

In Conversation | John Riddy and Martin Caiger-Smith

14 May 2026 | Golden Square

On the occasion of

[John Riddy: *Winter Landscape*](#)

Frith Street Gallery, Golden Square | 30 April–25 June 2026

Transcript

Martin Caiger-Smith (MCS):

Thank you for coming. It's good to see such numbers here, particularly with such a lot of weather outside. There's more weather outside than there is in here, it seems. And also I'm aware that there's a lot else going on for Photo London this evening. So all of that means, I guess, that those of you who are here are really here because you're very keen to hear what John Riddy has to say, which is great. It's a great start. It's also wonderful, a great advantage to be speaking in here with the works, which I know you will have looked at beforehand, and we can refer to during, and I guess you can also look at after with John's words in your ears.

So maybe we should begin with the photographs. As Annabelle said, I'm an old friend of John's and a long-term admirer. I hope I'm a critical friend, but in truth, I mean, I'm, what can I say? I'm, taken, I'm taken. And looking around here, I mean, the first thing that occurs to me is just – it sounds corny – but it's just the sheer pleasure of looking. There's a lot, a lot here, a lot of work for the eye to do. The detail, the visual happening in the work. And what hits me, the way I become engaged first and foremost with the work is in a way formally. It's difficult given the tightness of the construction, the level of detail in there, not to be drawn in by the whole, the geometry of the images, the way the horizontals and verticals work, the way the perspective plunges through or you're held back, the way the event is in the middle distance, the tonality of it, the colour, the balance of the work, all that.

But then of course, having done the formal side of it, one comes to the content. And to state the obvious, this is London, this is here and now. All of us, we know these places, we know these views. I feel I know these places very well. I'm the same age as John and I've followed over the years the same trajectories probably from South London on my bicycle through to college or the other side of the river. These are our places and the focal points of these images, even if understated, are our landmarks. Nelson's Column appears once, I think, Battersea Power Station maybe three or four times, Big Ben twice, The Shard several times. You know, these are landmarks and they have a look of now, but also I think a look of recent and older pasts and also a look of having been looked at, you know, by us, by others, and by artists, over time. And we could say more about that in a minute. So I'm going to ask you a question in a minute, John!

But the point of all this is that I think there's this mix of recognition and revelation going on, which seems to speak to something at the core of your work, John, because this is a world we know, we recognise, but these images, these photographs are ultimately not the way the world looks to us. They're yours. They're your '*believable* version of reality'. Those are your words, John. So, could you say exactly what you mean by '*believable* version of reality'?

John Riddy (JR)

Well, I think just to go back a bit, it's really important to me that they do have a strong relationship to what we know and what we're passing by all the while, and that they're sitting in a gallery in London and London's outside. So I think that amplifies maybe the effect of the sort of resonance and their presence, that when you're standing in front of something that you may literally have just walked past to get here. And yeah, they definitely have to be believable in that the description has to be, I think the word I would use is 'fluid'. So the illusion has to be fluid to be believable. You know, the whole thing about getting it right technically, for me, is that there'd be no barrier to, when you're standing in front of the image, to actually almost enter it as if it was a window or look through it. But at the same time, have the sense that it's just a piece of paper in a frame on the wall. Having that sense of believability and fluidity within the illusion combined with the physical reality of it being here is something I'm trying to bring to a pitch.

MCS

You talked the other day, I think you talked to the gallery here and you talked, so I hear, about how it's important that you seek elevated viewpoints. Looking at your images. But these are public viewpoints. They're not privileged positions. They're places where other people can be. And I think you talked about liking the way that there were other people taking in the same view, maybe taking the same view. And that the results, they would be getting some results and yours would be somehow different. That's interesting. I mean, it's interesting that you *like* that. But also, it obviously brings me on to think, well, because I think this all the time, I'm very prone to going round with the camera and thinking, putting something in my, looking through my camera and thinking, "God, this is very John Riddy." Which in some sense is, yes, it is, but it's, obviously the result isn't. So I mean, what is that difference? I mean, it's not just a difference of detail and quality, but it is somehow to do with what it is you're looking for.

JR

It can't just be a technical difference, otherwise you wouldn't stand in front of it for very long. So yeah, I do, for example, the one at Trafalgar Square that's taken from the old steps to the National Gallery, which is now a kind of viewing platform and somewhere people go to take pictures. So it's probably the spot that more pictures are taken from in London at the moment than anywhere else almost I would imagine. So I actually enjoy the fact that you're doing something that everybody else is doing around you. And like you say, it kind of puts the onus more on you to see, well, what can I end up with? I mean, part of the difference is not everybody else spends two or three hours standing there, which on that afternoon I did. And also that picture's the result of a whole week of working in Trafalgar Square, trying different things out. And really that is one frame that works really well out of, I can tell you, hundreds. And there are very specific reasons why it works, I think. One of them being that there are no buses, red buses, in profile going across the image. You can call it luck or you can call it a result of having spent so long there. I managed to get it when there were no buses *and* when all the other rhythms and intervals between the people sort of fall into place. So it's partly time. That's what I'm saying.

