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LUKE STEPHENSON

AN INCOMPLETE DICTIONARY OF SHOW BIRDS



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LUKE STEPHENSON: AN INCOMPLETE DICTIONARY OF SHOW BIRDS



Britain and its national psyche are at the core of London based photographer Luke Stephenson's work. For over a decade he has been photographing subjects that, for him, epitomize British eccentricity and culture, including puppets, the iconic '99' ice cream and the World Beard and Moustache Championships.

In 2009 Stephenson discovered the peculiar and insular world of show bird competitions and began to immerse himself in the subculture of 'bird fancying'. He has spent the past seven years tracking down and gaining access to ever more exotic species to photograph, inadvertently becoming an avid collector of these prized birds himself.

This exhibition showcases Stephenson's newest works in the series An Incomplete Dictionary of Show Birds. By combining his unique style of photography with the formal language of studio portraiture, the artist lends his feathered subjects an affectionate and often human presence.

Also showing at Selfridges, London is 'In Fine Feather', an additional large-scale presentation of more of Stephenson's bird portraits (16 Jan – 3 Apr 2017).

LUKE STEPHENSON

BIOGRAPHY

Luke Stephenson (born 1983, Darlington, England) lives and works in London. Since graduating in 2005 and winning the Jerwood Photography Prize the same year, Stephenson has been working as a freelance photographer focusing on eccentric British hobbies and exposing fascinating “archaeological layers of English culture” hidden from the mainstream.

His work has been published in a variety of publications including The New York Times Magazine, The Guardian, Dazed & Confused, Foam, Art Review and Wallpaper*.

EXHIBITIONS

- 2016. Beauty and the Beast: The Animal in Photography - MOPA San Diego
- 2014. PHOTOGRAPHY NOW Tokyo Japan - IMA Gallery
- 2013. Belfast Exposed : Thresholds : Curated by Ciara Hickey
- 2012. Hijacked III: Contemporary Photography from Australia & the UK - QUAD & Silk Mill, UK
- 2012: Hijacked III: Contemporary Photography from Australia & the UK - PICA, Australia
- 2009. XY. The Ascendancy of Gender - Dudelage Grand, Luxembourg
- 2009. XY. The Ascendancy of Gender - MAAC
- 2008. Ornithology Group show New York - The Jen Bekman Gallery
- 2008. Tatty Devine - 236 Brick lane, London
- 2008. Various Photographs curated by Tim Barber - New York Photo Festival
- 2007-9. The Exit Gallery - 125 Charing Cross Rd, London
- 2006. Festival International de Mode et de Photographie - Hyères
- 2005. Jerwood Photography Awards - Leamington Spa, UK
- 2006. Jerwood space, London

AWARDS

- 2010. Selected for the Talent Issue of FOAM
- 2006. One of ten photographers selected to take part in the Festival International de Mode et de Photographie.
- 2005. One of the Jerwood Photography Awards 2005
- 2005. Short-listed for the Next Level magazine VDT competition 2005 portrait category

BOOKS

- 2014. 99 x 99s - Stephenson Press and YES Editions
- 2012. An Incomplete Dictionary of Show Birds - Stephenson Press and YES Editions

DOCUMENT

Document | On a Lark

CULTURE | BY NOAH STRYCKER | APRIL 7, 2014 11:30 AM



IncompleteDictionary.com

What began as a simple idea — taking portraits of caged birds against blank, colored backdrops — has turned into something of an obsession for the British photographer Luke Stephenson, whose images are compiled in a new self-published book.

To access his feathered finds, he tapped into a network of quirky avian fanciers — from a vicar with an affinity for lovebirds to a hipster with an unironic collection of rare breeds — venturing into their homes with his miniature, portable studio. Save for a few dust specks, his images of budgerigars, conures, siskins and, yes, canaries aren't retouched. He simply chooses complementary backgrounds, letting each subject get comfortable before taking its picture.

Stephenson discovered that birds are generally well-behaved subjects. “Humans, on the other hand,” he says, “are a lot less predictable.”

