

THINGS THAT GO UNNOTICED

Mark Power's *Black Country Stories*, a commission from Multistory, has seen the Magnum member continuing his ongoing search for the forgotten, the overlooked, and the beautiful, in the unlikely environs of the West Midlands. Below, he discusses the project with David Land, while on page 334, we take a look at images produced by students at Sandwell and Walsall colleges in response to Power's work



“A dolf Hitler hated makeup, by all accounts”, says Mark Power. “He wouldn’t allow anyone near him with anything but a clean, scrubbed face - the Aryan ideal. But what was happening in Britain during the war was the complete opposite: women rouged their faces, and wore bright lipstick.

“When things are tough and you don’t have much money, just having your eye-

brows plucked or your nails painted can make you feel better about the world, and yourself, at least for a while. And there’s nothing wrong with that.”

At the time of this interview, Power was in the final stages of preparation for his latest exhibition, *Mark Power’s Black Country Stories*, which opens at Walsall’s New Art Gallery on 20 July.

The project, which also involves an educa-

tional element, working with students from Sandwell and Walsall colleges, was commissioned by the arts charity Multistory, and follows on from *Martin Parr’s Black Country Stories*, which it commissioned previously.

“I can’t speak highly enough of the work Multistory are doing from their little office in West Bromwich”, says Power. “They are demonstrating that you don’t need to be unambitious in times like this, and are rightly



getting recognition from organisations such as the Arts Council and the BBC. Their Director, Emma Chetcuti, wanted David Goldblatt to work on their next project, so she called him up, invited him over, and convinced him to come. *David Goldblatt's Black Country Stories* - wonderful!

"My brief was simple enough: make a project of my choosing in the Black Country. Emma took me underneath the M5-M6 motorway link initially. Then I remember walking down West Bromwich High Street, looking at what it was like today compared to late 19th century photographs Emma had shown me in the local library, when the place was thriving.

"A lot of beautiful Victorian buildings have been torn down since then, to be replaced with 1960s and '70s monstrosities. There are a lot of boarded up shops. It's always the areas that are already economically challenged that are hardest hit in a recession. In Dudley, another part of the Black Country, even the McDonald's has gone elsewhere.

"I began to notice beauty parlours everywhere, all doing good business, apparently. There seemed to be more than the average number of gentlemen's clubs too, and, as well, I did some research, and found that

both industries, beauty and sex, often thrive in times of austerity.

"I worked a lot with one beauty parlour,

where I heard a story that only the day before a woman had been in and said, 'I can't decide whether to get my nails done, or buy nappies for my baby.' While this is certainly very sad, it is also fascinating."

Power commenced the project as he usually would, photographing urban landscapes on his 5x4 camera, but says that it wasn't long before he began thinking, "This isn't re-

ings; a woman's stomach wobbling while she stood on a vibrating platform; and another having the names of her five children tattooed onto her thigh.

"I filmed a pole dancer and a lap dancer in two gentleman's clubs, and I made a film in one of those fish pedicure salons, where you put your feet into a tank of water to be eaten by baby piranhas. They're very big in Walsall."

"Even though I'm not going out with a 35mm camera, I'm still, first and foremost, a documentary photographer."

ally enough. What I'm seeing - and feeling - is much more complicated."

In response, he started to produce moving images. "For the first time, at least with any serious intent, I started to make some 'videos', he says. "The first was of a woman having her nails extravagantly painted from start to finish. Then I made films of eyes being made up; a number of gruesome pierc-

As a part of the project, Power also made a number of photographs of people wearing glamorous shoes. "They are worn as a statement of personal pride", he says. "These are sold in a shop on pavement level, so you only see them on the feet and the shoes always against a grey crumbling backdrop.

"I also became interested in the names given to beauty products and tattooists' dyes.

Some of these names are romantic, as you'd expect, while others are violent: tattoo dyes such as 'corpse grey' and 'napalm death', for instance."

Power's work stands among that of a new breed of photographers represented by Magnum. "There's always been a rift in the agency between, for want of better words, journalism and art", he says. "With the photographers that have joined it in recent years, such as Soth, Goldberg, Parke, Sanguinetti, and even myself, Magnum is a difficult organisation to define nowadays. But while we're all working in very different ways, we all make long term personal projects."

