

Barry Marsden

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

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What did you learn from the commission?

I think when I did the Art of Cooking exhibition I did learn something during the process of the shoot. That was really that a quieter picture could be appreciated as well. I'm generally working in the field of magazines and newspaper photography where an all-singing-all-dancing, very eye-catching picture is required and it was interesting for me to see that some of the softer, more downbeat pictures that I took were actually of interest to people.

Do you have a clear idea beforehand what you want to do with each portrait?

I almost never have a clear idea of what I want to do with a portrait before I go into a shoot. Occasionally something will strike me and in a couple of cases - I think particularly in the case of Terence Conran and Rick Stein - I actually had a couple of ideas that I thought would be very suitable for them and actually faxed off little drawings to them to get approval before I thought too much about them because obviously it's sometimes difficult to persuade people to do things that they may feel uncomfortable about, not that these particularly were. But also because I knew I had very limited time with Terence Conran and I just thought that there would be a possibility of setting things up and therefore not wasting his time, it could be completely shooting time. But the majority of the time I don't go in with a preconceived idea, I go in and sort of search the location for a place to do the shot which is interesting, an architectural detail or a prop, something that strikes me as I'm there, an interesting place to put light or stand a person. And that's all done in the period before the subject is really in the room with me. I don't want to keep hanging around while I do that but that's generally the way that I work.

When do you know that you have captured something interesting?

I sometimes know I have got something interesting during the shoot. Obviously that's the way you hope to plan it, so that you do get the result you want but even now there are times when something surprises me on the sheet of transparencies or on the contact sheet and that's quite a nice moment. It is interesting, after 16 years, that there is that possibility of a happy accident.

Were there any of the portraits from the series that particularly please you?

One of the portraits that I was particularly happy with was the picture I did of Sally Clarke. She was a good subject but what surprised me the most about the picture was that it was very different to anything I've done before I think. Again, it was of this more subdued, quieter, still type of picture and I was very pleased with that one. It has more of a timeless quality about it than an instant impact.

How do you use lighting?

I think that people may not realise that I use flash lighting in both indoor and outdoor shoots. I quite like the kind of theatrical, false effect that I can conjure up with that and if I'm shooting outside with lights I tend to use the background as a more elaborate and interesting studio backdrop. But I think probably the vast majority of these pictures are lit whether they are taken in indoor settings or outdoor settings.

Do you always photograph your sitters in colour and black-and-white?

I don't always photograph in black-and-white and colour. A commission tends to be more specific than that, especially for editorial work, the magazines know what pages they have and tend to use colour images on colour pages, it seems a luxury to use a black-and-white image on colour pages. And I have no preference for colour or black-and-white on a shoot, I'll use whatever is required for the job. It was nice that the Art of Cooking commission involved being able to shoot black-and-white and colour and I felt that actually I did mix it up more in this context than I would normally in my day-to-day work.