

Title	Annual Photographer's Lecture 2013 - Home
Type	Article
URL	http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/10659/
Date	2016
Citation	Hunter, Tom (2016) Annual Photographer's Lecture 2013 - Home. <i>Studies in Photography</i> 2016, 30th Anniversary Edition ii, 30 (ii). pp. 8-19. ISSN 1462-0510
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Annual Photographer's Lecture 2013 - Home

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Tom Hunter

Home has meaning in both a geographical and ontological sense as the centre of the world. The Romanian philosopher and historian Mircea Elidea (1907-1986) describes it as the place where a vertical line crosses with a horizontal one. The vertical line is a path between the sky and the underworld. The horizontal line represents all the possible journeys across the world to other places. Therefore, at home, one is closest to the gods in the sky and to the dead of the underworld, potentially giving access to both. At the same time, one is at the starting point and, hopefully, the returning point of all earthly journeys.

This notion of the centrality of one's home within the universe and how it affects one's sense of being resonates with me. I have explored the home through my art practice and this essay maps out my journey, using photography and the way this interweaves with politics, art history and media representations of society. I have explored this theme through my experiences of making

my home in Hackney, East London during the past twenty-five years. My work portrays and documents the home and in doing so many of my images capture people, lifestyles and environments that are being destroyed both physically and culturally. I have set out not simply to record the people and places, but also to present them in a way that challenges stereotypes and prompts viewers to re-evaluate how they perceive other cultures and social groups.

My visual sense of the home began as a young boy growing up in rural Dorset with a feeling of isolation, yet communal camaraderie, in a small village setting. For me home entailed not simply the house I inhabited but the wider environs of the village and its people. This resonates with the meaning of *home* as a village in Old English (*ham*), Old Saxon (*hem*) and Greek (*komi*). This visual identity flourished further in the 1970s at the height of England's great tribal identity manifestations, when I and my friends joined the battalions of punks, goths, skinheads, bikers, teds



Fig 1. *The Art of Squatting*, 1997



Fig 2. Tom Hunter in front of *The Ghetto* 1994



Fig 3. From the series *The Ghetto Portraits* 1994

and mods. At the time I was too caught up in the moment to capture our lives. Later, I wished I had been able to record and immortalise the stories of the vibrant youth culture that had flourished in my own time and place.

As my life changed, I found myself living in Hackney, but my cultural baggage and village mentality endured and I was drawn to, and lived in, a small community again. Now, instead of fields and hedgerows marking the boundaries and divisions between locations and areas, these borders took on man-made forms in the shape of roads, pubs, parks and council estates. In this jumble of architectural styles, people and cultures I used a camera to connect with and make sense of my urban village and turn it into a place I could call home. My early explorations of my home and neighbourhood through photography are represented in black and white images. These forays into East London life in the early 1990s capture the poverty, bleakness and stark reality of social deprivation. Following in the footsteps of my

artistic influences at the time, classic documentary photographers such as Paul Strand, I set out to document the harsh realities of my local environs. The images I created, *Brick Lane* (1990-1991), show Brick Lane Market, the place where the people of the East End gathered on a Sunday morning to promenade, peruse, buy and sell the commodities that furnished their lives. I became interwoven into this fabric by setting up a bric-a-brac stall and selling my wares to make ends meet. The culture of this market is illustrated through its goods and the backdrop of derelict buildings, industrial storage spaces and vacant lots.

I soon realised that my home and my community tended to be represented through stark black and white photojournalistic images. Quite often these were supported by pieces of derogatory text. This inspired me to re-evaluate these representations of my home and neighbourhood so as not to blindly contribute to this stock of images.

At this time in the early 1990s there were over 100,000 empty properties in London alone,

with a near equivalent number of people without homes. This was very apparent to me, living in Hackney where whole streets and estates had been abandoned by tenants, the council, property owners and developers alike. This became the backdrop to my own photographic practice but, rather than regurgitate and proliferate the abundance of sombre monochrome images of my neighbourhood, I set out to create a vision of my home as a warm and vibrant place to live. At the time I lived in a squatted community of around 100 people in two streets that backed on to each other. The community was a creative, supportive and nurturing environment, where people from a wide range of backgrounds had come together to reclaim abandoned houses and to share an alternative way of living.

