

Photographer Stephen Gill: the devil in the detail

The photographer Stephen Gill ensures his pictures are shown in the best possible light - in his own handmade books

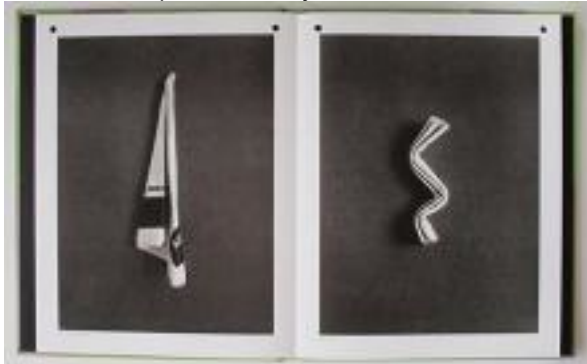
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The photographer Stephen Gill in Bruges, where his new book, *Coming up for Air*, was printed Photo: Stephen Gill

By Tamsin Blanchard
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The morning I meet the photographer Stephen Gill, in his studio in an old warehouse in Bethnal Green, east London, with its urban view of tangled railway lines and, in the distance, the shiny towers of Canary Wharf, he has already been out with his camera since 7am. He was on the hunt for a tawny owl and her owlets, which he had spied a few days earlier in a north London park.



Discarded betting slips from Stephen Gill's book *A Series of Disappointments*

'You just have to really stare into the top branches and you see these balls of fluff; they are really camouflaged,' he says. 'I'm always aware nothing happens twice. I checked the BBC weather and went back, half knowing they wouldn't be there, but I like that idea of going there just to find out if they will be

sitting in those branches again. Photography is so often about the pictures you don't take as the ones you do.'

But he was lucky. The birds were there. 'Really healthy-looking babies – apparently they are nesting there but hunting at Hackney Marshes. There is so much construction and so many more rats there than ever. I see so many, just from the corner of my eye. Occasionally one runs across your path.'

Gill has been photographing birds, insects and other wildlife since he was a child, when he would go to the library to renew the same book for months on end. The Observer's Book of Pond Life was a great source of inspiration to him.

His current bird project has been a work in progress since 2005. 'I only just recently brought it back to life again,' he says. 'It's purely birds in towns and cities. I felt there were a couple of gaps; I really wanted to catch a green woodpecker I'd seen in Hackney Marshes.'

He opens a box of prints and shows me the work so far – different birds in different urban locations. I struggle to see the subject of one picture for some time and eventually focus on the tiny blue tit perched in a tree. I feel as though I need binoculars to see it.

'It's a body of work about birds, but it actually doesn't tell you anything about birds,' he says. 'It tells you more about people, it's just that the bird happens to be in there somewhere.' He once photographed a wren that got so lost in the image even he couldn't remember where it was perched.

Gill's photographs can sometimes be apparently of nothing in particular. 'I've taught myself to really step back and have that equal treatment of things,' he says. 'I know that while photography is often seen as the amplification of something, it is also good at doing the opposite, quietening things and not enhancing them, and then perhaps you want to look at the picture, or study it, more.'

Gill was born in Bristol in 1971. His father was – and still is – a keen photographer and taught Gill to develop and print his own pictures in the darkroom in their attic. While still at school he went to work for a local photographer, and in 1992 he enrolled in the photography foundation course at Filton College in Bristol. He then went to work at the photo agency Magnum in London, first as an intern and then full-time.

'I was particularly interested in documentary photography,' he says. 'My knowledge of photography and history improved massively there.' All the time he was at Magnum, he was doing his own photography in the evenings and weekends. In 1997 he left to go freelance and worked on commissions to shoot portraits for newspaper supplements, which paid the rent while he continued with his own projects.

Gill's natural hunting ground has been Hackney in east London, particularly Hackney Wick, the area now being radically transformed for the Olympics. His first exhibition, at the Photographers' Gallery in London in 2005, was of the thriving illegal market that had grown up on an old dog racing track near Hackney Marshes. He bought a basic fixed-focus camera there for 50p, and began to photograph the people and the stuff that piled up there every weekend. He documented the mountains of fridges for sale, stacks of old television sets, secondhand shoes, people painstakingly sifting through piles of what, on the surface at least, looks like rubbish.

Other projects have included the backs of advertising billboards, cinema audiences (which led to a commission for an advertising job from McDonald's that he turned down, feeling it was at odds with the nature of his work), shopping trolleys and, always, an ongoing fascination with nature – trees, insects, swans.

These days, Gill's photographs are critically acclaimed and internationally exhibited from the National Portrait Gallery to the Toronto Photography Festival. But he is not interested in the high-profile commercial avenues open to him, preferring to continue channelling all his energies into his personal work.

