



# EDUCATING PETER

**When we heard that three Middlesex University photography students had won places in the National Portrait Gallery as part of the Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize exhibition we wanted to know more. More than a decade ago photojournalist Peter Dench graduated with a first-class degree in photography but no idea of how to make a living, so we sent him back to school to see how today's photography students are being prepared for the real world.**

I am standing in the National Portrait Gallery looking at the Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize exhibits. Sixty images selected from 6,000 submitted by 2,400 photographers. Perhaps more startling than the tumescent *Portrait of My British Wife* is that three of the entries are from students – of Middlesex University. Last year MU had two exhibitors. In the awards' previous incarnations I had success in 1999, 2001 and 2003. The last seven years – a cold slap in the face. MU is clearly doing something right and I want to know what. I give BA photography programme leader David Simmonds a call and enrol for a day. It's time for this snapper to go back to school.

Like any student before their first day, I'm nervous. Will I fit in? What shall I wear? Jump on the Tube to leafy Cockfosters and ponder the day ahead, a day talking with students. I suppress my inner Paul Calf and scan *Metro* for research; Gillian McKeith is not pregnant, Morrissey has been a naughty boy. I pause at the gates. It's been 15 years since I walked out of university and I doubt momentarily my ability to return.

David strides forward, Royal College of Art graduate and respected photographer in his own right. Thankfully he's not wearing an elbow-padded jacket and cravat. He introduces 26-year-old BA student Asef Ali

Above left: *Ernest and Ernest* by Rokas Darulis.  
Above right and opposite page: Model Fanny Fournier shot by Rokas Darulis.

ROKAS DARULIS



Above top: *Female Boxer No 3* by Inzajeano Latif, exhibition poster for the 2009 Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize. Above: Alisa from the series *The Pursuit of Happiness* by Inzajeano Latif. Opposite page, top: *The Solitude of Pygmalion*, a self-portrait by Steven Barritt. Opposite page, right: Philippos from the series *Anachronisms* from Steven Barritt's MA show, included in the 2009 Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize.

Mohammad. Asef was given a brief to produce a series of photographs that use 'America' as a starting point to the creative process. While others in his year took off to the studio flinging cream pies at the Statue of Liberty, Asef took off to Kabul. MU didn't discourage him and advised he text his daily progress. Foreign communications often being what they are, they weren't always received. Although concerned, staff trusted Asef's ability to complete the assignment safely. His resulting photo-essay, *Stories from Kabul*, is a series of colour portraits featuring ordinary Afghan people: Caterers, TV executives, beauticians, the police. It premiered as a 4min 45sec multimedia piece on the prestigious *FOTO8* website. US magazine *Newsweek* then published the reportage across four pages, paying around \$1,600. I decide not to mention selling, as a student, a portrait of Sir Richard FitzHerbert, Ninth Baronet, Squire of Tissington, for £25 to *Derbyshire Life & Countryside*.

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Asef is exceptional and may be the exception. I navigate the 30-plus Macs in the digital suite looking for his antithesis. The Macs have only Photoshop installed. Social networking addicts must vacate. Over the shoulder of one student I spy images of a stunning model. I introduce myself to Rokas Darulis. The subject is his girlfriend, who is a model, ranked among the top 50 in the world. Lithuanian-born Darulis, who wouldn't look out of place on the catwalk, graduated from MU in 2009 with a first. In a year working as a pro, commissions from magazines *Pravda* [in Lithuania], *Monika* and *Tank* are casually referred to. Elite Model Management Agency and Svyturys Beer tick the commercial client box. Accolades already on the shelf include the AOP Open Awards and Taylor Wessing. Aha! One of the year's MU inclusions. I flick through the brochure and find the entry *Ernest and Ernest* from his project, *It Doesn't Matter Who You Sleep With*, a series of portraits of people of the same sex in bed together. It's a subtly-lit portrait showing two of Darulis's friends. I note 'same-sex relationships' as a possible ingredient in the Taylor Wessing victory sauce.

I reflect on some of the projects from my university 'class of 95'. Roger photographed himself naked. Debra photographed herself nearly naked painted white. Sharon portrayed herself smoking a cigarette. Sarah chose a child's plastic farmyard cow to document. Jane simply snapped the BBC soap *EastEnders* playing on the TV. To be fair, Sarah went on to graduate from the RCA; *Aperture* has published a monograph of her photographs. Debra is co-proprietor of a gallery in Brooklyn, New York. Perhaps the MU Statue of Liberty pie flingers will end up chairing a world photography organisation while a photojournalist like Asef will graft for recognition in a world of grant refusals and shrinking budgets. It's a common tale.

Back at MU, Squiz, already a brand (squizhamilton.com), shows striking work in progress from a self-funded 10-day fashion shoot in Japan – estimated cost, a dedicated £2,500. Tottenham resident Inzajeano Latif,

INZAJEANO LATIF



THE  
CHANGING FACE  
OF EDUCATION

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a 31-year-old mature student and graduate from the MA at MU, is also in attendance. Latif has already impressed picture editors' finest Cheryl Newman with commissions for the *Telegraph Magazine*. Among other achievements, an Ian Parry Awards Show finalist, work featured in the *FOTO8* Summer Show and D&AD Awards. The 2009 Taylor Wessing

STEVEN BARRITT





poster was Latif's entry, *Female Boxer No 3*. I scribble down, female boxers in bed together?

