

Argentea Gallery

A Q&A between Al Brydon & Anna Sparham

August 2020

During lockdown, your posts on Instagram encouraged people to 'stay home, scan negs', as you were doing. Has this time spent focusing on your work to date inspired any new approaches you are keen to pursue?

Time will tell on that one. I suspect revisiting older work (specifically a series I made about eight years ago called 'None Places') must have had some effect. It was interesting to me how differently I felt about the work and maybe that could have a bearing on how I make future work. I think the simple act of re-scanning a series of work made in the past can breed new ideas. There were images I missed the first time round plus people's reactions to the work were much more positive. Maybe a body of work has a time when it works best. And photographs sometimes age really well. All I needed for this body of work to apparently resonate was the collective terror of a global pandemic. I have a tendency to assume I will always be a photographer but in reality, that could change at any moment. Maybe I've already made the best work I'm capable of creating? God that sounds miserable doesn't it?



From the series *None Places*

We all come to photography through a journey, refining and evolving what we choose to create. How did you come into photography?

My father probably started it by always having cameras about the house (he bought boxes of house clearance from a local auction and there were always old cameras and radios amongst the assorted junk). I admit I wasn't particularly interested in the cameras, but I always liked photographs. And I liked making photographs. I never really thought where the cameras came from so to speak. But I like to think their past owners would have been pleased they were still being used. So I took pictures of my toy dinosaurs in the front yard (or garden for our friends in the south) and that was it really until I went to art college when I was 16 and saw a photographic print appear in a dev tray for the first time and I then understood what I wanted to do. And considering I wasn't particularly academic I stayed in further education 'studying' photography until I was 21. I was an awful student really. I wasn't good at following a brief or completing coursework on time. I just wanted to be left alone to do what I wanted to do so consequently didn't do very well. Yet here I am all these years later still making work. There's something rather pleasingly perverse about that. In fact, an old lecturer got in touch a few years ago and asked if the college could interview me for an article or something or other. Me? I was crap. I'm guessing everyone else on the course went into IT.



From the series *None Places*

You're based in South Yorkshire and I wonder how much your immediate geographical location influenced the visual direction you have taken?

Almost all of my work is made in a fairly compact area. I'm not particularly interested in a geographical location or 'place' per se. I rarely go to a specific location to make photographs of that location. I go to a place because feel I want to be there, and I might make a photograph while I'm there. This isn't the case every time of course.

I've been working on a series of images using a 5x4 view camera for a few years now and that does require a certain amount of pre-visualisation. This sits fairly awkwardly with the way I usually find myself making work, but I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. It feels like I'm being pulled in two differing directions and I'm trying to make sense of the gap in-between. I think I'm trying to convey how I feel when I'm in a particular place. Maybe I feel there is a symbiosis between myself and a location that needs to be acknowledged before I make work there? Occasionally we all must feel like we really belong somewhere. I look for those places then I find the work usually follows quite naturally. Location (in my practice) isn't very important. Location becomes important when I find somewhere I like to be.

Can you tell us a little about your *Solargraphs* series? What were your expectations and success rates?

The Solargraphs started as simply something I wanted to try. I had no idea when I started that it would become a six-year project or that it would ever be exhibited and become a book. I found making Solargraphs and their subsequent deployment very relaxing. I loved the length of time involved with the creation of the images and the seemingly passive nature of that creation. When I went out walking, I would take two or three Solargraphs with me. And if it felt like the right thing to do, I would tape one to a tree or onto a rock. Sometimes I would try and disguise them as best as I could as (humans are curious creatures and occasionally I like to see what's inside a fetid tin can taped to a tree) and then I would walk away. I loved that bit. Also knowing that I had no control over the process, aside from the time I would let elapse before I went to collect it, was really refreshing.

I never really made notes on times or locations and when I did make notes, they were somewhat ambiguous. There are probably Solargraphs out there still that I've forgotten about. And some that simply disappeared or were tampered with. Animals would occasionally chew or peck open the cardboard lids allowing light and weather in. It was all part of the process.