MCS

More of which later maybe. I mean, it would be quite interesting to talk about individual images, but just to stick on the overall just for a moment, I mean, there's a remarkable unity in a way around this room. They are all clearly a body of work and very carefully put in place, but I sense that you think of them as individual images, complete in themselves, and if there be a sequence in which we see them, it's not what you would call a narrative sequence in any sense. And yet in talking about them, you do talk about the story that you're telling. So I wonder what story, I mean, this is a big question, big opening question. What story are you telling? What really were you looking for? How do you seek it out and how do you know when you found it? At what point do you know when you found it?

JR

I guess I was looking for a certain kind of atmosphere. Now I know that's a very vague word to use. It's more, to be honest, like so many things in photography, that I knew when I'd taken ones that didn't fit with the series or that I couldn't envisage hanging within this group in the space. So not only was the collection of images as it grew in my mind in terms of 'yes that that's appropriate' or 'that isn't' or 'this isn't a location that's going to yield anything' but also you know I actually know this is the fifth show I've done in this space so I'm almost thinking about the space as well and what will work in terms of the relationship between detail and the, and the whole canvas of the image within the space, if you're standing right back over here, will you actually be able to read the image and will it still invite you to walk up to it and investigate it more closely? All of those things, basically because I know they're so important to how the whole thing would or wouldn't work or would have a presence or wouldn't, it's not so much that I'm searching out and going, yeah, that'll work. It's more than I'm working, working, working, thinking that isn't going to work. So move on.

MCS

So I was going to say, how much of what will work is apparent to you as you walk down the embankment.

JR

No, it's more later on. It's more later on. In the studio. Looking at things on paper. I tried really hard with this when making this body of work. So I've been taking these pictures for about 2 1/2 years. I tried very hard to not edit what I was doing when I was actually out working. So it's hard to pick a specific example, but it's very easy, I think, looking at an image on the camera to start making quite snap decisions about what does or doesn't work. It's actually much better for me, I find, to make those decisions later on. To think about the really technical things, the framing and where you're going to stand and where you're going to be in space in relation to what you're looking at, rather than thinking whether this will work or not. I saved that stuff for later on.

MCS

The unity in these photographs is much more in the image, in the photograph itself, than in your subject, in your location, I would say.

JR

Yeah, I think it is. But it's a bit hard for me. It's a bit hard for me to say why that works. I know it when I'm looking at them. I know it in the studio. And obviously, I look at them near each other. Although I only really ever work on one at a time, I look at them and think about is it going to be possible to hang that with the other or whatever.

MCS

And if you begin to know what you're looking for, do you also know what you're trying to avoid? Are there things you're trying to avoid?

JR

Yeah, although that's a very visual thing. And I mean, I have a sort of list even when I'm out working, A, the sky's got to work. It's got to contribute to the total image. It can't just be an add-on or something that's sitting in the image. The sky's actually got to be a complete thing as a part of the image and the colour's got to work. So although I'm really, I think, a tonal photographer and somebody who thinks in the studio in terms of tonalities. It's no good taking a photo where I end up with a load of colour relationships that I'm just gonna be banging my head against from beginning to end of the process. So those things sort of predicate whether I carry on with something when I'm out working or not to a degree.

MCS

And I think when you've talked to me about trying to make an image work, you talk about an image that you can make meaningful. I'm sorry to keep probing you on these abstracts, but what do you mean by layers of meaning, by meaningful? What is *meaningful* for you? In terms of this series particularly, rather than just in general.

JR

I think meaningful is related to presence. So when I'm in, when I get to the studio stage, basically I have, I'll maybe it's better if I simply describe quickly. So you get back, you've got a load of files, you go through them on the screen, you pick out maybe five that you think are possible. Those 5 I get onto paper as quickly as possible. And then once I get it down to say one, I make a full-size print and I actually have it in a window mount right from early on. And then I have them around for quite a long time because it's only by having them around for a long time that I can decide "does it really have a presence that endures". So the whole process is going from the screen where you can easily get what I call 'stained glass windows sort of syndrome' where everything looks amazing. write the way down to paper in a mount that's been on the studio wall for a month and is it still interesting then? It's only then really that I pick it up and really try to take it to what I think of as a complete and finished thing.