"Even though I'm not going out with a 35mm camera, I'm still, first and foremost, a documentary photographer. My working methods aren't particularly new; Bruce Davidson used the same equipment I do while making his seminal East 100th Street project in the late 1960s. There's a great tradition of Magnum photographers making movies too, so I'm really not breaking any new ground; I'm just breaking new ground for myself."

Power is producing all the images for the Walsall show himself, as pigment prints, for the first time - no mean feat. "At 44x56ins, they are quite big", he says. "I've scanned the negatives on my Imacon, and I'm out-putting them on my HP printer."

"I got some C-type prints done as tests, as I normally would, but finally decided the time had come to make them myself. The inkjets are just as sharp, and making them at home means I have complete control." The prints in the show will be interspersed with plasma monitors showing his videos, while Power's photographs of tattoo studios and dyes will be shown in the context of a sound installation, in which the names of beauty products and tattooists' dyes are read out.

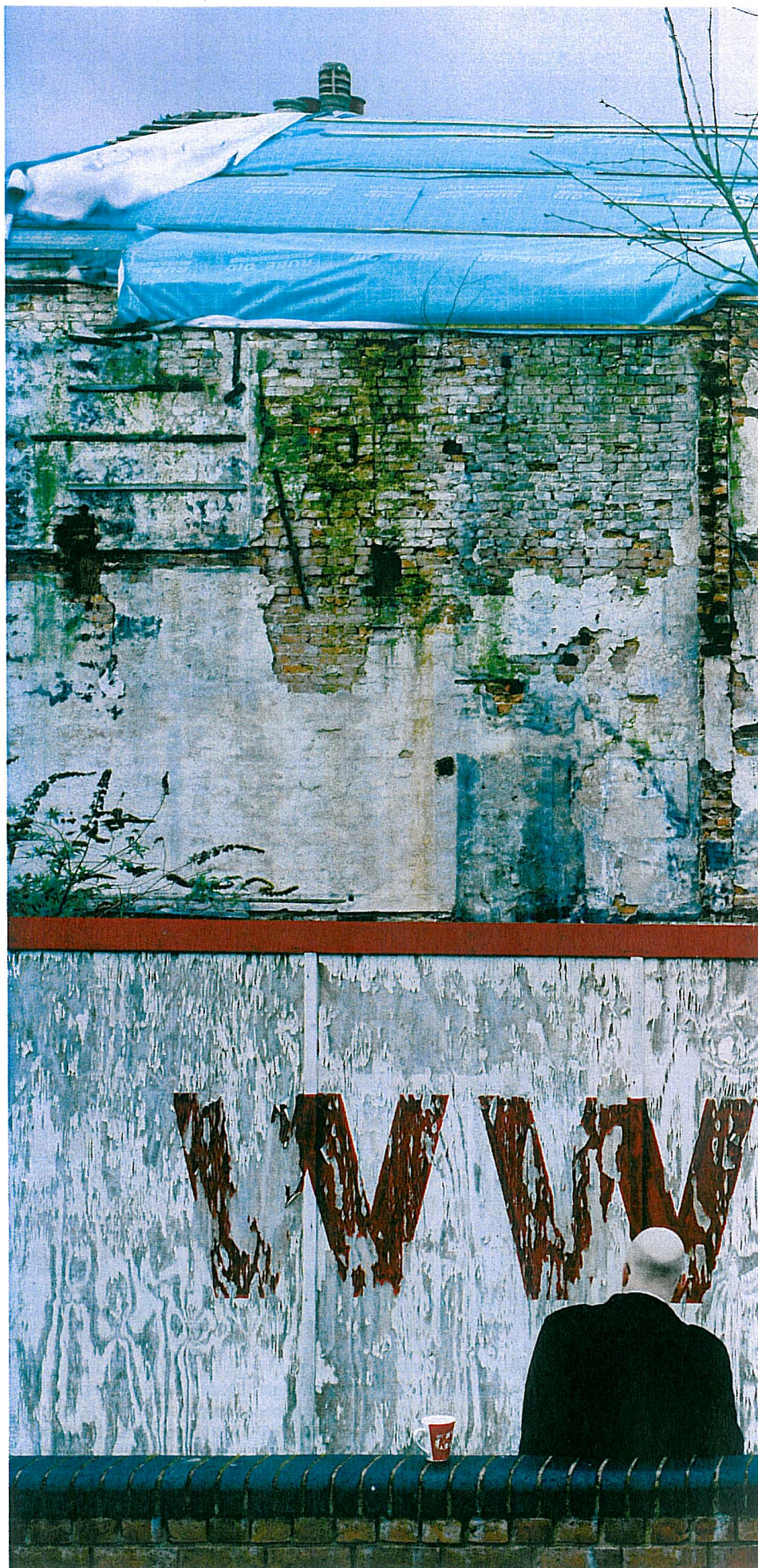
"They are mixed up together in the sound installation, which will hang in the air at the exhibition, beautifully read by an actress with a strong Black Country accent", he says. "We'll savour the words and phrases as a kind of poetic mantra, which will emphasise both their evocative, descriptive power, and their utter ridiculousness."

