IF YOU FEEL AN ITCH, SCRATCH IT!
INTERVIEW WITH TOBIAS TITZ
By Christopher Atkins 19 November 2007

Tobias was born in Trier in Germany in 1973. Following high school he entered into an apprenticeship at a photography studio in his hometown, a learning experience that was to last for three years. The studio specialised in portraiture, advertising and weddings. Tobias's employer had a background in photojournalism and news photography and Tobi credits him with providing a working environment that stimulated his own interest in documentary photography.

 "He took really good portrait photographs and showed me how to interact with people, no matter who they were, or what was their background. Whether they were famous or notable personalities, or just people off the street, he treated them all with respect. He didn't direct them too much; he just made them feel really comfortable. It was a country town and sometimes the kind of work photographers do in that environment can very staged and unnatural looking, but his portraits were very natural and unaffected."

"During the three years, I also worked for the local newspaper, shooting sports photographs: mainly soccer, boxing, hockey, wrestling and horse-sports. I did photographs for the local theatre as well, documenting every production and shooting publicity shots. I did all of my own darkroom work, processing film and making prints – all black and white – which gave me have technical control of the entire process from end to end. This meant that I could get exactly what I wanted in terms of cropping, print exposure, tonal range and contrast etc. These days if you shoot black and white film and want to produce prints on conventional black and white papers, you really have to do your own darkroom work, because very few labs still do high quality hand-made black and white printing."

At the end of his formal apprenticeship, Tobias applied, with a folio of his work, to theStaatliche Akademie Fuer Photodesign in Munich. He studied there for three years.

"You had to do a final project for assessment at the end of third year, and for me this was in portraiture, so it was really my major area. My subjects were the members of a band in Hamburg, in which some of the musicians are handicapped, and others are not. I photographed their tour through Germany and Switzerland in 1998 and it was an assignment that involved photojournalism and reportage as much as portraiture...but it was essentially stories about people. It was telling their story and documenting their tour. I have always been interested in just watching people. I could sit in a tram or a cafe all day and watch people."

After graduating, Tobias worked as a freelance assistant and did smaller commercial jobs. One of these involved working for an advertising studio shooting a retail catalogue of hundreds of doorknobs.

"...nothing but doorknobs for a solid week! I had plenty of time for my mind to wander because the job was so boring and repetitive. I had seen some images by Robert Frank, whose work I admire, where he had scratched into the negative with a sharp instrument. Some of Frank's images were on conventional negative film, but some were shot on Polaroid 665 film."

Polaroid instant picture cameras were first marketed in 1948. The cameras used only Polaroid instant picture film, which was a then revolutionary material that provided the photographer with a black-and-white print a couple of minutes after the photo had been taken. This was achieved by packaging the film in a container in which each frame of the film was in its own individual packet, rather than a roll, so that each image was captured on a separate piece of film. Some years later, Polaroid instant colour print films were released to the market.

The usual procedure with Polaroid materials was to shoot the picture and then pull the film packet out of the camera. The action of pulling out the film packet actually started the chemical process of development of that particular image. After the correct developing time, which depended on temperature, the photographer peeled apart the packet to reveal the instant picture.

Although Polaroid instant films were initially marketed to amateur photographers as a technology for snapshots, it soon became obvious that the high image quality of the Polaroid process suggested that it could be very useful to professional photographers for instantly checking results, before shooting on colour transparency film.

Polaroid made a number of fully manual control professional cameras designed specifically for this application, and they were virtually compulsory equipment for serious photographers, in the era before digital capture. Many of the high-end professional film cameras manufactured from the 1950s to the 1990s also had the capability to fit a Polaroid film magazine in place of the usual film magazine, which effectively transformed these cameras into instant picture cameras. Thus the photographer could check results on Polaroid film and then quickly switch the camera over to conventional film, having 'previewed' the result on Polaroid.

