



IN CONVERSATION WITH

Colin Prior

Legendary Scottish landscaper Colin Prior reflects on how changes in commercial trends have affected his ability to stay relevant, plus he reveals an exciting new project in the works...

Interview by Nick Smith

There's something reassuring about Colin Prior's Scottish landscapes. Maybe it's the classic simplicity of his mountain compositions. Or the extraordinary colour palettes, the well-observed detail, the unfailing beauty of the light. Maybe it's the fact that his signature images over the years have tended to be panoramas, shot on acres of transparency film in the 617 format. Or it could just be that these sumptuous visions of Scotland are made all the more imperious because of their near-universal lack of foreground markers. Whatever part of the narrative it is that arrests your eye, each frame bears the hallmark of a master craftsman.

You cannot call yourself an aficionado of landscape photography if you are not familiar with Prior's portfolio. And yet, despite having an enviable reputation as a photographic force to be reckoned with, the Scotsman admits he's uneasy about current trends in the world of photography, and not just because it affects his career. He also thinks the broad church of the artform itself is being diminished by a shift towards limitless non-quality-assured publishing opportunities on digital platforms. This is having a negative impact on the economic model for old-school pro photographers, a group in which Prior includes himself.

'If you look back to the past when stills photography was the apex medium for advertising,' says Prior, 'photographers were getting good day rates and were working on big commercial jobs. There were big budgets and there were great stories in the magazines. Each month passed and there was something new. Plus, of course, there were all the stock guys out there, travelling the world shooting images that were largely brought by the travel industry.'

Left Little Loch Broom, Loch Broom and the Summer Isles from Beinn Enaiglair, Braemore Forest, Scotland



Those were the halcyon days, says Prior, whose nostalgia for the creativity, scale and remuneration of late 20th century professional photography is intensified by the feeling that 'photography is passing me by'. It's something of a confession from the 60-something landscaper who made his name as one of the most successful and influential outdoor photographers out there at a time, he freely admits, when things were different. When pressed, he explains that he considers today's real demand to be for moving images, which means that stills photography is 'falling into the shadows'.

If someone of Prior's stature, a photographer with an elder statesman's reputation and credentials, thinks that photography is passing him by, then what hope is there for the run of the mill, doing-okay-thanks, mid-season photographers that don't have the glossy coffee table tomes and the TV profile to back them up? Has photography really been handed over to anyone with a smartphone? 'The answer to that is yes,' confirms Prior. 'People are looking for moving content these days. It might be a generational thing, but I've never had any desire to shoot moving images. I can't attain the type of

perfection with moving images that I can with a single still one. That's what I mean when I say it's passing me by. I'm not trying to chase it and I'm not trying to get ahead of it. If I thought there would be a pot of gold at the front end of it, that's where I'd be. Don't get me wrong, there are a lot of good people out there, and they are making money. But for the majority of us the competition is so ferocious that it's very difficult to make any sort of living from photography now.'

Prior accepts that part of his position might be down to the fact that, in his case at least, you can't teach an old dog new tricks. But even if

you could, and by some miracle he listened to his kids and dispatched himself into the landscape to start shooting digital movies for YouTube, there wouldn't be a great deal of point, because, 'everything is the same on YouTube and the only reason people shoot this stuff is to get people to follow them, and I'm afraid I'm not going to do that'. It comes down to quality of product. Prior says that he'd need other people working with him: 'Production experts, scriptwriters and so on. This stuff needs to be properly crafted, otherwise you run the risk of looking like an idiot. I don't want to do that,

and neither am I going to walk around with a selfie stick and an iPhone on it.'

Above all, there needs to be a point and purpose to what photographers are communicating, says Prior. 'I shouldn't bring this up, but so many articles in photography magazines go into all this detail and at the end the person says, "and I got the shot". Well, I know you got the shot because I can see it. But what I want to know is what point is being made here and what can we learn from that thousand words other than you got up early and pitched your tent?'

