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THE F2 PROFILE
Simon Roberts

“The most important thing is to come up with ideas”



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Simon Roberts

Simon Roberts, 33, is one of Britain's most successful young photographers. From 2004-05, he and his wife Sarah spent a year travelling round Russia, where he made the acclaimed photo book *Motherland*. He speaks to David Land about his goals and aspirations

The first thing that really got me into photography", says Simon Roberts, "was an exhibition of Ansel Adams in California while I was on holiday aged 14 - seeing Yosemite, which I was there physically seeing, but actually being more impressed by seeing it through Ansel Adams' photographs.

"I did GCSE photography, and then AS level, but when it came to university, my parents decided that photography was a bit Mickey Mouse, and that they would only fund a 'proper' degree. So I studied human geography at Sheffield which, in retrospect, I'm glad I did, because it opened up a lot of avenues and areas of thinking, and has informed my photography quite a bit. It focuses on processes that inform human interaction with the environment, encompassing the cultural, social and political, all of which are relevant to my work as a photographer.

NCTJ course

"After the degree, I stayed in Sheffield and took the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) photojournalism course with Paul Delmar, which is highly vocational. The idea is that you already know how to take

Right: Camping with Sasha and Paval. Kamchatka Peninsula. Far East Russia, October 2004. Alexander Jukov (Sasha) prepares dinner for his friend Paval, during a camping trip.

Overleaf: Ramzan Kadyrov, President of Chechnya, poses with his pet tiger, which he keeps in his private compound at Tsenteroi. In the background can be seen members of Kadyrov's private army along with a poster of his older brother Zelimkhan, who died at home in mysterious circumstances.



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photographs, and it teaches you to cover news events, copyright law, and working day to day. Unlike a lot of courses, it gave you an understanding of how you're going to earn a living. What it didn't have was the theoretical background, which I've had to research myself.

“A lot of the Reuters and AP guys took the NCTJ route – it's really solid news photography. It trains you to get a job on a local or regional newspaper – most of the graduates go on to work at the *Croydon Advertiser* or similar, and is designed to get you work experience as soon as you get on the course and employed by the time you leave. In fact, I left the course half way through, coming back later to do my exams, because I was working for Ross Parry, a Leeds-based news agency, covering south Yorkshire on behalf of the nationals.

Copyright

“This was very valuable experience, but I only stayed for a short period, because I was on a salary of £7000, and while I was given a car and cameras, I lost my copyright. There was one occasion when on my day off I took six pictures of the Spice Girls, and even though it was my day off I had to give the agency the pictures, and within a week they'd earned my annual salary, so I suddenly realised how important copyright is to the photographer. From that day, I vowed never to give away my copyright unless I'm paid an extortionate amount in compensation!

Ian Parry

“During this time I was also doing my own work, because I realised that you needed to have your own projects if you're going to extend your career. It's important to have something you're passionate about. I started working on projects in the boxing gym where Prince Naseem trained. I turned up hoping to get pictures of him, and of course he was having none of it, but his trainer told me to forget about him and start photographing this 14-year old who was stood in the corner on a bag. He said, ‘This kid's going to be bigger than Prince Naseem, so stick with him’.

“The trainer encouraged him to go to tap dancing lessons to improve his speed and agility – turning the idea of such a masculine sport on its head. The photographs won me the Ian Parry Award and, as a result, I was able to move to London and start freelancing for magazines. This was 1998. Awards have always been an important element of my career. It is an expensive business entering a competition, but the rewards can be many. The judges are often picture editors or gallery owners and significant people in the industry, and it's important that

your work gets up in front of these people. And even if you don't win, there's still second or third prize, or there might be an exhibition that goes with it, so it's great for having your work seen.

“Of course it's difficult to get into magazines that quickly, so one way that I paid the rent was to do PR photography through university friends who had gone on to work in PR. If I could get two or three jobs a week, that would be £5-600, which meant I could continue working on my own projects.

Ideas

“The most important thing that I've done from the beginning is always to come up with ideas, because these are your currency. I learnt that when I worked at Ross Parry, because the agency only survives by responding quickly to news events and coming up with interesting ideas to sell pictures. Of course, most of them are going straight to the tabloids, but it's the principle that you're going to be in demand if you come up with something different.