In using a voiceover to accompany his images, Power has returned to a tactic he first employed for his groundbreaking exhibition *The Shipping Forecast*, when the evocative poetic quality of the language used in the forecast was underlined and made manifest.

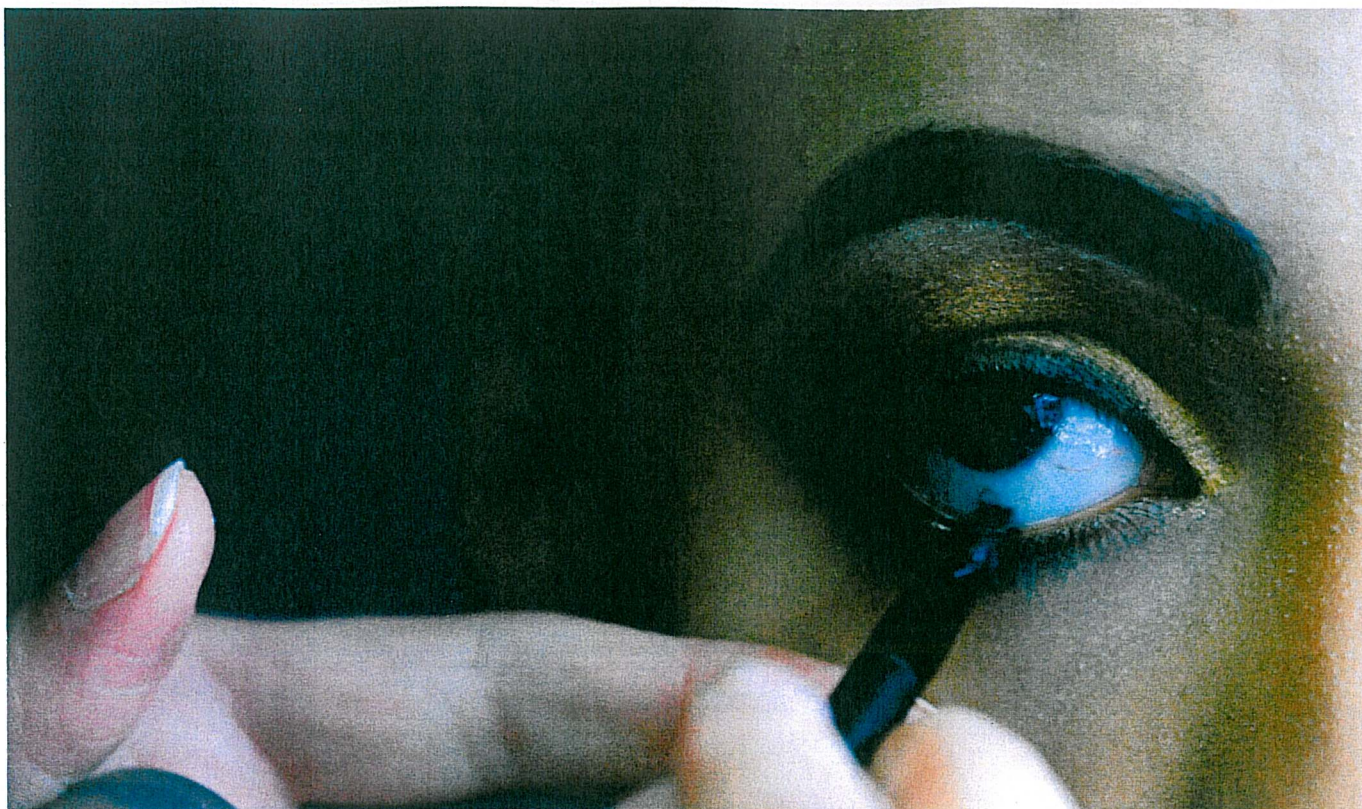
"This mixture of large format and video is a big step into the unknown for me", he says. "While they're not technically the best movies in the world, I'm much more interested in the ideas they convey. However, it remains to be seen if anyone will take any notice of my gentle, rather quiet photographs, when in the proximity of a video of a tongue piercing, or a lap dancer."