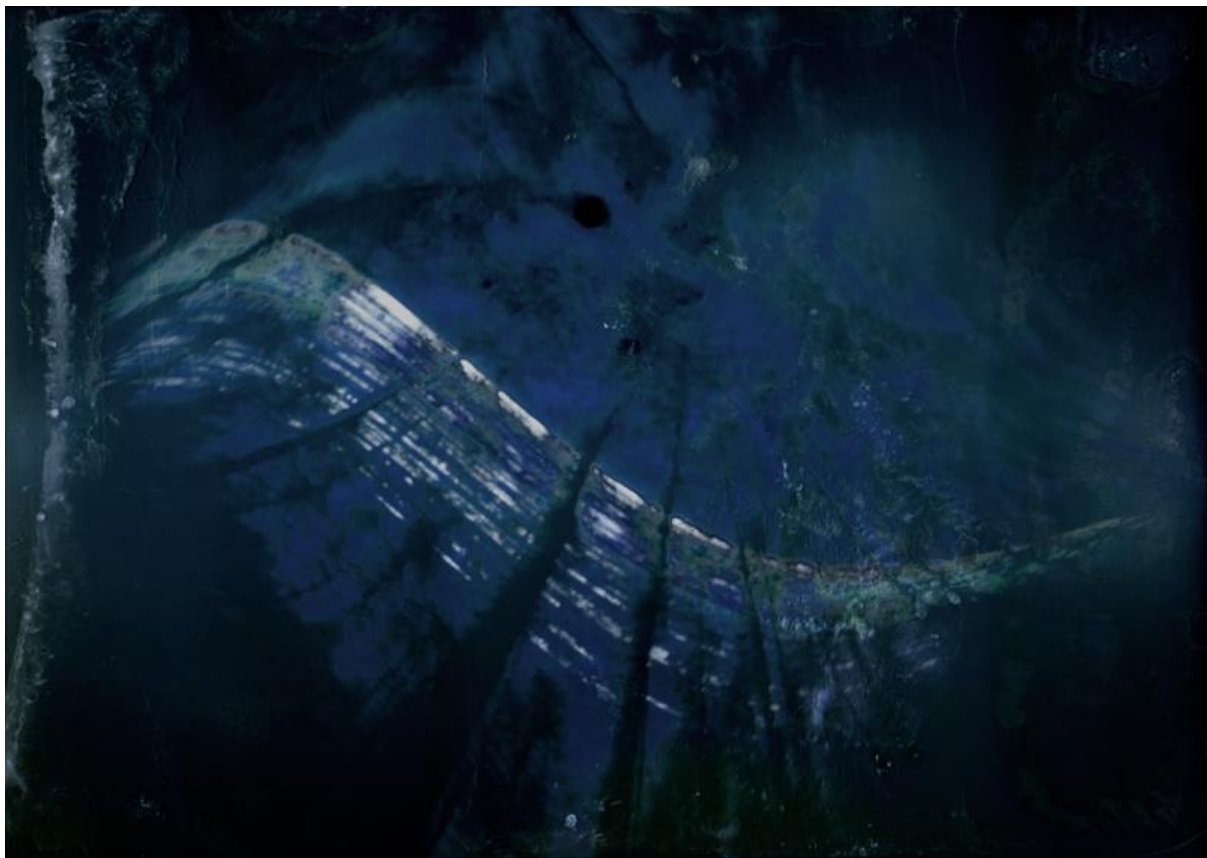


#1 and #49 from the series *Solargraphs*

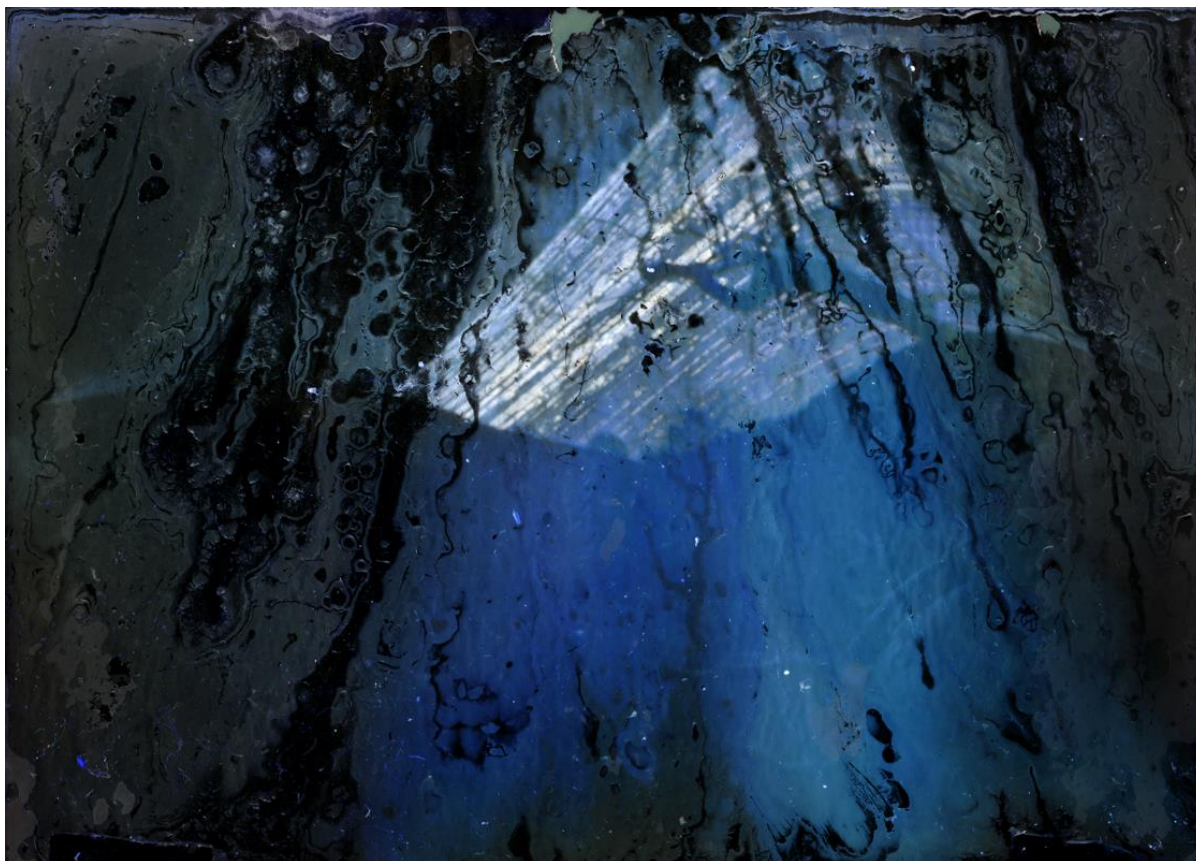
The tin cans interspersed around the countryside became a lattice work of anchor points I knew I could revisit at any point and harvest images, should I want to. Sometimes I'd go to a location just to check they were still there. It was always what isn't pictured in them that felt the most important aspect. The birds and insects. Myself walking off after placing the can. The entirety of everything condense onto a 5x7 piece of photographic paper. Maybe I've overthought all of this? Perhaps all they are, are pretty pictures of the sun.

When your *Solargraphs* have been exhibited at Argentea, most recently in the group show *Gather*, I've enjoyed watching people engage with the larger prints on the wall. How have you found such responses to that scale and presentation, in contrast to your excellent book of the series?

I've found it really interesting how differently people have engaged with the work. Not that I hide behind a pillar and glare at you, dear reader. I remember seeing my first large Solargraph print. It was an epiphany; they were crying out to be HUGE. And because of the size people were able to look at the strange striations and scars up close then move backwards to take the whole piece in. It's very easy, almost seductively so, to make a visual connection with an image but perhaps it takes much longer to make an emotional one. I think that's where the book comes into its own. It can be re-visited again and again at the reader's leisure and they can formulate their own ideas and concepts about the work that I couldn't hope to imagine.



#72 from the series *Solargraphs*



#32 from the series *Solargraphs*

Perhaps you can explain how you arrive at a particular concept - is it concept or content that first takes the lead?

It starts with noticing something that's invisible to someone else. That's not in itself special. Everyone does that every day. And the thing I've noticed may not be very interesting. But it's a start. So, I begin to make images but try and keep things very loose and fluid. I want the work to evolve and I want to make mistakes. It can take me a long time. And sometimes it works and sometimes it simply doesn't. Most concepts have been stumbled upon, not conjured in an intellectual exercise.

If I'm really honest I'm finding this a very difficult question to answer. The way I feel it happens is I go out and I make work. And it sometimes becomes something and other times it doesn't. The concept and content grow together and intermingle then when it feels complete, I keep going for a little longer. I like to work on a few things at once so I can have a break from one thing and do something different. I like how dual bodies of work play off each other and the ideas behind each then intermingle as well. Sometimes one series takes precedence over the other and I work on that solidly for months. I don't really restrict myself in any way.

