

Top Photo Books for the Holidays

By Peggy Roalf Wednesday December 20, 2017

The DART Holiday special featuring top photo books of the year takes a slightly different tack this year. First off, Top Ten lists have been largely retired and probably won't return unless Dave Letterman shaves off his beard. And any list of top photo books could be endless, when worthwhile self-published volumes are considered. So here is my list of selections made by top writers on photography.

For Photograph magazine, Vince Aletti reviews two to five books in each issue. For this year's top photobooks list, I chose *Deep Springs* (MACK) by Sam Contis. Aletti wrote: Sam Contis is a woman who photographs men with a probing sensitivity and remarkable subtlety, as if she's wondering exactly what makes them tick and is determined to stick around and find out. That care and patience more than pays off in her first book, *Deep Springs*, made over five years at a small, isolated, all-male college in the California desert. With no text save for a brief endnote, the book is casual and impressionistic but far from random; pictures of the students, often engaged in the rugged manual labor that's key to the college's curriculum, alternate with panoramic landscapes, nature studies, still lifes, and vintage snapshots. Contis flirts with the myths of the American West—magnificence, manliness, freedom, grit—but she grounds her work in the bodies of young men, in flesh and bone. Maybe that's why her pictures feel more like experiences than observations; *Deep Springs* isn't a destination, it's a journey.



From Sean O'Hagan's reviews of photography books for [The Guardian](#) I chose *Money Must Be Made*, above, (Self Publish Be Happy) by Lorenzo Vitturi. O'Hagan wrote: Three years on, Vitturi has created a dramatic photobook that captures the curious dynamic of Balogun market: the cacophonous streets and the silent semi-derelict building. In 2014, in his acclaimed book *Dalston Anatomy*, Vitturi captured the edginess of Ridley Road market in London's east end as it held out against gentrification. *Money Must Be Made* is a similarly imaginative evocation of a place that defies straight documentary.

Instead, Vitturi has applied the same hybrid approach: ornate, posed studio portraits of locals are juxtaposed with striking laser-cut collages and sculptural installations made from the brightly coloured products on sale: plastic buckets, woven mats, chairs, hats, bowls, beads, umbrellas, footballs and fabrics of every hue. Here and there, we are given a glimpse of a bustling street, with garish products filling the frame and objects piled high in teetering pyramids, as people jostle for space in the cut-and-thrust of street-level Darwinian capitalism.

From Luc Sante's Spotlight on the Season's Top Photography Books, in the [New York Times](#), I chose *Irving Penn: Centennial* (Metropolitan Museum of Art/Yale University), by Maria Morris Hambourg and Jeff L. Rosenheim. Sante wrote: [Irving Penn] made his living and his initial reputation from fashion and advertising photography, which is to say portraits and still lifes, while on his own initiative he made more portraits and still lifes. He respected and followed both fine-art and vernacular traditions, taking the mottled gray backdrop of early studio photography and making it his own. He discovered a daylight studio in Cuzco, Peru, in 1948 and rented it for a week, shooting locals, and then set up daylight studios of his own in Paris, London and New York to photograph people in the generally doomed small trades (glaziers, tinkers, rag and bone men) in their get-ups and with their accouterments — a motif dating back to the mid-19th century. *Left: Irving Penn, Marcel Duchamp, New York, 1978; © Irving Penn Foundation*

At the same time he constantly pursued innovation. In the 1940s he made fashion shots that looked like stills from movies that wouldn't be made until the 1960s; he wedged celebrities into a narrow studio corner or draped them over a carpet-covered mound; he took his daylight studio to Africa, New Guinea and biker enclaves in

California, the resulting series blurring the line between ethnography and high fashion....He never stopped finding new ground until a year before his death at 92, in 2009.



From The Times of London's best photobooks of 2017, selected by Lucy Davies, I chose the anthology, **Really Good Dog Photography** (Hoxton Mini Press). Davies wrote: This one will be streaking off the shelves like a dachshund after an escaped hamster. An absolute joy from start to finish, *Really Good Dog Photography* is the first title in a series from this pairing of publishers, and featuring highly regarded photographers such as Alec Soth, Elliott Erwitt and Tony Mendoza, it does very much what it says on the tin. Sophie Gamand's eloquent and hilarious shots of dogs just out of the groomer's bath seem to betray the personalities of their subjects, subjected to such indignity, while Traer Scott's dignified portraits of street and shelter dogs will make you want to weep. *Photo above: ©Tim Flach, Bichon Frise*

Images from **Incoming: Heat Maps** (MACK), the latest from Richard Mosse, were reviewed by Max Campbell in the [New Yorker](#), who wrote: In 2016, Mosse visited routes commonly travelled by refugees— from the Persian Gulf to Berlin, and from northern Niger to the now-cleared Jungle camp in Calais, France—and used a military-grade infrared camera to document scenes

along the way....By adopting a tool of surveillance, Mosse's photographs consciously play into narratives that count families as statistics and stigmatize refugees as potential threats. He recognizes that operating the infrared camera entails brushing up against the violent intentions with which the device has been put to use. "We weren't attempting to rescue this apparatus from its sinister purpose," he said. Instead, his project acts as a challenge. The people in his images appear as inverted silhouettes, sometimes disjointed, torn by the time passing between individual frames. The thermal readouts rub features out of faces and render flesh in washy, anonymous tones. Someone lays back on a cot, looking at a cell phone. Someone else hangs laundry. We can imagine what these people might look like in person, guess at the expressions on their faces or the color of their skin. Yet seeing them in Mosse's shadowy renderings erases the lines that have been drawn between refugees, immigrants, natives, citizens, and the rest. His camera makes little distinction between the heat that each body emits.



