

WORDS BY STEPHEN MCLAREN

That there is a classy bookshop on the legendary bacchanalian Sunset Strip in Los Angeles is odd in itself, but that a relatively unknown Scottish photographer should be there reading from a recently published memoir, entitled *Chancers*, is doubly odd. What photographer other than the likes of a Salgado or a Leibowitz gets to write a memoir and have it published by Random House? While the black leather brigade with their conspicuous piercings queue up for the nearby Whisky a Go Go, a crowd of youngish Angelenos have shown up at Book Soup to hear Graham MacIndoe and his partner Susan Stellan detail how photography sometimes affords its devotees a second chance in life.

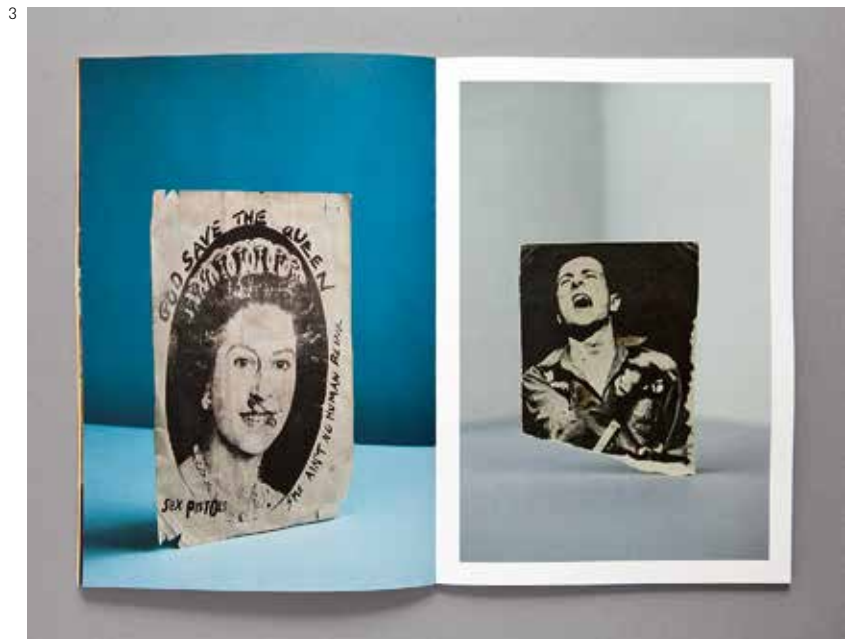
The tale that unfolds in the memoir is a salutary one in which the act of photography transcends the image-making and becomes a force for redemption in itself. A talented photographer from a working-class town in central Scotland, he gained a master's degree in photography at the Royal College of Art and then jumped ship for New York in the 1990s, where he quickly made a name for himself as a portrait photographer for high-profile editorial and advertising clients. At that time, editorial photography was booming, fees were generous and international travel was a regular perk of the business. MacIndoe worked hard and played hard and he soon acquired a cocaine, then a heroin, habit, which turned his life inside out. A marriage imploded, he found it hard to retain clients, and ultimately a drugs bust found him banged up in Rikers Island, one of the nastiest penal facilities in the US. If that wasn't bad enough, on being released from his four-month spell in prison, he was sent to an immigration detention facility for some months, after which he expected to be deported back to Britain.

A single photograph, a heroic portrait of National Football League quarterback legend Peyton Manning, taken by MacIndoe for the sports broadcaster ESPN, became his get-out-of-jail-free card. The judge overseeing his deportation hearing flicked through his website and came upon the shot, which as a big sports fan he remembered from an advertising campaign. Recognising MacIndoe's talents as a photographer and hearing that he had completed his drug rehab programme, the judge looked kindly on his situation and allowed him to stay in the US with his young son.

Several years on from this moment when the photographic gods smiled on him, MacIndoe is a changed man. He has become an American citizen, been taken on by a gallery, published two books of photographs, been appointed an adjunct professor at the prestigious Parsons School of Art and Design, and just had his memoir released. The story of how he bounced back from his addiction and imprisonment and returned to life as a working photographer is a life-affirming one that reminds us that photography can change lives for the better. At the bookshop reading, MacIndoe, with his Scottish accent fully intact, was candid about his earlier failures and the hurt he had caused friends and family along the way, and he also spoke of the difficulties in trying to resurrect his career.

"My plan when I was in Rikers was that I would get my shit together and print a new folio, get a new website and start again. But then I got taken into immigration detention and I went through a period of not knowing whether I would be staying in America or be sent back to the UK. When I was released it seemed that the whole photography and technology landscape had changed so much during the 10 years I was an addict. Digital had come in a big way; there were things called raw profiles I'd never heard of! I had some old film cameras which I hadn't been able to sell for drugs. I also had some rolls of film from before I was in prison that I wanted developed. So I went up to the photo district in Chelsea but couldn't find a lab that was still processing film. Everyone was telling me that editorial work had dried up since I'd been away and it took me a while to get over that hurdle.

- 1 Graham MacIndoe © Susan Stellan.
 - 2 Self-portrait, 2006, from the series *Coming Clean*.
 - 3 Spread from *All the Young Punks*, published by S_U_N, 2016.
 - 4 The White Stripes, outtake Polaroid from a shoot for *The New York Times Magazine*, 2001.
 - 5 Portrait from the ongoing series *Urban Runners*, NYC 2016.
- Images © Graham MacIndoe.



