

Interview with photographer Trent Parke

Trent Parke is the first Australian photographer to become a Full Member of the renowned Magnum Photo Agency (since 2007) and he has won numerous awards for his photography.



What inspired you to become a photographer?

I am not sure inspired is the right word. When I was 13 years old I witnessed my mum die of an asthma attack. From that moment on I questioned everything around me, with the inevitable question: why am I here? Somehow Mum's old Pentax Spotmatic fell into my hands and even though it's a Mamiya 7 now, a camera has never left my hands since. I think one of the first photographs I took was my own wet footprints on the cement pavement after walking through the downstairs laundry. One minute they were there, the next they were gone. Ever since I have been searching and recording all that comes my way. My camera has always been an extension of all that I experience in my life.

What was your first step to following this pathway?

Literally the footsteps, but after that and during school I used photography to earn extra money. I would photograph my fellow students in their groups and sell them a 10x8 inch print for two dollars. I then progressed to the school formal photographs and sporting teams. I managed to do work experience in a Kodak lab, selling cameras and processing people's happy snaps. As a result I was given a part-time job which enabled me to process my own films at cost price which helped in my own projects. All of this was aimed at being able to generate enough money to buy more black-and-white film to take my own personal photographs. (Not much has changed in the last twenty years. Every cent earned still goes back into buying more film and photography in general.) After building up a portfolio I applied at The Newcastle Herald for a job as a cadet press photographer. I failed several times, but wouldn't go away. Eventually they caved in and gave me the job.

What does a typical day in the life of Trent Parke involve?

Parenthood and all aspects of the photographic process. Currently we (Narelle Autio, my wife, and two boys) have been on the road for five months living in a tent travelling the country. This morning I was photographing over 500 giant green turtles mating in the shallows of a white sandy beach. Right now I am writing to you. I never know what the next day will bring. Always searching.

What is your favourite aspect of your job?

Discovering something new for myself. In photography or through the use of photography in general life. And that moment when an idea that may have been forming for weeks suddenly materialises and is held forever on a strip of film.

What is your least favourite aspect?

I still process and print all my own work. I have processed every black-and-white roll of film I have ever taken. It's important that I see through the entire process through from taking the pictures to the final print. I still enjoy printing in the darkroom, but I can't stand spotting every dust and scratch when it is scanned into the Magnum digital archive. (Yes there are programs for this, but none are as sharp or accurate as me spotting every single dot by hand.)

What is your favourite photographic image and why?

They are all my favourites for about one day. I live in the moment of right now. This very second. Usually by tomorrow they are gone and I am on to the next thing.

Has the rise of digital technology been a good thing for photographers?

Like most things it has advantages and disadvantages. For the general public it's been great. Everyone is now a photographer and the interest in photography has as a result increased. With such mass saturation, however, the hard part is finding something original to say with the medium.

What is one piece of advice for young photographers?

Always look behind you. The light is always different.

Top five photographers and why?

Now you're pushing it. It's been five months since I've even looked at a photograph, or photographer. Such is life living in a tent and the outback. But to narrow it down and place more emphasis on what I am passionate about I would add top photographers books. Photographers are interesting, single pictures are interesting, but for me the real art and vision is when a set of photographs are placed in book form. The ones that have had the most influence on my own work are:

- 1 Robert Frank, *The Americans* (1958)
- 2 William Eggleston, *Los Alamos*
- 3 Josef Koudelka, *Exiles* (1997)
- 4 Walker Evans, *American Photographs*
- 5 Stephen Shore, *Uncommon Places* (1982).

The obvious link that they all have in common is the road trip. And a road trip is what I am currently on. As mentioned I live in the moment of right now.