Snow Birds

“Magazines don't like to take risks, so at the beginning, I used the money I made from PR work to go out and shoot my stories, which I would then show to the magazines. A lot of my story ideas come from my geography background. One of the first I did, *Snow Birds*, was on a town in the Arizona desert, which has a population of about 6000, but for three or four months over the winter, a million old people turn up in mobile homes. I'd studied this in college, looking at temporary migration.

“I photographed it for *The Sunday Times Magazine*. While I was there, I met somebody who showed me his holiday snaps, including a picture from a pyromaniac festival, which has turned into probably the most successful story of my career. I put the idea to *The Sunday Times Magazine* and this time, to their credit, they commissioned me to shoot it, because this festival only happens for 24 hours. I sold that story to magazines around the world, and it's probably published in at least 20 countries.

Picture editors

“Over a period of time, I forged links with picture editors at major magazines, like Germany's *Stern* and *Paris Match*. This was before the internet and email had become massive, so people weren't being deluged by emails, and you'd often get a response. I'd phone them up and send a few pictures, and by not going through a foreign agent it meant that I didn't lose such a large percentage.

Right: Ballroom dancers, Western Siberia, May 2005. Nikita Kruktunov and Rufina Muharanova compete in the junior category of the All Russia Ballroom Dance Championships.

Grow Bag

“Greg Williams, a school friend, set up the Grow Bag photo agency. I was one of the first to join, and I ran it with him for about four years. We sold one-off features rather than stock. We represented Simon Norfolk, Tom Craig, Poppy Berry – these were great photographers to be with. But it got to the point where Greg and I didn't want to be running an agency, we wanted to be taking our own photographs. And our careers were heading in different directions. Greg wanted to move to LA to pursue the celebrity stuff, and I wanted to work on long projects.

FHM

“I got a commission from *FHM* magazine to do a travel story on Victoria Falls, so I went for 10 days on their money, and while I was there took the opportunity to shoot a story on AIDS and leprosy in Zimbabwe for myself, so it's quite ironic that I'm working for this men's mag, but I'm doing a black and white story on leprosy, which is something it would never run, but that was the story I was passionate about. It ran in the *Guardian Weekend* magazine, so the idea that you can't get a black and white story on leprosy published is nonsense. You can, it's just finding the right place.

Square format black and white

“For three or four years, I shot all my personal stories on square format black and white, mainly portraiture. Then I did a story for *Esquire*, about Russians on holiday in the southern Ukraine, in which I started looking more at landscapes, and felt it wasn't working shooting square any more. I moved to 6x7 and colour. There's more immediacy to colour. There's something detached about black and white, and as a documentary photographer looking at contemporary culture, it seemed to me that it needed to be in colour. There's a nostalgia to black and white that I didn't want in my pictures. They can be nostalgic in 20 years time, not now.”

Motherland

In July 2004, Roberts and his wife Sarah put their careers on hold, and undertook the momentous step of moving to Russia for a year, where he shot what was to become *Motherland*, published by Chris Boot. The book explores the pivotal Russian concept of 'motherland', and is one of the most extensive photographic accounts of this vast country by a Westerner.

“We sublet the flat”, says Roberts, “and cancelled every direct debit. There was something very liberating about it – in terms of living, but also in terms of my photogra-



phy, because when you're working for magazines, subconsciously you're thinking about how they're going to lay it out and what they're going to do with it. I wanted to free myself from that and just take pictures.

I'd become frustrated by working in magazines - fewer and fewer of which were taking the risk of running reasonably large stories. Also, to pay the mortgage I was having to do so much work, because the fees were quite small, and I found myself on this treadmill, and I thought, 'In five years' time, I'm still going to be on this treadmill, and my work will not have developed'. I decided that the only way round this was to completely cut myself off from the industry, and go away for a year and work on a large project which would hopefully end up in a book.

"We lived in hotels and B&Bs; we stayed with a lot of Russian families. I shot *Motherland* on a Mamiya 7 rangefinder. Because I was travelling for a year, I needed something light and small that didn't require much battery power. We did the journey in four three-month stints, because every three months I had to go back to Moscow to check in with the Russian ministry. I'd process the film while I was there, which was good because I was editing as I went along, and it meant I wasn't carrying my film all the time, so if there were any problems with the camera I'd soon find out about it.