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The fall and rise of Graham MacIndoe

“Image-makers are continually inspired by what we see, even at our worst. Many artists have gone through depression, angst and pain and still made work in the midst of it all”

I was thinking, how am I going to re-enter the profession now that there are millions of new photographers out there, but no work?”

During the chaos of addiction, much of MacIndoe’s archive, portfolios and equipment had been scattered to the winds. What had not been sold or stolen was in various storage facilities across New York. Although he had been clean for some time, it was a series of self-portraits he had taken while injecting heroin that kick-started his second career as a photographer. This collection of gruelling images, entitled *Coming Clean*, taken with a primitive point-and-shoot digital camera on a self-timer, was evidence not only of his basest urges but also that his photographic skills around lighting and composition were still intact. The pictures, a blisteringly honest portrayal of a junkie’s descent into oblivion, were published by *New York* magazine and *The Guardian* and were recently acquired by the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh.

“Image-makers are continually inspired by what we see, even at our worst. Many artists have gone through depression, angst and pain and still made work in the midst of it all. Photography is a bit different because there’s a technical aspect to it, but early on in the process of my addiction I was photographing the people around me. As I got more addicted I started turning the camera on myself. It was a compulsion. I was dysfunctional, living in the projects, not working, but it didn’t mean I wasn’t capable of thinking visually, picking up a camera and recording that. It didn’t matter that they were \$90 point-and-shoot cameras that couldn’t shoot raw. I just wanted to capture these moments in my life.”

Anne Lyden, the curator of photography at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, has taken a strong interest in this series since she met MacIndoe a couple of years ago. “As both the photographer and the subject he reveals a remarkable candour and courage in these portraits. The photographs are incredibly important in documenting the devastating impact of addiction, yet remain intrinsically arresting and moving explorations of the self.” The 25 prints acquired from the *Coming Clean* series will be the focus of an exhibition at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in 2017.

The interest generated by this raw and visceral series and the incredibly candid account given in accompanying interviews led to the memoir, which was published last summer, co-written by his partner Stellin, who is a New York journalist. Rikers Island, like those other infamous American jails, San Quentin and Attica, has a reputation for being a brutal hole from which no one emerges mentally unscathed. But according to his account in *Chancers*, MacIndoe found his mind photographically engaged. “I’d love to be able to photograph what it’s like in here. Not just the shitty parts about being locked up, but there are times you can still appreciate the way flashes of lightening illuminate the dorm or the sun comes through the slats of the windows. Like tonight – the sunset is casting these bands of orange and yellow light across the walls and the shadows of people passing by make it almost look like a painting.”

Re-entering a new photographic world where the screen had superseded the printed page and many real-world networks of support had migrated online, MacIndoe refused to believe that the new era would bypass him. “All my negs and folios were lost or in storage

so it took me a long time to tackle that. And I was even considering working for the parks department, or thinking that Starbucks might not be so bad after all. I was very lucky in that I found a part-time teaching job at Parsons School of Design, and that’s become the backbone of my practice and my grounding. There are lots of students in the faculty that made me really positive to be a photographer again, and the school gave me access to equipment that I could use. So I bit the bullet, updated my website, went out and shot a bunch of portraits, took my folio around and got work – not as much as I used to get, but enough. So that process was difficult for me, but part of it was using the self-portraits to get access to some people who got me hired to do other work for non-profits and magazines who had issues on addiction and homelessness. Sometimes my backstory has been a hindrance, but sometimes it’s been a help, because most people have been empathetic to what I’ve been through. Maybe there’s been one or two occasions when perhaps a designer has chosen someone else as they don’t want a client to Google my name and that’s fair enough.”

While shooting new work for editorial clients, MacIndoe has also managed to find room for personal work by mining a backstory that stretches further than addiction and imprisonment. As befits someone who was once a top talent in Scottish cross-country running, he has been shooting a new running scene in New York, where crews of urban runners hold night-time races across bridges in the city. These portraits of runners [right], taken before and after a street-pounding, night-time run, show a friendly subculture in the making, with dilated pupils and grins revealing the effects of endorphins on flushed faces.

As a teenager in provincial Scotland, the lure of the feisty punk scene in nearby Edinburgh was a draw for MacIndoe and his early experiments with a camera. In the process of reacquiring all his possessions from friends and storage facilities he discovered masses of long-forgotten ephemera and photographs from that scene and wondered if there would be any interest in this blast of late-1970s nostalgia.

“I started flinging it all onto Instagram and calling it sketchbooks, Polaroids and other stuff. It’s crazy how interested people were in this. I was getting loads of followers and comments, which is strange because I’d never understood the power of social media when it came around because I was in addiction and I didn’t care. I found old pictures I’d taken 30 or 40 years ago that I’d developed in the bathroom, never even contact-printed; shots of The Clash, or Edinburgh in the early 80s. A publishing company, Sun, got in touch and asked if there might be a book in it, so I decided to use old photos and ephemera and rephotographed a lot of it as if I was making still lifes with reflectors and little sets. It was a good insight into how light works at its most basic, and making things sculptural.”

Going back to basics and rediscovering photography as a tool for self-empowerment has been a therapeutic experience for this Scottish photographer whose life was in turmoil for more than a decade. From the questions that the audience threw out after the book reading it was apparent that MacIndoe’s story of redemption through photography was an inspiring one, suggesting that there is always a way back if your creative instinct remains intact. **BJP**

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