



In conversation with
Fabián Michelangeli

When not tutoring students in the microbiological world of cells and viruses, Fabián Michelangeli can be found off the beaten track creating abstraction out of the natural forms of flora and fauna, light and rocks. For him, the links between these two worlds are obvious, as he explains

Interview by Keith Wilson

Within the Georgian grandeur of Somerset House, London, I have spent an afternoon seated at a small folding table reviewing the portfolios of young photographers, eager for feedback and advice. Most are students, some are employed as assistants, one or two are working professionally, but the jobs must be sporadic otherwise they wouldn't be here. The occasion is the World Photography Festival, and I have one more person to see before the day is over. He is clearly not a student – he is older than me – and with him is his wife and a younger

woman, whom I guess is their daughter.

His name is Fabián and he is from Venezuela. He speaks precisely and quietly and tells me he wants *Outdoor Photography* to see his images because he has always liked nature and has photographed many things in his life and produces several discs for me to peruse. I begin thinking that I may be getting home later than expected. But I warm to Fabián when, with a slightly mischievous grin, he refers to his wife as his 'critic', and it is not till much later that I understand that this is not just a glib remark to humour his other half.

I load the first disc and am immediately struck by a contact sheet of swirling shapes and colours. Click, and the thumbnail pulls up to show bright green plant flowing like hair beneath the surface of a river; another click and red and yellow Gervera flowers are transformed into diffused shapes of contrasting hues. By the time I have finished looking at Fabián's work, my mind is made up: these should be published. He gives me his card – it tells a story: Fabián Michelangeli, Simón Bolívar Chair, Visiting Professor, University of Cambridge, Centre of Latin American Studies.



A medical graduate by training, Fabián is nearing the end of his 12-month posting to Cambridge. 'I haven't been in a ward for many years,' he explains, 'instead I study cells and viruses, how they invade cells and how they replicate.' In studying this microscopic world, Fabián spends as much time looking at images on the laboratory bench as he does when exploring the rainforests of Venezuela. But the two worlds are more closely linked than many would realise: 'In studying cells and viruses, I do a lot of micro-photography, so there is no divorce between my daily activity as a scientist and photography. Both science and art can be a driver of creativity.'

That creativity gives Fabián licence to employ an aesthetic eye in situations that his scientific peers may not even consider. 'For instance, in my day work I instinctively compose pictures of cells as a photographer. If I see one of my students photograph a cell I will even direct him a little and tell him 'move it this way a bit' for a better composition!' he laughs.

Viewing the micro world of cells and viruses has influenced his interest in photographing the natural world as an abstraction. He is drawn to the aquatic plant life and weathered pebbles on flowing riverbeds and blurred the wings

of hovering hummingbirds, comparing their suspended flight to a dancing ballerina. As well as similarities in shape and colour, Fabián looks for impressions of movement, even in well-known landmarks such as the slot canyons of Arizona. 'The light through Antelope Canyon reminds me of waves in a turbulent sea,' he explains. 'Even though they are rocks, for me these pictures are not static. Each time I like looking for abstraction so that unidentifiable objects provoke an emotional response away from what the subject actually is. I am trying to discover something else than the identifiable object itself.'

Like most photographers in the field, Fabián's passion for nature began when he was a child. His father was also an avid photographer but it was when he met his wife to be (the 'critic') in the 1960s that his tuition really started. 'Her uncle was one of the best photographers in Venezuela, so I became very interested in nature and landscape photography.' Then in 1977, in his early 30s, he made a trip into the tropical rainforests of southern Venezuela. 'That was a real turning point,' he recalls. 'I took my camera and up to then I had just been grabbing snapshots. It was like a discovery, not just the big expanses but I realised there could be landscapes anywhere.'

ABOVE 'Red Waves', Antelope Canyon, Arizona, USA.

Slot canyons in Arizona are magnificent geological features within the desert landscape of the American South West. I wanted to make somewhat abstract images of these, resembling and reminding me of water flow. The light penetrates from above and bounces from one wall to another reflecting colours and highlighting the textures and stratification of the rock.

Nikon F100 with Sigma 24-70mm lens, Kodachrome 64 film, f/2.8, tripod, exposure not recorded

OPPOSITE 'Dancing Ballerina', Sparkling violetear hummingbird (*Colibri coruscans*), Caracas, Venezuela.

These creatures fly and beat their wings at incredible speed. When they come to the feeder they hover and feed one or two seconds before disappearing into the forest again, or before they get chased away by a fellow mate or of the same or another species. I like the bird to stand out by isolating it from the surroundings, against a natural background as neutral as possible.

Nikon D300 with Sigma 500mm lens, ISO 400, 1/250sec at f/8, rear-curtain balanced fill flash

PREVIOUS PAGE 'Red Gervera... in movement' Caracas, Venezuela

I wanted to give the impression of movement, somehow an impressionist look. I experimented with zoom-out during a long exposure and a rear curtain fill flash.

