


Interview and feature in British Journal of Photography with Historian Colin Pantall about British Documentary Photography, the Photobook and Education, March 2015 edition.

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BREAKING COVER

Ken Grant used to have a quote on his enlarger from Josef Sudick that stated, "Rush slowly". It's been something of a mantra for the photographer who, over the course of 20-something years, has worked ceaselessly, without ever feeling compelled to shout about his work. Now his time has come, says former pupil Colin Pantall

I was in Ken Grant's MA class when he was teaching documentary photography at University of Wales, Newport. You'd bring out an undeveloped mess of pictures and Grant would start talking in his mellifluous poet's voice, his thoughts weaving in and out of the pictures, connecting music, literature and photographers to them. He touched on places where life shows, where soul came through, and left the rest alone. It was never about you, or the images, but about the wider world, the quiet moments, what you might do, and what you could do.

"The same poetic thoughtfulness infuses Grant's photography, much of which is based around his hometown, Liverpool. It is work that, through acclaimed shows at the Format Festival in 2003, and the publication of two books last year, No Fun Whatever and Hack, has brought Grant fresh recognition. It's richly deserved. Grant has been photographing for more than 30 years and has passed through the nine circles of photography hell. His career has never been easy, but he has always been committed to the people and places he has photographed."

"I was young when I started photographing," says Grant. "I worked for my father as a printer in the holidays. When I was 11 or 13 I used the money to buy a Polaroid camera. It meant that I had eight pictures for the summer. It was square and I had to make a choice about what pictures to make. My father worked refitting shops for months at a time and he got a lot of unskilled labour to help him. I met a lot of people that way, people who were transient and passing through. It wasn't intimate but it was intense, meeting with people who had conversations about how they lived their lives. I was privileged to be there, a quiet presence in the room, the tea lad who would listen to the conversations about money and family and football."

Grant absorbed these stories from the adult world and slowly they emerged in a photography that shows how people live, but also how they think and rest. It's neither simplistic nor romantic, but rather holistic, as informed by

the bleak short stories of Raymond Carver, Richard Yates and Flannery O'Connor as it is by the Scandinavian black-and-white tradition. "I started to realise there are a lot of these quiet activities that are unspoken or unlearned, that are neglected in photography or writing," Grant says. "But then you'd have people talking about how they kill time in a heavily industrialised environment, about going over the wall on a Friday afternoon... You'd have the official version of life, but then you'd have the unofficial take, where all these quiet moments came through. That's the version that I photograph."

Near and far
Grant draws an analogy between the quietness of his pictures and the ebb and flow of the river made in Liverpool - seasonal work that rose and fell with the tides that brought the ships to dock. There's a slow rhythm to his work that he finds a parallel in writers such as Alexander Gray, James Kelman and Erik Voss, authors who talk about the vulnerabilities of people who work in mundane jobs with low pay but, through a combination of spirit and will, manage to survive. As Grant photographed 1980s Liverpool, he also began doing editorial work with overseas journalists on assignment in the region. He soon found photography opening up to him. "I did a lot of work for Liberation," he says. "They used photography in a very forthright way. Their journalists would come over to do a story, but sometimes the brief was open and they'd say to me, 'What's the story, what can we photograph?' We'd end up doing something I was interested in. So we'd both get a story out of it, but I'd also get something that would have a longer life."

"Some of the things I photographed were much more warmly received abroad," he adds. "I'd go and photograph the dock workers every two weeks, but the pictures were only published in France. If I'd been waiting for newspapers and magazines to commission something, I'd never have done half the work I did." Grant traces his ability to get out and

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Untitled (Children, Chalk, Dandelion Seeds), from the book series, 1993. Art project by Ken Grant

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PROFILE



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[Left] Brothers outside the film workshop, Liverpool, 1988. From The Other Season, 2010. [Top right] Family Christmas, North Green, Liverpool, 1989. [Bottom right] And the Cat... The Cat, Liverpool, 1993. Art project by Ken Grant

[Overleaf] Untitled (Paula's Family), from Hack, 2014

photograph, to make work in "little pockets of activity", back to his apprenticeship in image-making while training as a technician in the Wirral. "I'd go to the library and I'd find things like Lee Friedlander books, and wondered how they ended up in this library on the Wirral," he says. "Then I found Tom Wood, who was teaching there, and Tom would add this dimension of the importance of how to make work, to keep going and how to find ways of doing things as cheaply as possible. So at that point it was also about getting a group together to buy film in bulk, or finding the cheapest possible out-of-date film."

