

FOOD AND PHOTOGRAPHY RETREATS™

with the Benvies

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MENU

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Torridon, Scotland, November 2019

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Chris Jordan



So, tell me, did you have to look twice at this picture before you realised what was going on? If so, that's good! I'm exploring how we can evolve the simple, white background image into something that is not only exquisitely detailed but also has a sense of place that has been lacking in these composites hitherto. I shot the elements for this piece at St Cyrus NNR, just 25 minutes from home, earlier this week to create an illustration of some of the more interesting plants found in the dunes there. Some, like the clustered bellflower and bloody cranesbill, are quite near their northerly limit in the UK. I used Photoshop's Darker Colour blending mode to let me overlay elements with each other and with the background. I think that with a careful choice of background and the right amount of Gaussian blur applied to it, there are many interesting images to be made using this combination of techniques. My thanks to [Dr Paul Hendley](#) for providing this particular evolutionary link.

News from Niall and Charlotte

If nothing ever happened to you, there would be no stories to tell. So goes the pep talk I give myself when things are going badly awry. It happened recently before the start of our Retreat in the Austrian Tirol when, 840 miles from home, with a full load, the turbo-charger on our van signalled that it urgently needed attention. We wasted three days dealing with Renault dealerships and the recovery company until it was finally booked in for repair. Whether we would get it in time to return to Scotland with our 400 kg of Retreat equipment was far from certain but the garage in Landeck came good and habitual caution, in the form of an extended warranty, covered the €3000 repair bill.

One of the consequences of not being able to drive around, pre-Retreat, as much as we had planned was that we spent more time in the vicinity of our self-catering apartment. And during an early morning sortie, we met the 81 year-old uncle of our landlady out walking his cow. His lack of English matched perfectly our lack of German, but he understood that we'd driven from Scotland and roughly what we were doing there.



All the while his cow grazed nearby until, having run out of patience, started back down the road. We left him and returned to the house for breakfast. Half an hour later, we were amused to see the cow staring through our window and lowing. But this went on for a

while and we were surprised at the absence of her keeper. When we went outside to look, we saw a bloodied figure coming unsteadily up the road. He had tripped over his staff when the cow got unruly and had gashed his head quite badly on the road. Warfarin is not your friend at times like this. It's hard to draw any other conclusion than that the cow was seeking help. There was a strong feeling that something other than blind instinct was motivating its behaviour.

Anyone who has a dog or cat will know that there is often more going on "under the bonnet" that we would reasonably give credit for. And it is the possibility that domestic livestock, too, may possess something akin to emotional intelligence that has been a big factor in our own change of diet. It's not something we want to impose on our guests but the meat we buy, for ourselves and our guests, comes with the promise of superior welfare standards. Since we've never seen a cauliflower raise a leaf to help anyone, we're not so worried about our vegetables.

Best wishes from Niall and Charlotte

Idea - sound and vision

I'm almost ashamed to admit that I don't watch wildlife documentaries on TV. As a youngster, I watched everything broadcast (and was particularly enchanted by those rare films from Scandinavia featuring animals I didn't even realise lived on the same continent as us). But as time went on, the music in these documentaries rankled more and more - I didn't want to be told how to feel. And I just couldn't stand the sentimentality that was too often bound up in it - this was not my experience of the natural world. Above all else, I wanted to hear the natural soundscapes of the creatures I was seeing on screen.

It's ironic then that it was to one of the UK's leading wildlife cameramen, John Aitchison, that I turned for a grounding in sound recording technique. And during those couple of days with him I came to understand the many parallels between wildlife photography and sound recording.

I think I may have failed to record almost as many fabulous sounds as I have great photographs over the years, peaks in the sonograph of my time in the wild. The metallic bugling of cranes echoing from the pines



around a misty Estonian bog; the chaotic din of those same cranes surrounding my hide in the Hula Valley in winter; the purring and bubbling of blackcock on a rain-soaked Scottish moor with a backing chorus of snipe, curlews and lapwings; an unintentional duet between a hoopoe and a collared dove, two different languages sung in harmony, resonating beautifully with one another in the Coto Donaña: all have gone unrecorded, yet are lodged permanently in my mind. The final push to fix moments like these came when we bought our house in rural Burgundy and discovered a new set of musical neighbours.

In summer, the large overgrown blackthorn and hazel hedge surrounding the field holds three loquacious nightingales, the oak at the end, a more laconic golden oriole.

We can hear hoopoes now and again from who knows where down the lane.

And most special of all, an evening flight of bee eaters catching insects in the fading light high above the house, before going to roost in a huge dark oak three small fields away.

I am more interested in recording and creating soundscapes (the equivalent of a habitat shot) than simply collecting clean recordings of individual species.

