

July 12, 2013 6:23 pm

Stephen Gill's photographs of London pigeons

By Liz Jobey

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Stephen Gill attaches a camera to a long pole to probe the bleak hide-outs of London's most maligned birds



If [Iain Sinclair](#) has become Hackney's unauthorised biographer, Stephen Gill is its alternative archaeologist, using his camera to peel away the layers that other photographers either don't see, or don't care about. He has always been interested in the underside of things. Years ago he did a series of pictures of the back of billboards – dull brown wooden rectangles whose blankness implied the

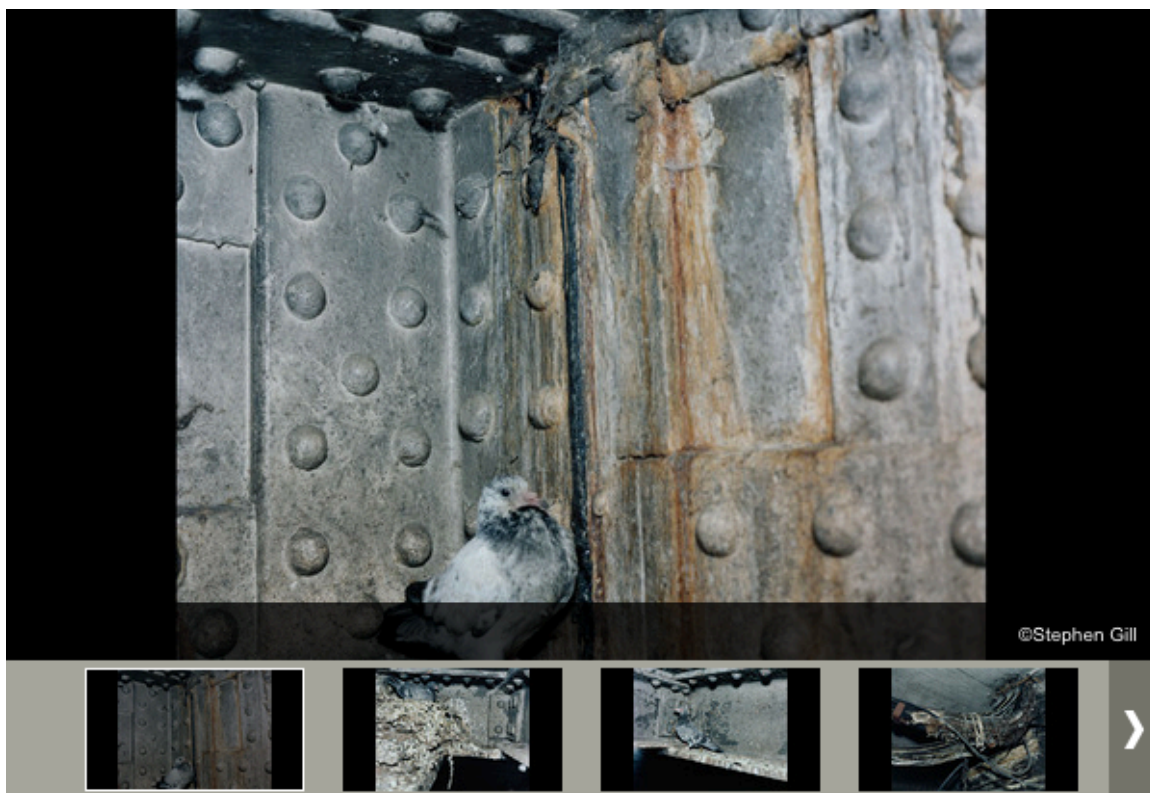
emptiness of what was offered on the other side. His photographs of the now-disappeared Sunday market in Hackney Wick, taken with a camera he bought there for 50p, showed the flipside of London's upwardly mobile self-image in the crowds that sorted through mounds of second-hand stuff.

Sometimes his archaeology is in reverse (the title of one of his books); he has experimented with what happens when you bury a photograph – it decomposes into an abstract image – or when you put bits of junk into the camera itself. He is curious about what happens when control meets chance.

“Photography is so much about control. There is something appealing about stepping back a bit and allowing the subject to take a few steps forward, to invite the subject to take shape.” So it wasn't entirely surprising when he decided to investigate the roosting sites of London's pigeons, under the brick and iron bridges of his local neighbourhood in Hackney and Bethnal Green.

“I love those bridges, the really beautiful iron and arched brick ones. They are teeming with life. There are sounds emitted from them as you walk underneath – sometimes there's quite a strong echo. Inner-city birds are something I've always watched and been interested in – the proximity between the human world and the animal world – and pigeons get such a hard time. So I thought, if I could get a camera up there...”

He attached a camera to a telescopic window-cleaner's pole and set up the self-timer and the flash. He had 12 seconds to get the pole up under the bridge and hold it still before the flash went off. He was photographing completely blind.



“I knew in my mind it would be a sort of labyrinth, because you get glimpses and feathers. But I was surprised. It was bleaker than I imagined. Much bleaker. You got the feeling that birds had been nesting there for such a long time; there were stalagmites of poo and there was the complete lack of colour.”

It was the deathly ash-grey of their habitat that affected him most. It was truly otherworldly, far from the cosy interiors of less-maligned varieties, the tits, swifts and barn owls surveilled by the BBC webcams of *Springwatch*. In one picture, his camera found a single egg, abandoned on a ledge. It must have been an unhatched, old egg. I didn't find any other eggs cropping up. It must have been the wrong time of the year.” Last weekend, however, when he cycled under one of the bridges, he heard a lot of high-pitched chirping.

This is just another glimpse into the city we rarely see. “It's a

world that is geographically so close to us, and yet it's a world so apart. That's what was so appealing: to know this was another layer of London. I just like those parallel lines.”

For more about Stephen Gill's photographs, visit www.stephengill.co.uk

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