

Interview with Christopher Apperley-Bennett – January 2023

Online presence

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Pre-interview intro

Christopher is a contemporary photographer and businessman from Leicester who mainly specialises in portraiture and property photography. I have admired him for many years now, he is multi-skilled and has created a large network around his work over the years. He is always thinking ahead, about what he is going to be doing next, while working hard on his current projects. His business and work ethic is admirable, and he seems to have no fear when jumping into new ventures. He has recently returned to being a student, and started a Masters in Art Museum and Gallery Studies. Let's start by finding out a little more about his past and how has become the practitioner he is today.

1. When did you first express an interest in photography, was it something you wanted to do from a young age?

The first time I found a passion for making photographs was during my early teen years. My parents enjoyed taking a camera out to our family events and holidays - I was always keen to use the camera wherever I was allowed. To this day, I still think that was mostly due to an interest in playing with expensive electronics!

I didn't particularly enjoy most of the core subjects during school, with the exception of art and design. Anything creative I loved. From this, I studied Art in both GCSE's and a BTEC National Diploma, followed by a BA (Hons) in Photography.

2. You achieved your BA in photography in 2012. Was it what you expected and did you stick to a specific style of photography or were you an all-rounder? What did you do for your Major Project?

I quickly found during the early stages of my degree that a camera gets you into places, sparks conversations and allows the opportunity for adventure. Throughout my three-year degree, the modules covered most areas of photography - from controlled studio work right through to documentary photography. It gave me a chance to explore all areas, and with this, I quickly found a strong interest in documentary photography. I used my final major project to explore the local fishing industry inside Plymouth Harbour. Over the course of three months, I spent hundreds of hours integrating within this tight-knit community

making friends, talking and listening to stories. which allowed me to start documenting the people. Building a strong relationship and trust with your subjects is important if you want to achieve true images. Only in the last month of the project was I then able to get my camera out to start my photography. My close relationship with the community allowed me to gain access into all areas of the industry which would have been out of bounds to a normal outsider.

Property photography questions

4. What was it that attracted you to work in property photography, how did it all start?

Honestly, as much as I enjoyed making documentary photography - I also needed to be realistic when it came to making a career straight out of University. I needed to find an industry which offered year-round consistent work but also allowed me to master a skill whilst running my own business. Property photography gave me this. The property market is huge and offers not only house sales but also rentals, hotels, holiday homes, commercial properties and so forth. It was this window of opportunity where I decided to research, learn and develop my skills in interior photography.

Secondly, everything about interior photography is within the photographer's control. I find it important as an artist to keep a balance of creativity and control as a photographer.

So, with that decided, the many hours of research and practice started. I needed to not only understand how to photograph interiors but also how to promote myself to clients through networking and conversations. The hardest part of going into property photography is getting a foot in the door. Most of the time it's solely about 'who you know' rather than 'what you know'.

5. What made you move from Leicester to London? Did you start through a company or were you freelance straight away?

Initially, I tried to get a full-time job as a property photographer but after about two months of unsuccessful interviews, which were mostly down to a lack of experience, I decided to move to London and build my own business. It was clear from my research that the opportunity for property photographers was much bigger in London rather than in my hometown in Leicester.

The hours were long and intensive. I lost track of how many emails and phone calls I made which never got answered. Through pure badgering and borderline harassment emails to one client, they finally agreed to meet me for a coffee! I must have made a good impression as this then led to a full-time job but on a self-employed basis. Suddenly, pretty much overnight after this meeting, I was photographing between 25-30 properties a week. This then greatly enhanced my experience, portfolio, and skills.

From there, I kept networking and slowly began to take on more clients.

6. You have an extensive portfolio, from simple flats to huge fancy hotels and everything in between, you must have seen some incredible properties! What would you say is key in taking a good property photograph?

To date, I've photographed over 3,500 properties. I've seen the absolute worst and the ultimate dream home. Any property can be photographed, if these two components are done correctly: editing and client communication.

Each property requires extensive care to make it look its absolute best, it's super important to take time with the client beforehand to understand what they are looking for. Write it down, remember it, and write it down again. Make sure you listen to your client's needs and fulfil their criteria. If you do this, you'll have a very happy client.

Interior editing is a unique specialism on its own. It requires its own set of skills - make sure to learn this fully. A photograph that is well edited will go far with the client.

7. What are some things that you learned through taking these kinds of photos and working as a freelance photographer in this field?

To this day, I've learned that there is always time to find a new problem or encounter. When I think I've seen everything there possibly is to see, there's always another surprise around the corner. For example, last year, I had to ask a homeowner to move full-size stuffed deer from the dining room - That's something I never expected to have to do!

Studio photography questions

8. You bought your first photography studio in Leicester in 2019, to get more involved with portraiture as well as property work. What questions would you ask a client before a portraiture shoot, to make sure you capture what they are looking for?

