



Voyage of rediscovery



Despite growing up in the frenetic melting pot of Hong Kong, **Paul Wakefield** developed a sensitivity for nature that translated into a keen yet subtle eye for landscape photography, as Keith Wilson discovers

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Overhanging tree,
northwest Scotland,
2004

*Ebony 5x4in with
Schneider 120mm
lens, Velvia 50,
1/2sec at f/32*

Opposite Gull's
nest, east coast of
England, 2004

*Ebony 5x4in with
Schneider 90mm
lens, Velvia 50,
1/4sec at f/32*

This page Tideline,
southwest Wales,
2004

*Ebony 5x4in with
Schneider 120mm
lens, Velvia 50,
1/2sec at f/32*

FOR SOMEONE WHO had always planned to be a marine biologist, Paul Wakefield takes a mean photograph. 'It was pretty much a *volte face*,' he recalls. 'Literally within a few days I did a complete turnaround and enrolled on a foundation course in art college. I had no idea whether you could make a living from photography!'

But make a living from it he did, and for some 20 years he has been one of the country's leading commercial photographers, working for clients as prestigious as Mercedes, Lexus and Toyota. However, for the past 10 years or so, the personal work which has illustrated books such as *Wales: The First Place* and *Ireland: Your Only Place*, and for which Wakefield was renowned in the 1980s, has taken something of a back seat. But all that is about to change. Following on from a successful exhibition at the Zelda Cheatle Gallery last year, you'll be able to see Paul's work, along with images by other photographers working for the National Trust and Magnum Photos, at a major exhibition at London's National Maritime Museum.

Opening on 23 March, the show is part of SeaBritain 2005, a year-long celebration of the UK's maritime heritage. With influences such as Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, Wynn Bullock and Minor White, Paul describes his style as 'pretty traditional.' Traditional it may be, but ordinary it isn't, and in some ways the commercial work that has so occupied him in recent years has kept him open minded about the potential of some subjects. 'With my commercial work I have to try to keep abreast of certain fashions. That might mean changing my style a little, which I'm prepared to do, because I think that actually opens you up a bit.'

What characterises Paul's photography most noticeably is its extremes. Both classic wideangle shots and close-up details feature heavily in his portfolio. 'I tend to go for one or the other,' he admits. 'Not much is in between.'

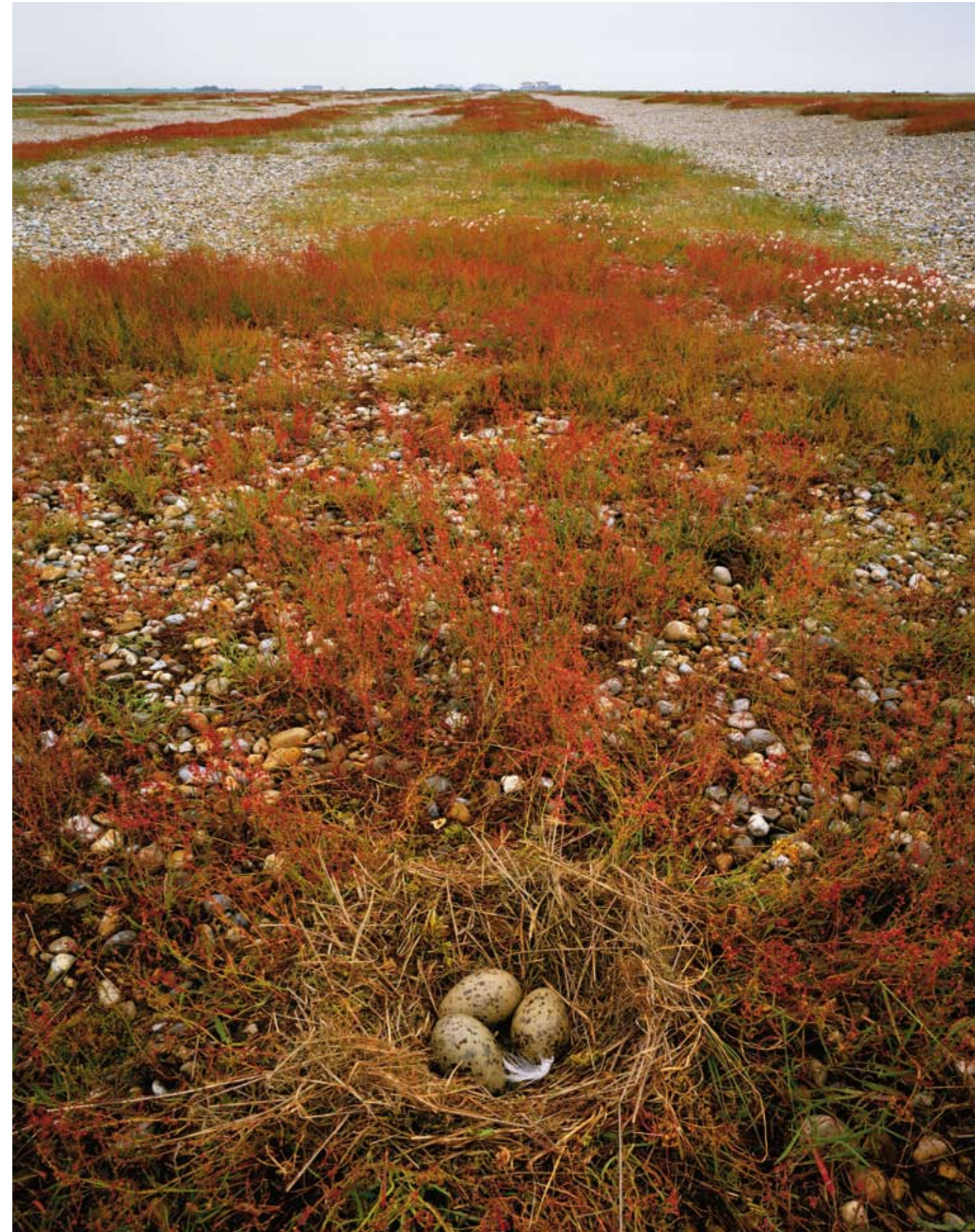
What also interests him is demonstrating the relationship between the detail and the wider landscape, but in as simple a way as possible – both in terms of composition and use of colour. 'I try to pare it right down to its