AnOther

Fashion & Beauty Art & Photography Design & Living Loves Archive

Luke Stephenson

— October 11, 2012 —

Photographer Luke Stephenson's key points of interest and exploration lie in the British lifestyle and psyche, elements he describes as being at the core of his work...



Siberian Bullfinch #1 Photography by Luke Stephenson

Photographer Luke Stephenson's key points of interest lie in the British lifestyle and psyche, elements he describes as being at the core of his work. But one of his most acclaimed projects, *The Incomplete Dictionary of Show Birds*, seems, at first glance, to be a far cry from such nation-centric influences. The series consists of bright and beautifully coloured portraits which detail individual exotic birds down to the smallest feather; wrens and wood pigeons (the UK's most common birds) these are not.

Yet it transpires that each of these perfectly posing creatures was in fact scouted in England, and played a vital role in what Stephenson uncovered to be a surprisingly popular British pastime, bird keeping. "It all started when I decided I wanted to take pictures of budgies," Stephenson explains. "I was influenced by the photography of prized pigeons, which is very formulaic, and I wanted to apply that to budgies so I contacted a breeder and went to his house somewhere in south London. I was very naïve and it didn't go exactly to plan but as a result I stumbled on this hobby of keeping and breeding birds which intrigued me so much I spent the next 3 years taking pictures of birds."

One of these birds, Australian Finch #2, recently featured in AnOther's short film for COS, in celebration of Frame at Frieze. Here, AnOther talks to Stephenson, whose recent side projects include the S/S13 Look Book for designer duo Agi & Sam, and unearth his favourite bird facts and dreams of photographing the Queen...

Where did you find the birds to photograph?

I was living in the north of England at the time and luckily they had a good bird club in my area and a great website with a breeders directory so I just contacted people and explained my idea; some people were happy to help, some flatly refused.

What in particular intrigues you about exotic birds?

I think they are really beautiful and fantastically colourful. I love the photos as you can see them really close up, which is something I'd never seen before.

Do you have a favourite bird fact?

Gypsies love green finches and if you breed one with a canary they make the best songbirds. Zebra finches have the nickname "angels with trumpets" as that what they sound like when they chirp.

If you were a bird, what species would you be?

I'd be a bird of prey that soars. Like an eagle or something like that.

What makes a good photograph?

That's a hard question and I don't think I know the answer but it needs to start with a solid idea.

What inspires your practice?

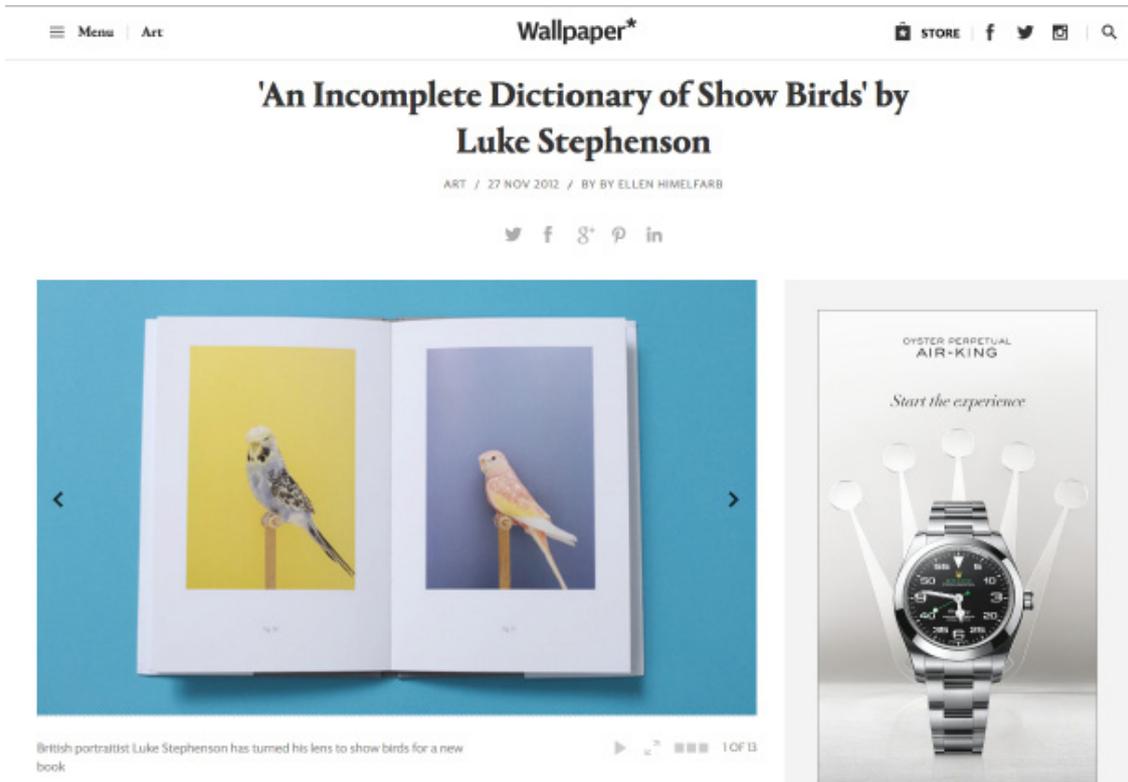
The little things in life.

