



Image © Sean Ebsworth Barnes

Profile / Sean Ebsworth Barnes

An artistic licence

The clue to this story lies in the name, and in the style of picture with which we begin our descent into a world where photography meets illustration and animation; where ideas and design play as much a part as behind-the-lens graft. Interesting? We thought so

You're currently looking at a portrait of Christian Adams, who's a political cartoonist for the *Daily Telegraph* and a superhero – if you like – of the genre. Christian's portrait forms part of an on-going project by Sean 'Ebsworth' Barnes, himself a commercial photographer, designer, and illustrator who is creating a series of images seeking to provide a glimpse into the world of the great cartoonists of today. 'Photoartists is a combination of photography and cartoons,' says Sean 'and it's never been done before in the UK. We see all these great cartoons in the media every day but rarely the characters hiding behind the illustrations. The idea is that in these portraits, the artists are interacting with what they are well known for, or revealing their personalities.' Whilst the works will eventually form a kind of joint exhibition – with the portraits hanging alongside examples of the cartoonists' own works – one of the most interesting elements here is the style of photograph Sean's creating. 'I've depicted Christian as a superhero himself, as his personal obsession is the Marvel Comics characters Spider Man, Hulk and so on,' Sean explains. 'Every portrait follows a different theme and is an involved project in itself – sometimes a combination of multiple shots or involving model making. There's a distinct concept behind each image and I hope they'll be seen as unique and very special portraits.'

Set this, then, against the overwhelming current trend for 'just stand there whilst I shoot it' portraiture, and you realise that this work is taking a stance at the other end of the scale, being entirely ideas led. There's a dizzying wealth of detail to be enjoyed in our superhero bathroom for example, offering up a gentle humour that's, of course, perfect for the subject. On top of that it's lit to create an almost hyper-real world that helps tell the story of the photograph and artist. Sean explains: 'The lighting is designed to have a Judge Dread feel to it, but in a bathroom where Christian's gone to transform into a superhero comic-book version of himself. The only way to make such an image work is to go the whole hog and pay attention to every detail and make the final image a little voyage of discovery in itself. Just like we engage with cartoons, I want viewers to get involved with the portrait.'

Put another way, Sean Barnes isn't 'just' a photographer – he's a thoroughly modern image-maker, bringing a sack-full of previous creative experience to the party and giving the resulting melting pot a really good *stir*. You could say that's his USP, and clients seem to like it. He's a

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→ photographer who can tell a story, create a concept, think above and beyond and not flinch when a job gets tough. That's attractive. Sean recalls: 'There were times in the past when I might have had to produce a cartoon based on a very specific editorial point and the brief from the publisher could be pretty weak. Sometimes you have to get your head down and work hard to find the picture – be that an illustration or a photograph. You know it's always in there but it can't half be difficult to dig it out at times!'

More than...

So where did it all come from, this melting pot full of bits? Back in the day, as they say, Sean had a successful career in advertising but jacked it all in to let his heart rule his head and work as a freelance illustrator and cartoonist. The pen name 'Ebsworth' came from a particularly naughty cat owned by Sean's landlady, who was always getting into scrapes and unending mischief (the cat, that is). Plain old Sean Barnes became 'Ebsworth' and a whole new world of possibilities was unleashed on the world. Ebsworth became a cat character in his own right and starred surreptitiously in many cartoons that landed in business publications as 2000 turned whilst Sean's work serviced

magazines and newspapers generally based in and around London. Times, they were tough. Legend has it that Sean would refer to Ebsworth as 'we' – the cat character and cartoonist of the same name becoming indistinguishable. Sean recalls: 'I was initially dashing around dropping off cartoons here there and everywhere by bicycle – it was like having two jobs, cartoonist and bicycle courier in one. I've never been so fit... but I was going a little mad at the same time.' He would eventually upgrade to a battered Micra and Ebsworth the cat would yield a greetings cards business, many more amusing characters, animations and short films to boot.

