

The following is an interview made with Anthony LaSala, the Senior Editor at Photo District News magazine, New York.

*Anthony LaSala: The basics: where did you go to school, where were you born and where do you live now?*

Marc Atkins: I was born in England. I've spent much of my life in many different cities, London, Rome, New York, Detroit, Paris, Warsaw... I did my undergraduate at Cheltenham School of art (in sculpture), England, and post graduate at Jan Van Eyck Akademie (in photography, video, film and performance), Netherlands. I now live in France

*AL: How did you first get into the world of photography?*

MA: My grandparents bought me a little camera when I was four years old, and so I've been taking fotos for as long as I can remember. My passion for image making began there.

*AL: Which photographers were your biggest inspirations when you were starting out? Why?*

MA: I guess Man Ray, Joel-Peter Witkin, Frantisek Drtikol, Alexander Rodchenko and Leni Riefenstahl, all of whom produced images of worlds I found, and continue to find, compelling. Many of their pictures are almost ethereal in space and form but they are firmly grounded in corporeality.

*AL: Outside of photography, what/who have been the primary sources of inspiration for you? (Movies, videos, paintings, music..)*

MA: Fine art certainly, particularly renaissance painting and sculpture, but also the work of Matisse, Picasso, Tarkovsky, Lynch, Orson Wells' "The Trial", Murnau... the poetry of David Gascoyne, Rod Mengham, Charles Bukowski... and many, many books and novels.

*AL: What do you consider your first big break?*

MA: I can't think of one big break really, just a series of incremental achievements which lead to other things: having my first solo exhibition; my first publication (The Teratologists); selling my first image commercially; selling my first images to a public collection.

*AL: What first led you towards nude photography?*

MA: Studying paintings and sculpture. When I as quite young, at home, my brother had a book on the history of art. I would sit for hours looking through it, I guess as a young boy the nudes attracted me for obvious reasons, but I became fascinated by all the the pictures. I would draw copies of them, trying to understand the way the shadows worked and the twists and turns of the figures, some of them impossible, like in William Blake or Botticelli. And those early impressions have stayed with me. So then later as a young man and as an art student, I had the opportunity to work at making my own images, in paintings, drawings, sculptures - I would do full body, nude life casts of the models, as well as modelling them in clay - and of course photography.

*AL: How do you choose your subjects?*

MA: They are mostly friends, or friends of friends. (I have only used professional models for commercial work, not for my work.) I've either asked them or they've asked me. And almost all of them have never been photographed before (apart from obvious family / holiday snaps) never mind about nude. I like working with people who don't

have a realised image of themselves photographically, who don't have a "look", as professional models do. The subject and I can explore the making of an image together, without too many preconceived notions of how they should look. The women I photograph are strong, assured, confident people who are interested in being part of an art making process.

*AL: How do you get your subjects to trust you?*

MA: We sit and talk, sometimes not even taking fotos for the first session. We look at my past work, and I tell them some of my ideas and the way I work: easy going, no pressure. Then, once we're ready to start, I will sit and load film, and move lights about, so they get used to being naked in a relatively, for them, alien environment. I make sure the studio is comfortable and relaxing, but also "technical" so it is evident that the reason we are there is to make images. But then many are just happy to jump straight into it, they know my work and are enthusiastic to make a start. And, more often than not, we will do several more sessions later.

*AL: What do you think makes a successful nude photograph?*

MA: The personality of the subject. If there is no evidence of the personality of the subject, then the figure is just a naked body. I want to feel I know something about the subject as well as something about the artist.