What is your dream project?

To take a portrait of the Queen.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

Life's not a race.



They may not be sexy in the traditional sense, but birds have been shaking their tail-feathers for eager photographers' lenses ever since the Audubon Society began publishing its field guides in the days of 'Watch the birdie'.

British portraitist Luke Stephenson is no exception, though show birds are more his type. His most recent photographic tome is devoted to capturing those kept beauties at their best, starting with the budgie: 'accessible, familiar and wonderfully beautiful'.

As Michael Smith, journalist and contributor to 'The Culture Show', writes in the book's forward: 'They live in an overlap between the natural and manmade worlds, and say as much about the culture that created them as they do about nature.'

Compiled with anti-Audubon crispness by the London-based design studio YES, Stephenson's 'An Incomplete Dictionary of Show Birds' is a project that grew into an obsession, with each new conquest, from finch to parrot, more alluring than the last. 'There are so many more I would love to photograph, which is why it is "incomplete",' says Stephenson. 'It's something I imagine I'll return to throughout my life, a never-ending project that could become my life's work.'

He will keep interesting company with enthusiastic owners ('mostly men', says Stephenson), some of whom have been keeping birds their entire life and eschew holidays between shows like concerned parents.

Their passion is understandable. The subjects, annotated in the book with both their English and Latin names, are either brazenly colourful or deceptively neutral, with brash colour peeking out from under wings or bellies like lingerie.

PRESS

FOAM MAGAZINE TALENT ISSUE 2010

7 SEP 2010



foam magazine #24 / talent
septembre 2010

Luke Stephenson

AN INCOMPLETE DICTIONARY OF SHOW BIRDS

Luke Stephenson was born in 1983 in Darlington in the North East of England and is now based in London. He studied at the Blackpool and Pymble College.

In 2009 he was one of the winners of the Journal Photography Award, with his series Spectroscopic Wearing Pail, and was selected the year after to be part in the Festival International de Mode et de Photographie à Paris.

His work has been published in numerous magazines, like Portfolio, Detail and Confused, Opposites, Men and Zoo Magazine.

His latest series An Incomplete Dictionary of Show Birds is here being published for the first time.

All images © Luke Stephenson

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'It's very simple really: I just want to show them at their best, to show how beautiful they are.'

interview by Marc Feustel

How did you start doing photography? What was it that interested you about it specifically?

It was very simple really, when I was in school in art class we had a little darkroom that I used to mess around in. I just found out from there that photography was something that came quite naturally for me and that I really enjoyed. I just carried on with it from there, went to college, did a little photography course and then went to university.

