



# Imposed/Opposed

*Niall Benvie discusses his latest project, in which hubris meets its nemesis in the Icelandic landscape*

## INSIGHT

For first-time visitors to Iceland it can be hard to know how best to start photographing it. Many are satisfied with recreating familiar iconography, with all the reassurance that provides, but I encourage our clients to put a more personal stamp on their work – to figure out their own response to the place and then suggest ways to clarify that in their photographs. A good starting point is to settle on a broad-ranging theme – energy, incongruity, space or layers, for example – and then interpret what you see within that framework. This approach produces a more coherent set of images than an unfocused one, with pictures that reinforce and make sense of each other.

I need to ask you to indulge me a little here, and allow the possibility that a photograph can be *about* something. We tend to think of photographs as being *of* things, but when they are *about*, well, that's taking us into the territory of art, and I know in many people's minds there is a mischievous link between art, artifice and pretence. That is not my intention, though: I'm using the term 'art' here to describe an approach and a mindset, rather than to presume a value for the work.

I've been assembling a series of pictures for the last three years about how we superimpose

ourselves on wild landscapes and how, as a matter of course, natural processes oppose our efforts and inexorably undermine them. This is evident at all levels, from a horsetail plant forcing itself up through the tiniest crack in tarmac to the indifference of tectonic movements to our sophisticated structures, or in the drying of an aquifer serving a desert city. Sooner or later, the hubris of our domination of nature is laid bare, and the art is in creating a set of pictures that demonstrate this.

Iceland has been a particularly productive place to explore these avenues. The balance of power between the land and the people has always been much more heavily weighted in the land's favour than elsewhere in Europe and it is easy to imagine that the impermanent nature of many of the country's buildings is a concession to this. Why build to last, or with elegance, when popular memory is filled with natural calamity? Many modern structures appear to have been built without the sense of resignation of older impositions, but their boldness makes them no less vulnerable; the remains of the steel Skeiðará Bridge, once the longest in Iceland, but destroyed in a cataclysmic glacial flood in 1996, serve as evidence of this.

In this set of pictures, the structures are centre stage, but usually I hint at their vulnerability. Sometimes they are dwarfed by the wild landscape around them, sometimes buffeted by wind or overwhelmed by snow. There may be a glacier lurking behind or some other unknown menace concealed by fog. All these devices can be brought into play to guide the viewer towards a particular view of the place, which is rarely hopeful.

The gloomy undertones of this *Imposed/ Opposed* series – particularly those photographs explicitly about decay – chime harmoniously (if unintentionally) with the two following pieces of literature. If you're interested in these themes, have a look at them.

Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*, describes a father and son's journey across a devastated landscape following an unspecified catastrophe that has rendered crop lands infertile and turned cities to ruins and people upon each other. It is not a light read, but one in which the landscape I imagine as I read it is mirrored in the ones I see in Iceland. On that level, these pictures can be dismissed as dystopian, produced for whatever weird reasons people revel in dystopia. So here I need to ask you to allow another possibility – that while they get their 'look' from *The Road*,



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their intention might be nothing more strange than sounding a warning note.

The writers of the *Dark Mountain Project* manifesto, Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine, are the figureheads of a group of artists and writers who believe that the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are nothing more than myths, and that forgetting this has brought us to a point of crisis that no-one is willing to look squarely in the eye. The myths of our separation from nature, of our right to exploit it without restraint, of the nature and inevitability of 'progress' and a need for endless economic growth are, in their eyes, myths held no less closely nor with any more basis in truth than the myths of pre-Enlightenment societies. They see their job as writers to 'look over the edge, face with a steady eye the world that is coming, and rise to the challenge of ecocide with a challenge of its own: an artistic response to the crumbling of the empires of the mind.'

I wish I believed that art like this could ever reach beyond a small audience. Photographs tend to have more prospect of doing this than words, but relatively few people are equipped to interpret them; most look only for the 'of'. As a species, we constantly show an extraordinary capacity to adapt to new, ever lower, more wretched baselines, especially if all of those around us are experiencing the same. So while these images may propose an alternative world view, where the symbols of progress are recast as emblems of hubris, I doubt they will affect any outcome other than to satisfy my need to express an idea.

That, though, is the point of art photography. Its actual value, the thing that should protect it from careless accusations of pretence, is that it is produced for the creator, rather than the market. Work informed by 'what the market wants' can't legitimately call itself art (although there are plenty of examples of paintings by

old masters that may not have been executed without patronage).

The post-production work I do on these photographs is intended to convey a sense of otherness; I want the things I portray to be a little removed from our everyday experience. If I were photographing a product, I'd want to represent the subject as closely as possible to what the buyer's experience of it would be, but if I'm photographing an idea, I want to lead the viewer to the same conclusion as me by choosing a look that matches my intention and what I'm feeling about a scene. In this regard, I make extensive use of software that allows me a high degree of refinement.

Whether or not you agree with the conclusions of the *Dark Mountain Project*, it is clear that there are interesting alternatives to shooting the same few iconic locations in low angle light. We are not photocopiers.