A further refinement came when Polaroid marketed a film which gave the photographer both an instant print and in addition, an instant negative as well. This negative was processed in the film packet at the same time as the print. All the photographer had to do was wash and dry the negative, which could then later be

printed and enlarged in the darkroom, just as though it were a conventional black and white film negative. The film Tobias uses is of this type and is called Type 665 film.

Tobias's scratchy portraits are unique in that each finished work is a pair of images. The first image shows the subject; and for the second shot, Tobias asks the subject to walk out of the frame, so he can shoot only the background. It is this negative of the background that he gives to the subject to draw or write upon.

"Usually the subject in a portrait has no possibility to interact with the photo. The subject can relate to the photographer as the shoot progresses, but once the shutter has fired, that's it. I though I would give them the opportunity to comment or contribute to the image itself, that I had just shot. Normally a portrait is just a single image, but I thought I would extend the process by giving the subject the chance to have a direct input to the finished piece."

"When you ask people to have an input - to leave a mark, it gives them an active role not a passive role. They have the opportunity to do whatever they want: I don't tell them what to write at all, or even if it has to be words. They can draw or design anything they like on the space."

"Some people don't initially know what to do, and I say, 'Do whatever comes into your mind.' Some people are very spontaneous and some take a long time to decide what to write. But, it's always interesting to see what people come up with. No one has ever been unable to come up with something to say. In the beginning, I decided to call these images 'scratchies', because to make a mark like this on a negative, the person actually scratches off the wet photographic emulsion. This means that whatever they write or draw comes out as black lines on the final photographic print, and appears as text or graphics which seems to float above, or in front of, the out of focus image of the background."

I came up with the idea of making two shots so that the two steps, the two halves of the process, would be quite separate. There are two representations of the subject: one is their physical appearance and the other is a statement or comment that reflects their inner thoughts or consciousness. In the image of the shepherd (at David Johns' Gallery) I would never have expected him to write that at all. In another portrait from the same session (NOT shown at David Johns' Gallery) the shepherd wrote: "I'm not like this, I'm totally different."

"If a subject writes more than one scratchy, I make a choice. It has to work both ways, with the writing but also the aesthetics of the shot. Both have to resonate with my experience of the person and the interaction of the shoot."

"I give the subject a Polaroid print on the spot. This would be the instant print of the image of themselves only at this stage. The scratching is done on the Polaroid negative and it is not until the negative has been scanned and assembled next to the chosen portrait image – all done in Photoshop – that the complete work 'emerges' as

a finished double image, for the first time. Then a print is made of the complete work, in its final form.”