My local newspaper, the *Hackney Gazette*, at the time described my neighbourhood as "a crime-ridden derelict ghetto, a cancer – a blot on the landscape. Why would people want to live there anyway?" This piece of tabloid text was a

wake-up call to the way I wanted to represent my community and the life around me, in direct opposition to the media stereotype. My work *The Ghetto* (1993-1994)(Fig.2&3), which is on permanent display at the Museum of London, is a 3D model of the two squatted streets where we lived. Each house has a colour photographic veneer and inside the windows and doors are placed 5x4 colour transparencies, which are lit from within. This gives the model an inner light and a filmic quality. The model is raised on a podium and, owing to its 17-foot length, the viewer has to walk down the street and physically engage with the model to view the images.

For me photography, with its inherent relationship to the real world, became a vital way not only of creating a picture of home but also of documenting buildings, people and transitory lifestyles. These fleeting moments in the history of a rapidly expanding and mutating city were rendered not by the 35mm black and white images of my early photographic practice, but by the



Fig 4. *Woman Reading a Possession Order* 1997

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My inspiration for this came from the Golden Age of Dutch Painting, when art became a radical new way to depict society.”

architectural large format monorail camera. This collected and rendered all the tiny details of the intimate living spaces with their rich colours, faded wallpapers and DIY furnishings. These depictions of our homes gave my community and myself a sense of our own identity that was being kept for posterity, while at the same time the physical structures were disappearing, being pulled down and redeveloped on a continual basis.

It wasn't long after my *Ghetto* series that my home came under threat and Hackney Council attempted to our community from the streets we inhabited. It was at this time that my relationship with the home was at its most fragile. In traditional, tribal societies the home was at the heart of the world and vital to making sense of it. Without a home one was not only shelterless, but also lost in non-being, in unreality. Without a home everything was fragmented and in chaos. Facing imminent eviction, I too felt this and questioned the notion of a home being a place of peace and security or even, as the saying goes, "An Englishman's home is his castle". The castles that I and my fellow squatters occupied were all built on sand and in many cases faced complete demolition.

The threat of eviction became the driving force for me not only to document my home, but also to use my images in a campaign to save our houses and community. My inspiration for this came from the Golden Age of Dutch Painting, when art became a radical new way to depict society. Reviewing the 5x4 transparencies of my *Ghetto* series I was struck by the uniformity of the architectural spaces in the dilapidated Victorian terraces and the cool Northern European light which illuminated my sitters. These bore strong relationships to Johannes Vermeer's 17th century paintings of his community in Delft, Holland. His quiet contemplations on everyday life set the scene for the Dutch Republic, which at the time was forging a new identity for its people while fighting a war of independence from the Spanish Imperial crown. Vermeer's work reflected the new Protestant country's rejection of the Catholic religious iconography that still dominated the work of Spanish and Italian artists. It captured the spirit of the time and gave an importance and credibility to a new society. For me, Vermeer's new merchant classes, maids, servants and musicians are elevated to the status of the kings, queens, generals and popes of the imperial courts of the old European guard. By borrowing from Vermeer's compositions, gestures and titles I set out to render my home in a way that would not only document the harsh realities of eviction but also depict the themes as universal and the sitters as worthy subjects to be dignified and immortalised.

In my series *Persons Unknown* (1997), which refers to the title of the eviction notice that was given to the squatters in my community, I focused on particular paintings by Vermeer. In my work *Woman Reading A Possession Order* (1997) I mirrored elements of Vermeer's *Girl Reading A Letter By An Open Window* (1657) (Fig4.) by placing my neighbour and friend beside a similar window in her own squatted home. I

replaced the mysterious letter with her eviction notice and exchanged the symbolic bowl of fruit for her baby daughter. These two elements in combination create the tension and drama involved in squatting with a young family, while at the same time giving the sitter a sense of dignity and beauty in this moment of upheaval and change. The notion of home is amplified further when the child is brought into the frame. Even the hardest of social commentators will flinch at the sight of a mother and child being cast onto the street. The series gained widespread attention in exhibitions, magazines and newspapers and led to our community being able to open a dialogue with Hackney Council. From this heightened profile and collective negotiations we managed to save the houses and form a housing co-operative to stabilise the community.

The home had now become a central theme in my work and I set out to explore my wider community, questioning what constitutes my home. For many people in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s, the notion of home was facing a huge shift. The country was continuing its transition from the majority of households being tenancies towards a nation of mortgage-indebted individuals. This shift in the socio-economic personal finances of a nation was also mirrored in our cultural understanding of social housing. In the 1940s 'homes were built for heroes' in a welfare state designed to give decent housing for all. But from the 1970s this notion changed and social housing became seen as sub-standard and even as the personification of evil in the guise of the inner-city tower block. These factory-built homes, where people had made their lives over years of struggle, were now being abandoned by central government in terms of funding, and, in many cases, blown up by local authorities drained of the resources to maintain them. This came to a head in the mid 1990s when Tony Blair's New Labour government decided to revamp the Holly Street estate in Hackney as a flagship urban regeneration project. Many of my friends lived in the Holly Street tower blocks and again the need to document, illustrate and to elevate these people and their homes before they were lost became the driving force behind my *Holly Street* (1997-1998) project.