MCS

You're back in the studio already, John. I just want to haul you back to the street for a moment, talking about what it is you're finding out there. Clearly, you don't know until later on. But you've got inklings. Does chance play a part in all this?

JR

Yeah, I think it does, definitely. But like I say, there's chance and there's chance. If you've been out there for five hours, you've earned some chances, right? The more tickets you buy, the better your chance of winning on the lottery.

MCS

Is there an example of that here that you could point to? I mean, you've talked about avoiding buses. but I just I wonder where chance has brought something an element into the work that you really had not conceived of.

JR

Both of these, there's a hell of a long time and a lot of frames and not just one visit. Burgess Park, that's a really good example in that I've worked in Burgess Park a lot over a period of over years. I had works from Burgess Park in Low Relief. To that afternoon, which was the sort of first sunny day of that year, I spent four hours maybe up there on that hill with people moving around and everything. And it's only by spending that long there that I got into the sort of chemistry of how people were moving around and the relationships they had between them and the buildings behind. It's only, so yes, you can say, well, it's a moment of chance that those two people are in profile and the shards in the middle, but you know, there's a reason. Yeah.

MCS

I mean, in terms of chance, I think you said the other day that if you remain in control all the time, you only get what you already understand.

JR

Yes, I've made a conscious effort to put, definitely to put myself into more situations where the events that were happening in front of me, which I were outside in my control, had more of an impact on what I ended up with. Yeah.

MCS

More so maybe than hitherto in the past. [JR yeah] I mean, and I mean, if I can take just take you back a bit now, because as Annabelle said, we go a long way back. And although we've talked over the years, I realise the last public engagement we had together was a short interview that I did with you for a photographic magazine back in 1996.

JR

Creative Camera.

MCS

30 years ago, almost to the month. And I realised it's only the second item. I looked in your major book, there's only the second item in your now very lengthy bibliography. So it really is going back to the beginning. I dug it out yesterday. The images we discussed of buildings, interiors. In Italy, in Spain, in France, each with their own strong sense of history. They were smaller and black and white in keeping with the times, of course. But we discussed the romantic, we discussed melancholy, we discussed pathos, and we talked about an architecture that's passing away. You talked about the deceptive calm of your images, written this down, of their frailty and fragility on the edge of falling apart. That's going to be my question in a minute. And you also talked about a slight wariness of the British documentary tradition and how your preference, in fact, for working away from home, almost as a visitor, almost as a tourist. And you also finally, you talked about the images as records of people's presence over time, but also of taking pictures when people had gone away of an absence of event. which seems kind of interesting in terms of this. I mean, of course, over 30 years you're going to change. No one would want you to stay the same. Some of those things struck me as of interest here because in some ways this work might seem to negate some of those and to represent a new, or even in some ways, a radical departure. But I'm wondering also what's new, but also what is constant? What of that, that you said 30 years ago, do you still hold to and recognise?

JR

I mean, I kind of got it into my head that because I guess the most basic thing that's changed about what's in this show is—a lot of the work you're talking about then—the exposure time would have been, I know this sounds very basic, 15 or 20 seconds or even a minute. And here there's nothing probably longer than a 15th of a second. So, I've tried to keep some of the silence and stillness and those things that we always talked about with that kind of work. I've tried to keep that element within the image, but also allow for the temporal thing of it being more acutely about the moment when the image was taken, and about the enigma of how things, the poignancy of a very short moment in time in a place. So by including things like the people in the boat in that one over there, or the heron, whatever, I'm trying to keep some of those things I had earlier with a sort of, for the sake of a better word, the pathos and melancholy of the architecture, but also to be a bit greedy and have some of the qualities that I sort of started to miss from photos I took when I was a kid, quite documentary photos, things I took in Coventry of political events and things like that when I was 15. I kind of thought “why not try to have some of those things working at the same time within the image?”.

MCS

Because in thinking of change and the reasons for change, there can be internal reasons. You can, in a way, your own project may shift, may develop. They could also be to do, as I think you're hinting at that, also to do with developments within the medium, technical changes, new technical opportunities. Or they might be to do with the conditions of the wider world. I mean, you've mentioned the exposure time. Is it, without getting too technical, I mean, is it worth you just saying what of your practice recently in practical terms has changed and what opportunities that has afforded?