bare essentials,' he explains. 'My work's very colourful, but on the whole there's not a great deal of colour outside a certain range.'

Paul believes his style has remained fairly constant over the years, but he feels he has made progress in one fundamental area. 'I'm much more open to chance now than I was,' he reveals. 'I now know, from years of experience, that chance always comes along.' As a result, he re-visits locations in a way he never used to, not with the aim of nailing *the* image, but with the intention, over time, of making several successful images.

'I used to think I wanted to go everywhere in the world to photograph – that it was important to experience everything. Actually, what's important is really getting to know the bones of nature – and you can do that anywhere. And the more you do it in places you know well, the more successful you're going to be.' With this revelation has come a desire to concentrate on locations within the British Isles, 'because that's my back door and I can get to it easily.'

As a strong exponent of the slow, meticulous methodology of large





Left Fissured coastline, Isle of Rhum, Scotland, 2004

Ebony 5x4in with Schneider 90mm lens, Velvia 50, one second at f/32, Lee 0.6 ND grad

manner in which he painted the British landscape. 'I do like to abstract things, which is difficult to do with photographs because you're dealing with material people can recognise,' he comments. He is also very sparing in his use of the format, because he feels its drama can have more impact than the composition.

You might have the impression by now that Paul Wakefield is something of a perfectionist – and you'd be right. It's rare to find a large format photographer who doesn't share his eye for detail and high standards. A case in point is Paul's recent transition from making Ilfochrome prints ('Which I hated!') from his transparencies, to making inkjet prints from digital scans – these will feature in the aforementioned exhibition.

He works closely with scanning operator Patrick Horgan, who matches each scan with the original transparency, creating a file of around 350Mb. If the print doesn't match what's on screen so Paul will then finely tweak the scan so that the inkjet print – made with Epson Ultrachrome inks on Hahnemühle paper – holds all the detail and

Below Nettles and seed drift, Wiltshire, England, 1986

Linhof 5x4in with Schneider 150mm lens, Kodak slide film, 1/8sec at f/32

'What's important is really getting to know the bones of nature – and the more you do it in the places you know well, the more successful you'll be'

format photography, the opportunity to revisit locations becomes doubly important to Paul, simply because the process of setting up a 5x4in camera means that sometimes a photograph will disappear in front of his eyes.

With a philosophical, 'so what?' he goes on to explain why missing the light isn't always such a disaster. 'A lot of times I'll just stay, because although it was a fleeting moment, you know that moment will come back again. And if it doesn't, you know where you are, you've got your composition – you can always return.'

Although 5x4in has been Paul's size of choice ever since art college, he has been known to venture into the letterbox world of the 6x17cm format. It was the influence of artist Ivan Hitchens, who painted in the panoramic ratio, that turned Paul onto the format in the first place, as well as the abstract





sharpness of the original Velvia or Provia transparency.

What Paul's work demonstrates is that it's all about attitude, not technology. And he's someone who is still discovering and – more importantly – rediscovering. 'I did the books on Scotland and Wales in the 1980s, and recently went back to some of these locations for the first time in 15 years. It was a revelation. Not only had the landscape changed, but so had my perception of it. I had thought there was nothing more I could extract from it – how wrong I was!' One expects that Paul Wakefield still has plenty more to say, through the language of his stunning photography. ❖

Exhibition

The Coast Exposed, an exhibition by the National Trust Photographic Library in conjunction with Magnum Photos, will be on show at Queen's House, The National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, from 23 March 2005 to 8 January 2006. For further information, call 020 8312 6565.

Above Maram grass and dunes, County Down, Ireland, 1996
Ebony 5x4in with Schneider 90mm lens, Velvia 50, one second at f/32, Lee 0.6 ND grad

Left Lichen 2, southwest Scotland, 2004
Ebony 5x4in with Schneider 120mm lens, Velvia 50, one second at f/22

● *Additional reporting by Ailsa McWhinnie*