

In Conversation with Colin O'Brien

By Philip Gray

Colin O'Brien took his first photographs of daily life in post-war London in 1948: he hasn't stopped since. Still an enthusiastic and very active photographer, his latest book, *London Life*, contains an extensive collection of photographs taken over almost seventy years.

● A 'Box Brownie' when you were eight, then a Leica at fifteen: what a contrast and what an opportunity.

That 1936 Leica IIIa was a wonderful present, and I don't know how my parents managed to afford it in those days, but picking up the Leica for the first time was certainly quite a contrast. I found it relatively easy to work with and was soon using it extensively.

That camera has served me very well over the years. It is not my only camera these days but I still use it occasionally. When I show it to people while giving one of my talks I say: "This camera is four years older than me - and some say better looking."

When the shutter blind failed many years ago I put the camera on one side but recently had it repaired by Leica. My eyesight may not be as good as it was and my fingers not quite as supple as they were, but I loaded a film and went for a photographic walk around the City of London and was soon back into using it again. For a camera made in 1936 one feature that always amazes me is the fact that it included a dioptre adjustment, which is something I find very useful today.

● You grew up with two inspiring aerial views of London. Your childhood home was a flat with an uninterrupted view of the Clerkenwell Road and Farringdon Road junction -

as long as you leant right out of the window. Then your parents moved to a new flat on the top floor of a nearby tower block and this time you had an uninterrupted view of the whole of the City of London.

Looking down on a scene gives such a great perspective. *London Life* includes many of my photographs of the Clerkenwell and Farringdon roads junction, including various shots of traffic accidents. I remember an American visitor looking at one of the traffic accident shots I included in the Oxo Tower exhibition: he asked me how I managed to set up and stage such a great shot!

The photograph of that road junction in the snow was taken on New Year's Eve in 1962. Many of my relatives lived in the same



Photograph by Philip Gray

block and we had all gathered to see the new year in around our very small black and white television. There was a power cut and all the lights went out: it was a memorable evening. I took the picture at dusk, ending up with a very thin negative.

But I am not so fascinated by the grand view. I started out taking pictures of people in their everyday surroundings which is exactly what I still photograph today. I recently worked with a young photographer on a project featuring life in Whitechapel before, during and after the Olympics and we are currently working together on a long-term project in the West End. He shoots in colour, using a digital Leica, and I work in black and white.



Junction of Clerkenwell Road and Farringdon Road, New Year's Eve, 1962



Two friends at Swan Wharf, 1956

● **Digital photographers store vast numbers of images on their disks and drives, many never to be seen again, but film workers can also amass substantial collections over a lifetime of photography. How did you set about choosing images for *London Life*?**

I started by searching through the files for photographs I had taken at relevant moments in my life and then having a small selection scanned - but I have a vast back catalogue of negatives that have never been scanned: many of them are undated and without contact sheets. Someone once suggested I may have as many as half a million negatives. That's probably an overestimate but there is certainly a great number.

I have never worked out a foolproof way to catalogue by subject, particularly when you are roaming around London all day taking photographs of various subjects on numerous films. Unless you take individual negatives out of

sequence it isn't easy to catalogue such a vast collection by what is shown in individual frames.

Another problem was that many of the older negatives that I wanted to use had been scratched over the years. Some people suggested they would give an authentic feel to the book but I decided to have them retouched before production - and that was quite an expensive step.

● **How did your career in photography develop?**

My first job was at Fox Photos in the Farringdon Road. It was a leading Fleet Street picture agency and I worked in the library, sorting and fetching photographs for the clients all day. I remember trying to spend as much time as I could hanging around the downstairs darkroom, talking to the



Cowboy and Girlfriend, Finsbury, 1960



Shopping in Oxford Street, early 1960s

photographers and watching them at work.

After a short period working in the office of a firm of City stockbrokers I was offered a job in The City Lit adult education centre, working in their media resources department. From there I went on to look after photographic resources at Central Saint Martins where part of my work involved processing films for the degree students - sometimes as many as 100 rolls of black and white film a day! That early chance offer has given me a fascinating career in photographic education, as well as a masters degree in photography and a life-long passion for taking pictures.