I find that one of the best things about photography is that it gets you into places that you wouldn't normally have any access to. You can enter little worlds or communities that you would never get the same kind of access to if you didn't have a camera.

You were asked once what you would make if you didn't make photographs and you said 'bad paintings'. Did you ever consider painting instead of photography?

If I was any good at painting, that is something I would have liked to do. With photography you have the restrictions of having to make use of what is in front of the camera. With painting you can work from an idea, adding elements or taking them away. There's a kind of luxury to that. Unfortunately I'm just not very good.

You could say that your work is all portraits of one kind or another whether it's people, birds or puppets. How did you get into portraiture?

When I was at university in Blackpool, I mostly did landscapes or little observational photographs. It was quite a closed environment and all the students were using each other for their fashion shoots down a back alley. It was always the same people getting used all the time for shoots, which put me off. This got me thinking about trying something different and towards the end of my degree I came up with the idea for the *Spectacle Wearing Folk* series. I collected glasses and clothes from charity shops and developed the idea over six months, the theory behind it and the way of shooting it. That was what started me off in portraiture.

I find people fascinating. Real people rather than models, although I wouldn't necessarily say no to photographing a few models, don't get me wrong, but ordinary people just really fascinate me. Their movements, their body language, all these little elements that tell you something about their personality.

It feels like you use the minimum amount of elements to make your images?

I try to give the people or the things that I photograph their own importance. I find that by using a blank background, you can use stance and positioning to say about the person rather than having their belongings or environment speak for them. I think it makes it more interesting when you have to work a bit to figure out what might be going on beyond that little blank space. I like that elusiveness. I also like the challenge of working within the confinements of a small blank space.

*In your series *Budgies*, the birds have a very pronounced, almost human, personality. That also comes through in *An Incomplete Dictionary of Show Birds*, although in a more subtle way. Do you approach photographing the birds the same way as you would people?*

Photographing birds is quite different, just technically speaking. When I first started, with the series *Budgies*, I was quite naive thinking I could go along and have them sit on someone's finger and just photograph them against a white wall. When I arrived for the first shoot, the owner told me that was never going to happen. Luckily he had a little cage to put them in and I was able to get some shots. Also the budgies are easier to photograph because they're quite lazy.

Since then, over the last few years, I've been researching and developing the way I photograph the birds. I learnt quite a lot about the criteria for judging the show birds and when I showed the budgie images to someone that knew about birds they really didn't like them. People in photography always got excited about them, but not bird-lovers. I also found out about a famous bird photographer, Dennis Avon, and tried to learn from the way that he set up his shots. Although I didn't really know how he did it, I got some ideas from looking at his images. The theory about photographing birds, is that they will go to the highest point they can find to sit on. So if you give them a box with a single high-point to sit on, they will generally rest there.

I'm not really a technical photographer. I approach it more like someone tinkering around in their shed and making do with what they've got. I find it interesting to try and figure out ways of doing things that are more sparing and economical.

What are you looking for when you're taking those shots?

I'm just trying to show the birds for what they are. A lot of people never see birds from close up. It's very simple really: I just want to show them at their best, to show how beautiful they are. A lot of the series comes down to the edit since there's a lot of trial and error in photographing them. Trying to find the best combination of stance, colours and shapes.

How did you end up finding the breeders in the first place?

I was living up North for a couple of years, where I was brought up. They had a great good bird club and I went along to a few meetings and met some people there. They were quite suspicious at first as, surprisingly, there is quite a bit of bird theft that goes on because they are worth quite a bit of money. Once you get to know a few people you can drop a few names which opens doors. The thing that takes the most time is gaining their trust and getting in their front door.

There are quite a few subjects in your work that are very British. What is it about Britishness that interests you as a subject?

Britishness is quite important to me. I've lived in Britain all my life and I don't think I could live anywhere else. I think it's because I understand the British and their slightly off-key attitudes. I'm interested in entering these little worlds and societies that you don't generally get a chance to see. In terms of British photography I think there's a lot that has been overdone, time and time again, but I still think that there's a huge amount that hasn't really been explored yet.

