

## Sam Irons

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*"Oh, how incomprehensible everything was, and sad, although it was also beautiful. One lived and ran about the earth, and rode through forests, and certain things looked so challenging and promising and nostalgic: a star in the evening, a blue harebell, a reed-green pond, the eye of a person or a cow. And sometimes it seemed as if something never seen but long desired was about to happen, that a veil would drop from it all; but then it passed, nothing happened, the riddle remained unsolved, the secret spell unbroken, and in the end one grew old and looked cunning... and still one knew nothing perhaps, was still waiting and listening."*

Hermann Hesse: *Narcissus and Goldmund* (1930)

Photographer Sam Irons graduated from Brighton University in 2004 and in 2009 was awarded with two years commercial representation by Lisa Pritchard Agency. He has described his landscape photography as "an allegory for my experience of being in the world." Irons recently exhibited alongside major practitioners including Gerhard Richter and Andreas Gursky, as well as other emerging artists in *Nowhere...Do We Go From Here* at Jacobson space in London.

**JA:** You presented Hesse's excerpt as an introduction to your photographs. Hesse's narrative has obvious parallels with your roaming, searching, method of making work, as well as your thoughts about resistance to the interpretation of your images. Can you expand upon what you are attempting to achieve with your photography and explain the relationship between literature and your work?

**SI:** My attachment to the Hesse quote predates my photography. I studied English Literature at Trinity College Dublin, but my transition from Literature was a fairly abrupt one - a Eureka moment... Out of pretty much nowhere, I realised that photography was what I should be doing. I don't know where it

came from, but from the start (and with hardly any experience) I had a fierce sense of confidence in myself, as a photographer, as a critic, and even in critical theory - in a way that I had not when it related to literature. So literature has always been an influence on my work - in the past I have based projects on the work of writers such as Graham Swift, Mikhail Bulgakov and William Carlos Williams. However, why this quote resonates particularly with me is the sense of unknowing, the paradoxical awareness of unawareness, admission of ignorance... and yet the tantalising sense that understanding our place in the world is possible, that the code is crackable, that the resulting un-concealment exists. When Hesse talks about glimmers of this understanding ("a reed green pond, the eye of a person or a cow") and its consequent disappearance, he expresses, in far more eloquent and poetic terms than I could, the experience that I aim to communicate with my work.

**JA:** How would you describe the way in which you respond to a particular text or author?

**SI:** My response to writing, and its influence on my work, is totally self-absorbed. I receive it and appropriate it; it becomes my experience. So it is collaboration in the sense that the writer posits the opportunity for that experience, but as Roland Barthes says, " a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination", and hopefully that process repeats itself when people look at my work.

**JA:** Could you talk about how you work and your sources of inspiration, in terms of subject matter, and locations?

**SI:** Generally I have taken road trips, with a camera and a tent, purposefully working, but some photographs have come out of more opportunistic encounters, of having my camera with me at the right time, or rather the right place. But the where and the how doesn't interest me so much, in mine or other people's work. I find inspiration in the unfamiliar - the fewer the preconceived ideologies that one has about a place, the easier it is to interact with it on a purely experiential level. Equally, although it deals with landscape, my work is rarely geographically specific. Without such a narrative, the photograph can

potentially elicit a more pre-reflective, non-theoretical response from the viewer, and the landscape can become as much of a psychological space as a physical one.

**JA:** How do you compile a body of work or an edit out of such varied material?

**SI:** I used to work with very precise series (*One Hundred Forest Clearings*, *Fourteen Motorway Exits*) but I seem to have moved away from the kind of typographical photography obviously influenced by Ed Ruscha and the New Topographic school, towards a more holistic approach that shares more with Tillmans' *If One Thing Matters*, *Everything Matters*, Eggleston's *The Democratic Forest*, or even the apparent randomness of Hesse's epiphanies: "a star in the evening, a blue harebell, a reed-green pond, the eye of a person or a cow." Subject matter, locality, or even reality are not necessarily particularly relevant to my work - what is more important is the subjective reaction it provokes in the viewer.

**JA:** You have said before that you want your work to "inhibit easy interpretation", which is a kind of perversion of the traditional notion of photography as a form of universal communication. Why is ambiguity important to you personally and to your work?

**SI:** I don't really believe in the notion of "universal communication" (as it seems to infer a universal truth), rather that each of us interpret the world through our own subjective prism, and that language operates as a normalizing means of sharing our relative experiences of the world. However, language is an inherently ideological construct, and it is language as an interpretive tool that I wish to evade with my work. As Robert Smithson writes: "In the illusory babels of language, an artist might proceed specifically to get lost..." My work aims to be "without signification, yet summoning up the depth of any possible meaning; unrevealed yet manifest" (Barthes).

**JA:** Barthes was a bit contradictory in his writings, referring to photographs as "a message without a code", but also describing their indexical nature in texts

such as *The Rhetoric of the Image*. Even through, as you eloquently put it, "our own subjective prism", we share collective experiences that can transcend cultural boundaries. Do you recognise this contradiction as something inherent to photography - something that you feel a need to explore or subvert?

**SI:** I don't think the indexicality of images is universal - when it is communal, it stems from the communality of cultural learning. I really strive to go beyond that, to outrun historical meaning. Not saying that I've got anywhere near, but I think that all art has that potential.