Top Sgùrr an Fhuairail, Sgùrr a' Bhealaich Dheirg, Sgùrr Fhuaran, Kintail Forest, Glen Shiel

Below (left) Marsco and Garbh-bheinn, Red Cuillin, from Blaven, Skye, Scotland

Below An Teallach; Sgurr Fiona, Lord Berkeley's Seat, Corrag Bhuidhe, Fisherfield Forest, Scotland





The expression 'point and purpose' is one that Prior keeps returning to. 'It's all about knowing what you want to say as a photographer.' He describes how he started out as a commercial photographer, a career move that allowed him to establish himself financially, before following his true passion of landscape. 'All of my landscape work is self-funded. None of it was shot off the back of workshops,' he explains, 'which is what up-and-

coming photographers inevitably end up doing these days, because they can't afford the time or the money to come to Scotland to shoot independently. That era of self-funded projects is over, and they were only affordable to me because I was running a successful commercial business. And don't forget that each time I went to the Highlands I was shooting a dozen rolls of film, paying for the processing and having the images scanned.' With overheads that are

unheard of in the digital age, Prior says that it focused the mind as well as the camera. 'You needed to know what it was you wanted to achieve. You'd wait for the weather to be right and then drive four or five hours from Glasgow to Skye, climb one of the Munros, which is another four or five hours. There was a huge amount of effort that went into the production of these images. It was like a military strike with the reconnaissance and preparation.'



Opposite (top) Fourteen-point red stag with hinds during the rut, Assynt, Scotland. Corraling his harem of hinds, this magnificent 14-pointer moistens his nose to help him to scent when a hind is in oestrus. October is the most exciting time of year to watch stags as they engage in fierce mating battles. Rival stags can be heard roaring across the moorlands and will often engage in parallel walking to assess their opponent's size and strength.

Opposite (bottom left) Lichens, Allt Coire Sgamadail, Croulin, Knoydart, Scotland

Opposite (bottom right) Rock pools in sandstone, Bay of Laig with Rum beyond, Eigg, Scotland

Above Oak, hazel, ash, rowan and birch, Morvern, Scotland

Left Cul Mor, Stac Pollaidh, Cul Beag, Sgorr Tuath, Beinn an Eoin, Sgurr an Fhidhleir, Loch Osgaig, Coigach, Scotland



There was a time when Prior thought that this type of photography expedition – to borrow the mountaineering term ‘siege style’ – would be taken up by a whole army of young photographers eager to learn the ropes. ‘I thought they were going to get out into the mountains and express themselves in the way they wanted to. Now, of course there are people doing that, but there is a certain truth in the statement that the younger generation of photographers simply can’t afford to work that way anymore. There’s no return on it for them. They can’t sell their pictures because they have no commercial value. The currency of photography has been completely devalued. Just like music today. Worthless.’

This devaluation has been caused by the technology shift from analogue to digital, a change that has played a part in the career of a photographer that built his reputation and

visibility on shooting panoramas on the largely unfamiliar 617 film format. He recalls: ‘No-one was doing that, which was why magazines and newspapers were keen to publish this stuff. I remember in the 1980s being told it was a “letterbox” format. But it defined my career in the way that 5x4 defined Joe Cornish’s career. These technical formats are now irrelevant. Today, in the new model, the sole purpose of photography seems to be to get followers on Instagram and other platforms. If you get followers, then brands will take notice of you. But the brands don’t care who is an authoritative photographer and who’s not. In fact, they’re incapable of telling the difference between a proper photographer and a snapper.’

For the moment at least Prior has finished with panoramas. In fact, it’s now a decade since he sold his 617 camera gear, and there are no regrets: ‘Someone told me that it was somehow

this great big emotional thing to let go of these cameras, and I thought, “that’s nonsense. Get over it. It’s a bloody camera.” Today, his main focus is on seeing through to print a major book project, *Fragile: Birds, Eggs & Habitats*. For the photographer it is the culmination of a multi-year assignment to photograph the eggs of the native birds of Scotland, presented in a diptych opposite a landscape of their natural habitat. The eggs (collected legally in the 19th century) are part of the collection of the National Museum of Scotland, with each photograph a compilation of between 40 and 80 separate exposures stacked into a single almost three-dimensional rendition of the egg, pin-sharp from the front to the back. Sneak previews of the book (published in September) confirm Prior is about to experience yet another career-defining moment. I put it to him that all this business about photography passing him by was

perhaps a smidge of an overstatement, maybe even a touch of Caledonian pessimism? ‘Well, you’ve got to try something different, and the egg book is very exciting,’ he says. ‘The panoramas are a thing of the past now.’

To see more of Colin’s work visit colinprior.co.uk

Above Suilven, Canisp and Cùl Mòr, Loch Sionascaig and Loch An Doire Dhuibh from Stac Pollaidh, Scotland

Top (right) Uli Biaho and Trango Towers, Baltoro Glacier, Jupiter (top left); Venus (below right)

Middle (right) Eilean Molach, Mangersta, Isle of Lewis, Scotland

Bottom (right) Speicin Coinnich, Ben Mor Coigach, Scotland