Nikon D200 with AF-S DX Zoom-Nikkor 18-70mm f/3.5-4.5G IF-ED lens, ISO 100, f/25, 1.1 sec at f/25, rear-curtain balanced fill flash

Interview

From the 1980s till 2004, Fabián participated in more than 30 expeditions to the jungles of the south as a member of the Terramar Foundation, an NGO committed to raising public support for the conservation of marine environments and land-based ecosystems. The jungles of southern Venezuela take in the upper reaches of the Amazon basin and to this day are among the least explored regions on Earth, what Fabián describes as the ‘white speckles’ on the map, most notably the dozens of flat-topped mountains (Tepui) that support a unique array of plant and animal species found nowhere else. ‘I would document and study the animal life and ecology of these mountains,’ he recalls. ‘It was the most gratifying experience of my life. I now have a large collection of landscapes of the forests and mountains of this area and will self-publish these pictures soon.’

His work from these expeditions was noticed by oil giant Exxon Mobil Venezuela, which every year commissioned a different photographic assignment about Venezuela for its public relations and local marketing. ‘I was approached in 1999 to photograph the Orinoco (Venezuela’s

longest river), after they saw my pictures of the Tepui,’ Fabián recalls. ‘We navigated from the source of the river to the sea, a distance of 2,400km. Photographing from a helicopter was a real challenge because I suffer from vertigo!’ Challenges are not something that make Fabián balk. Four years later Exxon Mobil approached him again, this time to photograph the small stretch of Venezuelan coast where Christopher Columbus landed on his third voyage of discovery of the New World in 1498.

‘That was a very ambitious editorial project because the stretch of coast where Columbus landed is such a small place from which to produce a whole book, but we produced a book of more than 300 pages after just four months of very intense work. It was amazing to see the variety of subjects to be found in one small place and the stories that could be told.’

That last comment does not sound so surprising when considering Fabián’s familiarity with the microscopic world, his fascination with macro photography and his love for what he describes as ‘intimate landscapes’. These are his images of riverbeds, some of which were taken

on those first expeditions to the hidden depths of southern Venezuela’s impenetrable jungle. ‘They are my favourite pictures,’ he says. ‘I keep coming back trying to discover something new that goes with my sense of interior peace, it drains all worries and I forget about everything. When I get one picture I like I feel very happy for a long time.’

He is currently working on two new projects: macro abstracts of flowers – which deploys most of the techniques and style of his intimate landscapes – and the vivid and vibrant hummingbirds, which are drawn to the feeders in the garden of his home in Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. ‘I have some hummingbird feeders, a liquid solution of water and sugar, four parts water to one part sugar, in a flask,’ he explains. ‘When they hover it’s a very fast action. They become very tame, if the feeder runs out they hover just 20cm from my face as if to tell me!’

Hummingbirds are tiny as well as fast and among the most difficult bird species to photograph, so Fabián had to learn about high speed and slow sync flash and the precise



adjustments in exposure required in order to achieve the results he wanted. ‘I like a new challenge,’ he emphasises. ‘High Speed flash is a challenge. In the beginning I just kept shooting until I got the combination of light, aperture, shutter speed and flash intensity to something I liked. The main component is still the available light; the flash is fill-in to get the catch-light in the bird’s eye.’ Although the hummingbirds remain clearly identifiable in his pictures, he is still aiming to portray a degree of abstraction, a recurring theme in his work. ‘I don’t like the pictures where they freeze the action,’ he stresses. ‘I like to see some kind of movement and I have some pictures where they are completely blurred, but I like them because the colour and shape becomes an abstraction.’

With less than a month to go before he completes his year at Cambridge University and returns to his hummingbirds, I ask Fabián what he will remember most about his time in the UK. ‘Until coming to the UK I had never lived in a country with four seasons,’ he replies. ‘I live in a country that just has two, wet and dry, or should I say wet and less wet! I have been

documenting the seasons here in Cambridge: a white frozen River Cam, then the greens of spring and colours of autumn. I will make a Blurb book of these pictures for family and friends in Venezuela. But the most interesting thing has been the cultural experience, in every sense.’

As our conversation draws to a close, Fabián reveals how his next photographic assignment will help him overcome his natural shyness. ‘My next project will be to Ethiopia, then down to Kenya and eventually into South Africa and Namibia. That would be a completely new challenge as I am very shy about meeting people and taking their picture.’ Typically though, he doesn’t have straight portraits in mind: ‘I would like to get some abstraction into the picture about what the people may be feeling; I call it a psychological abstraction.’

As he says this I cannot envisage the result, but I have little doubt that the learned professor with the abstract eye and an unquenchable thirst for a challenge will find a way that proves as revelatory as sighting a new species from a distant bend on the Orinoco. ■

OPPOSITE ‘Aquatic Head of Hair’, Parupa river, Canaima National Park, Venezuela
These aquatic plants move underwater in the slow flowing river as if it were a long-haired swimming woman. The golden-green head of hair contrasts with the tea coloured waters of the river.
Nikon FE2, with Nikkor 200mm lens, Kodachrome 64 film, f/4, tripod, exposure not recorded

ABOVE ‘Yellow and Pink Gerwas’, Caracas, Venezuela
Here the blurring and diffusion of the flowers was attained by having another flower (of another colour) in the foreground completely out of focus and using a shallow depth of field. I was searching for an impressionist look and a romantic atmosphere.
Nikon D200 with AF Micro-Nikkor 105mm lens, ISO 100 1/90sec at f/3.3, rear-curtain balanced fill flash

