

Helen Herbert FRPS AFIAP

"A Monochrome Miscellany" A talk to Durham Photographic Society 14th June 2012

An Appreciation by John Cogan

What is it about the Scots and their mist? If it's not Hunter Kennedy importing it from his vast vaults of ancient mists then it's Helen Herbert stalking the fells of Cumbria in the early morning armed only with a Hasselblad and a roll of film, capturing the essence of a Lakeland dawn. Still, looking at their results you must admit being mist-wise creates beautiful images. In Helen's case there is an ethereal quality that has been described as *"Grade A Minimalist."* (I need to ask Tom just what he meant by that.)

In Helen's work there are recurring motifs that enchant us with a sense of the familiar, those revisited trees and hills and lakes that never palls... trees in the landscape, especially the single tree standing alone, (a metaphor for the lone artist or the human condition, perhaps?). On a practical level what that single tree does do is to emphasise the nature of the rest of the image... the ruggedness of Glen Coe or the rough embrace of Crummock Water. Every image that was modestly placed before us was an object lesson in composition and tone. Moody daughters notwithstanding, the anthology became a procession of simple images that, as is the nature of a simple image, were deceptive in their true content. Nothing is simple in Helen's world. She may profess to the simple and claim that she was forced to work this way by the Hasselblad, as if this Swedish "monster" could, or would, demand such obsequiousness from her. NO! Helen forced the camera to her will and to "speak" the voice that she had discovered.

Like other modest photo-artists that we all know (and respect, and love) she claimed that an image here and a relaxed portrait there were caught "on the rebound". As if she "just turned around and it was there!" Patiently waiting for the light with that second sight some landscape photographers have she merely explained away a masterpiece by the phrase "I was saved by the intervention of the light!"

Many of her images are of stillness. Reflection of trees in water or the single tree that survives in the limestone pavement; these are images made with a measured approach that is grounded in geographic reality. Only the vagaries of the weather are uncontrollable yet, even here, Helen manages to manipulate the results and turn rain and mist and snow and scudding clouds into trademark landscapes. She has an almost Zen-like approach to a subject; one that strips away the irrelevant and the facile leaving only the essential kernel that lies at the heart. In this she is almost unique, but not quite. Our own Gentleman Joe approaches his subjects with this same gentleness.

Trees figure large not only as metaphors but as structures in their own right; often at odds with their surroundings. They become the vertical in a predominantly horizontal landscape, the only straight in a dominating, curved context, the only texture in a stark statement. Her landscape is often at rest, stilled by whatever the weather has become and what the prevailing light allows. Into this sense of time suspended, Helen will discover a tree or some other element that provides a counter-point to the general sense of the subdued. This is especially true of her winter images; those that show how,

with "Earth's foul deformities" covered by a healing blanket, the scene becomes an experience in the ultimate monochrome.

To place her work in an overall, artistic context, there are elements of Bauhaus simplicity and, dare I say, functionality. Some of her images have the stamp of the Russian Realists about them and one in particular could mirror a scene in the early part of the film "The Cranes are Flying", not that the parallels are conscious. It is merely that Helen has arrived at a similar point in her development. Being a thinking photographer and reacting with great sensitivity to her surroundings and to the people within them, Helen has discovered a relationship between herself and her subject. Even the briefest of consideration of her Fellowship panel tells you much about this relationship. There is no condescension in any image. There is a great deal of care taken to reveal each one of her subjects with respect.

Hints and tips apart ("Try using a Selenium tone," or "I aspirated the film up to 3200") I, for one, came away with great admiration for this quiet, calm and highly talented woman. I also said a silent thanks to those of the DPS who persuaded her to come and talk to us (from what I have gleaned Helen is not often to be found talking to Societies or Clubs) and have managed to provide such a variety of talent over the past years. It has been a privilege to be allowed into their private worlds, to share their excitement and skills and to find ourselves reinvigorated. One final thing though: if someone could tell me what an aspirated film is, I'd be most grateful.... thanks!

John Cogan, June 2012