I'd love to say I'm one of those disciplined photographers who have an idea then meticulously formulate a seamless plan, go and make the work and then release it to the world and bask in the glory of an overwhelmingly positive reception, but the truth is I'm not.

You are a Co-Founder of *Inside the Outside*. How did it come about? How would you describe the experience of being part of a collective?

Four men sat in a pub and emboldened by drink decided they would form a collective. Then nothing happened for a while. Then we decided we would put on an exhibition. My memory is a little hazy about time periods, but I think we got going in April 2016 and the first exhibition happened in October the same year. Then the MMX gallery invited us to show the exhibition in London and we just went from there really. It's all worked out pretty well and we are all rightly proud of what we've achieved. And how would I describe the experience of being part of a collective? I highly recommend it. I've learnt a lot and working to make something bigger than just one of us has been incredibly rewarding. What could be better than four friends doing something they love and promoting the work of other photographers they love? It isn't easy. We are four individuals with different ideas but learning to listen (and I mean actually listen and not spend the time thinking what you want to say next) has been very beneficial to me. Photoworld is a strange place and I think we all felt rather adrift in it. So, we made the collective, and it's a wonderful thing to be a part of. We each have our own practice which obviously takes precedence but being part of this collective has and continues to be a very positive influence on my own work.

As an accomplished creator of photobooks yourself are there any recent favourites by other photographers, and are there any you most treasure or have been inspired by?

There are a lot. I'll keep it brief though. I find I'm most drawn to work that I could never make. I think one book that has really resonated with me over the last few years is Dan Wood's *Gap in the Hedge*. It's annoyingly good. Susan Lipper's *Grapevine* has stuck in my mind since I first saw it in 1999. I really love Tom Wilkinson's *Blotts Pit and Skylarks, Requiem* by the photographers who died in Vietnam and Indochina. Iain Sarjeant's *Out of the Ordinary* series of publications. Like I said there's a long list. I try not to look at too much photography. I do find it quite distracting sometimes. I think that's why I prefer to look at photographers who make work vastly different to mine.

No doubt like the rest of us, your workspace altered somewhat during lockdown, but could you let us into your current world of work a little? What is the balance between venturing out to make pictures and wrapping yourself around a scanner?

Well during lockdown, I quite rightly stayed put and to distract myself from being inside I went a bit nuts scanning old work. I would get up around 5am for my one hour of state sanctioned exercise and during my hour would try and make some work as I wandered the deserted streets. I haven't even been able to look at it yet. It isn't a time I remember fondly obviously. But gradually as the lockdown eased, I found myself going out to make work again. Now I'm more or less back to making work every day. It's still a bit limited as I find myself trying to avoid crowded areas but to

be fair, I did that before the pandemic. I recharge when I'm on my own. I don't necessarily want to be near other people. Not that I don't like other people. If you go away from this thinking 'God, Al really doesn't like people' you'll be wrong. But those times of solitude are very important, and I think are an essential part of my practice.

It is early days easing out of lockdown; the freedom of the natural outside world still feels extra special, restorative and more keenly appreciated. Have these last few months altered your perceptions of working in this field?

Absolutely. In many ways.

During lockdown, my family had to self-isolate for two weeks. So that was two weeks inside the house. No outside world at all. Now, I'm not claiming it was any sort of hardship compared to the misery suffered by others, but it wasn't easy. But that first step outside on the first morning I was allowed back out was the most glorious sensation. And this was still just walking up my road in a city. Now things are a little different and I can pretty much go where I want to.

During lockdown I kept my mind centred on a place I like to sit. It's not the most breath-taking scenery but when I walk there, I always sit on this particular rock and spend 10 minutes doing absolutely nothing but looking. So, I pictured my rock over the weeks and how I would once again sit there and stare into space. And then eventually I got to go back and sit on my rock again. But it wasn't the same or even how I expected it to feel. All I felt was a sadness. A loss. Nothing had changed about the place. But I think we are all finding there's a certain amount of processing of this awful year we're nowhere near ploughing through.

I think a lot of people are in mourning for the year they've effectively lost and for those who have perished. How do you unpack this year? How do you go back to these familiar places and expect to feel the same? I don't think you can. I think we metaphorically shape the landscape depending on how we feel. And I think these walks out and the subsequent work made are a way of making sense of this tragedy. How could it be any other way? I've found the more I go out the easier it becomes. But it will never be as it once was. We are changed. And on that jolly note I think I'll end.