

North

Chris Killip (1946-2020)

In 1974, photographer Chris Killip journeyed north on an exploratory road trip. On route he passed through another country, a land of coal and iron, a land defined by three shipyard rivers, the Tees, Wear and Tyne. On return to London he applied for and was awarded a two year Northern Arts photography fellowship. The following year he moved to Newcastle upon Tyne. In need of a darkroom, Northern Arts suggested that he approach Amber, a documentary film and photography collective working from the quayside district in Newcastle. Chris Killip introduced himself to Amber and asked if he could use the darkroom. His timing was bad. Having just finished converting a derelict room into my first personal space to develop and print photographs, I said no.

Regardless of my unwillingness to help a stranger, Chris was drawn to Amber. We were a group of idealists guided by a philosophy to create a dialogue with working class communities, to value and document their culture, to live cheaply and be in control of our own labour.

Murray Martin, the driving force of Amber, acknowledged Chris and soon their mutual interests and respect for each other bonded them in friendship.

In 1975, the core group of Amber made a crucial decision that would indirectly affect Chris. Under threat of eviction from a landlord who wanted to sell our rented workplace, an old stone built quayside warehouse, we formed a legal partnership, borrowed money, and bought the property. Owning our workplace rooted the commitment Amber had to the North East.

Chris was influential to Amber, mostly through his relationship with Murray. Although Chris chose to be independent to the collective, he played a vital role in the conception of Side Gallery, a gallery created by Amber to show documentary photography. Within a year, Side had become an established gallery but with an emerging programme that reflected more an interest the director had in photography than the philosophy of Amber. Conflict provoked the director to hand Amber a letter of resignation. We readily accepted his decision to leave. Chris, who was already advising on gallery matters, offered to help for a limited period. With collaborative support from Murray, Chris took on the responsibility of director and, with a work ethic second to none in whatever he undertook, the gallery became his life for a year or more. With the knowledge and connections Chris had to the world of documentary photography, his input was significant.

By the mid- eighties and for different reasons, Chris and myself had drifted away from Amber.

Born and raised in three pubs on the Isle of Man, bar life and a little observational wisdom passed on by his father gave Chris an early insight into the ways of people. After leaving school he began a career as a trainee hotel manager. A year or so later, flicking through a magazine, Chris was mesmerised by a photograph that revealed a life changing concept, that photography could be used as a means of expression. He abandoned a future in hotel management and left the island in hope of getting a job as an assistant to any London photographer on his list of a hundred. Chris learnt from the best as he passed through the world of commercial photography during the second half of the sixties, a world where celebrity fashion photographers were revered as artists. However, a visit to the Museum of Modern Art during a working trip to New York was confirming. A Bill Brandt exhibition, the first photographic exhibition Chris had looked at, was on show. He also looked at the work of two photographers represented in the permanent collection of the museum, Paul Strand and Walker Evens.

Influenced and motivated, Chris left London to photograph a world that was in his blood, the Isle of Man, homeland.

What transpired to be a ten year journey for Chris ended when he moved to Newcastle. Exploring Tyneside and the north east coast exposed Chris to a landscape shaped by the heavy industries of coal, iron, steel and shipbuilding, and to a people whose lives were connected to those industries. The essence of working class communities and their environment was not lost on a young man with a deep passion for social documentary photography. A commitment to the area was inevitable, but Chris needed somewhere to live that offered space for a darkroom.

During his first year or so in Newcastle, Chris lived in a shared house in Walker. I was living with my family in a borrowed house that had to be vacated. Our needs were different but we were both looking for a more permanent home, cheap, and preferably overlooking the Tyne.

