

# STUART FRANKLIN: NARCISSUS

Is landscape a narcissistic art form? **Stuart Franklin** contemplated this question and the nature of landscape photography on the Norwegian island of Otrøya during a reflective three years. Simon Frost reports...

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Magerøya House (2011)

It was with a rattle of the nerves that I approached Gee Street in Islington where, at number 63, is the entrance to the world-renowned Magnum Photos' London headquarters. Stuart Franklin was invited to join Magnum in 1985 by Sebastião Salgado after five years honing his talent as a news photographer for Sygma, and has been a full member of the global co-operative since 1989.

During his time with Magnum, he has cast his camera's eye on the student protests at Tiananmen Square, where he was one of four photographers to capture the famous 'Tank Man' image; the ongoing conflict in Gaza; a study of incarceration in Libya and some 20 features for *National Geographic*, to note just a fraction of a vast and diverse body of work.

He recently served three years as Magnum's president, stepping down in 2009, since when he has spent three years putting together the collection I had been poring over in preparation for our meeting. Stuart Franklin's CV reads like both a comprehensive history of the last 35 years and the index of an atlas, so you can imagine my trepidation as I reached for the button on the intercom.

But my first sight of these photographs, in beautifully reproduced full-size prints on the walls of Magnum's gallery, greeted me like

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a friend and soothed my mounting fears. A smiling welcome from the man behind the lens dispelled the last of my unrest, and we sat down to talk about *Narcissus*, his latest black & white landscape collection.

Stuart Franklin was lecturing in Kristiansund, Norway, in 2009 after three stressful years as Magnum's president, 'Always with a busy schedule of assignments, I felt there to be something missing: the space and time to think,' he writes in his afterword. He found that tranquility in Norway, and three months after his visit, bought a small lakeside cabin on the island of Otrøya. 'Norway gave me the time to concentrate on what I was actually doing,' he says, 'We live in a very distracting >



Stela III (2010)

◀ society with a lot of noise.'

As time passed in this new, calm environment, his overwhelming astonishment with an unfamiliar landscape of snow and ice, sublime metamorphic rock formations and silver birch woods, gave way to a deeper engagement with the landscape; of recognising personal memories, faces and bodies, snake-like tracks winding out to the horizon and hair-like patterns in stone. 'When you're faced with a landscape, you have to make sense of it as a human being with a deep, psychological memory,' he says. 'I think that what I tried to do was remove all the chaff, all the noise from the signal in order to try to identify what it was that drew me to particular things.' Free of the exterior aesthetic expectations placed on, for example, a *National Geographic* feature, Franklin began to reflect on the nature of landscape photography. 'I realised that when we look out at the landscape we're not simply looking at something. Rather like when we look at somebody's face – when we talk to somebody, we're not looking at some foreign thing, some "other"; we're looking for signs, things that have meaning personally.'

One of the most overt examples of this response to the landscape is a series of a mountain and its reflection in the lake which, rotated from landscape to portrait format, creates a set of bewildering, totemic human profiles. The phenomenon of perceiving recognisable forms such as faces in the landscape – pareidolia, to give it a name – is a thread that runs throughout the collection, underpinning this sense of a human need to make sense of one's environment. ▶



Right Willow I (2010)  
Below Stela Lying Down (2011)





Guitar Interior (2009)

Having travelled almost incessantly throughout his life and career, Franklin 'missed the knowledge and richness of experience that comes with a more prolonged stay'. His initial desire in Otrøya, as one might expect, was to 'explore the whole island and climb every mountain', but he soon came to realise that, dwelling within the landscape, his most significant, intimate engagement was with that which immediately surrounded him.

Much of the collection is based within close proximity of his cabin as it became his home; Franklin particularly identified, for example, with the willow tree in his garden, and *Narcissus* includes a series of photographs where, though it is redecorated by the seasons and altered by time, the willow tree becomes ever more familiar. Capturing so much that surrounds the cabin, and even some photographs from inside, *Narcissus* communicates the experience of dwelling within the landscape rather than simply observing its beauty.

'Every latitude has its own light,' he says, with regard to the technical aspect of the project. 'As you go further north you get very bright, high-contrast light that you don't get in Britain where the light is mostly quite subdued in one way or another –

quite flat. So I had to deal with this light, which was extraordinarily beautiful but often quite difficult to manage. I think that when you've worked as I've done for so long, say for *National Geographic*, you get that automatic translation into knowing what

the picture will look like.'

Franklin captured around two-thirds of the collection in analogue, using an Ebony 10x8, Contax 645 and Leica M6; and the rest digitally, with Leica M9, Contax 645 with PhaseOne digital back and Leica Monochrom.



Face in the Ice, Holsvatnet (2011)



Rope Like Hair, Skarsheia (2010)



Grasses II (2010)

It seems that this collection must have been tackled with a wholly different approach to that of volatile, politically-charged situations Stuart Franklin has documented as a photojournalist, or his recent, environmentally-concerned landscape

collection, *Footprint: Our Landscape in Flux*, which focuses on the dramatic transformation of the European landscape under the influence of climate change.

*Narcissus* appears ostensibly to be a more personal collection than Franklin's previous

work. But though the disparity between the subject matter of *Narcissus* and much of his other work is clear, this very personal approach, he says, is nothing new. 'I think all the work I do is personal – I make it personal. I suppose that my approach is always the >



Tyre Track II (2013)



**Dark Cloth I (2011)**



**The Ebony 10x8**

*'When you're faced with a landscape, you have to make sense of it as a human being with a deep, psychological memory.'*

◀ same – I work in quite a quiet, gentle way. The subject matter and even the style changes, but my approach, I think right across my career in photography, has been quite consistent, and to me that's the most important thing. A lot of people consider that their personality is stamped on their style, but that's a very narrow, technical thing.'

Franklin's aim to remove the 'noise' from a situation and capture something significant from within it is the underlying approach which led him to capture both the lone protestor who brought a column of tanks to a halt in 1989, and the familiar willow tree framed from behind by the mountain and its reflection in the lake.

*Narcissus* asks a challenging question: are we the true subject of landscape

photography, and the landscape itself merely the environment from which we select forms that are familiar or resonant? It is a genre that Franklin feels rarely wanders far from its foundations in 18th century painting; 'Sadly, when I look through *Landscape Photographer of the Year* compendia in Foyles bookshop in London, I see little that is in any way progressive.' *Narcissus* gracefully encapsulates Stuart Franklin's yearning to confront this condition, with a driving curiosity for his craft.

▶ ***Narcissus*, published by Hatje Cantz, 2013. ISBN 978-3-7757-3554-4**

▶ **To see more of Stuart Franklin's work visit [stuartfranklin.com](http://stuartfranklin.com)**

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