As Grant's photographic investment gathered pace, so did his pragmatism - he got by with teaching, training, running workshops, assisting image-makers such as Marketa Loukacova, who is better known as a photographic artist than a commercial photographer, and doing "work that had nothing to do with photography", he says. "I did everything. It sucks people that I still know how to hang a door, but that allowed me to keep on working in photography. It's all these little jagged pieces of how to make a living from photography. I used to have a Josef Sudick quote on my enlarger: 'Rush slowly', he said. And that's what I've been doing."

Life became less complicated when he began teaching on a more permanent basis - he worked part-time for a long time, up until around 12 years ago. "The advantage was that you could be quite stable with what was coming in, but you could be flexible enough to still do long-term residences," says Grant, who currently works at the University of Ulster in Belfast following a 10-year career at the University of Wales, Newport, where he rose from part-timer to course leader.

"So I'd have access to a place for half a week or a summer and could continue with photography. Full-time is different - what things are going well, you have to be pragmatic about how you use your time. Josef Koudelka used to work in the summer and then do his printing in the autumn and winter, but if there are too many responsibilities, or things don't go well, then duties stack up and making photography becomes impossible. If you work full-time, you can see people become institutionalised, they can get comfortable and not make that much work. You have to keep moving to keep making work." Fortunately for Grant, he's also found teaching inspiring, both in terms of the students he teaches and the encouragement he receives from his colleagues. "I want that connection with my work, being at Newport and having people telling me I needed to do something with it made a difference," he says. "In Ulster I'm sharing an office with Donavan Wylie, so in the office we talk about photographs and what works and what doesn't. When we're out on a lunch break we are doing the same, so we're talking about pictures

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all the time. If you're working around people you trust, they can tell you what works.

Slow progress
Grant clearly has a fierce work ethic, but he says his photography comes from a deep emotional need rather than self-discipline. "My wife will tell you there's a greater thrill when I'm not making pictures," he says. "I have to make work."

And for the most part, that's made in Liverpool. In *The Close Season*, he tried to push through what it is to survive in a city on the brink of dereliction. In *No Pain Whatever* he reprised

this but went deeper, to give a sense of place where personality, landscape and architecture all combine. There's an unemployed man scavenging cans in a city tip, the hard-faced woman with steady eyes and bright permed hair, the two men on the cast-off mattress by the boarded-up houses. They are not pretty pictures, but they are intensely human. Despite the lack of exposure, his work was attracting attention. His images are in the *Museum of Modern Art* in New York and *Museum Folkwang* in Essen. Martin Parr bought an early book *Dumpty* in 1984 and, after a long hiatus, *The Close Season* was published in 2002.

But it was slow progress, work no bells and whistles, partly because Grant preferred it that

way. "I guess part of it is down to me being ready to put the work out," he says. "But I've always been making work. I want to be sure when I do something that it'll last. Those things take time to come through. When *The Close Season* was published, there was no internet, there were no lists. All you had were a few newspapers and magazines that would show your work. Now books flood the world in much more fluid time."

Eventually, though, he built up so much critical mass it came out - though not always via the channels you might expect. His work on the Everton district of Liverpool was shown in the *Beaconsfield Community Centre* in Liverpool's 2011 *Look Festival*, for example, after Steve Bell,

who worked at the centre, said, "You've been making this work for 20-odd years, isn't it about time you showed some of it?"

"So I did," he says. "Steve died before the show so on my website there's a Steve Bell edit," which shows the work that would make sense to him.

Few luminaries from the photography world would have seen the exhibition, but for Grant that's beside the point. What matters more to him is showing the work where the people he shoots can access it. "It's always an important question for me - how do you get the work back out?" he says. "How do you get work on the people photographed can see it? I wandered around the exhibition on a grey Saturday

afternoon and it was moving to see people engaging with pictures of people they know, of places they know. They came in and saw pictures from 20 years ago - pictures of family and friends, of their younger selves, of people who had passed on. It was an exhibition where the audience-related memories that remain close."

It's photography that matters in a very direct way, and perhaps that's what keeps Grant going. "Sometimes you feel you've given people back their childhood because the pictures were taken when people were children, and when they see the pictures they become children again," he says. "To me, even when I meet them today, the people I photographed still seem

young. But they grow up so quickly in these areas, so sometimes you feel like the Grim Reaper of photography because the people in the photographs are not that privileged. They have difficult lives and don't always live long.

"There are things I don't want to leave behind," he adds. "A book is a consolidation of work. A lot are compromised by how many pages or how much time you've got, ideally one day I'd like to see all my work in one big book, but whether that will happen I don't know. Projects get finished in the sense that other things come up and take priority, but like the *Beaconsfield Centre*, I always want to go back. It's never finished."

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