One day, in the mid-seventies, I was sailing downriver with Murray on board the Bessie Surtees ash dumping barge from Stella power station. We were exploring hidden riverside terrain and taking photographs when Murray spotted a For Sale sign on a house in Bill Quay, an isolated neighbourhood half way between Newcastle and the mouth of the Tyne. Chris was informed and he bought the property. Although it was his home for the next fifteen years, in reality it was not much more than a base central to the places he would photograph. His small upstairs flat overlooked a bend on the River Tyne. On the opposite riverbank, Walker Shipyard with its empty slipways was a sign of times to come. The view from his window was like looking into a Chris Killip photograph, high-rise flats and housing estates scattered above idle cranes and an almost silent shipyard. Swan Hunters, a shipyard in the death throes of building giant oil tankers, could be seen downriver from Bill Quay.

My growing friendship with Chris soon revealed that his ability with tools was as bad as my generosity in sharing a darkroom. A pub promise, or maybe a touch of conscience, whatever the reason, I made an overdue difference to the working life of a photographer by converting his spare bedroom into a purpose built darkroom. In that small space lit by dim yellow safe lights, the extraordinary vision of Chris Killip appeared from the chemistry of black and white photography, photographs confirming the worth of a driven life, or otherwise on a bad day.

The darkroom served Chris well until he moved to America in 1991. Our close friendship lasted the rest of his life and, for the time being, will continue in spirit.

At the time of building the darkroom, I had already moved with my wife and son, Joyce and Gary, into our first permanent home. We bought a cheap run-down commercial property with a pub either side of our front door. Steeped in history, it was an extraordinary home that overlooked a broad section of the river where tug boats manoeuvred large sea-bound ships, bow to stern, before towing them out from the Tyne. Both pubs survived on trade from the river - thirsty tug boat crews, Middle Docks ship repair yard working day and night, Harton Staithes loading coal onto colliers, and the Seaman's Mission whose front door shared the same back alley where Joyce hung her washing out to dry.

During six years of living downriver from Chris, with the dying shipyards of Jarrow and Hebburn in between our homes, we spent many a good night in our local riverside pubs. Those nights and occasional all-day sessions were predictable. Steady-away drinking, talking about photography, the places and people we photographed, never ending money problems, Amber and Side, family and life, usually in that order. Never football or television, and rarely politics.

No mobile phones back then so whenever I was passing Bill Quay with a thirst or an urge to see Chris, I would take a two minute detour. If his car was there then I knocked on the door. Except for the year or more when he was director of Side Gallery, Chris used his home mostly as somewhere to sleep or to work in the darkroom, otherwise he would be away photographing. On one of my unexpected visits, Chris had a batch of film to wash and hang up for drying before we could go to the pub. After thirty minutes he lifted a rack full of 5x4 negatives out of the wash tank. With a Golden Virginia cigarette in one hand, he held them up one at a time to a light bulb. Skilled at reading negatives, Chris looked with anticipation at each of his twelve pictures clipped in stainless steel hangers dripping with water. In hindsight, smoking, fag ash drifting around his negatives in the toxic air of a darkroom gave Chris more than a photo re-touching problem.

Early last year Chris told me that he had been diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. Ignorant of the severity, I asked him what stage 4 meant. In a chirpy voice he said, "There's no stage five." From that day on, whatever feelings or fear Chris lived with regarding his terminal condition, he buried them deep. Always an optimist, he made it so easy to be in the company of a dying man.

There will be an ever more growing recognition of how gifted Chris was and what he achieved. But the qualities of determination, sacrifice, hard work, and what Chris described as a selfish journey should also mark the man. As should his generosity of spirit and love of good people.

The legacy that Christopher David Killip has left behind is beyond words, and that is the power of photography, a power he recognised a lifetime ago.

During his years in the north of England, over a time span of four consecutive governments of both political parties, Chris witnessed the onset of long term deprivation caused by what he described as the de-industrial revolution. His published testimony, especially 'In Flagrante', 'Seacoal' and 'Skinningrove', values the lives of those who made the most of what they were born into, and of those who struggled to do so. His photographs of northern environments lived in with a proud sense of place, and of a class of people whose lives and culture were mostly disregarded or abused by the governing powers of self interest, will forever touch the lives of those who look at such a telling history.

Graham Smith, December 2020