

Point of View:

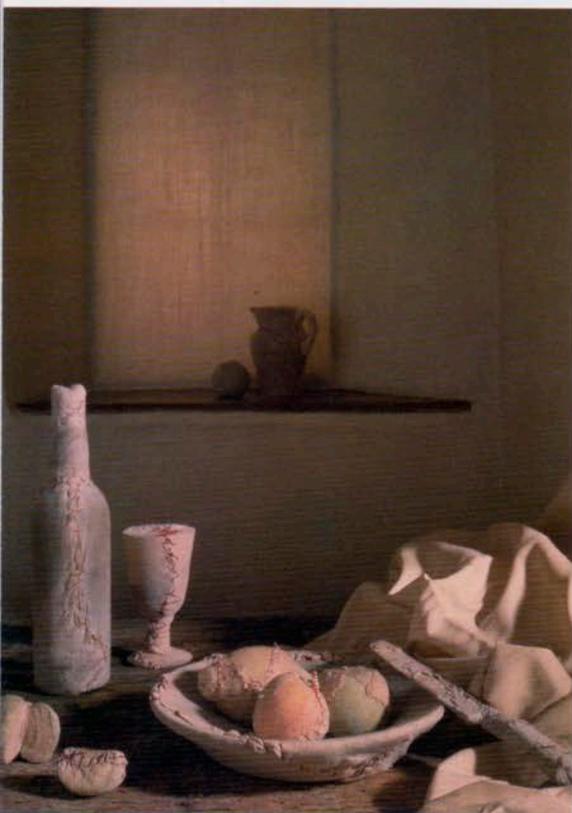
PAUL BIDDLE by Tim Malyon

This is the first of a series of profiles that we plan to run in *IMAGE* on AFAEP members, their ideas, philosophy of life and how they work. We invite any AFAEP photographer to approach us to take part in Point of View.

Your views on life and examples of your work are welcome and we would hope to persuade one of the assistant members of the Association to get into print in *IMAGE* with a portrait of you. You have nothing to lose but your low profile -- so please contact the editorial committee with what you have to say

'I used to be incredibly snobbish about commercial photography, which is why I wasn't a photographer. I used to teach photography. And then it dawned on me that I was being very stupid. Looking at top-flight commercial work it became increasingly evident how good the photographers were, both technically and on a creative level. And because the budgets are large, you can experiment. The turning point came when someone told me the only way to get good was by putting as much film through the camera as possible. Commercial photography allows me to do that.'

'To some extent the Revlons of this world are like the old popes, handing out artistic patronage. And it's becoming more like that with the present fashion for using more fine-art biased photography in advertising. The consumer is so used to advertising that

