Photographing in Ice: A Conversation with Julian Hibbard

By David LaRocca

Julian Hibbard is a British photographer and author recognized for his compelling and enigmatic images that often maintain a palpable tension between the real and the imagined. He earned his bachelor of fine arts degree from Kingston University in London where he studied intermedia fine art. This interdisciplinary training led him toward his chosen career of photography, and his work has since been exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, Scotland, Chile, and at the prestigious Fundación Rosón Arte Contemporáneo in Spain. He is the author of The Noir A-Z: A Modern Abecedarium as Imagined by Julian Hibbard (2009) and Schematics: A Love Story (2011)—two books that break with the conventions of photo books and explore different sorts of visual narratives. The Noir A-Z is an alphabet of twenty-six graphic incidents accompanying dominant terms from the noir universe. In the book, word and image come together in stories the viewer must tell—stories the reader discovers or invents as the relationships between word and image are discerned. In the subsequent publication—also a unique and experimental board book—he pairs found scientific line graphics with simple prose to form a narrative language in which life is mapped, charted, and diagrammed. Hibbard lives in New York City with his wife and son. This interview took place via email in the Fall of 2015.

DAVID LAROCCA: You’re a photographer, yet your most recent book, Schematics: A Love Story (Mark Batty Publisher, 2011) contains no photographs.

JULIAN HIBBARD: Yes, it’s true; although I’m generally known as a photographer, the book contains no images made by a camera.

DL: Was the idea, then, to translate your capacities as a photographer into some other kind of imaging?

JH: Yes, I wanted to investigate a different form of visual expression. Though I sometimes struggle to understand the phenomena they describe, I began to see great beauty in diagrams. Everybody understands that a heartbeat can be represented as a pulse moving across a screen, or that magnetism is a law of attraction, and I wondered if these sorts of ideas—or descriptions—could be taken further, and if diagrams could be used to illustrate a loose narrative, and thus to construct a simple language.

DL: We should back up then, and consider where and how Schematics emerges from your earlier photographs and practice as a photographer.

JH: Sure.

DL: I initially came across your work around the time of the publication of your first book, The Noir A-Z (Mark Batty Publisher, 2009). The book takes its shape as a board book—a form familiar to our young children—but its subject matter is anything but childish. Its playfulness as an object creates a tension with the menace and threat apparent in the words and photographs it contains (hence the “noir”). I had the chance to critique the book for a previous issue of Afterimage. [Ed. note: See David LaRocca’s essay in Afterimage 38, no. 5.] Another aspect of the book’s engagement with primal forms is its pronounced use of the alphabet (hence the subtitle). But again, the abc’s here are not apple, bear, and candle, but abandoned, bound, and caught. This board book, then, juxtaposes a letter/word/concept with a highly stylized, sharply focused photograph that befits the lighting and staging of fashion editorials.

JH: The Noir A-Z was my first foray into a book format that breaks with convention and invites the viewer to explore boundaries, and to become, as it were, the condition for interpretation. The word component happened once I started to identify and categorize certain recurrent psychological themes in my work. As I began putting words to images, an alphabet with dark and provocative undertones emerged. Thus, The Noir A-Z was driven first by an image, and though many of the images have been described as being meticulously lit and as looking like fashion images, I don’t operate commercially in the world of fashion editorials. My relation to fashion photography begins when the reader picks up the book.

DL: But you brought in a kind of “editorial” of your own in using a board book, an alphabet (as a kind of taxonomy), and also the thematic imposition of the familiar but still amorphous tone of “noir.”

JH: Yes, I wanted to find a way to comment on the images without writing discursively. I wanted to label the images and encourage the reader/viewer to start asking questions about the relationship between—or their relationship to—image and idea (in this case, the bridge for that relationship being a carefully selected word from the alphabet/dictionary).

DL: The reader might ask: is this image staged or somehow documentary? Is it art, or entertainment, or even a record of an installation or performance? Does the letter/word/image mashup summon a relationship between an idea and a desire, or perhaps a condition? How does glamour factor into our attempt to mask the darker side of things?

JH: All of those questions are at work for me in The Noir A-Z.

DL: So what happens with Schematics, particularly in your decision to let go of photographs altogether?

JH: I wanted to explore a more primal notion of mark-making. How
do we organize the world according to rules, patterns, and forces? And how do these renderings—or representations—come to define our very relationship with reality?

**DL:** But instead of creating a photograph that might respond to, or interpret, the schematic (as photographs did in The Noir A-Z, effectively “illustrating” the letter and the word), here you write . . . prose. Or is it better to say poetry?

