

recharging the creat

**British Professional Photography Awards Under 5s
Photographer of the Year Jo de Banzie tells Chris
Wordsworth how she keeps her work fresh.**

These days we rely heavily on batteries – most of them rechargeable. Digital cameras, flashguns, mobile phones, laptops – the essential gear of the modern photographer – all need topping up. But what about our own creative 'batteries' – that spark of inspiration which keeps our work fresh and our clients buying it? Doesn't that need 'recharging' too?

Jo de Banzie is an intelligent photographer who thinks about this kind of thing. "I certainly don't think it's possible to be creative in isolation," she tells me, "it needs feeding and stimulation." How does that work? "I place a great deal of emphasis on creative refuelling," she explains. "When I've been working flat out on a project I really do feel drained creatively. So I make a point of spending time on personal work as well as messing around with old cameras or playing with processes in the darkroom – without any external constraints – that's my way of putting back the sparkle."

For de Banzie, work flows in three channels: portraiture, commercial projects and personal photography. To a great extent each stream feeds into the others – nourished by a continual drive for perfection from image capture right through to the finished picture. "As a perfectionist I'm never satisfied with my work which makes me try even harder," she says, adding modestly, "That doesn't necessarily mean I'll get particularly good, but I'll certainly get better than I was."

But before we consider how each type of work co-exists with the others and how the creative spark operates, let's take a look at de Banzie's background. Unlike most professionals, she did not start as an amateur enthusiast. In fact when she went to Medway College of Art, she had never taken a photograph. "I was always interested in art and had expected to take the fine art or graphic design route," she remembers. "However at the last minute I felt I wanted to put some distance from the



Above: this shot won Jo de Banzie the Under 5s Oskar at the 2006 British Professional Photography Awards. Below: another shot in her favourite square format with muted colours. Facing page: music industry clients Katie Melhua, top, and The View, bottom.



process of 'putting pen to paper' as it were. So I changed to photography, believing that an instinct for the image would be the most important factor."

The move, which she has never regretted, gave her a thorough technical grounding and enabled her to sample a range of different types of photography. As a student she was hugely influenced by documentary photographers like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans: "Their work is honest, heartbreaking and beautiful all at once and they continue to cast their spell." So it was no surprise that by her final year all her work was editorial.

In fact she finds it fascinating that many years later, her portrait work is "right back in the editorial camp." This involves creating what she calls 'family documentaries': "I generally spend a day (sometimes more) with a family, recording them as unobtrusively as possible," she explains. "The process

tive batteries



is based around watching rather than directing, and the result will be a set of images which record the family within the context of their lives, through a series of glimpses – moments of interaction, contemplation and play. I design these into an album which records a family at a particular time in their lives." Because the creative process (including post-production) is a lengthy one, in commercial terms these projects tend to be high income/low volume.

Her commercial work also tends towards the 'editorial camp'. For example she works regularly with the singer Katie Melua recording what she calls 'fly-on-the-wall moments' on tour, during video filming, on stage and recording. These images are used on albums, slideshows on her DVDs and for press and PR. Another regular client is a fashion label for whom she produces 'mood images' for use in advertising, brochures and on their website.

Finally de Banzie tells me that her personal work could be "loosely categorised as landscape". She describes these pictures as "portraits of absence – quiet studies of lonely, desolate places where people have clearly been but are there no longer." As well as connecting with her portraiture which is mostly environmental, this work also allows her to shoot film and continue to run a wet darkroom at home.

For the rest of her work she now shoots digital but believes that the skills she has as a silver printer have been invaluable to her in the digital darkroom. "After an initial reluctance," she reveals, "I now totally embrace Photoshop – the biggest advantage is that it has given me back colour. Prior to going digital I worked only in black and white as I wanted to retain full control over the printing process and operating a colour darkroom was just too much hassle."

When I remind her of the maxim of Ansel Adams "the negative is the score, the print the performance", she is in full agreement. "I'm constantly berated for handling all my own post production," she admits, "as it obviously limits the number of shoots I can undertake. However I feel strongly that what happens in the darkroom or in Photoshop is as important to the final image as the taking of the photo. There's no formula to what I do – it just happens and I stop when it feels right. I don't consider it image manipulation, but rather, just finding my way back to how I felt when I took the photograph."

Feelings are important to de Banzie especially in her portrait work. "The act of photographing someone is intimate," she explains. "I personally feel immensely vulnerable in front of a camera so I'm sure my subjects feel that too. By allowing me to photograph them they are exposing themselves a little bit and it's a great privilege to be allowed that insight. I therefore have a responsibility to do it right – to make an honest image that says something about them."

This also explains her preference for environmental work. "It's much easier to engage emotionally if you photograph your subject within context," she declares. "Watching a person interact within their environment will give you so many clues as to who they are. I would find it so much harder to sit someone on a stool in front of a white background and try to 'get them.'"

As a 'family' portraitist, much of de Banzie's focus is on children. Does it help that she has three of her own? She agrees that of



Jo has a natural affinity for her young subjects and many of her shots use props and dressing-up, as well as fun locations like the beach, to turn the session into something more interesting. She often spends a full day with a family capturing activities planned for the camera. Top right: a fashion shot for Xile. Jo does not look for sunshine in every image.

course it does. However her natural rapport with young subjects derives more from that somewhat over-worked word 'empathy'. "In order to relate to children," she stresses, "it's much more important to have

a real memory of how it feels to be a child. Even parents can forget that."

Perhaps the most important thing that young children can teach us is a sense of wonder



Meet Jo de Banzie in Lanzarote next January

You can find out more about Jo de Banzie's approach to portrait photography in Lanzarote next January. Jo will be joining a group of outstanding photographers who are leading workshops at George and Glenys Dawber's 21st Photo Training Overseas (PTO) during a week of sunshine and inspiration at the luxurious Rubicon Palace hotel in Playa Blanca from 24th – 31st January 2008.

After showing examples of her stunning work, Jo promises that in her workshops she'll be encouraging delegates to "let go a little" with their portraiture. "If you can engage emotionally with your subject, your photographs will take on much greater significance," she stresses. "Emotion and energy are much more interesting to me than classic composition and perfect posing."

To find out more about PTO in Lanzarote visit www.pto-uk.com where you can explore PTO's exciting new website which features profiles and portfolios of all the speakers, a report on the 2007 event earlier this year, details of the luxurious venue and online booking facilities. So don't delay, take a look today!

about the world around us. It's a sense that de Banzie hasn't forgotten. When I ask her where inspiration comes from, she mentions exhibitions, galleries and photo books, but adds, "I find that mostly it comes from just opening my eyes. It can happen in the most unexpected places – a slash of colour on an old van can be just as mesmerising as an 18th century watercolour."

So really it's all about looking, but in a focused, receptive way. As Cartier-Bresson famously remarked, "Some of my best pictures I take without a camera."



Our thanks to PTO for providing this article. You can meet Photo Training Overseas at the British Professional Photography Awards, October 28-29th, Newcastle Gateshead Hilton Hotel.