For many of my clients, it was a case of trying to work out what they really wanted from a portrait session. I found that many clients just wanted a 'series of portraits' but they hadn't actually considered what style.

I found that the best way to spark both excitement and ideas from the client was to share a Pinterest board curated of many different portrait styles. I found if they were able to select the images they liked, this would give me a rough starting point and a better idea of how to organise the photography session. This technique also impresses the client, yet it's super easy to do.

Another key question is to find out exactly how many portraits they are after, this allows me to book adequate amount of time for each appointment.

10. How do you make clients feel comfortable and relax in front of the camera?

Standing in front of a camera can be a very daunting and intimidating experience for many people. You need to allow people time to relax. I found that starting the session with a small chat on a sofa in the studio, with a coffee worked really well. It allows you to build up a friendly tone and allows both the photographer and the client to relax. It's also very

important to give time for sufficient breaks in the photography session, allow the client to go for a walk or get some food.

11. Do you have a preference in the style of studio portraiture (individuals/kids/pets...)?

I prefer working with adults. This is just my preference. I've done a few pet portraits but these type of sessions really require a whole new set of patience which I haven't acquired as of yet!

12. How did Covid-19 affect your business and your day-to-day? What made you make the big decision to close up and move on with other things?

That's a big question! I think in the most honest way, it was a case of taking security from my longest and most regular clients. The pandemic was a time just to focus on business survival rather than business growth. On top of this, I've been wanting to do a Masters in Gallery Studies for quite a few years and a slight break from photography was needed after an eventful couple of years during a pandemic.

Street Portraits and Photography Events

13. Your 100-portrait challenge was inspirational. How did it come about and how did you approach the challenge?

I really enjoy both meeting new people and making portraits. Street portraits were a fun way to both keep my enthusiasm in photography and equally increase my local presence in the community by making these portraits. There really isn't any real theme in the project other than meeting people and taking their portrait. Each portrait is different and as a collective of portraits, they represent a vast selection of the local community.

14. Did you find it easy to approach people, did you have any specific locations or times that you went out to shoot them?

I've learned that as a street photographer, members of the public are much less likely to stop and talk to you if they see a camera in your hand. It's sneaky, but I've found that if I hide my camera in my backpack and approach people in a friendly enthusiastic manner, you're much more likely to get a positive response. At the very least, I get to meet someone new and hand out a business card. It really is an effective way to market your photography services.

I found that I preferred taking portraits in the daylight hours. Other than that, it was a case of simply going for a walk whenever I had a few moments to spare in the day. My studio and property photography bookings were different day-to-day so keeping to a specific time or place for these portraits would nearly be impossible.

15. You offered photography classes, walks and events. What prompted you to start these, and have they been successful for you? Is it a seasonal thing or do you intend to keep going with them in the future?

Photography classes and walks are a simple and effective way to build up your client-base and increase your social media presence. It can be quite hard to fill each class and a lot of marketing is required. I enjoyed them but currently it's not something I would look at doing more of unless I found more demand in the local area.

General questions

18. How important is online presence to a professional freelance photographer? How often are you on your social media platforms and website, updating or advertising etc?

Social media is very important for a photographer. I use Instagram, LinkedIn and Facebook. I find that Facebook for me works well, and this is the platform I tend to use the most. I try to post new Facebook posts every day, although during busy times this may become a bit more inconsistent.

Most of my work comes from word of mouth and I'm in a very good position where I've been able to build a strong client networking base and I very rarely find myself in the position I need to advertise. If I do advertise, Facebook works quite effectively for me. Updating my website? - Not nearly as much as I should be!

19. What is your experience in editing photos? Do you do it all yourself?

I try to do most of my editing myself. However during busy times, I do use a team of editors to take care of my editing. It's important to be able to get some rest after a long day of photography, so this works quite well for me.

20. As a freelancer, how do you keep on top of your admin: is there much paperwork involved with each shoot/event?

Absolutely when running a full-time business, finding time to keep admin up to date is hard. It's one of the more tedious parts of the job. Time-planning is super important. All my accounting is done using professional accounting software alongside my accountant who will take care of tax returns.

21. Is there anything you struggle with, as a freelance photographer, do you have any advice for me, as a newbie to the freelance world of photography? What would you consider to be the most important factors in getting started with freelance work?

That's a great question! As a freelance photographer, I find that being able to offer a range of services is useful to keep a variety client base. Networking is key when building a new business. It's important to have a large range of clients around you - this will give you recommendations and work in the future.

Thank you so much for your time, Christopher, I appreciate you are a very busy man! You told me you have just been awarded a month-long research trip to Venice through the British Art Council, congratulations! I wish you all the best in your Master's degree, and for the future.