**JH:** Yes, Schematics was driven by words—more of them, at least—unlike The Noir A-Z, which was driven by images. I had written and collected the text entries over time. The diagrams were found by Googling words derived from the essence of the texts. In Schematics I wanted to suppress the photographic image and replace it, as best I could, with a kind of linguistic expression made up of abstract marks, lines, blocks, arrows, digits, and other interpretations of visual data that give form to related feelings, observations, and uncertainties.

**DL:** Is each text entry, then, a schematic of what the en face diagram calls to mind for you (or perhaps called to “mind” for Google)?

**JH:** It’s very much a personal response. I’m not trying to create a dictionary—where the definition would be generic and fixed for any reader—but instead a kind of confessional mode, where prose generated from private experience is coupled, and set in response to, a very abstract diagram (that nevertheless directs our attention to a specific kind of energy or force or function related to the text).

**DL:** In your more recent work, after these two books, you appear to be creating a hybrid of The Noir A-Z and Schematics. For instance, in your new series, Transference (2015), you develop a series of haunting images involving model (“toy”) airplanes and tanks—again tracing our eye back to childhood archetypes, myths, and objects—frozen in ice, and partially exposed. Yet instead of creating a diptych, as in your first two books, you superimpose a schematic atop the photograph: as if the diptych went vertical.

**JH:** Yes, in this new body of work, diagrams related to time and space taken from Schematics are overlaid with images related to disappearance. In Transference, I explore the overlaying and interlocking of image, object, memory, and time.
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DL: What sorts of questions or ideas have been occupying you as you work on this latest body of work?

JH: Some of the claims, questions, and concepts I have been thinking about while working on *Transference* include:

1. A picture’s beauty does not necessarily depend on the things portrayed in it.
2. What is the relationship between memory and light?
3. How does one provoke a moment of appreciation rather than of mere recollection?
4. Memories are not found, they are made; they are not fixed but malleable. What makes memories precious is the fear of forgetting them. Memories therefore consist of constructions, and later reconstructions, and broader narratives, not just simply the storing and retrieving of mental “data.”
5. How does one insert a sense of time back into a digital image?

DL: This last question stands out a bit, perhaps especially since your education and most of your photographic work up to this point has been made with analog equipment and film. Is your question, then, about the way we’re creating images now, or some other attribute of the ever-expanding digital realm?

JH: In many ways I think this work, *Transference*, was made in reaction to a world saturated with digital images, and a world, for me, that includes changes since the birth of my son two years ago. Before his birth, I wanted a very clean and unblemished surface to my images. After taking time off from photography to be a new parent, I felt a little lost and disoriented upon my return. The digital image is normally an impenetrable surface: it is not made by one’s hand; it has not been mediated through touch or material. After the very hands-on, tactile nature of being a new parent, I had a reaction against this non-corporeal, non-reciprocal digital quality I was seeing everywhere.

DL: The digital image is behind glass at the moment of its creation. There is no longer a process—exposure to film, developing, printing, framing—that enables us to select and cull. Every image is luminous, framed, and protected by a sheen of glass.

JH: Absolutely, and I think that being out of touch behind glass affects how we engage with the world. I had a reaction against this distance or separation, and because of that I started to rework and reconfigure the *Transference* images. This work became my attempt to find my own place in photography again, a way for me to treat certain images more like the construction of memories, and also created an occasion for me to emit my own frequency rather than absorb the frequencies around me.

DL: There are so many touchstones here—many of them evoking the materiality and attributes of the photograph-as-object (light, glow, aura), and also how photographs work upon us, in terms of beauty, time, memory, appreciation, and recollection—and perhaps, negatively, or in troubling ways, in terms of alienation, the mummification of past moments, the stoking of nostalgia, and the like. Returning to your list above (and to use terms that seem fitting), how might your work radiate, or find points of attraction, with the work of other artists, photographers, and imagemakers?

JH: I was happy to discover David Byrne’s diagrams of “the human condition”—from *Arboretum* (2006). And Benjamin Betts’s mathematical illustrations of consciousness have been similarly captivating. Unlike Byrne’s drawings, which are handmade and loose, Betts’s work—his schematics—bear much more resemblance to the kinds of tight-line, print iconography I was using in the book *Schematics*.

DL: How did you land on the use of ice?

JH: One night I woke from a dream about a sunken sailing ship. Partially submerged, the sunken ship seemed more beautiful than it had ever been afloat. I wanted to capture that ethereal feeling in a
photograph, and I started freezing small model objects that I built related to what seemed like collective memory—plastic kits of ships and airplanes used in military conflict—as a way of getting close to that feeling.