JR

I mean, what we're talking about there was shot on 5x4 film on a view camera. These, I'm sure there are some people with a technical interest so, these are all actually taken handheld, which people often can't quite believe, but they are, on a totally contemporary medium format camera, which from a distance looks pretty much like a 35mm camera, but isn't, with the crucial image stabilisation, which means you can take a photograph at a 15th of a second and get everything pretty sharp. One of the really nice things about that as well is it kind of stills the camera when you're looking through it as well. So it sort of helps you to see the world as a more *still* thing than it really is outside of the camera. And obviously the technology, the digital technology generally has changed so much so that not only in the taking but in the printing. And to be honest, I'd say that to make this show even three years ago, four years ago, would be pretty much impossible. So I've definitely tried to make use of *everything* that's available.

MCS

And you've been using this new camera for other reasons as well. I mean, I don't want to move you on to a different body of work, but I think you began using it in order to capture a different sort of event.

JR

Yes. I worked on a documentary project that slightly overlapped this and before it for HS2, where I had to photograph people on building site, basically building a tunnel and a viaduct. and capture moments within process and moments within people's sort of working pattern and capture figures basically, obviously in the act of constructing things and get it pretty sharp. So doing that allowed me to get familiar with this kind of equipment and think, 'what if... what if I started carrying it around?' and thinking about a different kind of product from it.

MCS

Because the dictates of that work that you were doing there are very different from this. When you talk about yourself now being able to be a photographer of event, well, event, I mean, you mentioned the boats drifting in there, it could be the event of a heron or a train coming out, it could be the event of the weather or someone passing, these are a very particular sort of event, and I think there's one image Which one is it? Do you have the Tower Bridge image here?

JR

Yes, over there.

MCS

Which actually is a major event. It's New Year's Eve and people are waiting for something. And yet there are thousands of people there, but they're a long way away from you. They're in the middle distance. They're like you, they're waiting for something. So I'm just wondering what your definition of event is, how you what you see in these images constitute *events*?

JR

I think one of the reasons it works is there's very different kinds of events. So obviously the River [Thames], it isn't just like having a boat frozen still or whatever. It's actually being able to get the cloud movements, the movements of the water, that kind of thing, without it simply becoming a blur. Those things become much more active. You're much more aware of them as a constituent part of the image that I've ended up with than they would be if they were shot over 30 seconds or something where they become a completely different thing. So I think that has a big effect. In other ones, yeah, definitely the people's movements and what's going on in Trafalgar Square or the one in Tower Bridge. It's great to be able to actually have the people fairly sharp and to have that contrast between their activity and the stillness of the architecture or the mirror-like river and the sky. It makes it that you can have these things in more acute relationship with each other than previously and still be able to print it successfully to this scale, which obviously, if you haven't got enough information in the file to make the print physically present, have enough within it, then it wouldn't work.

MCS

So in terms of *event* and the moment and time and movement, these four images here, they're almost constitute a body of work in themselves. Is it a good moment to just talk about how those four work either together or why there are four?

JR

I find with a lot of when making series that it's actually really helpful to have a go-to place to start the day. And so what I ended up with was, okay, I really like *that* particular area of the embankment. There's the modern architecture, the power station, which obviously has been modernized, renovated, but then there's just enough of the industrial architecture from before so that the mix is interesting, especially at low tide when you can see the beach. And basically most days I started by going there. So obviously you end up with quite a lot of images from that location. But it's a bit like a writer not finishing off the day without knowing what they're going to start with the next day. It's really helpful, I think, to have a sort of go-to point where it gets you going. Basically you play your scale, you do the thing that you've gotten used to doing every day, and then you branch out from there. In previous series, like in Palermo, I developed a route that I kept following. So each time I went back, I'd redo that route. It allows you to get used to the way light's changing and the things that are going on a particular day or whatever. I think they do form a sort of mini-series though, yeah.

MCS

They seem to speak a lot about time. And of course, the time in the work is really interesting. There's the time of finding the image and the time of making it, or taking it. But then also, back to your studio, the long time involved between when you have your images and you're working on post-production. Do you want to say more about that process?

JR

I think... A, it takes me a long while to decide whether something's worth persevering with or not. But I think the other, you know, Guston said that 'the only thing that was really worth discussing in the studio about work was whether it was finished or not'. And one of the interesting things or the sort of complex issues for making photographs and printing them yourself especially maybe a sort of, this isn't a large scale anymore, but at a certain scale, is that it can be finished literally from 5 minutes after you've got back to the studio and made a print, because it's all there, right? And so you've got a lot of time to think about what constitutes 'finished' for a particular image, or not. And that is actually what I spend a hell of a lot of time thinking about. Has it come to a conclusion or not?

MCS

You said that post-production takes forever within a limited range, within a narrow range.

JR

In that I don't really do much more than a lot of basic Photoshop, but I quite like that. I quite like that it's basically about luminosity and colour. [MCS What do you not do?]What do I not do? I don't move people around or add people in or take the sky from another one and put it in.

