



IN CONVERSATION WITH

## Valda Bailey

*With her intense thirst for knowledge, a willingness to explore and a love of painting as well as photography, it isn't so surprising that Valda Bailey has emerged as a leading innovator in intentional camera movement and multiple exposure techniques. Her powerful photographs are packed with emotion, and go far beyond traditional imagery. She shares with us how it all came about*

Interview by Steve Watkins

Five years ago, a group of mainly 'alpha-male-type' photographers gathered in New York for a workshop with guru Jay Maisel. It was to be an intense week of no-punches-pulled learning about the craft of street photography. Alongside them was British photographer Valda Bailey, who had signed up for the course as a 50th birthday treat because she loved Maisel's work for its graphic shapes and colours. Not fully knowing what she had let herself in for, Valda recalls that, at the initial get together, 'my status as a middle-aged, Sussex housewife had never seemed more apparent.'

She continues, 'One of the guys on the course had just come back from covering the war in Iraq; one was a cameraman for CNN; and another was a professional portrait photographer from Germany. On the second day, I thought I can't do this and almost came home. We were sent out on the street to take images that were critiqued at the end of each day. At that point in time, a critique to me was based on my experiences as part of the Flickr photography community: "nice colours", "the light is good", that sort of thing, but that didn't cut it with Jay and the

group. I learnt a lot and gained some confidence that week.'

Ever since childhood Valda has had a burning desire to learn as much as she can about anything that grabs her attention. 'I become very obsessive and single-minded about things. I used to be a keen cook and particularly loved baking bread. It wasn't ordinary bread, though, it had to be sourdough, and although I didn't grow the grain, if I could have done I would have done. There is a saying that talent comes down to 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration, the hours can be talented.'

It's hard to pinpoint where this insatiable appetite for learning and creative pursuits stems from but its origins may go back to Valda's schooldays. 'My mother will tell you that I was pretty bright and top of the class until age eight or nine, then all of a sudden I slipped back and nobody could figure out why. When I was 11 they discovered I was terribly short-sighted - I was a timid little thing so I wouldn't have said anything about it. It seems logical now that I couldn't see the blackboard. Even when the eyesight problem became apparent, though, I was too embarrassed to wear glasses - I was bullied a bit and



thought they weren't going to make that situation any better, so I flatly refused and just struggled on. I was always doodling, and created this little world of stories and cartoons that I could escape to. Of course, I regret squandering my education to some extent but it's pointless looking back; I love my life now, and the creativity that has developed is probably a consequence of those childhood experiences.'

Valda first picked up photography when she was in her early teens, and went to night school with her dad to learn the basics (they even built a darkroom in the downstairs loo). But around the age of 19 or 20 life intervened and she turned her mind to other things. 'I was still painting during my twenties but it became apparent that I was never going to achieve the marks on the canvas that I wanted to; I just wasn't a good enough draughtswoman' she says.

It was only eight years ago that Valda rediscovered her love of photography, when a friend introduced her to Flickr: 'I posted a few shots of flowers and puppies and got hooked again. I'd never been interested in traditional landscape photography, as I assumed it was all about milky seas, sunrises and sunsets, it just didn't appeal to me. Of course, now I know there is a huge amount of creativity within the landscape community. A big moment for me was when I came across the work of Chris Friel in a magazine. He was doing intentional camera movement (ICM), and I saw the very abstract image he'd entered in Landscape Photographer of the Year. I thought, that can't be a photograph; I used to want to paint like that! So I set about

trying to find out more about him, but Chris is notoriously reticent. I did come across his friend Doug Chinnery, though, who was advertising workshops based on ICM and Chris' approach. I booked a one-to-one session with him, and he came down to Sussex for it. Chris lives relatively nearby, in Whitstable in Kent, so he came to join us. It was fantastic; I was made up. He was very generous with his knowledge and time, and since then he has been a great influence on me.'

Valda immediately connected with ICM and began to further explore this and other alternative techniques. 'I realised that I didn't have to approach landscape photography the way that 99 percent of people do; there is another way. Then when I got into multiple exposures too, again thanks to Chris, I saw that with the blend modes in the camera you can create abstract shapes that almost look like paintings.'

One of the most common reactions to Valda's work is the question, how does she do it? 'I don't spend a lot of time in Photoshop or Lightroom, but I do mess around with the colours. I adjust the contrast, luminance and hue, and I don't feel any sort of guilt about doing so. I like to create tension in an image by making the colours sing, and most of the time they don't bear much resemblance to what I have seen. In the field, I see how the camera interprets the scene and if it looks like it is coming together on the screen then I will keep doing what I am doing. If it isn't right, I may mess around with the settings but first and foremost it has to be about shape and composition.'

It's not an exact science by any means, and Valda often finds

with multiple exposure that it is almost impossible to repeat an image if there are little things she wants to change about it. 'It's one of the joys and one of the frustrations of the technique; you can't replicate it time and time again, there is always something slightly different. That helps to keep it fresh for me, and keeps me thinking and wondering about how to solve problems. I've only been doing it for just over 18 months and the possible combinations of settings on your camera - even before you get into Lightroom - are so numerous. You can change the white balance or exposure values through the sequence, select different apertures or even change lenses if you want to. You can start with a base image of anything you like and then shoot something else on top of it. That's one of the exciting things for me; there are so many ways to approach it.'

When it doesn't work out, Valda admits to feeling 'absolutely gutted' but it mirrors her experience with watercolour painting, where 'accidents delight or frustrate you in equal measures.' She feels there is no point applying multiple exposure techniques to a bad photo; the image still needs to stand up on its own merits. 'That is one of the hardest things to be objective about when I am looking at my work: is it appealing to me just because it's multiple exposure or does it work as an image? I find it's better to upload them on to the computer, have a quick look through, and then walk away for a month. The emotional connection is lessened when you come back to them.'

True to her nature, Valda is not happy with simply having her images sit on a hard drive; she needs to indulge in the whole

process of photography from capture to print. 'I have been learning about printing, as it is important, for me at least, to have something tangible. I have a good printer and get sales via the website reasonably regularly. I go to great lengths to ensure the print is how I want it to be and it is satisfying to see the end result, although I am aware I have a long way to go to get prints I am 100% happy with. I got involved in the Year of the Print exhibition at the Mall Galleries in London last year, and was pretty pleased with that. I managed to sell some work and got other sales off the back of the exhibition. It is lovely when somebody wants to own something I'm so passionate about, which draws upon everything I've been exposed to: artwork I have seen and done, poetry I have read, the music I listen to and the places I have travelled.'

Intrigued as to whether Valda feels photography, and particularly ICM and multiple exposure, are things she may eventually move on from, I wonder if she has thought of what may come next. 'I hope that doesn't happen to me,' she says. 'I think it will evolve. I do enjoy exploring and pushing the boundaries, and I suppose I would see success as being completely satisfied with what I am producing, but I am not sure that will ever happen. I can't imagine my life without photography, and I never felt that way about painting. I'm mainly worried there isn't enough time to learn everything I want to and that I am never going to get to the bottom of it.' ■

To see more of Valda's work, go to [valdabailey.co.uk](http://valdabailey.co.uk).