DL: This is the first time you’ve mentioned anything like a shared or collective experience. Despite using Transference as part of your personal journey back to photography, to “emit [your] own frequency,” as you noted earlier, might Transference also represent, even accidentally or unconsciously invite, a shift to icons or images of a more social nature?

JH: That may be. I guess the books were more personal—both in their imagery and their words—but Transference does find me trying to connect with symbolism that goes beyond my own experience, or, for that matter, individual experience per se.

DL: Your use of warships and warplanes, then, becomes a bid to connect to historical memory—to a memory beyond your own?

JH: Yes, and for a while it was a way for me to reconnect with my exiled sense of “Englishness,” as the first models I was building all have important references to English cultural memory—for example, the use of the British Churchill Mk. VII tank from World War II.

DL: Such objects give us something to ponder aside from the now ubiquitous image, and allegory, of drones. The mood of the images in Transference as well as the use of elaborate, stately mechanical machines calls to mind O. Winston Link’s work. Perhaps Hotshot Eastbound (1956)—with its cars at a drive-in, a movie screening an airplane, and a passing train billowing steam—was an inspiration?

JH: Yes, Link’s work has always been important for me—but funny enough, less so the picture you mention. Images like Shaffers Crossing Roundhouse (1958), The Y6 on the Shaffers Crossing turntable (1956), Train #2 arrives at Waynesboro Station (1955), and Train #17, the Birmingham Special, arriving at Rural Retreat, Virginia (1957) spoke more to me. In these works, I was caught up by the isolation and the way Link creates a latent quality of power in the trains—power somehow arrested or stilled. Like Link, I have photographed in darkness, at night with strobe lighting, for many years. I used the same approach to elicit an emotional response in the Transference series, albeit on a miniature scale.

DL: So, in an important sense, scale doesn’t matter when it comes to our emotional relationships with objects?

JH: I think scale is less important, in part because memory doesn’t seem to differentiate between the sizes of things.

DL: Also, by using strobes, doesn’t Link give us a glimpse of something we couldn’t see (trains at night) and simultaneously create a device for appreciating familiar objects in new ways?

JH: The trains, the steam, the buildings are always there in the daylight, but as with any great artist, Link’s use of light, framing, tone, perspective, and focus transforms our capacity to see.

DL: To see what is in front of our eyes but goes largely unseen.

JH: Right. In my case—despite their size—just by adding ice, the planes and tanks in the Transference series seem to regain their potency as objects.
DL: They still make a deep emotional resonance despite their diminutive size. Such an insight draws a through line to the affective power of signs, symbols, schematics, models, alphabets, and so much more in your work that addresses how we feel in relation to the structures that give us meaning. Like an alphabet or a language, icons or objects, photographs contribute to the shape of memory even as they might summon it. As you continue to evolve your work from analog photography into the new space of digital tools and imagery, are there any other projects you’re developing?

JH: Perhaps like everyone else, I have an idea for an app.

DL: Of course! It used to be “I’m working on a screenplay.” Now it’s app development. A sign of the times, and an indication of how another miniature device is shaping our individual and collective experience. Will the next generation recall memories of cherished—but-now-defunct apps the way some people speak nostalgically of early video games, or a generation before, of double-feature Saturday matinees?

JH: The motivation for the app might be tapping into something nostalgic again. I’ve been thinking about what might be called “electronic texture,” and an app that would capture part of a lost analog experience, not by sending images instantly between users, but instead by reintroducing a delay of time between recipients and the content they’re sharing.

DL: I’m not clear how it works. Someone is notified that I sent a picture but the note says the image will arrive . . . later? What about contemporary culture’s already well-developed addiction to electronic instantaneity?

JH: Right, this is not necessarily a commercial idea! The way I see it, we live in a culture now of not-seeing works, and increasingly, technology and technological processes remaining hidden from our sight. The app would restore a sense of a time-based, visual processing. The app would constantly recalibrate itself as images are formed and sent, adjusting what might be called the rate of revelation. In essence, images would be developed over time (as they were in an earlier, analog era). In that suspended or elongated moment between creation, development, and final delivery—I believe that meaning, fulfillment, and value could emerge for users. As Albert Einstein said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.” And I would add, “as we come to know it.”

DL: All of this suggests a more serious sense of “app development.”

JH: Until recently, photographers were not just artists of time (taking images at the fraction of a second), but artisans of the darkroom: watching images develop in chemistry. Perhaps digital technology can be used to restore time—to slow down processes—so they can be appreciated anew: with more concentration, with more affection.

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