Despite describing his Walsall work as, "characteristically uncomprising ... fairly bleak urban landscapes", Power adds that, in keeping with the rest of his work, he is raising questions of what might be considered beautiful.

"I've tried to make arresting images of an







austere landscape", he says. "It's wonderfully interesting historically, and there is clearly a rather strange beauty pervading the place. It's ambitious, but I'm hoping to produce a series of prints which will encourage viewers - the majority of whom will be local - to stop and think about the things they pass by every day unnoticed - and get them thinking about a different notion of beauty.

"It's an idea I've been interested in for some time, and was certainly a theme I followed in Poland while making *The Sound of Two Songs*. That was a reaction to the kind of tourist books you could buy there - always

pretty castles and lakes, shot in bright sunshine - which was the antithesis of what I was seeing myself."

Power currently shoots on 5x4 film. I ask whether he sees himself converting to digital any time soon. "There will come a time", he says, "but I don't have the £25,000 I'd have to invest to give me similar quality to that I can achieve on celluloid. I'd rather spend the money I do have shooting film while I still can."

There are other benefits to working with film, he adds, and he particularly appreciates the discipline it brings to his practice.

"Strangely, I quite enjoy the frugality imposed by the sheer expense of it", he says. "Currently, it costs about £10 every time I press the button, to get to the contact sheet stage. This certainly concentrates the mind. Therefore, I normally expose only one sheet in each situation. But it also means I could probably sit down in a café at the end of a day's shooting and accurately draw every picture I'd made that day.

"I also enjoy the theatricality of it. I was out on the streets of the West Midlands with my 5x4 camera, my big tripod flung over my shoulder, dark cloth around my neck, and never once did I experience any animosity: only interest, particularly from the generation of (mostly) males who recognised the camera.

"You can't be secretive when you're using equipment like this. You might as well walk around with a flashing light on your head. There's nothing surreptitious in this body of work, nothing stolen.

"Something else I love about large format are the tiny details that emerge on close scrutiny, which I'm often not aware of myself when I press the button. I'd like to think that people will spend a little time in front of the work enjoying these. I've never been one for giving people pictures on a plate, for easy consumption.

"Although of course my work is always subjective, I try to make my pictures as close as possible to reality. I'm not interested in adding 'dynamism', so I rarely use very wide angle lenses. I've been using the same camera, with the same two lenses - a standard 150mm and the slightly wider 135mm - for a very long time. I know these lenses so well, I can stand in front of a landscape and be aware of exactly what I'm going to get. I make compositional and structural decisions



very quickly, then move on."

The pressure of only making one exposure per scene sounds enough to strike fear into the heart of even the most experienced photographer, but Power is comfortable with his technique - shooting negative, which provides good latitude. He has had to be equally confident when editing down the work for exhibition.

"There are about 450 negatives in the whole project", he says, "but just 26 prints in the show. It could have been a lot more, but I wanted to retain some feeling of space in the gallery."

Meanwhile, Power is looking at republishing *The Shipping Forecast*, published in 1996, which sold 10,000 copies. "Having recently gone through countless contacts and scanned the negatives for the first time", he says, "I've realised there's an awful lot of work that never saw the light of day. So, perhaps, there's potential for a new edit of the project."