"We didn't have any children at the time, and were aware that this was probably the last opportunity we'd have to do anything like this for some time. Sarah conceived while we were in Russia. She studied Russian and English at university, and then trained as an English teacher and worked in a secondary school. She left her job and acted as translator and fixer, which was very valuable.

"I've always been a lover of photography books. They're one of the ultimate avenues for a documentary project because here is something that you can edit yourself, which you're the complete author of in terms of how it's presented. And I'd always been interested in Russia, and I realised there were few photo documentaries made about it in the last five years, although a lot of stuff came out after the fall of Communism and tended to concentrate on disintegration and decay. I wanted to go to places that hadn't been seen or documented.

"I went to talk Chris Boot about the project before I left and he showed interest, but no commitment. I came back halfway through the trip for visa reasons and went to see him with the film I'd shot so far, and when I came back I showed him an edit of 500 pictures, and it was on the basis of that that he agreed to publish the book.

Returning

"It was a very different life we came back to. We moved from London to Brighton, and then the baby was born. I do miss the freedom

of being on the road, suddenly being back to commitments of mortgages and bills, but photographically I'm in a different place. I'd encourage other photographers to take calculated risks - if you're feeling stuck, then evaluate where you're at and look at other options. Some may think it's radical to go away for a year, but really it's not. Even if I hadn't got a book published, then it would still have been an incredible experience. The book's doing well and its getting good press. It's never going to make me any money but, in a roundabout way, it's an important career move.

Focus

"I started to do more advertising. I did a recruitment campaign for the army, but the thing about advertising is, if you want to make it work, you need to put so much time and effort into developing it, and my focus has shifted away from editorial and advertising to large projects over extended periods, to be published in book form and exhibited.

"I'm represented by the Photographers' Gallery, which came about after I got back from Russia. I visited the Print Sales room and showed them work, at a time when they were thinking about taking on six contemporary young British photographers, and I was chosen. I'm doing well on print sales. Deutsche Borse has just bought a large set for its collection, and private collectors have bought pictures. I sell digital C-types in editions of six at 40x30ins, and editions of 10 at 20x24ins.

"I'm going on short editorial assignments, always my ideas, which I then take into magazines. I'm just about to do a story on the Russian army for *Time* magazine. There's another story on the Prime Minister of Chechnya, which has sold about 10 times to significant European magazines. Chechnya is a lot safer now. I wouldn't go to Iraq; I wouldn't go embedded with troops in Afghanistan, because I think it's too random, whereas before I had a child I would probably have thought about it.

"I'm now researching my next big project, which is going to take place in England and probably take the form of a journey. I can't say any more about it at the moment. I'm still photographing boxers, documenting a person's life, someone who was living as if he was already famous. He had a successful amateur career, turned professional and didn't make it, and is now selling electricity as a door to door salesman in Rotherham, and funnily enough is happier than he ever was as a boxer.

"He started boxing when he was seven and it was his life until he was 24, and now he's realising that fame and fortune didn't materialise and he's actually happier living quite an anonymous life. So while for me it hasn't been private jets to Las Vegas to see him fighting, it's still turned into a very personal journey for him and for me, which is why I go back to this idea of working on your own projects, because to have these things going on is very

important and it produces your identity as a photographer.

My generation

"My generation wants things quickly, and I think sometimes we can expect things to come too quickly. Something I've learnt over the years is to be a bit more patient in my career, and realise that it takes a while to get to where you want to be. I saw Martin Parr talk in Arles. He's been a photographer for 37 years. These guys have done their graft, and I think it's important we all do our graft, and that you're better for it.

"I came to photography quite late. I was 24 before I started working as a professional. It's such a demanding career, and it's very popular, so you've got to be dedicated in the beginning, just living and breathing photography for the first few years. There are so many people working in the industry that the only way you're going to make it is through your tenacity. Looking back, I realise that I wasted time on trivial tasks when I should have been looking at the bigger picture.

"My work's developing, and I can feel that it's getting closer to where I want to be. You're looking inward, which can sometimes be a difficult process but at the same time liberating. You've got to know who you are and what you're about. I'm not just an illustrator. I don't want to illustrate other people's visions or other people's stories. I'm the author and it's about me - and the subject - but it's my vision of the subject." **f2**

Ideas from the top

- 1** Always retain your copyright
- 2** Enter competitions, even if you don't win, it's a good way of getting your work seen
- 3** Build up good relationships with picture editors
- 4** Be patient. It takes a while to get where you want to be