

## FEATURE

All images  
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# WAYS OF SEEING

One of the most important things for a photographer to learn is not only what to see but how to see it. For **Alexander Brattell**, the journey that led him to fine art photography was perfect grounding for just that. Elizabeth McClair-Roberts reports.



Above **South St, July 2015. From the series Still Point, Prints 2016.**  
Opposite **The Bourne, September 2010. From the series Qualia: Photographs 2010-2012.**

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For many of us, our early lives are about searching for what and who we are and how to shape our lives to fit that imprint. So it was with Alexander Brattell, who started out studying psychology at Liverpool University. 'The first year was wonderful – I did units in film studies, philosophy and psychology and it opened up all sorts of questions for me,' he says. But by the second year, he found a disparity between the model of psychology teaching and what he was looking for. 'It didn't explain anything about my own life.'

And so started a journey that was to ultimately end in fine art photography, but it

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wasn't quite as straightforward as you might imagine. 'I decided I wanted to be a writer and started taking pictures with a compact camera, thinking I would make a visual diary of the things I wanted to write about,' he explains. People started to admire his images and he began to turn his attention more to photography, buying a Ricoh SLR

and taking pictures for a fanzine. 'This was back in 1981 and the only way I could afford to process film was to learn how to do it in the bathroom of my tiny flat.'

He left the psychology course and thought he should train in photography, but at that point was offered a job as a social photographer in Monaco. 'It was great for a while,' he says. 'But there was nowhere to go to from there, so I went travelling for a while.'

On his return to the UK, Alexander got a job with a large commercial photographic company in Surrey. 'I was probably the last of those who learnt on the job using 5x4 and no Polaroids, but it was a good basis for what followed.' >

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Marine Gardens, July 2011. From the series Qualia: Photographs 2010-2012.

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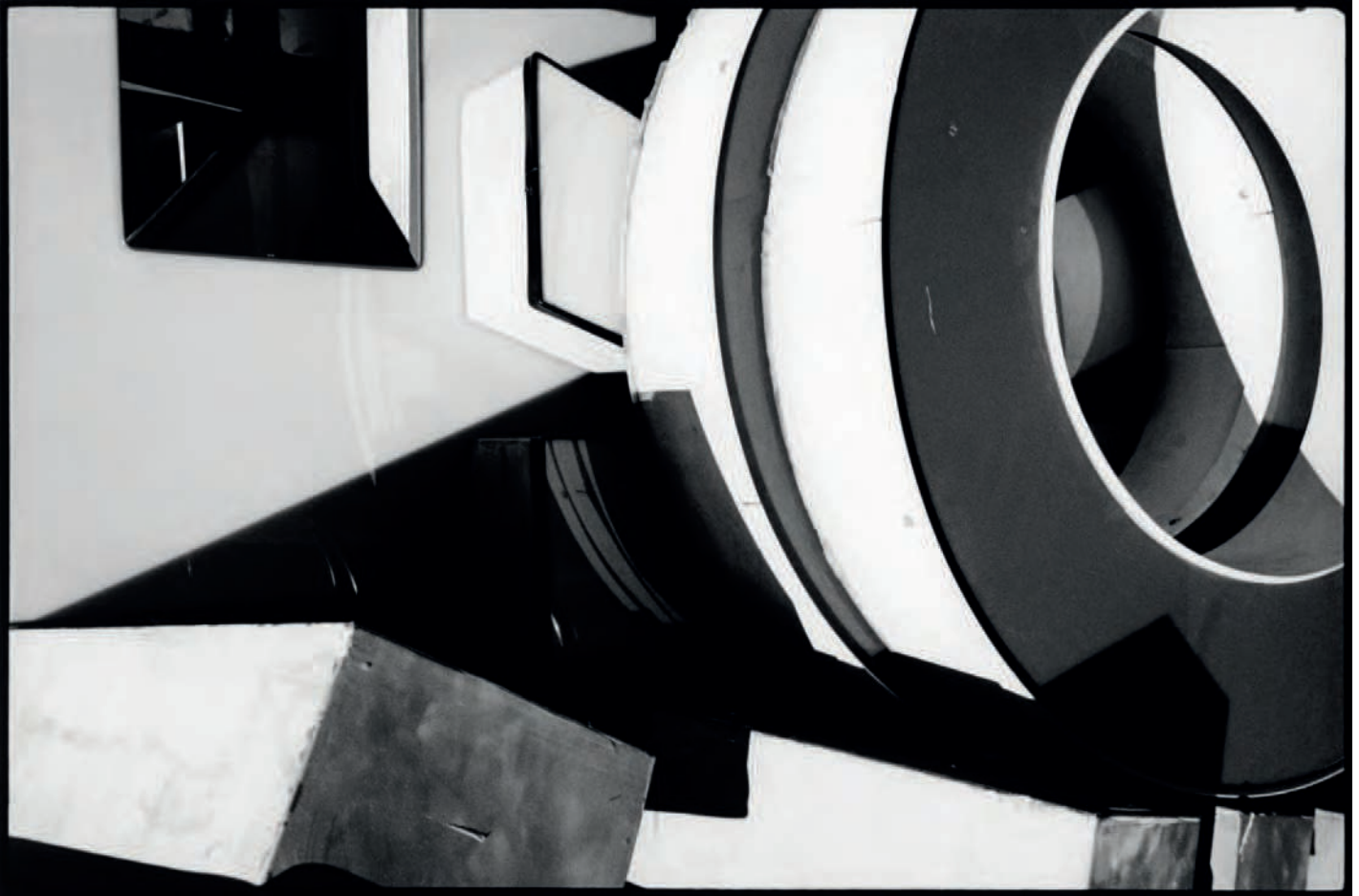
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Above La Brea, August 2011. From the series Qualia: Photographs 2010-2012.