"We still have a flat in Krakow, Poland, and I've just finished a new project about the power of the Catholic Church out there, which I'm hoping to publish this year. It's called *Mass*. And I've started to research another subject, which is also Poland-based."

Despite the recession, Power remains optimistic about the future of photography. "While it's really tough out there, hard work, commitment and good ideas remain as important as ever", he says. "There may be more photographers now, but there are also a lot more opportunities, for those who want them enough and are prepared to think outside the box."

"Photography seems to be constantly reinventing itself and throwing up new possibilities. I advise my students to keep up to date with what is going on. They may not



be able to afford many photobooks, but there are some exceptional photo blogs out there that enable us all to feel part of a wider international community. The smart ones are learning from what's happening across the world, adopting and adapting interesting ideas, and making fresh work in their own backyards. None of this costs very much, and it's very exciting."

All images from Mark Power's *Black Country Stories*.

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MARK POWER'S BLACK COUNTRY STORIES

20 July-15 Sept A special evening viewing will take place on Thurs 19 July from 18.00-20.00. All welcome.

Sat 8 Sept Join Mark Power with Director of Multistory Emma Chetcuti, and Deborah Robinson from The New Art Gallery Walsall, for an informal tour of the exhibition. Free, but book in advance.

14.00.

01922 654400,
www.thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk

POWER AND BEAUTY

World renowned photographer Mark Power, launched a project with college students to capture the unseen beauty of the Black Country. A selection of the best images will be exhibited alongside his own at an exhibition this summer, as project co-ordinator Phil Brooks reveals



In January of this year, world renowned Magnum photographer and Professor of Photography at Brighton University Mark Power visited Walsall College, to give a talk about his career, and launch a project for photography students from both Walsall and Sandwell colleges - two newly built Black Country colleges at the heart of regeneration in the area.

The student project has been closely tied to Mark's current *Black Country Stories* work, discussed on the previous pages. A selection of the best student images from both colleges are being exhibited together with Mark's work at The New Art Gallery, Walsall.

The brief was to create still images or short digital films that explore the social landscape of the Black Country, and document everyday life in the region, under the theme of hidden beauty. Rather than aspiring to copy Mark's vision, students were encouraged to aim for personal, novel photographic insights, which relate to their own familiar perception of the Black Country, but which in some way evoke or question the idea of unseen beauty.

For these young imagemakers, the Black Country, an area often associated with post-industrial ugliness and economic decline, is a challenging yet compelling backdrop on which to test their observational skills, in the search for arresting images, which challenge these stereotypes and raise questions about the future of Britain's heartlands.

For the photographic commentator Susan Sontag, photography is essentially always bound by the competing tensions of beautification and truth-telling. Perhaps now more than ever, for photographers communicating through computers as well as cameras, the notion of manipulation is also key.

Essentially, this project sought to promote the importance of being a thinking and questioning photographer. Photography is now finally established as a contemporary art, despite being essentially retrospective in nature, revealing what has occurred, be it in the near or distant past. The camera is all-seeing but undiscriminating.

As a communicative medium, our social history is reliant on photographers' propen-

sity to be nosy, poignantly questioning life and times, people and place, through the scrutiny of the lens. What better medium than photography, with its roving, unremitting eye, for capturing a collective snapshot of Britain's industrial heart, while looking forward at a time of regeneration for the Black Country?