+

All scream for ice cream: Luke Stephenson's "99 x 99s"



Luke Stephenson, *Wells Next to Sea* #56, from the series *99 x 99s*, 2013. Copyright Luke Stephenson. Courtesy of the artist and The Photographers' Gallery, London.

MOST VIEWED



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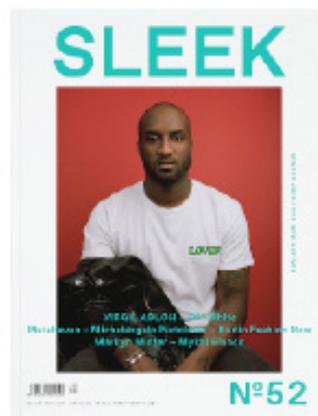


THE 5 ICELANDIC ARTISTS YOU SHOULD KNOW



THE EXHIBITION DOCUMENTING THE CULT BERLIN CLUB NIGHT

SLEEK 52



While Berlin's weather may be currently flirting with the idea of summer, things are heating up over in London at The Photographers Gallery with the group exhibition "Didn't We Have A Lovely Time...", a show focussing on the British seaside with works from Simon Roberts, Luke Stephenson, Nicholas Hughes, Mike Perry and John Hinde.

Here, Sleek caught up with British photographer Luke Stephenson, about his series "99 x 99s" in which he photographed ninety-nine of the iconic British seaside ice creams quite simply called, the 99.

Sleek: How did the series begin?

Luke Stephenson: It all kind of began when I was started doing a project on ice cream vans a couple of years ago, and then from that I started to get more and more interested in the ice creams themselves and how they have become iconic items in British culture. From there I started to think, "What if I was to photograph ninety nine ice creams in the same way every...

time?” – you would see all the differences between each one. That was something that was really appealing to me. In the beginning though I thought I was just going to go to ice cream vans, but I soon realised that when you’re at the seaside you don’t need to be in a van because people just come to the beach, so I had to open it up ice cream parlours as well.

How did you make the series?

I bought myself a little camper van, called the “Bedford Nipper”, which became my little house and my mode of transport. It began at the end of July and I was on the road for 25 days, I started in Southampton and then I went east to Brighton, Kent, Essex, and then all the way up the East coast to North Yorkshire up to Edinburgh. Then from Edinburgh I went to Glasgow, and then I came down to Carlisle and left the van with my mum, before setting off again about a week later and heading towards Cumbria, Wales, Devon and Cornwall.

I also made a little studio on wheels that fit into my camper van, and the idea was to photograph the ice creams exactly the same throughout the country. Because of the wheels on the box, it meant I could wheel it up to the ice cream van or shop, get the ice cream, put it in the box, photograph it and it would all be done within about thirty seconds.

Was this the first time you had set out to photograph one thing repeatedly?

A couple of years ago I did a project on cornflakes where I set out to try and photograph every cornflake in a box of cereal. It then escalated into 7,122 cornflakes. That was a horrible week of my life!

Back to the ice creams, did you set yourself any rules when you were making the series?

Only that I would say yes to any sauces or toppings that they asked, sort of a bit like Supersize Me. Otherwise it was just a plain 99.

Ninety-nine ice creams is quite a lot, did you have to eat them all?

I didn’t have to eat them all... But I did eat quite a few! I did taste every one, just to see and I definitely had one a day at least. I couldn’t have eaten them all, I would’ve been sick! I became quite the ‘99’ connoisseur by the end actually.

I also got really interested in some of the cones as just some of the designs on them are absolutely beautiful. I used to get quite excited when I was handed a nice cone! But remember I did do this on my own, so I was basically just spending two weeks on my own in a little van eating and obsessing about a certain type of ice cream. It got a bit maddening at times.

For many years in British documentary photography, photographers such as Martin Parr and Tony Ray Jones have been fascinated with the British seaside – what is it about the British beach that is so appealing?