While working with the residents of the estate the role of the court painter from a bygone age became the core of my practice. As with my squatter and traveller images, I used the large-format architectural camera to render all the documentary details while capturing the beauty and colour of these homes. I worked collaboratively with the residents, showing them 5x4 Polaroids of themselves before making any final images. This enabled people to present their chosen image of themselves to a wider audience in a similar way that kings and queens presented themselves to their subjects. The images of single elderly residents, young families and couples again describe a sense of home with dignity and pride, against a backdrop of degradation and displacement. The *Holly Street* (Fig5.) series gave an insight into people's lives, experiences and



Fig 5. From the Series *Holly Street Portrait*, 1997

conditions at the time.

In contrast to this, my subsequent series *Holly Street Voids* (1997-1998) is of the same estate when the residents had been relocated and the spaces vacated. The eerie images become requiems to lives lost, with their epitaphs written through the textures of the patterned wallpapers that hang starkly in desolate voids. These stage sets with their backdrops are all that remain of the optimism and promises of lives to be fulfilled. Three of the four tower blocks on the Holly Street estate were blown up in 2001. My images are reproduced in the book *Factory Built Homes* (1998), alongside archival images of Holly Street. They were also enlarged floor to ceiling size and wallpapered over three flats on the 19th floor of one of the tower blocks. These portrayals of everyday lives became a focus of celebration and remembrance, when the residents were reunited for the private view and took a final look at their once cherished homes, before the block was blown up.

It has been important for me, while describing my home and the homes of others, to incorporate other physical structures that map out my neighbourhood. Looking at the different communities around me has led me to think about the social, spiritual and public spaces that define and reflect these different cultural groups. East London has always been home to many immigrants - from the French Protestant Huguenots of the 17th century and the Russian Jews of the 19th century to the Afro-Caribbean and Bangladeshis of the 20th century and the more recent arrivals of Vietnamese and Turkish peoples. Each wave of immigrants brings with it their cultures, religions and shared experiences and these are often embodied in their community spaces, giving a thread of connection to the countries and homes that they have left behind. Whether it is a community centre, place of worship or market, these locations all create a sense of belonging and identity, which is central to the notion of home.