MCS

So it's not a sort of Jeff, it's not a Jeff Wall type of?

JR

No, although I don't think, I don't think a lot, somebody like Jeff Wall does maybe as much putting in as people like to think. What he does do, obviously, is he makes the image and that he uses a group of people and he set and the set and he sets it up. So you could say that in... is quite similar to what Jeff Wall might end up. It's just, I do it by taking and he does it by setting. I think they're equally valid. I mean, I really enjoy looking at Jeff Wall. It's just, I'm actually no good at that kind of thing. I find what I end up with by having an interaction with the real world. much more interesting than anything I could end up with in the studio by trying to make it myself.

MCS

Is this back to the believable version of reality?

JR

Yeah, I think I like the fact that when you look at the image, you know it is a photograph of reality. I think that's really important for me still. I don't want to present people with something I've created in the studio.

MCS

Nor do you want whatever you do in the studio, manipulation is the wrong word, to be evident in the...

JR

No.

MCS

Back in 1996, when you weren't working in this way at all, it's interesting that in that interview, you said something about cinema. You said, "I find the cinematic experience more poetic than the theatrical", and I've got it here, "because the work is elsewhere and what you're left with is the illusion."

JR

Yeah, I still, that's still a fundamental. I don't want people to look at the work. I want them to be taken into the image and then discover what's to be found inside it. I mean, that's, for me, that's another big difference between making a painting and making a photograph.

MCS

That's an interesting point.

JR

Because when you look at a painting, you see the maker's hand, don't you? That's part of the time within the image that you're looking at. You see the illusion of time within the painting, but you also see the time

that it took to make the brush mark from there to there. You do not get that in a photograph, or not when they're made in this way anyway. And I don't want that, my maker's time, to be in the image. I want the image to be about the time in the image.

MCS

It's an interesting comparison between painting and photography. I wonder whether an essential contrast also is that somehow a photographer is working from something and painting is working towards something. You pointed me to a text, I can't remember why, but it was Michael Fried, who has written on your work, talking about Stephen Shore. And I've got it here. He said, "where a painter starts with a blank canvas and builds a picture, a photographer starts with the messiness of the world and selects a picture."

JR

Exactly. It's a reductive process.

MCS

Post-production aside, I mean, that's an essential difference.

JR

Yeah, so basically, I think the bit, there's a sort of two sides of it. So the bit while you're walking around out with the camera, I think essentially it's a reductive process. What you're making decisions about most of the time is what you don't want within the frame. And then you think about, for me, the rhythms, the intervals, and everything else that you've decided you'll be happy to include. In the studio, you're basically walking a fine line trying to make sure that everything works by adding or subtracting, but it is closer to painting, but it's not the same.

MCS

I've just finished a long biography of Cezanne, and you're making it sound rather *Cezannian*. A process of trial and error, of adding and subtracting all the time. Does it feel like being a painter in that sense?

JR

It does, but I'm also aware that it's different because it's not plastic, is it? And it's easy to underestimate the relationship that painters have with the plasticity of the thing they're working with. Whereas I'm sort of thrashing around, but I'm thrashing around in a kind of virtual space between what's in the file, what's on the computer, and what's the illusion on the piece of paper.

MCS

And of course, I mean, paint. photography's had a vexed relationship with painting ever since, you know, all through its history. Terms like pictorial or painterly are quite often sort of pejorative. You started as a painter.

JR

Yeah.

MCS

You've told me why you moved to photography. But I wonder, and you often talk, you refer to painting a lot as in some ways being more important to you as a reference and a guiding element in your work than photography, which you're not the only photographer to say that, but I wonder what that actually means. Does that mean you're looking at a photograph with a painterly eye or are you seeing paintings when you

come across a view? Where is that reference, how do you hold it and how does it operate for you in terms of your work? I mean we could talk in terms of individual instances, but just in general, if you can.

JR

Actually, to be more specific to this show, I mean, a lot of people have said to me, it has a very feeling of Dutch painting. Well, that basically is for a very good reason, is that I spent a lot of time looking at Dutch painting and thinking about it when I was making the show, and that's why I ended up with the title, Winter Landscape. I've got an old book from the Mauritshuis of Dutch winter landscape painting, which I really loved looking.

MCS

What for you appealed?

