

Robin Friend

Belly of the Whale

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JA: What was the impetus for *Belly of the Whale*? You have mentioned before that frustration had a part to play.

RF: Before moving to London I spent 3 years living in Exeter. Dartmoor was nearby, a place I spent a lot of time losing myself. Often I would just get in the car and drive, not knowing where I was going or what I might find. It was very liberating. Woodlands, cliffs, quarries, moors, bogs, rivers, seas, farms, factories, reservoirs; the list would go on and on. The West Country was a plethora of potential subjects I could openly explore and discover whilst at the same time honing and developing my photographic practice. London felt immediately restricting; a concrete jungle I struggled to connect with. It was hard to see. My vision was blocked off, and at every turn there was a barrier of some sort. Ironically many of the images from the *Belly of the Whale* reveal objects that obstruct the landscape and in turn your vision.

Classic stories like *The Odyssey*, *The Golden Bough* and *Moby Dick* fused with real life accounts and journals from explorers like Stanley, Valerian Albanov, Scott, John Muir and Peter Fleming gave birth to the 'Belly of the Whale' and the desire to set off and create my own epic adventure.

JA: How many of your images are planned and how often do you rely on chance encounters?

RF: I am currently working on a couple of projects that are very much site specific and involve careful planning, research and continuous return visits. However, the *Belly of the Whale* has emerged in stark contrast to this process. The subjects and places depicted are all born out of chance encounters and accidental

discoveries. If I do go somewhere specific I try to go there without any preconceived ideas of what it might be like. Intuition and a curiosity for the unknown are my travel companions.

The location and topographic details of the work are deliberately held back in a bid to avoid grounding the objects and settings in specifics. The *Belly of the Whale* is a world, a place, a landscape that exists on the periphery of time and the borders of fiction.

JA: Do you think it is ever really possible to travel without preconceptions of a given destination?

RF: I traveled to Iceland two years ago and of course had thoughts about what it might be like having seen photos and footage and read fiction that described the landscape. But this was superficial and secondary information; someone else's story and account. The Geysers, waterfalls and blue lagoons were all there like I had expected but only on the surface. I had come to find my own Iceland, and nothing I had previously seen could have prepared me for the island and the experiences I encountered.

In our minds eye we always have an idea of what something might be like but this is trivial or at the very least just speculation and hinders the possibility of a meaningful encounter. Most of the time we are unaware of events as we experience them, performing tasks as if half asleep. Virginia Woolf called this the "cotton wool of daily life" and talked about how this monotonous and conventional world could be split open by a "moment of being". The idea that there is a hidden reality behind an opaque surface that can be ruptured through vivid conscious experience is an idea I am very much alive to. Naturally we will anticipate what a location might be like but one should tread carefully because in doing so we are in danger of limiting and closing down what that place and experience might have to offer us or become.

JA: The image of the rusting shipwreck on the rocks is a perfect parallel to the narrative in the Book of Jonah from which your title originates. How did you come about this text and how does it contextualize your images?

RF: I came upon the story of Jonah and the whale after reading Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell argues with great effect that throughout the world's mythologies, cultures and the history of civilization there has always been a story that has been retold though different guises, that being the journey of the archetypal hero:

"A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."

Campbell describes with immense insight the numerous phases the protagonist will face upon the journey. One of these stages being 'the Belly of the Whale' taken from the Book of Jonah. This is the point where the hero is faced with an ultimatum and with a sense of no going back, must decide whether to enter the zone of danger or return empty handed having failed. "Instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the *hero* goes inward, to be born again." Figuratively speaking by entering the Belly of the Whale one undergoes a metamorphosis and leaves having found a new way of looking and thinking about the world.

The 'Belly of the Whale' as a title for my series helps by setting the scene. The belly alludes to a dark and unrecognizable place or world that must be challenged and overcome. The whale is alive, a vessel one can use to navigate, an archetype that moves and grows. Taken from a biblical story the title suggests a spiritual and epic awakening that gives the work the option of an added dimension. The story of Jonah and the whale has had numerous interpretations depending on which faith you believe. The boundaries of fact and fiction seem blurred in a similar way to how I want my *Belly of the Whale* to operate.

JA: How do you think you will draw this narrative to a close?

RF: The experience of being there in that moment and making that picture is crucial to my practice and why I am an artist. But this is just one stage in the life of the work. The final print, the scale, the framing, the hang and the relationship each

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image has with the next are all crucial to *Belly of the Whale*.

The challenge of image making and trying to produce a picture that ticks all the boxes is like no other challenge I have come across. Even the smallest detail like a leaf can have an enormous effect on the synergy and shape of how a picture exists. If it is not right, the picture and experience ultimately breaks down and I pack up the camera and move on. This is probably why the series moves forward so slowly. At some stage it will take the form of a book but I see myself continuing to explore the *Belly* right to the end.