I think it is just because the seaside encompasses everything that is great and bad about British culture – all in this little enclosed world. You see all the sides to Britain and it draws you in.

What was your favourite ice cream?

The nicest tasting one was from an ice cream parlour called “Jones” which was just outside Swansea. That was a really good tasting home-made ice cream and I used to get really excited when I found a good one. Thinking back, it was really strange for a thirty year old man to be doing that...

The Universal Appeal of the Ice Cream Cone

Viewfinder

By JAMIE SIMS MAY 22, 2014



In this weekly series, T's photo editors share the most compelling visual projects they've discovered.



Luke Stephenson

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FINANCIAL TIMES *Make the right connections*

Perhaps no sound heralds the start of the summer season better than the singsong melody of the ice cream truck. And no sweet treat feels more Memorial Day-appropriate than a sugar cone topped with cold swirls of soft serve. So on the occasion of the holiday weekend, we're taking a closer look at the photographer Luke Stephenson's latest project, "99x99s," which feels especially timely as temperatures finally begin their merciful rise.

The series, shot on a summer road trip across 3,500 miles of the United Kingdom's coastline, features 99 still-life photographs of 99s — the iconic British soft-serve ice cream cone garnished with a Cadbury Flake bar. Alongside each cone, Stephenson catalogs the ice cream truck or parlor from which it came. These sunny but otherwise mundane-seeming locales only heighten the mythological appeal of the 99s, which are presented as pristine specimens, too beautiful — almost — to eat.

Photography
The Observer

Luke Stephenson's British seaside ice-cream odyssey

Here's what happened when photographer Luke Stephenson set out to document 99 ice creams around 3,500 miles of UK coast...

● [Gallery: Luke Stephenson's 99 portraits - in pictures](#)

Giulia Crouch

Sunday 18 May 2014 00:05 BST



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99 please: an ice-cream van in New Brighton. Photograph: Luke Stephenson

Charmed by the British seaside, 31-year-old photographer Luke Stephenson embarked on a road trip in search of its ultimate emblem – the 99 ice-cream. His mission? To snap 99 ice-creams in 99 locations, documenting the subtle touches that made each ice-cream unique. The Darlington-born photographer had only one rule when he began last July: if the vendor offered sauce, sprinkles or any other topping, he would accept. If not, a plain 99 it was. “One asked if I wanted sherbet,” he says. “And occasionally you got some nuts on there.”

Stephenson spent 25 days on the road, covering 3,500 miles of coastline in his Bedford Nipper camper van. At around 240 calories per ice-cream, he thinks he consumed between 6,000 and 10,000. “I ate quite a few and I tasted most of them. I think I ate about one whole ice-cream a day. I did start getting sick of them but I’ve eaten them since. I’ve become a bit of a connoisseur – they should be really smooth.” His favourite came from the Mumbles in Swansea from an ice-cream parlour called Joe’s. “It was homemade and had a slight taste of caramel,” he recalls.

Inspiration came initially from childhood memories – “the excitement when the ice-cream van turned up” – and then from the three years he spent studying photography in Blackpool. “It was a project that was close to my heart. I got to see firsthand the ups and downs of the seaside. It’s a strange world – a place that lives and dies by the weather, which is quite sad really.”

Stephenson’s Kickstarter campaign has made it possible to turn the 99 collection into a book, out in August, which will showcase each ice-cream next to its corresponding location. As writer and broadcaster Michael Smith observes in the book’s introduction: “It wasn’t a journey to explore the 99 so much as a journey into the collective psyche and the land that had created it... a rite of passage. American photographers do epic road trips down Route 66. English photographers go to the seaside.”

LUKE STEPHENSON PRICE LIST

Giclée prints on Hahnemuehle photo rag paper (308 GSM)

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AP	£ 1500 + vat
AP 2	£ 1750 + vat

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Edition 4	£ 1250 + vat
Edition 5	£ 1500 + vat
AP	£ 2000 + vat
AP 2	£ 2500 + vat

FRAMING

16.5 x 12"	£140 + vat
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