His only source of income comes from the occasional editorial commission, print sales and the books he publishes through his own imprint, Nobody, which he started in 2005. His website has become the key to his self-sufficiency. After the Haiti earthquake in January, he produced 100 prints from his Hackney Flowers series (a continuation of the Hackney Wick pictures) to raise money for the victims; within 15 hours of appearing on the website they had sold out. 'I could have sold 400 easily,' he says. 'A great reminder of the power of photography.'

Nobody Books is a way of controlling the making and distribution of his own photography books. Gill is supported in this by the publisher Archive of Modern Conflict, which has been collecting his work since his Hackney Wick show. It collects his prints as well as documenting and archiving every part of the process of the book-making, including maquettes and related artwork. Having such a voracious collector helps Gill fund the books.

One of Gill's most complicated books was 44 Photographs – Trinidad, published last year. The entire book was manufactured and assembled by hand over a period of four weeks by a small production line of friends in his studio. The edition of 115 copies involved Gill and his team deconstructing a stack of vintage 1964 paperbacks he had found and hand-writing the title page, as well as several other individual processes including letter-pressing and assembling the photographic prints into handmade pockets within the book. It is a work of art in itself.

A Series of Disappointments, his collection of photographs of betting slips discarded in bookies in Hackney, is printed in concertina form on heavy recycled paper. Simply remove the book block from the cover, unfold it and hang it from nails using the holes punched into the top of each page, and it becomes your own personal exhibition.

'I love the idea that the actual shell of a book can really be at one with the content,' Gill says. 'Books are for your hands as well as your eyes and it is so nice to think about texture and paper and inks and subject and the pace of the book. Our minds are often so geared to computers and machines that I've always tried to hang on to the handmade touches. It's actually not that hard; we forget it's possible to do things by hand in volume.'

While Gill makes his books to be the best possible environment in which to show his photographs, rather than something that will have commercial appeal, they have become highly collectable. The special editions usually sell out quickly. Each one is made as a continuation of the photographic project itself and involves

multiple hand processes, including lino-cut printing, spray paint and rubber stamps – books such as his 2006 edition of 750 copies of *Buried*, whose photographs were buried in Hackney Marshes for periods of time, including one additional print to bury yourself, which is no longer available. As I write, there is one on eBay priced £150. It cost £40 when it was published. A special-edition cloth-bound copy of *Archaeology in Reverse*, a series of photographs of the Olympic site just as the construction work was beginning, which was published in a small run of 100 and sold originally for £250, is on sale for £329.

Gill's latest book, *Coming up for Air*, is published on July 1. Between 2008 and 2009, he spent two years travelling the length and breadth of Japan, visiting more than 30 aquariums. As in the bird series, the fish are almost incidental. The photographs – sometimes blurred, abstract and filled with flash – leave you feeling slightly uncomfortable; damp, claustrophobic and a little disorientated. 'There is hardly a fish in the book, but it is still a very aquatic series,' he explains. 'I knew deep down, even though these aquariums were my destinations, most of these pictures would be made on my way to these places, in car-parks or cafes.' He is interested in how places function, how the tanks are cleaned, the air pumps, the workings behind the fish tanks. And as is always the way with Gill, he became so fixated on his subject matter that he began to see sealife in everything, from bits of machinery and sections of frozen scaffolding, to everyday umbrellas in the rain.

Timothy Prus, who runs the Archive of Modern Conflict, says, '*Coming up for Air* really marks a turning point for Stephen. He's really raised the bar with it. This is by far the best, but you expect really good stuff to start coming now he is in his late thirties.'

Prus says Gill is trying to make his work quieter and quieter. 'It's about a lot of things. It's about our human condition as if we were fish in a Japanese aquarium. He is relating the condition of fish to a world outside the glass they know nothing about. It's a funny feeling looking at the pictures as if you are stuck on the other side of the page. There are a whole load of underlying issues. On another level, it's quite a jolly book about a romp through Japanese aquariums.' Prus says that Gill has dedicated two special editions of his book to his veteran 20-year-old goldfish, Chippy, who is also given an acknowledgement in the book.

Coming up for Air is the result of a long process of editing, printing, choosing papers and cloth bindings, finding the right printer (Gill chose one in Belgium), as well as the right material for the dust jacket.

In a final flourish, Gill spent two weeks in a warehouse at the printers, handpainting swirls on to each of the 4,500 dust jackets. He even made an intricate etching that he was going to use for the end papers but decided to keep for the companion book to be published in November, *B-Sides*.

'There are a lot of repetitions – weirdly it's quite a nice way to finish a project,' he says. 'It's been such an intense project that the swirls are a very nice feeling of completely bringing something to an end.'

'Coming up for Air' by Stephen Gill, published by Nobody, £36. A signed and numbered limited edition of 100 copies with a C-type print and case is available from nobodybooks.com