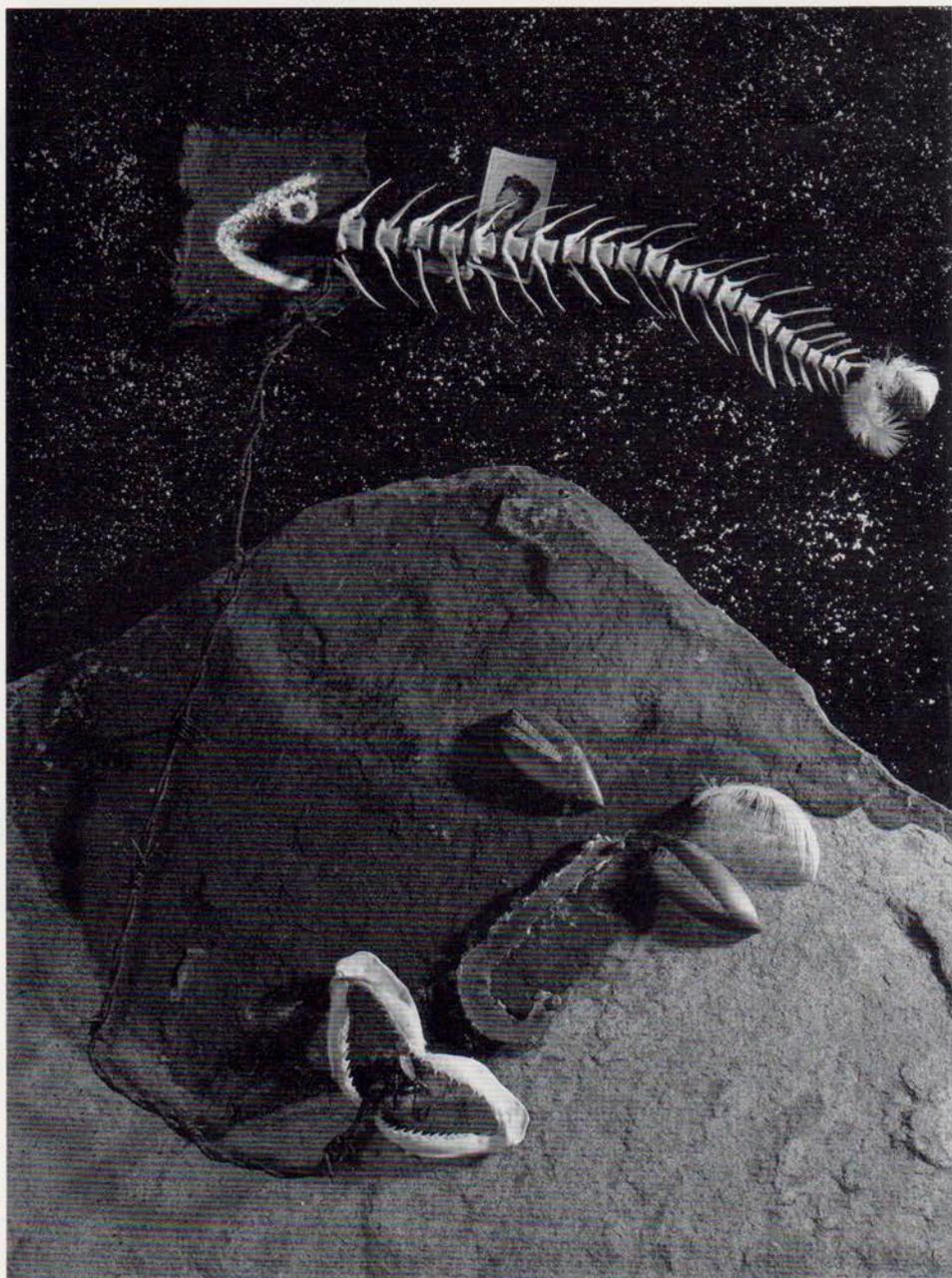




Point of View

By [Name]

Photo by [Name]



it is really the more offbeat which catches the eye. That's the way advertising has gone over the last few years. That's why fine art photography is enjoying a renaissance.'

Paul Biddle is thirty seven. Over the last four years he's moved from teaching photography to part-time then full-time commercial work. I've known him for seven years now - he and his wife Pam are close friends - and often worked with him on commercial jobs. He's a warm-hearted, obsessive perfectionist, with a wicked sense of humour and a wonderful eye. That's my own biased opinion. The following tale, told with a naughty glint, is typical.

'I managed to flood the Harrow Road once, in London, and the police arrived.' This is a tale of large-scale problem solving. 'We were doing this big outdoor shot of a housing development. The background was really messy, cranes and a building site, so we were doing the shot at night, lighting it with a battery of HMI's. And the ground was just this boring concrete. So I insisted on flooding it with thousands of gallons of water, then put blue gels on to liven up the whole thing. We opened a fire hydrant to do it, and erected barricades. But they gave way...'

When Paul is not working in London he lives in Devon in a village (population 40) officially classified as a 'hamlet'. 'I can be in London in three hours, that's close enough.' He prepares shots in the old chapel, 'St James', in his garden, often spending a week experimenting before coming to London and reshooting for the client. He walks a lot, which is when many ideas come to him. Last time we talked an old pine tree standing solitary above the village had just blown down, and he was extremely upset. He and his wife renovated their stone-built cottage together from the bare walls up, and created a Japanese garden behind. There's bonzai trees, another Biddle obsession, and an appropriately proportioned pond, some two feet across, irises growing on the farther shore, a decoy duck floating



upside down with its tail in the air, diving for weed, a disembodied plastic hand. "That's the village lake," Paul proudly declares, airily sweeping his arm across the endless expanse of water.

The early commercial work was mainly locally based, photographing south coast holiday camps was his least favourite assignment, but it brought in the pennies and was all 'film through the camera.' He learned much about the commercial side of his craft from working on interiors and room sets, architectural models and locations and brochure and catalogue work. Then came the move to the London market.

