to pack everything up.

I sauntered over and asked the gangly lad in a silly naive sort of way, "hey was that guy that just left a PRO-fessional phoootographer"???? !!!!! The assistant nodded. 'Yeah' he said. "So you're his assistant" I asked in a dopey voice, of course realizing what a dumb ass question that was. He nodded again. I persisted with my daft questions. "so how do you get a job with a PROOfessional photographer", and this time he stopped what he was doing and asked my name. "Dick" I said. "But you can call me Dickhead if you want". He laughed.

We got chatting more and he explained to me that the place to go looking for assisting jobs was at AFAEP or the Association of Fashion, Advertising and Editorial Photographers a stupidly long winded acronym that relatively recently has been sensibly shortened to AOP, Association of Photographers. He told me they were in Old Street, London EC1 and had a 'jobs' book. "Go look in that" he said. Next day I was paging through the jobs listings, collecting names and addresses.'

I was photography hooked by late 1996 and decided I wanted to be a professional photographer. A location photographer. I wanted the camera to be the conduit for world travel. To go explore. Make life an adventure. To learn the craft, I knew it was important to seek out the best location photographers in London. After many months of researching, I found who I was looking for. His name was Duncan Sim. A knock on the door of his Old Street studio, and my life as a journeyman photographer was to begin! Through Duncan I developed a keen appreciation for photographic craft, technique and above all, the realization that it was through the camera that I could ultimately realize my desire to go 'walk-about with a purpose'.

1989-1990

After 4 years learning from Duncan and other talented photographer mentors I was ready for a 'new adventure'. In February 1989 I left London for the Far East. By early 1990 I was settled in Hong Kong, and my 'professional career' began. I quickly established myself as a successful editorial and commercial photographer.

1990-1997

Hong Kong. From Asia I worked regularly for both local and international magazine and corporate clients. With extensive trips into China and the Asia Pacific. It was a time of great awakening to lands long locked away from my thoughts and imagination. China was a great mystery to me. Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos held particular interest because of their geo political and historical significance. The 1990's was a particularly beguiling time to be travelling to these 'closed but slowly opening'

insulated communist countries. Memories from these years of travel in the 'exotic' Far East, are vivid layers of organic stimulus. They induce a rosy, gut tingling glow. These memories manifest from a combination of youthful curiosity, and a heady sense of adventure. These were highly informative years. I did a lot of travelling. I was always on the road. My photography served a purpose. It was the passport to travel. I was a busy editorial, travel photographer, but I wanted more. I wanted to try my hand at advertising photography. Lets say moving away from the 'observational' photo reportage discipline. I wanted to be 'conceptualizing ideas. Other peoples ideas. Namely I wanted to work for advertising agencies. For art directors.

Hong Kong was not a creative environment for print advertising photography. At least I thought so anyway. I had seen much more creative work in South Africa. I decided it was time to return to my adopted home.

1999-2008

The great South Africa love affair began again. I was back after a twelve year absence. I was older, I had matured as a photographer. I found South Africa fascinating once again.

My early years were spent in Johannesburg. By this time I had connected to the French and German GEO magazines. Career dreams fulfilled. They kept me busy. I developed a love for the Karoo. I produced a book about the place. Karoo Moons.

I spent a lot of time in inner city Johannesburg, exploring the 'darker side'. Heady times. Fascinating years to be back in South Africa. Mandela was out of prison. He was President of the Republic of South Africa. The country and continent was in flux. Giddy times in Joburg. Covering stories for the French media, stories about Jozi youth culture. It was all such a lot of fun.

The advertising agencies where playing hard to get. Yes my dreams of becoming the next big advertising photographer were hobbled by the incestuous little ad scene in Joburg. The art buyers were happy to farm out the work to their clique of favourite photographers. I got bored with been told repeatedly that so and so photographer had got the work. I quit Joburg. I moved to Cape Town. Ah. Cape Town. I watched the second Iraq war kick off on TV from a favourite bar in Hout Bay. I wanted to go to Iraq but didn't have the money. So I just sat in the bar. And followed along with the death and mutilation. You know all that looking for weapons of mass destruction.

2008

I finished a lengthy editorial about the South African borderline for French GEO mid 2008. It seemed to me however that the writing was on the wall for all things editorial assignments. I sensed there was probably going to be a lull in editorial commissions, if not an end entirely. The business of editorial photography for prestigious magazines with ample budgets, was to become a thing of the past. Work dried up. I was feeling restless again. My mind drifted back to Asia. I decided, I would go immerse myself in SE Asia. I chose Saigon.

2009- 2017

Saigon was a roller coaster ride. The higgledy piggledy years I call them. I lost my sense of purpose, but at the same time, a glimmer of art aspiration emerged. These were the years where I sensed it was time to find a new direction. Think out of the box. To think about what it is I wanted to say, what it is I wanted to do. Ultimately what kind of photographer I wanted to be.

I knew I had to think of new ways to work. I could not rely on the old paradigms of commercial work paying my bills. I was feeling very confused. Very unsure. Reaching out unsuccessfully to people who didn't want to know. Big changes were in the wind. I felt claustrophobic in Saigon. A city that was in a state of great flux, disheveled. I wanted to find a place that I could think. Reset the inspiration button. Find some peace of mind. Peace and quiet.

I took a year out of the hustle and bustle of Saigon and decamped to Vung Tau. Situated on the coast and surrounded by jungly hills it was the perfect place to get fit, take long walks and really begin to lay the foundations for my art career.

Yes around about 2011, I began to experiment with lots of personal work. Concepts that ranged from abstraction to street photography. I opened a gallery later in my own house in Saigon. I took great pleasure in seeing my work hanging on the walls of my home. I began to feel like an artist for the very first time.

Frenetic Saigon burned me out. The city, hell bent on physical change, and with it, a lot of the things I found endearing about Saigon was been lost. I wanted to find a place that soothed me. I began to think about Thailand, or Malaysia.

2018

I found Penang. Malaysia. I found a house on a forested hill. Pearl Hill it was called. So now my house is surrounded by jungle. I have sea views across the Straits of Malacca. The air is sweet with frangipani and mango. Fish eagles soar the above. Monkeys frolick in the trees. Giant squirrels run the telephone lines across the road. Flying foxes wing suit stlye come gliding out of the high treak trees. Pythons slither out of the grasses. Yes I have found my slice of paradise. Penang really feels like the best place in the world to think, plan adventures and rejoice in been alive.

Amen