Ideally, I want the track to comprise of what natural musician, Bernie Krause, has dubbed the "geophony" (natural sounds of the Earth such as a flowing stream, creaking tree or rolling thunder) and the "biophony" (the sound of living, wild creatures with as little noise of people, their livestock and machines) as possible.

A composite represents several experiences in the one piece, so too does a soundscape comprised of several elements dubbed together. It makes the process of balancing



sounds around us much easier. Nevertheless, in the same way as a biologist may take issue with a photograph where unattractive elements have been removed or avoided, the same charge of "imbalance" can be levelled at these "musical composites" where the anthrophony is underplayed to give more prominence to natural sounds. While some photographers may be irked by having to avoid explicit signs of man in their photographs, it is nothing to the trials a sound recordist, even using a highly directional microphone, faces in down-playing our dominance in so many soundscapes. It's not surprising that we need to resort to the editing suite.

My approach is unsophisticated. I get myself somewhere with lots of the sort of sound I'm interested in, ideally early in the morning when the acoustic in a landscape can be quite different, then put the equivalent of a long telephoto on the tripod - a Telinga microphone in a parabolic reflector. With this I can record what John refers to as a narrow "corridor of sound" in front of, as well as behind, the subject. Ideally, I like to create a sense of depth in the recording with an accompaniment to the main subject *sotto voce* in the background. Sometimes it is easier to record the elements separately so that you can balance them just as you want them, at the editing

stage. I am very grateful that digital recording has spared me the limitations and difficulties of working with magnetic tape - the equivalent of transparency film.

As soon as you don a set of headphones and switch on a microphone, you will become aware of just how pervasive our presence in the landscape actually is. Photographers can select a different viewpoint to hide something they don't like. But escape from the anthrophony is much harder for sound recordists. Habitat replacement with monoculture, mining and air pollution are easily seen, but the impact on the natural world of the sounds we make is much more subtle and poorly understood. It needs greater exploration, more Bernie Krauses. Much of Krause's archive, dating back to the late 1960's, documents natural soundscapes that can no longer be heard and from his work we can get an insight into how the disruptive ripples from our din spread far beyond a flight path or motorway.

Natural soundscapes not only add a vital dimension to av-shows but recording them gives the photographer a fresh insight into the complexity and fascination of natural systems. And, as a bonus, you can't be accused of manipulating anyone's emotions.

Skill - Light painting

I love listening to the reaction of guests as their first light painted image appears on the back of their camera. For those who have never used this technique before, it can be a revelation. For those who have, well, I like to think that we take their work to a level beyond twirling sparklers or whisk-fulls of steel wool in the dark.

Light painting is great for picking out particular elements in a landscape, to give them prominence over others. Some subjects, like lighthouses and standing stones, are natural subjects but many others work well too, so long as they can be shown against the sky. No matter how gloomy a day it has been and how thick the clouds, you can always be reassured a rich, deep blue sky as darkness gathers.

The picture here, of The Eye in Galloway, shows several aspects of the technique. The principal light is provided by a high-powered, tungsten-balanced Deben hunting spotlight. Tungsten gives a much better colour contrast with the sky than cold LED lights. In this case, I directed the main beam away from the subject using instead the softer, weaker secondary reflection from the lamp to play light on both sides of the pinnacle. It's important to have an exposure time long enough - in this case, 148 seconds - to allow you to render the sky a rich blue (rather than black) and to give you time to move around the subject. This way you can mimic the look of two or more lights. I played a little more light behind and to the right of the pinnacle before applying some fill from the left. All the time, it's essential to keep the light moving.

The finishing touch involved a short sprint to put a smaller amount of light, using the spot, on to the willow in the background, to balance the photograph.



Food - Chanterelle entrée

"Here's a lovely thought: gathering golden chanterelles while ambling through the dark, humid woods then taking the basket back to your cool kitchen. There, you will cook the mushrooms with fresh garlic, butter and shallots then sit down to enjoy them with hot crusty bread and some chilled white wine. Welcome to France." - Charlotte



For four servings as a starter.

First, you'll need to clean the chanterelles (sometimes sold as girolles). You might get away with brushing them clean but if they have more dirt and twigs on them, lightly rinse them in a colander a few hours ahead and lay out on a clean tea towel so that they have dried off by the time you come to cook them. You needn't worry about them losing flavour through washing; they've seen a bit of rain, after all! Once they are clean set them aside and prepare the rest of the ingredients.

You will need:

1 tbsp of olive oil;
40 g of unsalted butter;
2 crushed garlic cloves;
2 banana shallots finely chopped;
300 g of chanterelles;
A decent glug of dry white wine;
175 ml of double cream;

A squeeze of lemon juice;
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper;
A handful of flat leaved parsley.

Now

Prepare each component so that it's ready to add to the pan when needed.