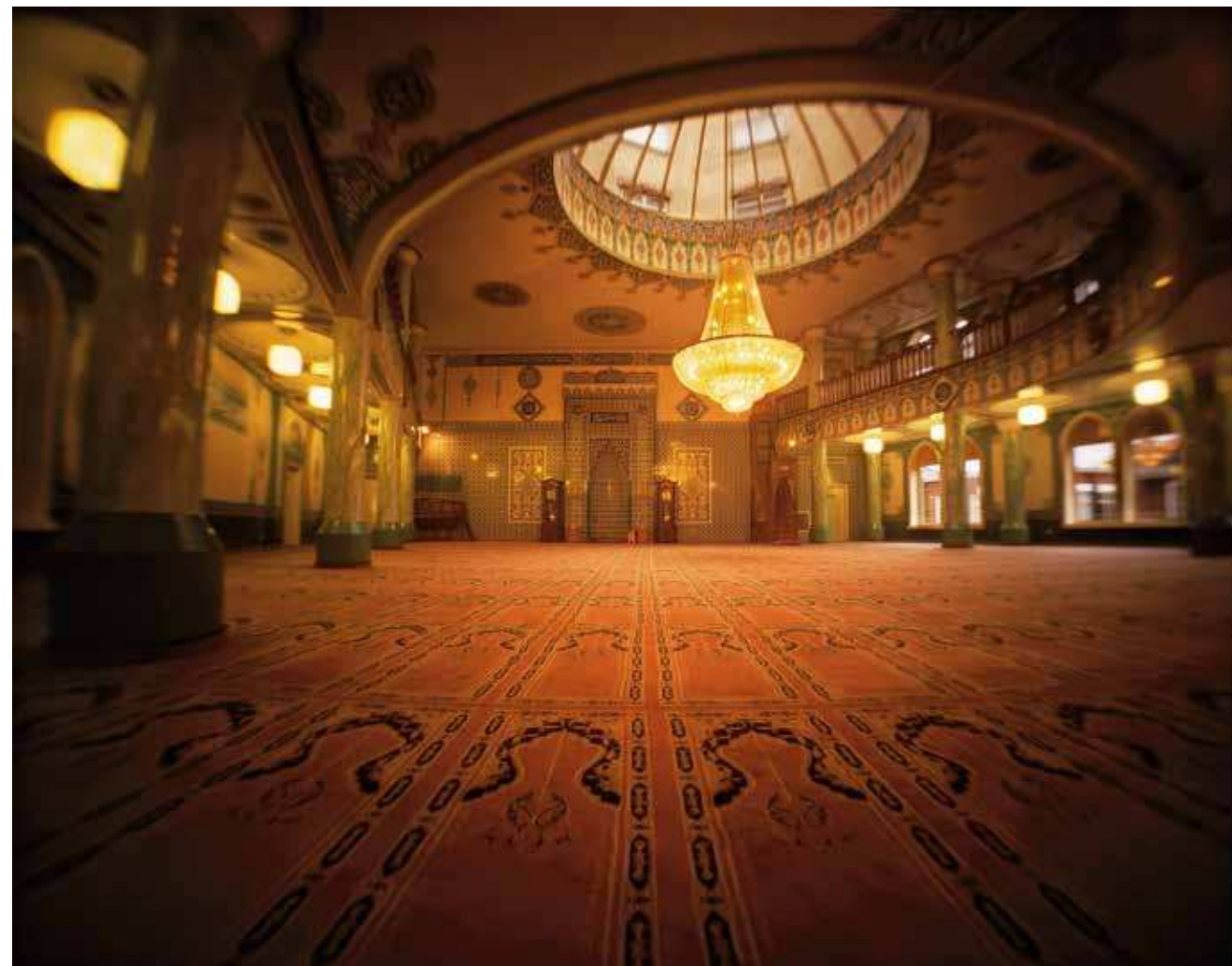


Fig 6. *Suleymaniye Mosque, Kingsland Road*, 2006

Over the last number of years I have set out to define the landscape of these locations using a large-format pinhole camera (Fig.6). This camera - which has no lens, no shutter and no lighting - felt like the perfect way to interact with these unfamiliar and sensitive spaces, capturing them silently and unobtrusively and giving a respect and calmness. The images, which render the interiors into dreamlike theatre sets, are the products of long exposures that blur colours and edges and leave the human form undetectable. These sets give the viewer the space and backdrop onto which they can project their own narratives and imagined lives, rather than viewing a portrayed subject. I have photographed assembly halls, local theatres, cinemas, mosques, synagogues, churches, temples, markets and shops, which all map out both my and my wider community's psychogeographical notion of the home.

It is not simply the physical structures we inhabit that shape our notions of home but also the wider geographical setting. The landscape

that makes up the place I know as home is an important aspect of how I depict the life around me. At the eastern edge of Hackney lies the marshy landscape of Hackney Wick. Criss-crossed with waterways, it became ideal for industrial development in the 19th century. Printing and chemical companies reliant upon a good water supply moved into the area. However, during the 1970s, when much of Britain went into industrial decline, many of the warehouses and factories were abandoned and became derelict, leaving parts of this marshy Venice of the East to be reclaimed by nature. It was here that I reconnected with my rural childhood and created my *Life and Death in Hackney* (1999-2001) series.

Even in the urban, industrial, pre-Olympic landscape of Hackney Wick and the Lea Valley it is the shrubs, bushes and greenery, vestiges of a rural idyll, that make a significant visual impact. The images I created for this series reference another generation of artists, in this case the Pre-Raphaelites, and how they made



Fig 7. *The Way Home*, 2000

social commentary while exploring the notions of beauty, narrative and nature. In my case, the nature that I described brought the landscape of Hackney Wick back to life through buddleia, brambles, nettles and wild grasses. Tableaux, which are traditionally used in classical painting to record historical events, became the method I used to create a picture of the area, its people, their stories and notions of home. By setting up tableaux and arranging my subjects to re-enact the events that constituted their lives, these lives transcended the ordinary and disposable to become universal and immortal. In *The Way Home* (2000) a girl re-enacts her accidental plunge into the River Lea following a rave party in a derelict warehouse. This moment in time takes on an otherworldliness, echoing John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1852) (Fig.7) and the narrative of Shakespeare's tragedy. While all the images from *Life and Death in Hackney* can be seen as documenting a landscape that has been lost to the devouring appetite of the 2012 Olympic

games, the life stories they depict will endure for posterity (Fig.8).

