

Robinterviewing Levon Biss

Levon: We've been on the road now for, coming up for four and half years. 2016 I launched the project in Oxford. I'd started this new type of photography dabbling in extreme macro photography for a little while, and it took me about eight months to a year to develop the technique first of all and then produce the first image. And then I started honing that technique even further, and then I approached the Oxford University Museum of Natural History and showed them some of the images that I'd been producing, and I'm not sure that ever seen anything quite like it before when I started zooming in and they could see the kind of detail that I was able to achieve.

Rob: And they've got a particularly fine collection of insects I think there haven't they?

Levon: Yeah, I think there's something like three million insects I think they have and, you know, a whole wide range both geographically and historically. And they've got some historically significant specimens there as well, from Darwin's collection as well. So, um, I was fortunate enough that they were so keen on the images. They gave me access to their entire collection and also the assistance of one of the curators there, Dr James Hogan. And together we worked for about three years on the project. He would select the specimens for me. I would give him a kind of brief as to what I was looking to shoot, whether it's a type of adaptations, or colour, or the textures of a specimen. You know, something that, photographically, gives me something to work with. He'd go off into the collections and bury around, and dig out what he thought was suitable, and then once every couple of months I'd go up there and I'd do an edit of the selection of insects that he'd found for me and I'd take those away to my studio and beaver away with them. It takes quite a while. It took about a month to do each one.

Rob: A month for each picture? They're extraordinary looking insects. Are the colours natural? I mean they don't look natural.

Levon: Yeah, the colours are natural. You know, nothing there is altered in any way to get more emphasis or make them more dramatic. I mean, the colours are quite vivid, because the insects are lit, so, it's not using daylight, it's using artificial light that you get on a camera flash, but a bit more bespoke and high-end than that, but because there's so much detail in there they become more vivid and arresting than normal.

Rob: They are certainly very arresting, and certainly seen in a huge scale that you've been able to achieve.

Levon: Yeah, I mean each image can be printed up to three meters in height. We don't do that for all exhibitions because obviously there's I think about 36 images in the exhibition, and that takes up a lot of space. But when you're standing in front of a three by two metre bee, it's a strange visual experience. The relationship between you and the insect changes completely, and you're kind of just able to appreciate the fine details and the intricate details that we normally don't see, because they're too small, so hopefully it's given people a new respect for these tiny creatures we share the planet with.

Rob: I was just about to ask you what the aim might have been, what you were trying to get across to the viewing public.

Levon: Well first of all, photographically, you want to give them an experience. You want to supply them with a kind of emotion, and also you want to educate people as to how important these creatures are. The fact is, if there wasn't insects on this planet, the human species wouldn't exist. They're vital, absolutely vital for the ecosystem, and I think because they're not the size of a rhino or an elephant or stuff like that, they don't generally get the same amount of appreciation, potentially, that those big mammals do. But the reality is you could argue they are far more important because of the work they do. And at present, it's topical in the fact that the insect population, and biodiversity, is in massive decline – the numbers at the moment are alarming, and I think that conversation's starting to grow. I'm realistic about how much impact a photographic exhibition can have. If limited, at the end of the day I would hope that possibly the next generation, the kids that come there and the children, it may resonate with them a little more. These are all conversations that we should have had a long time ago, and we get too caught up in our daily lives, don't we, to really a lot of the time to take these conversations seriously, and hopefully, you know, if you go to the exhibition, you see the actual beauty of these specimens and these insects, maybe we can think a little harder about 'do you put that chemical in your garden'? If people think twice about that then I think the exhibition's a success.

Rob: I notice from your website that you've done an awful lot of portraiture. Would you say that these are portraits of insects?

Levon: Oh yeah, for sure. If you look at my previous work, when I was photographing humans, for example, the way I photograph humans and the way I light them and how I approach them isn't drastically different from the way I photograph insects. The technique that I use for incredibly small subjects is obviously different, but the whole aesthetic and the look is fairly similar.

Rob: I must say that the portrait of our President Macron is very dramatic.

Levon: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I've had a diverse career, shall we say? It's good to keep moving, you know. It's good to keep evolving and try new things, because it keeps you creative and keeps exercising the brain, which is important.

Rob: You must have had such a response that you must have been commissioned to do other, similar exhibitions, or have you got other things that you're working on at the moment?

Levon: I finished a project for The National Museum of Qatar, photographing 20 specimens that are local to Dohar, and I've just finished a project with The Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh, that's based on seeds and fruits, and that's a project that will be launched next year, and there'll be a book coming out for that in April 2021. That's macro-based, you know, tiny, tiny seeds, and showing us details of these seeds that you'd never normally see. I think the exhibition's slated for March next year, and then it's likely

to tour again, in the same way that my microscopic exhibition has done it'll go from museum to museum and various botanical gardens around the world.

Rob: Did I read something about you going to the jungle?

Levon: Yeah, I spent a month in the Bolivian rainforest shooting a type of fungus, called *Cordyceps* – funghi that basically infects insects, and it infects, it takes over their brains, and then it re-infects the population. It's nature's way of population control of insects, this parasitic fungus, so it's a bit creepy, but it's a fascinating thing to shoot. There was a piece on Netflix for a natural history documentary called *Our Planet*, with David Attenborough, and I think I shot in the rainforest for about 27 days, I think, in total, and then the final documentary because it was video that made approximately about 45 seconds of footage. It was a lot of hard work but I think the 45 seconds of footage in the final documentary make it worth it. If it was easy it wouldn't be worth doing, would it? So you might as well make it difficult.

Rob: Can I ask you a personal question?

Levon: Yeah, go on.

Rob: I'm very curious about your name. I've never come across a name quite like yours. Could you tell me something about your origins?

Levon: Well, I'm quarter Irish, and the rest is English. I don't know, I think my parents had heard it on the radio one day. It was on a song, and that was it. It's Armenian, apparently. And randomly, you know, I've ever met an Armenian person in my life until I met my wife. My wife is half-Armenian, and it turns out that, yeah, I've got an Armenian name.

Rob: It was meant to be, wasn't it? Thank you very much indeed for your time, Levon Biss.

Levon: A pleasure. Take care.