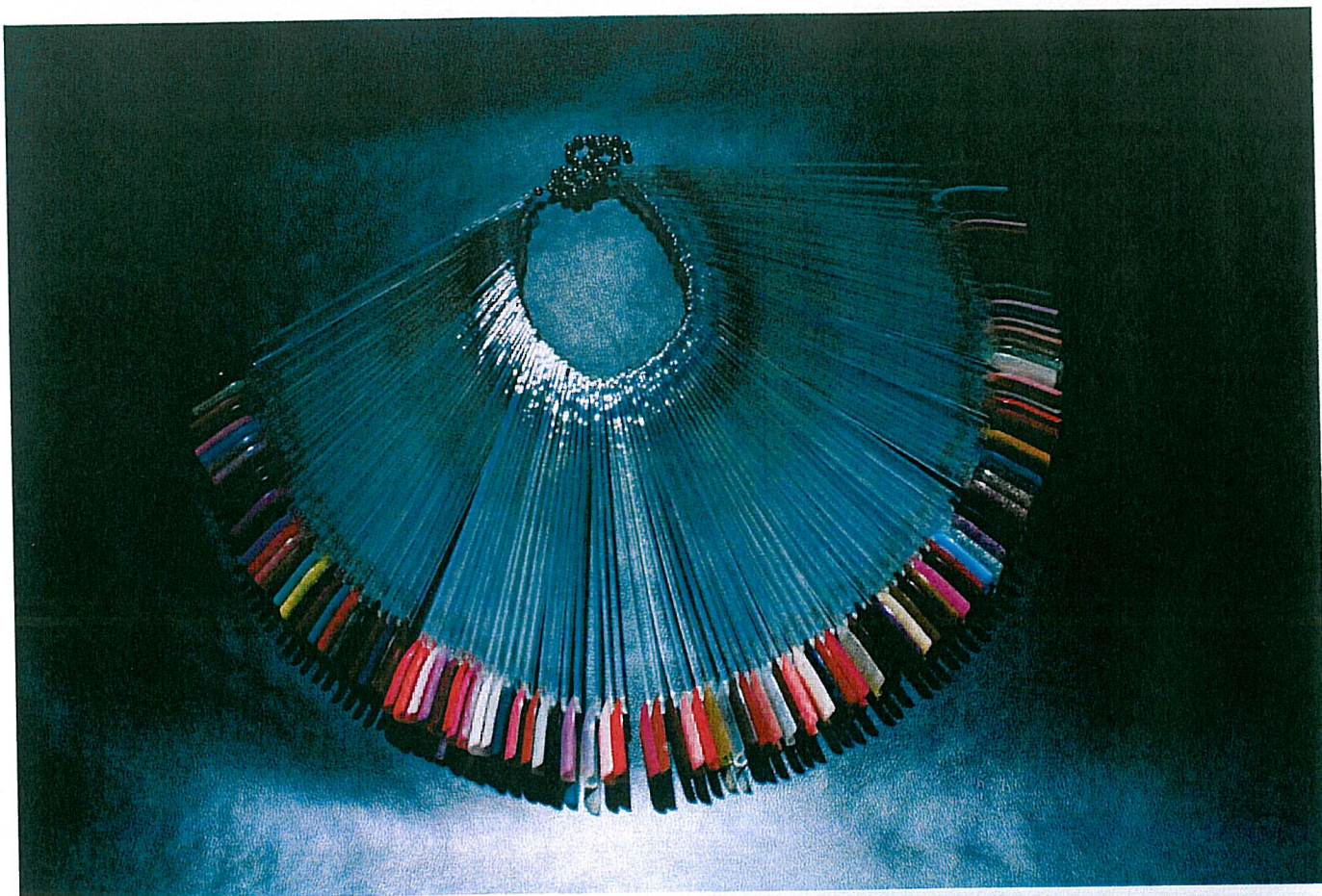
It has been a great honour for our students to work with someone as high calibre as Power. It's also a great chance for them to showcase their talent on a big stage, and submit work for possible inclusion in a prestigious exhibition that tells a story about local life.

Power is a highly celebrated photographer, having won a number of accolades during his illustrative career, including the *2001 Year of the Artist Award*, as voted for by the Arts Council of Great Britain.

The student project has been a resounding success, and Power has selected two winners from the many participants, who will both

Above: © Ashley Bourne. Right: © Lucy Brown.





receive free membership of The Society. Ashley Bourne, from Sandwell College, and Lucy Brown, from Walsall College, received this accolade, with Andrew Jefferies and Khuram Choudri being recognised as runners up. All four will receive a signed book of Power's work. A Blurb book is also being created, and will feature the best work by 16 students, eight from each college.

Phil Brooks

Above: © Khuram Chaudri.

Right: © Andrew Jefferies.



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POWER AND BEAUTY

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