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→ Digital everything

It might all seem somewhat romantic, the struggling artist and all that, but there's some crucial points to note. The last decade has seen almost total digitisation of illustrated media as well as photographic capture. Illustration, design and photography make excellent bed-fellows with huge cross-over in software and computing and of course it's the same 'job' being done for the client at the end of the day. Sean comments: 'I was always interested in technology and with animation there was such a lot to get your head around – so when digital photography came along and became so clearly the way ahead I saw it as a natural progression and an obvious next avenue. I just threw myself into it, day and night, but assumed I knew nothing. I suppose, though, I've been lucky – I was already well into Adobe Photoshop – if you're not happy learning a truck-load of software techniques then I figure life's pretty hard these days.' It's fair comment, but similarly, not everyone can manage to take an apparently random set of circumstances and skills and make a successful business out of it that's loosely called photography. It's something to do with art and creativity, that's for sure, and a willingness to get involved.

Ebsworth sure isn't a jobsworth: 'Perhaps I've been *unintentionally* willing to get involved, just because that's how my mind works – when a photographic job has come up and I'm in the initial meetings with the client, the creative juices just flow and I talk it all through and they have some more ideas and the next step just seems so obvious to me. I think the old notions of what a photographer does or can do have moved on. I think I'm providing what you might call photography with added value, and it's just that the added value is what naturally flows when I'm thinking or talking about a visual idea.' That finds Sean providing design and conceptual input, along with full-service artworking: 'Assuming skills can be learnt to a fully professional level, it makes perfect sense to have as wide a portfolio as you can. At the end of the day we're trying to make a living so the more you can do under your own roof the better, but standards have to be very high.'

The big network

If that leaves anyone thinking 'well that's alright for him', Sean Barnes also seems to be ridiculously well connected. No matter in what direction conversation turns, Sean's got a contact who knows their brother or sister or he had dinner with a friend of a friend the other night. As we talk clients and jobs, it becomes very clear that people he's worked with tend to become long-term associates or friends so a whole lot of mutual back-scratching and helping out goes into the mix. As we've been chatting about the background and the Photoonists project, Sean comes across as a kind of bohemian version of Ben Fogle – he has an easy and instantly likeable manner and one can imagine Sean reassuring you that all the ideas you've just discussed are totally possible! 'The Photoonists project is really about me meeting my heroes – it's not about making a fee. They are all very cynical and have a great eye on life of course – in the long term it's about being noticed and creating a show that people are going to enjoy going to see. These days you have to make things happen for yourself. So much comes through word of mouth and by personal →

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→ recommendation – it's what it's all about. I think you have to see every client you work for as a potential free advert for your services. It's how the next job comes around. And it's also really important not to be too short-term-ist about work. The Photoonists idea will more than likely not yield anything for a long period of time – but then someone, somewhere will be thinking about who they want to shoot their next campaign and it'll sync together – that could easily be five years from now.'

It can be recognised that Sean's portfolio of work extends across numerous genres of photography, and he's very much of the opinion 'why not'. However the arts appear to play a predominant role. Sean photographed the two-day recording session at Abbey Road, London for Ghost the musical at the end of 2010 and his pictures include the show's composers Dave Stewart and Glen Ballard, their band, and the leading actors from Ghost – Richard Fleeshman, Caissie Levy, Sharon D Clarke and Andrew Langtree. He's also worked on dance productions such as the English National Ballet's Cinderella.

Can the world of Sean Ebsworth Barnes really be this laid back and 'go with the flow'? It seems so, yes – one job leads to another as long you're always

looking to make a really good impression and use your networks well. We talk tech for a while, and realise that Sean is well into his boys' toys – but it yields some discussion about how it's necessary to get a client on-side and have them trust your opinion and point of view, particularly in terms of post-production and when using different approaches. 'Sometimes you have to take risks to make it different and stand out,' suggests Sean. 'For instance, we've gone down the route of using actors rather than models for fashion shoots, just to give a different feel, perspective and to move away from the norm. You can come out with some really striking images. Of course no matter how much it's discussed with the client and examples are shown and everyone's totally on-board with what's being attempted, the fact remains that's it's on your head. If it goes wrong in any way there's always going to be the issue that you led the process.'

Therefore, there's no time better spent than working through the details of what's going to be shot and how that's to be worked up to a final set of images: 'There's nothing worse than a client in the studio getting upset because they haven't got a grasp of the final destination of the shoot. Post-production and retouching are the norm but not always well-understood. I've found that some clients can be too pleased too soon because of the immediacy of being able to see the raw visual realisation there in front of them without delay. It can mess up the flow of the shoot and stop the real image coming through. If that happens I think perhaps we haven't quite understood what the role of the image is and that's frustrating. The captured file is just the beginning of implementing the style of the image. Perhaps sometimes it's just hard to describe what's in your mind. **tp**



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