

DOCUMENTARY





LEFT
Untitled from
the series Vera

THE EPIPHANY

Selected for IPE 161
and now Sony World
Photographer of the Year
2018, Alys Tomlinson
reveals why she swapped
stills for film to document
the life of a Belarusian nun

INTERVIEW:
CLAIRE MACAULAY

DOCUMENTARY

MET VERA AT Grabarka, a pilgrimage site in Poland. She's the main nun I photographed for my project *Ex-Voto*. She is fascinating; very deep in one way, but in another she's playful and full of mischief. I felt a real connection with her.

She's intense and very much confronted the camera, but you can feel her spirituality. She's become quite a good friend, but is complex. If Vera doesn't want to do something she'll tell you.

Winning Sony Photographer of the Year 2018 has opened up a lot of opportunities and given me an enormous confidence boost. *Ex-Voto* isn't loud or flashy – it's

a quiet project that I kept going at over years and years – so to get that recognition feels amazing.

BEGINNINGS

I'm 43. I was born in Brighton and studied communications and English at the University of Leeds. It was there that my dad lent me an old 35mm Pentax, as I used to do a lot of photography around Brighton. I got involved in the student paper and did a City and Guilds evening class in black-and-white photography.

I left university thinking 'what do I do next?' I took a year out and did work experience, including at *Time Out* magazine in London. I thought I wanted to go into film and got an internship

at a film production company in New York, so moved there for a year. I was 22 or 23. I hated the internship but wanted to stay in New York. I was taking photographs – all on black-and-white film, street photography.

Time Out New York had launched and I wrote to them on a whim saying: 'I've done work experience with *Time Out* London. Do you need anyone to do any writing?' I also put together a portfolio of my street photography. When you're young and you've got nothing to lose, you think, why not?

They rang and said: 'We don't need any writers but would you be interested in shooting the new *Time Out* guide to New

BELOW
Untitled (#07) from
the series *Ex-Voto*





ABOVE
Untitled from
the series Vera

'I'm always looking for new ways to learn about the world and how people live'

York?' I had zero experience so it was my dream job, an adventure. I'd be sent to Harlem, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Staten Island and all these places I probably wouldn't have gone to. It took months. I'm always looking for new ways to learn about the world and how people live. It satisfied that side of me and felt creative.

When I got back to London I thought: 'This is something I could do as a career.' I enrolled in a postgraduate course at Central Saint Martins, my first formal qualification in photography.

INFLUENCES

I'd seen a film, *Lourdes*, by Austrian director Jessica Hausner. Over three or so years I went there many times. I wasn't getting the images I wanted but something kept bringing me back. I was shooting in colour; it wasn't working. I didn't want to repeat what other people had done. I

enrolled on an MA while working on the project, which was just about Lourdes at that point. I found the only suitable course in the world – a part-time MA in travel, tourism and pilgrimage.

I wanted to learn more about my subject – not by becoming religious but in terms of research and theory – and enrich what I was doing. I did my dissertation about Lourdes and it changed my way of thinking. In a seminar, someone brought up these things called *ex-voto*, objects or offerings of hope and gratitude left at sites by pilgrims. I thought, 'I'll go back one last time.'

It needed to be shot from my perspective; someone slightly detached but who finds intrigue, mystery and almost mysticism at these sites. I had to slow everything down; think about every shot. The answer was to work in large format, with film.

How I worked affected the outcome. My assistant Cécile and I would approach people individually. What worked best was to make an appointment with them if they weren't free, to photograph them maybe that afternoon or the next morning.

With the portraits, for instance, you have a different connection with someone when you're not snapping them. I had to set up my camera, do light-meter readings, put a cloak over my head. It isn't something you can do quickly. You build different relationships with someone when you photograph them in that way. It felt much more considered. That was the breakthrough.

After Lourdes, I went to a couple of other pilgrim sites – Ballyvourney in Ireland and Grabarka. Lourdes is heavily commercial in one sense. There are masses of tourist shops



ABOVE
Untitled (#45) from
the series Ex-Voto

selling trinkets and all sorts of things. It would've been easy to do a pastiche but I was more interested in these very quiet, calm areas, which have a really strong spiritual sense to them. I started finding places away from the grotto and the shops.

Sometimes we'd hang around for hours and take one portrait, and there'd be days I wouldn't take a single image. Other days I might take four or five pictures – not much, because it's a slow way of working and it's so

expensive to process the film. I wanted the portraits to be quite isolated – I didn't want busyness in the background. At all of the three pilgrimage sites water is a big feature so I would often photograph them next to lakes or next to the river. In Ireland, stone is an important presence in the pilgrimage site, so the background was often stone or the woods.

In Ballyvourney and Lourdes I'd often trek into the forest with my wobbly suitcase and large

'I'd often trek into the forest with my wobbly suitcase and large camera to see what was around'



ABOVE
Still from the short
film Vera (2018)

camera to see what was around. The environment represented something unique but also a spiritual sense, the sense of hope all these places have.

THE MEETING

I met Vera and a lot of her sisters, who go to Grabarka every August for a feast day, the Transfiguration of Christ festival. Thousands of people travel there for this big celebration. I remember saying to Cécile: 'She's amazing. Shall

we ask if we can take her photograph?' Cécile speaks many languages but she doesn't speak Polish or Russian. There's always this element of should I ask or not, but I had to ask her.

When I met her she said: 'You must visit my convent in Belarus.' I thought: 'That will probably never happen but thanks for the invite.'

After the Sony award I got a grant and equipment. I couldn't finish the project on my large-format camera because that wasn't the deal. I really wanted to do an extension of the project, but how? Mike Trow, chairman of the judges, said: 'You could think about doing a film.' And I was like: 'Yeah. Why don't I experiment with moving image and make a film about Vera?' So we went to Belarus in August and made a short film.

I wanted there to be a natural thread from the still photography into the film. I was clear I wanted stillness and careful composition. I wanted the film to look almost photographic. I've cropped the film to the same proportions as my images – 5x4.

We were so fascinated by Vera, and the community, that we were invited to come back in January for the Epiphany. It is a bit mad. They all plunge into an icy lake at five in the morning.

It's -15C and they immerse themselves fully in the water.

PLAYFUL

Beforehand I thought nuns were scary or serious, and actually we've had a good laugh with the sisters. They're normal, ordinary people who have dedicated their lives to their faith and their god, but that doesn't mean they can't be silly or playful or have fun.

Vera has a deep connection with the horses she looks after as part of her obedience, or religious duty. This became an integral part of the film, as we explored the spiritual and unique relationship she has with them.

I was never disrespectful of people with religious beliefs, but I felt I didn't have anything in common with them. Now I've got a lot of respect for people with very strong beliefs and almost a little envy, because they have this high spiritual power that means things will be okay. Sometimes I wish I could share that.

Ex-Voto is published by GOST Books. Ex-Voto is exhibited at HackelBury Fine Art, London, until April 18; Chichester Cathedral, 2-23 April; and Side Gallery, Newcastle, 6 April – 9 June. Work from the series Vera is at the Sony World Photography Awards, Somerset House, London, until 6 May