*AL: What feelings or messages do you try to convey with your work?*

MA: I strongly believe there is as much personality of a person in part of their body as there is in their face. And I try to evince this idea in my work. But that is not my whole raison d'être. On a wider point, I have a great love of art, and I attempt to make an image that is as great as a painting, that is, I want to make an image that people will be eternally and increasingly intrigued by, as I am by, say, a Piero Della Francesca. High ideals I admit, but one can't aim too high. Maybe it's impossible with photography, but I've seen some photographs that come damn close. I worked out a while ago that the difference between photography and the other plastic arts is that a photograph is always of something, no matter how abstract, it is always an image of the light that bounces off someone or some object. It is through this notion that I work to produce my images. I also see the photograph as representing the meeting point between our inner reality and the reality out there. The dark glass onto which both realities project.

*AL: You use many different techniques in your photography – what are some of them and why do you use them?*

MA: I love working with materials, their textures, weights, the marks you can make on them, in them, with them. This is why I did my undergraduate in sculpture. My belief system is grounded in the phenomenon, so I like to work with objects, in three dimensions, to reflect this. Sculpture production processes I discovered can be compared to those of photography, in that one can make a cast, a negative, and from that produce a positive. I continued to make photographs, as I've always seen the photograph as an object, a piece of paper, three dimensional object with chemically induced marks on it. The marks being the signifiers of scenarios. So the photograph to me is one good way to present an object which conveys concrete and abstract concepts within a single medium. You may notice that in many of my images the figures are very sculptural. I also just love messing about in the darkroom, with chemicals, different papers, lights, lenses and general mark-making things. So the joy of different materials is one of the reasons. But also to show off the image to its fullest. I don't like being limited to one technique or process, if an image looks better one way than another, why compromise that for the sake of having a unified look across all of one's images?

*AL: What cameras do you use and what are your most trusted pieces of equipment?*

MA: A camera is just a black box, with a lens that focuses light (in different, idiosyncratic ways) attached to it. "High quality" is not my primary concern when making an image. Cameras are tools for making shadows on light sensitive materials, so I'll use anything that comes to hand: I have reconstituted throw away cameras, two Nikon FM2's, a Pentax 6x7, an East German Pentacon 6x6, an M3 Leica, various Polaroids, and a 1936 twin lens Rollaflex and various "snappy" cameras. For a shoot I tend to load them all, as it is a bore when in the middle of working when it's going well and you have to break the mood to reload film (I never use an assistant - unless it is for a commercial shoot). It is useful, and enjoyable, handling different cameras anyway, it makes for subtle changes in the way one is viewing one's subject, certainly the way one is depicting them.

*AL: You cross between black and white and color – why is that?*

MA: Up until about 7 years ago I worked only in black and white, with experimentation in the darkroom being an important element of my work. No one else could print my work. Then I discovered how I could make colour images using trays, that gave me the opportunity to produce colour prints as I would want them. Now I like doing both. Black & white and colour printing give different effects, apart from the obvious, they react differently to the various processes I employ, these can reflect the different looks of the subject, the ideas I'm trying to convey, the moods of the shoot and, the different moods I have while making prints.

*AL: Do you think there is a difference between photographing a man or a woman?*

MA: For me certainly. I have made fotos of male nudes, but they hold less intrigue for me, I know what it is to be a man, the female form and personality is more intriguing and mysterious to me.

*AL: Besides the obvious, what do you think attracts viewers to the world of nude photography?*

MA: Anyone who wants to understand the world is interested in all sorts of images, scopophilia is an established idea of a human trait. The nude image takes humans out of fashion and the quotidian into more timeless, universal concerns.

*AL: If you could give one piece of advice to someone trying to break into nude photography today, what would it be?*

MA: Make your first photographs of your wife/husband/lover/friend, if possible, as they will hopefully give you more space to be unsure and to experiment, to work out you want from this subject matter and from yourself. Then when you come to make images of your first subjects, they will be more comfortable with you if they feel you are comfortable and confident about photographing them. Not to say that you have to have exact, planned out ideas about how you want your final images to look, but its not so good to be sitting about scratching your head trying to work out what you are doing and why.

And make sure your studio is warm and comfortable; a supply of cigarettes, wine and water is often useful too.