The first large contract was for the International Wool Secretariat, photographing futuristic instruments on their new range of computer-designed carpets. Then came the task of finding an agent. "The hardest thing about getting started, apart from cash flow, is persuading people to take a risk and use an unknown name. Once a few people have used you others will follow. I'm a bit of a novelty, in that I live in Devon and yet I haven't got a straw sticking out of my mouth. I had decided it was a good idea to get an agent. First of all I spent the time ringing them. I had no idea. I just got a list and decided to ring every single agent on it. The first twenty I rang, none said they would even see me. I'm not very good at blowing my own trumpet. Then suddenly I said, 'but I've got six pictures in the AFAEP awards.' As soon as I said that, they all agreed to see me. So I really rate the awards from that point of view. Obviously I was really excited at getting the pictures in. It was a recognition of what I was doing."

This was the 1989 AFAEP awards. Paul received a gold and merit in the non-commissioned 'things' category, as well as four pictures in 'series things.' At the exhibition opening he was asked whether his pictures 'meant' anything. The reply was typical. 'Oh, they're just visual drivel.'

'I get incredibly excited when I'm doing pictures, very drained as well. Although my

pictures look very simple, I assemble them for some time before actually taking them, playing around with positioning and objects and light. A lot of work into each picture, so I get disappointed sometimes when the actual taking of the picture is all over in a two fiftieths of a second. Although there's no meaning in them, there's a kind of visual meaning. They're often quirky, there's a sense of humour in them. That's obviously intentional. Also in some of the pictures I quite like the idea that they are slightly disturbing, that interests me, not to shock, not to go beyond taboos. But I like combining real objects with my painting or my backgrounds, distorting reality so you don't quite know what is real. It's just like conversation, every now and then you joke with one another, so they're visual puns. But then again, they're just pictures, which are okay to look at if you key into that visual style.'

His visual roots are broad. from Surrealism, Yves Klein, Man Ray, the Dada movement, to the painters of the Renaissance and oriental art. When he finally came to pick an agent, he chose Louise Fennell and Carolyn Traylor, because he related to them well and respected the other photographers in their 'stable,' Charles Settrington and Frank Herholdt included. 'I look at all sorts of photography. My favourite photographers change constantly, but if I was to give you a list, I'd name John Claridge, Robert Dowling, Andreas Heumann, and then at the other end of the spectrum, Joel Peter Witkin, Koudelka, some of the early Magnum photographers. I love that kind of work. I don't do anything like that, I respect it very much.'

He's visually obsessed, constantly seeing photographic ideas which he sketches out in notebooks, coming back to them over and over again until he feels the idea is sufficiently 'cooked' to see the light of day. Not only does he love the countryside, his environment constantly offers up objects for incorporation into photographs, rusty iron, pieces of oiled slate, an old seed drill, which

in the city would have long been tidied away.

The biggest problem at the moment is one which besets every photographer I know: waiting to be paid. 'Ad agencies and clients seem to think that photographers can wait anything up to six months for payment. I don't understand this reasoning at all. There's always an incredibly desperate rush to get the trannies done on time. We deliver on time, then put our invoices in and wait for months and months to be paid. Some of the excuses I've been given are ludicrous, from just missing the famous cheque run to the mysteriously localised postal strike. And we're having to carry the debt for money already shelled out, studio costs, film costs, prop bills, assistant's fees. It drives me round the bend.'

Paul's style is swiftly recognisable, and is starting to bring him the work he deserves, advertising shots for Revlon, two contracts for The World Of Interiors, a New Scientist cover, the complete catalogue and advertising commission for an exclusive London jeweller (the cover of which gained a merit in the 1990 awards). He's also one of the three photographers chosen by Kodak to be specially featured in their new book, *Exposure*.

Ideas tumble forth. I asked him to outline a visual dream, given unlimited expenses. 'I'd like to do some bigger shots. I'm experimenting at the moment with taking my still-life work into the landscape. What I'd really like to do is grow a background on a large scale by approaching a local farmer and renting a few hills for a year. If I wasn't happy with the shape I'd rent some bulldozers and large earth-moving equipment, which fascinate me anyway, I love large machinery, and sculpt the landscape, shape it. Then I'd have it planted in flowers, various colours, to create a massive background for the epic shot, the one I've got planned at the moment also involves a few pyrotechnics.'

I look forward to it. Any sponsors?