In the same way that I have made Hackney my home and the centre of my universe through my art, Thomas Hardy immortalised Wessex, making it the centre of his literary universe. He grew up in a Dorset village close to where I did and wove the real life stories from his local paper, the *Dorchester Evening Chronicle*, into his novels. His eloquent descriptions of ordinary people's lives, dramatising tragic everyday realities, had a huge impact on how I viewed the human condition and inspired me to look at the headlines in my local paper, the *Hackney Gazette*. The people and their stories became disposable as they were reported one week and then disregarded the next. I collected the articles that could be categorised into negative aspects of the human condition: lust, rage, poverty, hate, violence, revenge, rape and murder - the staple material of the tabloid press. I re-imagined the headlines and their narratives to create tableaux that referenced art historical



Fig 8. *The Vale of Rest*, 2000

paintings from the National Gallery, London and created my *Living in Hell and Other Stories* (2003-2004) series.

In *Living in Hell* (2004), from this series, I took the story of an old lady, sofa-bound in her own cockroach-infested home, abandoned by the state and her own family (Fig.9). Her tragic story was re-imagined using the painting of the Le Nain Brother's *Four Figures at a Table*, c. 1643. Their work shows the poverty of a family living in 17th century rural France; the painting is devoid of material objects, but the family still has a sense of dignity and camaraderie through their companionship. This is all lost in my reimagining of an old woman's home, which is situated in one of the richest cities in the world but whose resident has been left to rot. This is further emphasised by the use of a thousand cockroaches that pattern the wallpaper. In this case the physical structure of the home is no longer Elide's centre of the universe, equidistant between heaven and hell, but feels far closer to the underworld. My image shows

a different side of home, which is the experience of many, where poverty and neglect has made the space a cause for despair and suffering, rather than celebration and security.

Tableaux have become a significant feature of the way I render my home. My concerns in these reconstructions are the political, economic and cultural forces that inform and shape our surroundings. In *Unheralded Stories* (2008-2010) the subject of home is again manifested through art history and the real lives that make up the landscape of my neighbourhood. Many of the people and their homes are in a moment of flux, seeing their culture and landscape disappearing before their eyes. In *Woodberry Down* (2010) a young girl is portrayed under a pear tree with her Dalmatian dog, posed as if from Lucas Cranach's *Cupid complaining to Venus* (1525). In this case the backdrop is not the biblical prelapsarian Eden but a half abandoned council estate, where flats are steeled up to keep squatters out in preparation for demolition. The girl stands at a crossroads in



Fig 9. *Living in Hell*, 2004



Fig 10. *Death of Coltelli*, 2009

her own life, while also personifying the impact on society of the way we develop London and the effects of this on those that inhabit it. Where will her generation live in the future? Will they be able to live in inner London or will it become like Paris, where the workers of the city have to commute from suburban ghettos?

In *Death of Coltelli* (2009)(Fig.9) art history is again referenced in the form of Eugène Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* (1828). In this classical painting Delacroix overlooks French society in favour of exploring exotic notions of the Orient. The painting describes a romanticised and westernised version of the home of the last King of Assyria on his deathbed, watching his harem and entourage being slain before his own death. This exoticism represents the antithesis of what I do in my own art practice which is trying to document, reimagine and immortalise ordinary moments and places of my home, while Delacroix's paintings abandon his

everyday environment. In my tableau the setting is the home of a recently deceased Italian Catholic grandmother. The girl in my image mirrors the posture of the semi-naked female figure spread at the Sultan's feet in Delacroix's painting. But, unlike the painting, my female figure is the only one to inhabit this shrine to Italian matriarchal Catholic culture. In taking this pose, my subject becomes like Mary at the feet of a crucified Christ. This scene of an immigrant dying above her café takes on universal themes and references played out by the grieving granddaughter. In this case the home is more than a home, it is a shrine to lives and cultures lost, the bed is no longer a place of comfort and peace but echoes the eternal struggle from life to death.

This image represents many of my concerns around the notion of home - its physical and geographical space in time, its connection to its inhabitants, narratives and lifestyles and its relation

to history, culture and the politics of having one's own space in which to live and die. For me, my home is not just the modern, domesticated space, perpetuated by contemporary culture, but more reflects our earlier notions of the home as village, with its sense of community. Through my work I have set out to capture both the uniqueness and universality of the home, echoing Mircea's idea of the home being at the centre of the universe and that without a home one is in chaos and living in a kind of unreality. Using photography I have revealed the complex tapestry of my neighbourhood and its many homes, which form the central points in people's lives. My images frame and freeze these moments on life's journeys and give the home another dimension, as a shrine that connects the everyday to the eternal, commemorating these homes and the people that live in them, before they are lost and written out of history.

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The girl in my image mirrors the posture of the semi-naked female figure spread at the Sultan's feet in Delacroix's painting.”