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Becoming The Narrative...

Grant Scott

Graham Macindoe was born in Scotland but unintentionally found success as a commercial photographer in Manhattan at the end of the Nineties. Susan Stellin was a reporter and contributor to *The New York Times* with a degree in Political Science from Stanford University. Susan asked Graham to photograph her for an upcoming travel book she had written but neither of them could have ever imagined the series of events that were to follow that meeting and the narrative that unfolded over the following fourteen years. Grant Scott spoke to them about their experiences so powerfully documented in their jointly authored title *Chancers*.

Grant: Reading the book, there seems to me to be three central narratives that come through most clearly. Your individual stories and your joint story. Narratives that the structure of the book further emphasizes. In addition to these there are then so many additional narratives and sub-plots that seem to inform everything that is happening to you both. You both seem to have that persistence to 'get the story' that informs both a photographer's and journalists approach to life, that desire never to give in, were you aware of how that impacted on what happened to you both?

Susan: Absolutely, by nature I'm like that anyway. Once you are embedded in something that you feel the world doesn't understand or that hasn't got the attention it should, whether that's the struggles people go through to find effective treatment for drug addictions or what it's like to be entangled in the criminal justice system or the horror that is immigration detention and the deportation system that exists now in the US. All of those things seemed to me like this is a story beyond just what we were experiencing.

Graham: In the beginning having lived through years of addiction and then being in Rykers Island, it was just a daze. You know alcoholics and addicts talk of that moment of clarity that comes to you when you realize just what you've been through, where your trajectory has led you and the damage you've left behind. It's a hard one to come to terms with and it was only when I was dragged into immigration detention that I realized the severity of what was happening to me. That was way more traumatic than being locked up in Ryker's Island, way more psychologically damaging. You can assimilate to the jail situation, but in Homeland Security there was no transparency and they don't have to tell you how long you're being held or what's going on. It's a reverse of the criminal justice system where your innocent until proven guilty, they consider you guilty and you have to try and assert your innocent and that's really difficult when you are incarcerated. There's no bond, no bail, no legal aid. They make it very difficult for people.

Grant: Photographers and journalists are good at assimilating into situations and environments.

Graham: You're really spot on there, that was part of my downfall with drugs because I assimilated with that environment and that crowd having been a documentary photographer travelling all around the world to take portraits here, there and everywhere. You get to be chameleon like as a photographer, you merge yourself into people's lives and assimilate very quickly because you need to get that picture and journalists need to get the story so you learn how to move into strange environments. When I became an addict I moved into environments within the Projects in New York that would have seemed crazy and hostile to a lot of people but I got into it really easily. When I was incarcerated I was able to assimilate into that as well and find my own little place. You become a people person as a photographer, you end up on the doorsteps of all sorts of people to take their portrait and you have to quickly put them at their ease and make them feel comfortable. That came in useful both on the streets and in the jail.

Grant: Graham, how much do you feel that photography and the life it afforded you was responsible for the situation you found yourself in prior to being arrested?

Graham: In some ways, but to me it was like a perfect storm, with two or three things happening all at once that just threw me into the midst of this thing. I never prepared myself for being a commercial photographer, it wasn't what I really wanted to do. I wanted to be a photographer and I left London to come to New York and started working in galleries and somehow I fell into commercial work, got an agent, assignments followed and I started flying all over the world which in some ways took away some of my passion for photography. I was making money and I'd never made money in my life before. In fact, ridiculous amounts of money and I think that at that point I was emotionally and psychologically ill-equipped to deal with that pressure, although I did it and shot massive ad campaigns and stuff quite successfully. I was also surrounded by people that were enabling me in a world I had never been a part of. I had never been a big drug taker or drinker but it seemed to go hand in glove with that world of making too much money, advertising and famous people and stuff like that. It's like "Hey! You've gotta party, you've gotta do this!".

Grant: What do you think it was that drove you to document your decline into addiction and the addiction itself?

Graham: At first I used it as a conduit to get to the Projects, I'd go down there to buy drugs and I'd pretend that I was doing a documentary on the projects which gave me validation to be there. If I ever got stopped by the cops or something like that I'd always have a camera on me not that I ever used it that much in those days. I'd tell people that I was a photographer but I was buying drugs. It's a weird justification in the mind of the addict that you are not just an addict.