JR

It's basically this, there's a very similar relationship, I think, between tonality and colour. So somebody like Avercamp, I think the relationship there between, he's basically a tonal painter, I think, but the the colour is really beautifully modulated. So there's the two things that are going on at the same time in a very, which I kind of aspire to in the way I've worked on these. And I also like the fact that I think it's fantastic that there's a whole genre almost of painting from a long period of time, which is referred to even in art history by a season. I think that's a really extraordinary thing about that whole period and that body of work. I mean, why that came about so clearly I find really interesting. But also, yes, it's a landscape and you have the background, but again, it's often from an elevated point and There is a whole social survey also in the foreground.

MCS

And you've got an overall colour and you've got leafless trees and the structures are bare. I mean, in yours, you like leafless trees too, just like low tide where things are exposed.

JR

The sculpturality of things, yeah, which I'm, yeah, I think basically the linearity of things and their sculpturality is obviously a key element to what attracts me when I'm taking pictures.

MCS

And I'm sure 30 years ago when we talked about architectural photographs, you were talking about [Johannes] Vermeer and [Pieter de] Hooch and talking about the Dutch 17th century use of linear perspective like you might do with Japanese woodcuts and so on. I don't know whether that something of that is still in these works as well. The plunging perspective of this Charing Cross, for example.

JR

Yes, yeah, yeah. And for a long time also, I had a bit of a Hokusai obsession and I think that's still there. I mean, and obviously there are a whole load of art historical links, like you can go from Hokusai to Impressionism. I think there's a strong relationship to the sort of freedom I found or tried to find in making this to the moment of Impressionism where instead of making larger history paintings, people turn to the everyday world.

MCS

I mean, the work you did in Japan on Mount Fuji was an obvious, I wouldn't call it an homage, but it was directly referencing Hokusai. And equally here, it's difficult not to think of Monet and Pissarro coming over in the autumn, indeed, in the autumn and winter. Were those images in your mind?

JR

I don't think you can have them in your mind when you're working, but it just comes through. If there's something you really, has sort of gone into your sensibility, and you're spending a lot of time, I mean, you know, one of the links I really like is between the Burgess Park image and the Seurat, [Bathers at] Asnières, in the National Gallery, where people are Burgess Park is a park that's basically a converted industrial landscape. And, you know, for the sake of, it's a working people's park that was made so that working people would have an outdoor area when the big estates were built next to it. And the Seurat painting out in the air, the old painting in the National Gallery, they are local people with an industrial landscape behind them. And they are literally being transformed by sunlight and the water in the river.

MCS

And the whole composition. I mean, is that something that occurred to you? I mean, did you go out looking for it?

JR

I go and look at it on a regular basis because, to be honest, I think it's so *incredibly* metaphysical. It's It seems to be so laden with meaning and presence. And actually, it isn't just me, I know because I spent quite a lot of time in that room. And people are just standing in front of it and they are pretty much gripped by it often. You see kids standing in front of it for a long time. There is something just extremely metaphysical and transcendent about it as an image. And obviously, this is work that's made with a belief in transcendence, that you can photograph the everyday world and create an image that is transcendent and has a metaphysical content beyond what you might expect from that simple process.

MCS

And obviously we're referring to painting here in terms of, I guess, motif and also composition. But I mean, your interest in painting is obviously much more broad than that. I mean, abstraction, for example. I mean, are there artists quite apart from the figuration and the motif whose work you find as interesting reference?

JR

I think, so I kind of believe in a historical progression. And I, as a painter at college, I thought I was trying to solve the problems of post-painterly abstraction in New York. I really got sort of very, for a while I made paintings that were a bit like internal landscapes in paint on quite a large scale, and then it became even more like things like Morris Louis or whatever, but the two shows that really changed that for me as a student were Guston and Martin at the Whitechapel, which are obviously very, very different kinds of painters. But I think it was because suddenly I could see how they both made work about place and other things, obviously, rather than making work about where you could take painting so much or, more overtly, an image about place. And really, place is obviously what I'm interested in.

MCS

But also, I mean, you talk yourself as a tone of photographers, I guess colour must go. I think you mentioned somewhere Milton Avery. So this morning I looked in my extensive library to find Milton Avery. All I could find was a few images in a group catalogue. I was thinking, Well, what the hell's he picking up here? They're all black and white images, so I said, Ah, it must be the colour.

JR

Yeah, it is. It's just the particular qualities of the colour relationships. I mean, sometimes you just make it like that one, the one at dusk, that does remind me of Milton Avery. It could be just me, of course.

MCS

I mean, we'll wrap up quite soon. I can see Annabelle inching closer and closer. Just to broaden it out to sculpture for a moment. Obviously, photography is quite at a remove from sculpture, but it is there. In your past, we first met, I think, when I was at the Hayward Gallery and you were the supreme photographer of installations, particularly of sculpture. I think of Eve Klein, and Anish Kapoor, and others. And obviously you've had a close relationship working with sculptors like Anthony Caro over time.