Bring a heavy-based, shallow pan to moderate heat, add the butter and olive oil and gently fry the shallots and garlic until soft. Add the chanterelles and cook for another 4 or 5 minutes.

Pour in the white wine and simmer the mixture until it has reduced slightly then add the cream and seasoning. Stir well and simmer for a further 5 minutes. Scatter in 3/4 of the parsley and stir. Serve in a shallow bowl with a garnish of the remaining parsley and squeeze of fresh lemon.

Enjoy with a crisp dry white wine and some crusty bread to mop up the delicious sauce.



*Featured Retreat -
The Heights of Torridon*

AN AUTUMN LANDSCAPE AND MACRO PHOTOGRAPHY
RETREAT IN NORTH-WEST SCOTLAND
2 - 9TH NOVEMBER, 2019

Over the last 12 years, Niall has spent a lot of time in this wild area, shooting personal work and on commission for the government agency, Scottish Natural Heritage. It manages this, the UK's first National Nature Reserve, founded in 1951 in recognition of its internationally important flora - principally of mosses, lichens and liverworts. It is also a redoubt of the once vast Scots pine forest that covered much of the Scottish Highlands for thousands of years but which has been reduced to a few scraps and remnants. At Beinn Eighe, we can see the work being done to re-establish a corridor of woodland from the pine-clad slopes above Loch Maree, down the length of Glen Torridon, to join with other fragments of old forest around Shieldaig.

Mountains formed from Torridonian sandstone, capped by glistening quartzite, seem to fill the sky. While it's not necessary to climb to gain a good vantage point, doing so can bring its own rewards, if the fitness of the group permits. The summits conjure with clouds rushing in from the Atlantic to produce squalls then drizzle then brilliant sunshine then hail, all within an hour. On other days it is utterly still and the dark lochs fill with reflections of emergent plants and sombre mountains.

It's as if the whole landscape is holding its breath: a time to be quiet ourselves and get a sense of the endurance of life here.

In terms of landscape and macro subjects, there is no shortage of "raw material" to work with and during this Retreat, you will learn how to:

- assemble "Chocolate Bar" collages;
- create "Colour Transects", to add to your landscape repertoire;
- create mood at the post-production stage and;
- light paint.

These techniques open doors to creative avenues that you'll be able to explore for years after. Our discussion sessions will centre around how to hold the viewer's interest as well as how these ideas might be adapted. During the review sessions, now an integral part of the programme, Niall guides but everyone is encouraged to contribute their own ideas.

Photography, of course, is just one part of the Retreat. Charlotte will not only make our base at Annat, at the head of Upper Loch Torridon warm and welcoming, but provide you with lovely meals that display the full extent of her culinary and presentational skills. You

might even be tempted to photograph them and Niall will have his food photography gear along should you want to do so. Located within easy reach of many of our key locations, Ferroch House and cottage sit back from the road, overlooking saltmarshes and over towards Ben Alligin on the north side of Loch Torridon. Each room has an en-suite bathroom, there is wi-fi throughout and a spacious lounge for tutorials and processing. We bring our own UHD 55" OLED TV screen to let you see your work in unprecedented detail, with accurate colours.

The days may be short, but the golden hour is prolonged and the day extended by our light painting sessions. Come and see the Scottish Highlands without the crowds you can expect in Glen Coe or on Skye.

You can read the brochure for the Retreat [here](#). There are currently only four places remaining on this Retreat.

Dates - our Retreats in 2019 and 2020. Full details on our [website](#).



Inspiration - Chris Jordan

It's a recurring theme in our discussions during Retreats: just how do we keep viewers with a picture for more than a couple of seconds before they swipe on to the next one? In the work of American artist, Chris Jordan, we see that question answered convincingly; create something with a simple, compelling story and give the viewer a lot to look at. In the case of this recreation of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* Jordan uses around 2.4 million fragments of plastic to represent the estimated number of pounds of plastic that enter the oceans every **hour**. The work measures 8 x 11 feet but its on-line version, and others in the series *Running the Numbers I & II*, allow you to zoom deeper and deeper into the images to reveal the complexity of their construction. The choice of images on which to base his own works adds poignancy, such as hump-backed whale portrait by Bryant Austin, composed of 50 000 plastic bags, the average number estimated in every square mile of ocean on the planet.