© Simon Roberts, *Eid al-Fitr Celebrations, Jamia Mosque, Green Street, Bristol, 08 August 2013*. From *Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island*

In the [British Journal of Photography](#), Michael Grieve featured *Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island* (Dewi Lewis) by Simon Roberts, writing: [this book] is a concise compendium of Britain over the past few years and is an excellent visual survey of the run-up to Brexit. The book includes six essays from notable writers such as David Chandler, Carol Ann Duffy and Ian Jeffery. The photographs examine rich and complex variations of Britain that are now even more poignant after last year's vote. Images of election campaigning in clean and tidy suburbia, protests, the aftermath of riots in London, diamond jubilee celebrations, rock concerts, a family enjoying Brighton beach, computer screens of the trading floor of Lloyds – the list goes on.

Roberts has managed to capture all the major events in juxtaposition with minor situations that are large with meaning, from the dead of the Iraq war being saluted by Army veterans through Wootton Bassett to an depiction of impoverished mothers and children at a youth club in Blackburn. Contained within each photograph are mini dramas, cheap-looking high streets with pound shops set against Victorian architecture. Roberts shows a Britain at odds with itself. Rather than a harmonious society, we sense fragmentation and

In [The Telegraph](#), Michael Kerr made a list of holiday books for travelers. While not exactly a travel book, *Dronescapes: The New Aerial Photograph from Dronestagram* (Thames & Hudson) sheds light on the newest photo fad afloat. Kerr wrote: Aerial photography is not exactly new: the photographer known as “Nadar” (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon) went up in a balloon to document the rooflines of the French village of Petit-Bicêtre in 1858. But it has never been as widespread or as cheap to practise as it is today, thanks to the development of the drone and the quadcopter. This book is a collection of the best images submitted to the website Dronestagram, set up in 2013 by another French pioneer, the entrepreneur Eric Dupin. Embracing locations from Antarctica to Vietnam, and subjects from wildlife to weddings, it is curated by the renowned picture editor Ayperi Karabuda Ecer, who doesn’t dodge the question of the threat posed by drones to privacy, safety and security.



© Mark Neville, *Annie and Snowy*, 2008, from *Fancy Pictures*

The Paris Photo-Aperture PhotoBook Awards short list was selected by Gregory Halpern, whose *ZZYZX* won the Paris Photo-Aperture Foundation PhotoBook of the Year Award in 2016; Lesley A. Martin, Creative Director, Aperture Foundation and Publisher, *The PhotoBook Review*; Kathy Ryan, longtime director of photography at the New York Times Magazine; Joel Smith, Richard L. Menschel Curator of Photography at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York; and Christoph Wiesner, artistic director of Paris Photo. From the PhotoBook of the Year short list I chose *Fancy Pictures* (Steidl) by Mark Neville. David Company, author of the Introduction, wrote in [The New Yorker](#): In the broadest sense, Mark Neville is a social-documentary photographer, but one with a modus operandi that’s entirely his own....in 2004, when he embarked on an immersive photographic experiment, he went to live in Port Glasgow, a working-class town on Scotland’s west coast whose shipbuilding industry is now depleted. Eighteen months later, with the help of funds from the Scottish government and the European Union, he had produced a substantial book about his new neighbors. Printed in a hardback edition of eight thousand, a copy of the collection, called “The Port Glasgow Book Project,” was given to each citizen of the town for free. Instead of mailing copies out, Neville gave his shipping budget, of fourteen thousand pounds, to the members of the local boys’ football team, who delivered each book in person. Unlike glossy coffee-table tomes of documentary photography, this book had no publisher’s logo. It was never sold commercially. Some in the town found the pictures—of the townspeople at community dances and social gatherings, or posing in their homes—a loving portrait. Others, perhaps suspicious of the free gift, took against it. There was even a book burning: a contingent of Protestants felt that there were too many depictions of Catholics (in reality, the balance was even) ...

Neville’s approach to immersive social photography might be dismissed as merely earnest were the images not so compelling—full of tenderness, intelligence, spontaneity, and all manner of illuminating details. Often, there are numerous figures in his pictures, each Christmas-party dancer or playground adventurer or bored schoolchild given his or her own space and weight. Neville often shoots with an elaborate lighting rig, to make the view more theatrical, and more revealing, than a traditional documentary picture. He does not attempt to be invisible, and he says that he never sneaks a shot. He talks with his subjects, comes to know them, and allows them their rightful part in the making of the pictures. And, although Neville precisely shapes his projects, the images themselves do not deliver messages like campaign slogans. They are rich, open documents of what it is to photograph, and to be photographed. I