JR

Particularly Anthony Caro, yeah.

MCS

What of that, what did you extract from that you brought into your own work, if anything?

JR

Well, one thing is that working in the Caro studio a lot was a bit like a kind of apprenticeship in how you manage making work. how you aspire to make better work, to be honest. I think a lot of us would agree that maybe Tony made too much work, but the determination to make better work and keep changing was absolutely palpable within the studio. So, I think I learned a lot from it about studio practice. I think I make work where collage, seeing the world as a collage, is actually quite an integral part of how these work. So, I'm almost trying to take it apart and put it back together again, in the image, but in a seamless way, so that you're more aware of how the different constituent elements meet each other in the frame. And I think a lot of that...

MCS

Are you talking about sculpture here or about photographing sculpture?

JR

No, about actually making these. And a lot of other work I've worked, but I think a lot of that came from being really very interested in collage sculpture. For a long while after college, I tried to make sculpture, collage sculpture, in that tradition. And then simply one day realised, you know what, I could contain all this in a photograph, talk about these things, textures, spaces, negative spaces, the rhythms and intervals between things, I could actually still be doing that with a camera rather than having to deal with the problems of running a big studio with welders and everything else. So I actually think they're about a lot of the things, a lot of the poetics, if you like, are about things that, the same poetics that you found in, I mean, Caro is really about space and place at its best, I think, not the figure.

MCS

As are you.

JR

I'm about space and place. I'm pretty certain.

MCS

Back in 1996, 30 years ago, talking about your work, you were very wary of labels. You didn't want to be thought of as an architectural photographer, for example. But you referred to your work as a singular activity. Do you still feel singular, or do you feel 30 years later that somehow you've got a different place? I mean, if you can cast your mind back, do you feel the same in that way?

JR

I think I've stopped thinking about that, basically. I think the whole idea that you're trying to develop a voice, if you mean that, can really lead you to nowhere. I think you're much better off thinking about what you're photographing and what you're trying to make at the end of it and trying to make a better job of it. I think it's incredibly difficult to conceptualise having a voice in photography, especially if you make it in a fairly straight, for the sake of a better term, straight manner within the basic means of the medium.

MCS

I can't remember now whether you said it in terms of trying to find a singular voice or in terms of not fitting categories.

JR

No, nor can I, but I think, I think it was more about trying to make something unique within a context. I mean, Maybe I do, but the thing is, I try not to think about it all the while, because I don't think it's, like I say, when I talk to younger people, I say, you're much better off spending more time taking photographs, looking at them harder, and thinking more about "what you want from it, what you think it might mean", than, you know, "how can I develop a voice of my own?" I think that can be a bit problematic.

MCS

John, I think it's a very good moment to throw things. I'm questioned to just throw things open to the audience. How do you want to do this, Annabelle?

Audience member #1

Thank you. Hi, John. Thank you for that, both of you. My question is – the scale that you printed and they're very grey. The colour, there's a lot of grey in it for me looking at them. I have two more questions, sorry. What camera do you use, and what lenses do you use?

JR

Yeah, great. Let's get onto the camera. Yeah, so all of this is shot on a Fuji GFX. Some of them are, couple of them are shot with prime lenses, but actually some of them are even shot with a zoom lens. That's how good it is. And the other one was about the grey that's sort of underneath things. The scale. So partly the scale is determined about what the experience I want people to have in the space, partly. And it's also about establishing a relationship between detail and overall sort of canvas. The whole thing's got to work for me over the whole thing. There can't be, sort of, dead areas. And that doesn't mean every part of the image has got to be busy, but it does mean every part of the image has got to contribute. And that can only happen for me at a certain scale. So I realise that's quite a painterly way. That's more of a painterly way than a traditional kind of figure/ground photographic way of thinking. But to make that work, you've got to get the scale to a certain point, I think, otherwise those areas don't get enough space to interact with each other. Anything that really matters, I think, that will take you further when you're working in the studio, is about relationships. It's not about single things. It's about how things relate to each other. That actually, I think, extends even to what something can mean. So what I'm all-the-while trying to do is make relationships within the image have more presence and more meaning, and that can only happen at a certain scale. These are actually a bit smaller than the last show I made in the space, and I think it's helped, it's helped actually to bring a bit more compression, to bear, on the relationships that are happening within the rectangle. And the other thing in that, that I think using shorter exposure times has made me more aware of the relationship between detail and, specific details that you're drawn to and the overall canvas. Yeah.

Audience member #1

There's a lot of grey colour in it. Was that intentional?