● **You are best known for your studies of everyday life in post-war London. What do you say to people who ask how you take your type of photographs?**

I tell them that it is easy: all you have to do is go out and take them - although that usually means walking around for most of the day, and the next day. The Whitechapel

project took over two years to complete, going out one or two full days every week.

I like to think my peripheral vision is trained to see what is moving into and out of a picture so that I know just when to take it. So many street photographers working today seem to end up with the same subject - a person walking past an interesting object such as a poster or a window. And that's it!

I know many modern photographers craft their photographs a great deal after they take them whereas I always try work by seeing the picture, composing the image in the viewfinder then printing it without cropping. The really difficult part of good composition is trying to isolate the main subject in such crowded streets.

● **From church crypts to the Oxo Tower, and the new Leica City store, you have held nearly forty exhibitions in venues throughout London, and had a documentary film shown at the British Film Institute. When people look at**

your work what do you think fascinates them most?

For some people there is certainly an element of nostalgia for those 'good old days', but I have also shown these pictures to groups of mainly Bangladeshi schoolchildren in East London. They seem to be fascinated by some of the pictures and often ask questions about the games we used to play. They find it hard to believe that my parents let me go out on my own from the age of about seven and we would play all day long and only come home for tea.

It certainly isn't nostalgia for children who didn't know that era existed, and who don't understand how tough it really was growing up in an old tenement block. I certainly had no nostalgic memories for the old days when my parents moved away from our old tenement block to the top floor flat of a modern tower block nearby - particularly as it had a balcony that offered amazing views over the City. That's where I took



Lightning flash over St Paul's Cathedral, August 1973

the 1970 shot of lightning over London, which was published in the Daily Express, and my August 1973 shot of lightning over St Paul's Cathedral, which made the Evening Standard the following day.

As with so many other documentary photographers, my one great regret is that I didn't take even more photographs at the time.

● **There is a current trend to label and categorise photographers based on their type of work: are you a street photographer?**

I hate the term street photographer because it is such an overused and almost meaningless definition: it is the subject that is more important. One subject I have been photographing all my life is people sleeping rough on the street. It concerns me that it is still happening today in such a rich country. I am not a politically minded photographer, but certain issues need to be recorded.

Working on projects with Spitalfields Life I often photograph people

living in older housing areas that are threatened with skyscraper redevelopment. Time and time again the people tell me their homes may not be the height of modern living but they are happy there.

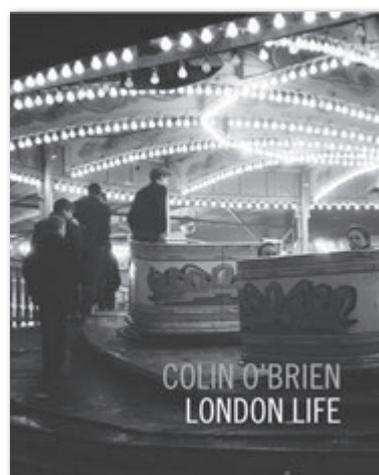
I try to record the commonplace things that are going on around me - the things that are often overlooked. It is easy to take photographs in the street with strong graphic elements but without anything happening in them: a good photograph needs

to tell a story. I leave a comments book in every exhibition and still remember one anonymous entry: 'The commonplace is so often overlooked - but it is the most important documentation of circumstance'.

If we have to be categorised then perhaps that makes me a social documentary photographer.



All photographs courtesy of Colin O'Brien



London Life (ISBN 978-0957656956) is published in hardback edition by Spitalfields Life Books and is available from the publisher's website, and from all high street and online book sellers.

Other photography titles by Colin O'Brien include:

Traveller's Children in London Fields (ISBN: 978-0-9576569-0-1)

65: 65 Images - 65 Years (ISBN: 978-0-9927761-0-7)

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