Brittany Rd, January 2011. From the series Qualia: Photographs 2010-2012.

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Source Park, May 2021. From the series *The Aesthetics of Absence*, 2021.





Waterloo Rd, June 2021. From the series *The Aesthetics of Absence*, 2021.

Alexander went freelance and was doing well until he had a motorcycle accident in which he broke his leg. The fracture was complex and he was laid up for months on end. Dispirited and bored, he began to feel his self-respect ebbing away. 'Finally, I decided that I had to move on and so started making collages and scrapbooks and learning about art – it was the beginning of my art education,' he says.

From there, things took off and he spent a successful 14 years as a freelance photographer with a studio in the East End of London. 'By the mid-90s, I realised the world was changing and, having been paid particularly well for a job, I bought a digital set-up and learnt how to work in that way, but there were many times when I saw an image on screen and just had an overwhelming urge to do it "properly" and so went rushing off to the darkroom.'

Throughout the time he worked commercially, Alexander had always made personal work and having moved from London down to St Leonards on the south coast, he found that he had the freedom to concentrate on what he was most interested in – the expressive fine art print. 'I see my

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work as psychological reportage – a visual mystery. The images don't need explaining,' he says. 'I am interested in what people bring to my pictures – I love it when people interpret my pictures in ways I've never thought of because that means that the picture has its own life out in the world.'

Drawing on his interest in psychology, and his commitment to analogue photography, he now produces work for exhibition and print sales. 'I find myself wondering why photographs have to be about things. The way I react to a picture is through feeling. My photographs are not tied to subject matter. What I love more than anything is when people live with my pictures.'

Alexander works from his home darkroom, which he finds productive and absorbing. 'I've learnt to trust the darkroom as a filtration system. I'll mark up a contact sheet, editing carefully, and decide what

I want to print, but at the last minute, I might decide to print the shot next to it just because I feel like it. I've learnt to trust that process; I am a great believer in physical intelligence,' he explains.

In 2018, Alexander began an MA in Photography: History, Theory, Practice at Sussex University and found the experience enriching. 'My final project was influenced by a feeling I had seen in my pictures for a long time, and that is absence. I hadn't talked or written about this before because it's such an obvious paradox – how can you photograph what's not there?'

He named the work *The Aesthetics of Absence* and is working towards producing a book. 'As the project progresses, "absence" has moved to "interiority" – the feeling that you are looking at something in the images that's within, something that you can't really describe,' he explains. 'The images seem to create a melancholic place, although that wasn't there at the time I took the picture. It's as though something seeps through, but that means that I can work with the outside world to say something about the inner world.'

▶ To see more of Alexander Brattell's work, visit [brattell.com](http://brattell.com).