JR

Yeah. It's quite hard to, it's basically all about thinking about what I wanted from the colour relationships lined up alongside the tonal kind of structure of the image. Basically, I think I spend 90% of my time in the studio, or whatever, thinking about the tonal relationships with the image, and about 10% thinking about the colour, because the colour I find it's either going to work or it's not. And I will alter the colour very slightly, but they tend to be sort of global relationships, like 'make the whole thing a bit cooler' or 'make the whole thing a bit warmer'. The tonal things I spend forever on. Whether something's lighter or darker. And basically it's very similar to the interaction that you'd have had in a wet dark room, working with an enlarger, but obviously you can be much more precise working in different areas on the computer than you ever could in a dark room.

Audience member #2

I was really interested to hear what you said about them being like looking through a window, because to me they look a bit *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Do you know that they're like a familiar landscape, but they're almost got a magical quality to them? But some of them are quite prosaic images, like the train track. Like when you're standing in front of something quite prosaic, do you feel the magic then or does that arrive when you're looking at the flat image?

JR

No, like I say, when I'm standing taking pictures, I would say the thing I think about more than anything else is where am I going to be up, down, left, right, backwards, forward? And most of that is about the best position for the rhythmic and interval relationships to work within the image, and where it's going to end within the rectangle. And I'm, like I say, it takes me a long while, like, whether it's going to run further. I kind of find out later on when I'm in the studio. It's, I guess, like everybody, when you get sort of what people call 'in the zone', it's quite hard to remember what you were thinking about in terms of when you're composing the image in the camera. But yeah, that's basically.

Audience member #2

You're not standing there sort of *moved*?

JR

No, actually, I'm really distrustful of things. Like that, when normally they're ones I don't live with for a long while. Yeah. So, and I'm sure I'm not the only person, there must be lots of people here who make work. So, often if I get home thinking I've absolutely nailed it, that lasts for about a week, and then that's not very good actually. So, and of course, everybody wants to have that feeling because you're trying to make work, right? So you're trying to move forward with it. But yeah.

Audience member #3

It's the last question. Thank you both. I thought that was really interesting, really enlightening. John, I wanted to ask about, for me, there's a bit of an outlier, which is maybe the photo behind you, in the way that it, behind you, I guess first question is is it Hackney Marshes? [JR yeah] But it doesn't, like the absence of, it seems so reductive, no architecture. And some of the photos feel kind of timeless, like they could have been taken in many of the last few decades or something. [JR yeah] But I don't know, just kind of curious about that image because what you, because you could have obviously gone to the other end and shot back and seen the city.

JR

So the thing that made me go there, right, let's start with that, is I've never been to Hackney Marshes, so I really wanted to go and see it. But I've always really been fascinated by these aerial photographs of it in like the 50s and 60s with like 80 football matches, all happening at once. And so I was just really interested by the idea of this level of activity within an open space. I know it's on the edge of the city, but you know what I mean. And then, yeah, it's the usual story. I mean, I spent hours there and I've got loads that don't work. I simply really enjoyed the fact of this ribbon of activity. That's one of the last ones I've taken. So I really like the sort of contrast between, I mean, if you think about it, a lot of this work depends on the relationship between absence and presence about areas, apparent areas where apparently things *have* happened, and apparent things *are* happening. So I like that relationship within the image with the empty goal. especially the record of all the tapes where the net's been put up and then the incredible intensity of the and which is also shown by the colour right of the people playing across the sort of Kenneth Noland aspect of it you know yeah, yeah.

Audience member #4

John, do you crop the work, of these as shot?

JR

I do crop and I do all the basic stuff if verticals aren't vertical, I do the basic stuff to get the verticals vertical. I'm not having any verticals that aren't vertical. I mean, obviously, there's a sort of gravity that you want and that's the only way to get it right, to have the verticals vertical.

MCS

Did you crop the Trafalgar Square image?

JR

Only a very little bit. I did a lot of cropping out when I was taking them. So I tried loads of different, because that's taken with the Zoom, o I tried lots of different in and outs on the Zoom. Technical term, in and out. Yeah, different focal lengths.

MCS

I'm wondering whether the guy on top was just one person too many, if you're... [laughter]

JR

Yeah, Well, of course, yeah, the fact that he's not there, but you all know him, adds something to the picture. I mean, it changes the sort of democracy of the content underneath of what's going on. I mean, that is so much about what's not there, tthat it can work.

MCS

I also like the way that it then it just equates with this more prosaic vertical. Yeah.

Frith Street Gallery

I'm sure more questions can be asked to John, who will be around. And we also have more work of John's downstairs and also in the office space to see. So I think let's say many thanks to John.

MCS / JR

Thank you very much.