After being ejected from the digital suite, a tour of further facilities follows. A historic smell permeates one room. Stepping in, through the amber gloom, more than 30 traditional B&W enlargers morph to attention. David explains the importance of teaching the craft. He deplors the quick-fix digital prints produced by students seemingly as an afterthought. He encourages them to treat the process with the same develop, stop and fix precision you would an Ansel Adams landscape. David is constantly slowing people down. The frantic 'shoot thousands of frames, something must be good, sort it out in Photoshop later, attitude' must stop.

It is not unrealistic to compare my experiences of 15 years ago as the principles of education remain the same: Equip a student with the necessary skills for a career in their chosen industry. I sped through my university

doors with a first-class (hons) degree in photographic studies and headed for London. I would join Reuters (I'd seen a photograph I liked credited in a newspaper) and travel the world. The folio was lost in the Reuters system. Two years on the dole followed. I had no realistic concept of how to approach the industry. On reflection, my impressions were that the lecturers were self-serving, their own personal projects a priority. It is important for a tutor to have a profile outside of education, but not at their students' expense. Their efforts are still as bemusing now: Portraits of fish, found objects outside photographed inside, views on top and under a table. It was with a sense of the inevitable that our final year degree show was

Above: A shot from the *Back 2 Basics* series by Squiz.  
Opposite page: Peter Dench's entry in the Photographic Portrait Prize 2003.

called *Introspection*. Academically the work of Jo Spence, Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin prevailed. It took me years just to remove the lens cap without feeling a misogynist. My dissertation on Dr Diamond and his use of photography in the treatment of female lunatics has not been useful.

It is with these concerns that I head to lunch with David. Over wine and calamari he explains how the course reflects the industry. Deadlines are non-negotiable, lateness an immediate markdown. Students are introduced into the industry as much as possible and industry to the students. There is a healthy visiting lecture programme, from retouchers and photographers to magazine editors and gallery curators. The only visiting lecturer I remember was a philosopher who posed the question: "Does green exist?" For two hours. It does. I seriously questioned if I wanted to. Internships and competition submissions at MU are compulsory. Assisting is encouraged. Tim Walker's assistant of five years, Alison Tanner, is on hand to advise. Rather than a 'Jack of all trades' approach to portfolios, the strategy is to produce one substantial coherent body of work that the creator is passionate about. There is an open-door policy from staff to students. The course is young and has already made a significant mark. David is realistic enough to suggest only 15% of graduates may go on to make a living taking photographs. Other employment opportunities within the industry are covered. Being a technician is not considered a failure.

Back on campus, David is keen for me to meet Steven Barritt (35), another MU MA graduate. I'm not so keen to meet Steven. The Taylor

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Wessing brochure introduces its protagonist as a product of the 'I photograph myself naked' approach. Steven's portrait *The Solitude of Pygmalion* from the series *Analogous Mythography* is based on the Greek myth of a sculptor who fell in love with his sculpture. Steven said: "I made a lot of effort putting on lots of weight and letting myself go, even resorting to not washing for weeks." Essentially, a dirty Steven sits naked on an unmade bed surrounded by booze and with walls covered in posters and magazine articles on Britney Spears. I warm to him immediately. Steven wants to make enough money from photography to get out of London. He prefers the influence of Truro on his photography. His *Anachronisms* portrait series for his MA show are beautifully considered, meticulously planned 5x4 film portraits. It took him around nine months to shoot the first frame. That's academics for you.

PETER DENCH



Eight years' discipline as a former computer programmer has left an imprint. Steven's umbilical connection with MU has him lined up to be interviewed for a teaching position.

All of the students I spoke to expect to hit the ground running as working pro photographers. They all have a print folio and eschew the case for iPads. Cited influences are the ones that have shaped previous generations of snappers – August Sander, Bruce Davidson, James Nachtwey, Walker Evans, Cecil Beaton. They speak fondly of their tutors and hope to retain a relationship with the university. We talk amicably as equals; industry names are exchanged with familiarity and I even note down a few new ones. Social networking is embraced. I consider myself a bit of a player (365 Facebook friends!) and suggest they keep in touch. I leave them my card. There is nothing in the inbox when I get home, or the next day. I search them out. Squizhamilton has 4,956 Facebook friends, I ask to be his 4,957th. Rokas Darulis, 2,365, most of whom I assume are beautiful. Inzajeano Latif, 1,333. Steven Barritt, well at least he's clothed in his profile photo.

Curious to find a few students not drafted in for my benefit, I peel off unescorted to the studio. It's industrious and populated. A jewellery student sparkles on her back. Photo student Holly, fragrant, clipped and sartorially crisp, is setting up for a shoot, a series of portraits on redheads. A young man poses awkwardly on a stool. I make a note to remember his face, a potential Taylor Wessing 2011. Reminded of my pursuit of domination, I show students the portrait prize brochures from the previous decade, pen poised to jot down the winning formula. Discussions suggest not much has changed. There was a bit more B&W. The dominant digital 35mm format has conquered the square but the content is constant: the ginger, puberty, teenage girls, nakedness, muff and combinations of all represented. Back at my studio, well the Villiers Terrace in Crouch End, I reassess my own successful entries, verdict – guilty; naked old man, a ginger woman on a urinating horse, two awkward-looking children. Seems I've been entering content along the right lines all along. I have an idea for the next submission, pick up the phone and dial. "Hello, is that Anne Robinson?"

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