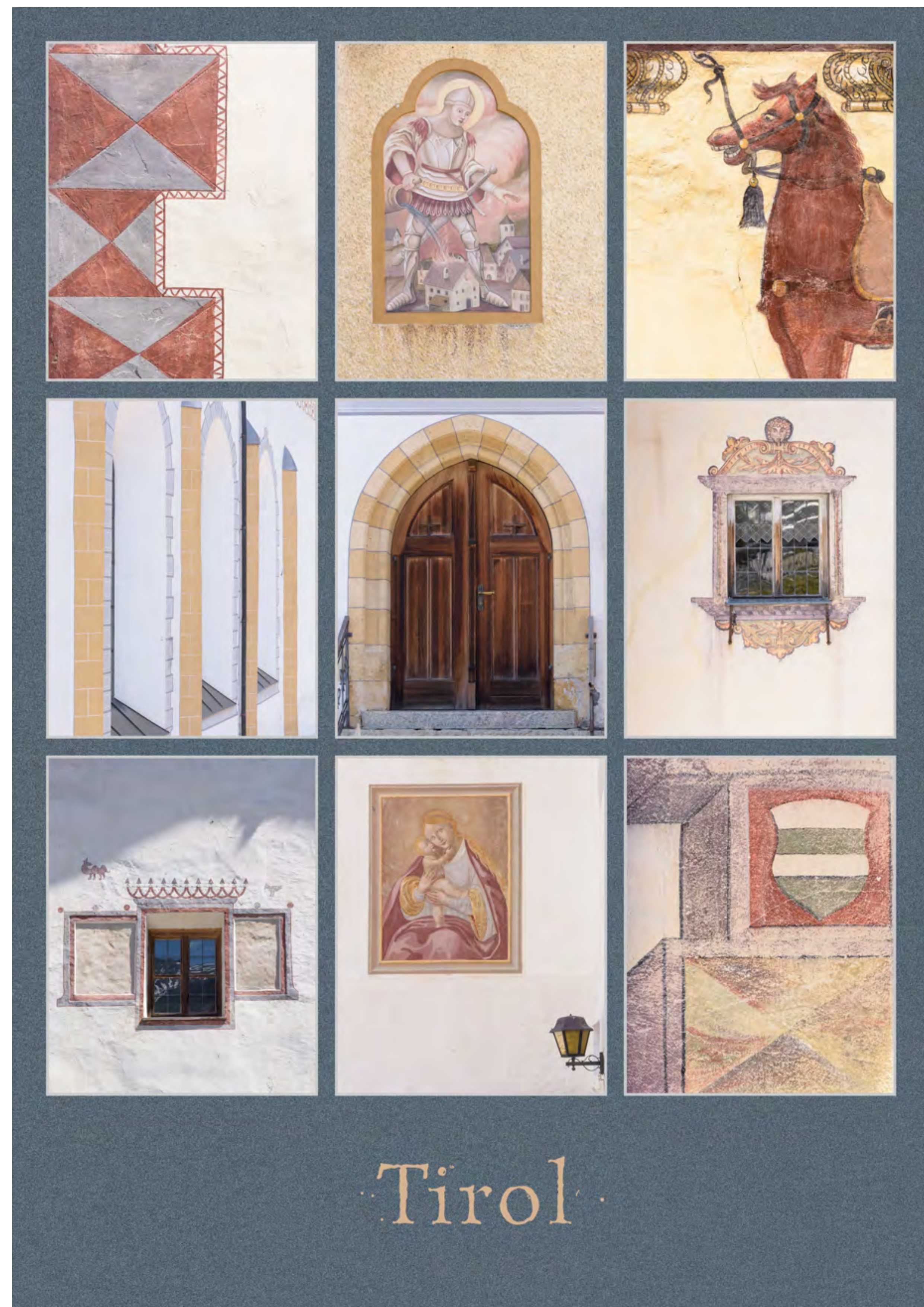
This body of Jordan's work, at its heart, is about our often unconscious yet rapacious appetite for what the Earth has to offer, our misuse of these "gifts" and the



inequality of their distribution. But while we are all aware of this, the journey into these pictures brings the reality of the scale of these issues into focus in a way I think few other artists have done, so alarmingly and

with so much ambition. Visit Chris Jordan's website [here](#) and see his TED talk [here](#). Image © Chris Jordan 2009.

Bonus footage - Austrian chocolate bar



Landscape photographers often struggle with the middle of the day, especially those of us of an ascetic disposition for whom the idea of just relaxing and reading a book is deeply troubling. But there's a simple, unsurprising solution: head into the shadows. In fact, if you're interested in photographing urban details, a bright sunny day is the best time to do it, so long as you chose the side of the street that is picking up the reflected light.

So it was in Austria this June that we visited Fließ and Wengs in the middle of a hot sunny day to "harvest" material for chocolate bar panels. Had we done this on an overcast day, the light would have looked a lot duller, the subtle colours muddier. I assembled the piece quickly using a Photoshop template by [Martin Santbergen](#) (one of nine he has created for us to make Chocolate Bars and Colour Transects quickly and easily).

The fellow with the bucket of water is Saint Florian, local hero and patron saint of fire-fighters and chimney sweeps. Sometimes, you just have to pick up a book to find out the details...

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