"The controls in Photoshop have replaced the conventional printing controls one used to use in the chemical darkroom. Because of the unique tonal range of 665 film, I have to be careful to scan at high resolution to preserve the detail and luminosity of the original. The flesh tones and highlights on 665 film have a silvery quality that is part of the look and feel of the work.”
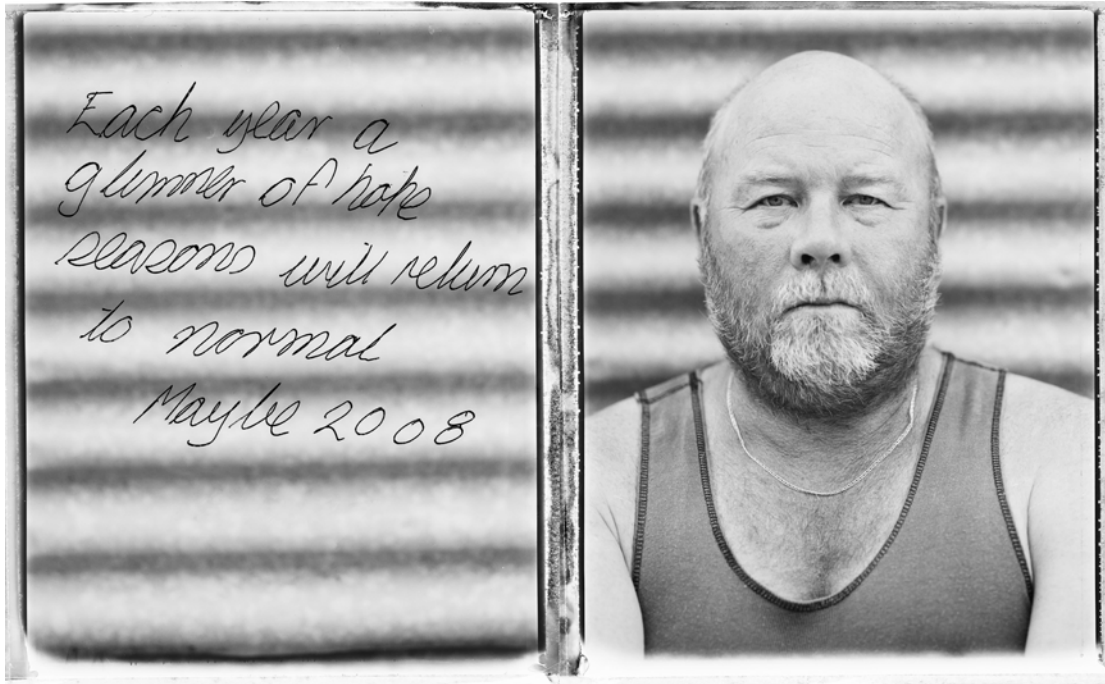
"The camera I use is a 5x4 inch monorail, and you get a totally different image than if you use a small camera, because people have to concentrate fully on the process. Once I have set up the framing and focussed the camera, they then have to stand still for about 10 seconds while I load the film and take the shot. If they move forwards or backwards, they will move out of focus and I work with the camera aperture wide open, so there is almost no depth-of-field. The focus has to be exactly on the eyes.”

"Since 1998 when I started this, I have always used a consistent approach. This involves a wide-open lens, which is always the same focal length (240mm); no flash; no fill; no added shading or reflectors, and always daylight. Usually I shoot in open shade, but sometimes I used direct sunlight at the end of the day. I don't use sunlight in the middle of the day because it looks too harsh and the shadows are too dense. It looks aesthetically wrong for me.”

"I like the look of shallow depth-of-field because it separates the person from the context, but there is still a hint of detail. I don't want the person to blend into the background like you would get if you shot at F/32. Wide-open aperture on my lens is F/5.6, and at a subject to camera distance of less than 2 metres, the depth-of-field is about 2cm, or less. It's really shallow.”

"Also, the softly-focussed background gives a good canvas upon which they can write. If the background were sharply focussed, then the detail of the image would compete too much with the writing.”

"People have to really concentrate, and I take only a couple of shots or three, instead of say 20 or 30 or 50 with a digital camera. There is much more attention to detail with the very slow and deliberate way you use a large-format camera on a tripod.

Also the subject sees, as the shoot progresses, that this is not a casual snapshot. They see that I am putting a lot of thought and effort into making the picture, and when the time comes for them to make their input, they write in a way that reflects and complements that very considered and careful approach."

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS
Exhibits locally and overseas.
Represented in the ACMP Collection.
Won Polaroid International Award (Europe and Africa) in 2000 (for scratchies)
Won Head On Portrait Prize in 2008.
Nominated in 2006 and 2007 by Capture Magazine as one of Australia's
Top 10 Portrait Photographers.
Member of the **MAP Group** of documentary photographers currently working on the ***Beyond Reasonable Drought*** project.

Lives in Melbourne and works the world over.

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The images in this article and also the ones in the accompanying Powerpoint were shot as part of Tobi's involvement with the ***Beyond Reasonable Drought*** Project. This is an Australia-wide documentary photography initiative involving about 30 professional photographers who are working on a voluntary basis to record the effects of the current severe drought that is still damaging much of the country. The images from the Beyond Reasonable Drought project will be exhibited at Old Parliament House in Canberra in mid-2008.