Early on I didn't just photograph myself but also the people I was around, other addicts, but those people came out of the equation when I decided to never show anyone those pictures because I realised that there was a very important issue about consent. The consent of someone that is on drugs and could they really give informed consent when they are high on Crack or Heroin or whatever it might be. I was a photographer using techniques photographers use to get into situations to get photographs so the whole notion of consent was problematic for me. When I look back on those photographs now some of the people in them are dead but some of them are clean and trying to re-build their lives and it's not my place to put those pictures up on platforms where anybody can access them.

Grant: Did you feel that you wanted to visually document your experiences when incarcerated in the same way you had your addiction?

Graham: I was always taking pictures in my head but in some ways it would have been good to have photographed the quiet moments, that were more compelling and resonated more with me. We've all seen bunches of guys in orange uniforms, incarceration imagery can be very obvious a lot of the time.

Grant: Susan at this point did you feel part of the story or more of an observer?

Susan: Being a reporter you are an observer I was instinctively taking notes but I was also the conduit for information to Graham. I would talk to the lawyer, to friends, to family members and then pass that information on to him, because communication in these Homeland detention centres can be extremely limited. I also had to work out what was happening next, if your life hasn't been touched by the criminal justice system there is a huge learning curve; I went on to Google to find out how to post bail when Graham was first arrested. I was outside the network of people who do deal with these things so that part of it was like being a reporter because I had to figure out how bail works, how do you find a specialist deportation lawyer?

Grant: Did you find the boundaries blurring between being the person attempting to solve all of these issues and becoming part of the narrative as it developed?

Susan: Absolutely, that was a challenge for me and one of the editors we worked with on the book was really helpful in drawing out the more personal emotional element from both of us. It was particularly challenging for me because as a reporter you keep yourself outside of the story, but fortunately I did have a lot of notes and a journal that kept notes not directly related to the case which gave us a lot of material to access. Without that I'm not sure we could have recreated the intensity of the emotional experience.

Grant: Do you think it would have been possible to do all of that and achieve what you did for Graham without your journalistic experience?

Susan: ...I don't think I would have been able to pull it off as quickly, other people without my background manage to do what I did but the challenge at least at that time was that people were getting moved from state to state so quickly and as soon as they were moved far away from where they had been picked up and lived it became very hard to win a case. The urgency aspect of the process meant that because I knew how to do research and how to find information was critical.

Grant: It seems as if you were in a race against the system.

Susan: That's definitely how it felt.

Grant: Graham, when you were released you created the body of work, an exhibition and a book documenting bags Heroin is sold in and you adopted a very clean and controlled aesthetic that was the complete opposite of your addiction documentation.

Graham: When I look back on my addiction now and remember all of those trips across New York to weird places to buy drugs and being told about this new product they had and this new type of Heroin they could sell me and the bags with these brandings and stamps. This reminded me so much of product photography, like selling I-Phones and I-Pads and when I looked at how they were photographed it was really clean and stylized focusing on the brand, so that why that work was photographed in that way. It was no different from selling you an I-Phone, it was the new Heroin on the block, a new grade or so you were told.

Grant: The experience you both went through led you to collaborate on a project documenting people and families that had been through the deportation process titled *American Exiles*.

Graham: That was a three-year project which was supported by a fellowship from the Alicia Patterson

Foundation which we exhibited at Photoville, New York last year and its' just been exhibited at the Head On Festival in Sydney, Australia.

Susan: It started out as a combination of interviews and photography. We photographed and interviewed the person who had been deported and then their families that had stayed in the US with the idea of showing what the experience of exile is like and the repercussions it has for people from a range of countries from Senegal to Germany, from Northern Ireland to China. The work consists of twenty families right now but we are interested in expanding the collection, maybe take it into a different direction and definitely continuing to exhibit the work.

Chancers: Addiction, Prison, Recovery, Love: One Couple's Memoir by Susan Stellan and Graham Macindoe
<http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/247823/chancers-by-susan-stellan-and-graham-macindoe/>

www.grahammacindoe.com

www.susanstellin.com

American Exiles: www.grahammacindoe.com/American-Exile/1

All In (Heroin Bags): www.grahammacindoe.com/All-In-/1

Grant Scott is the founder/curator of United Nations of Photography, a Senior Lecturer in Editorial and Advertising Photography at the University of Gloucestershire, a working photographer, and the author of *Professional Photography: The New Global Landscape Explained* (Focal Press 2014) and *The Essential Student Guide to Professional Photography* (Focal Press 2015).

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