



PROFILE: MARK GALER

ROUND THE LONG WAY

BY MIKE O'CONNOR

Mark Galer's tireless passion for both photographs and the tools we use to make them have made him one of our most in-demand speakers, guides and experts on just about everything image-making. He talks to Mike O'Connor about how a love of great photography is at the heart of everything he does.



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Cape Woolamai, Phillip Island, Victoria. Sony A7RII + FE 4/12-24 G. Multiple 30s exposures at f16 to test Sony's new ultra-wide Zoom with NiSi filters 10, 6 and 3 Stop. High resolution files can be viewed here: <https://flic.kr/s/aHsm35d9BY>





I don't really think of myself as a regular, commercial photographer," says Mark Galer.

For someone who has worked as a photographer for more than thirty years, it's an unusual statement – but one that starts to make more sense when you look at Galer's varied career both in front of the lens and behind it.

Today Mark Galer is an ambassador for Sony and Adobe, a master of Lightroom and Photoshop, an author of more than 30 books on photography, and a former senior lecturer and program director of the BA Photography course at RMIT University in Melbourne. And despite an endlessly packed schedule, he still finds time to lead workshops and speak at dozens of photo clubs every year.

It's a world away from what the young lad, born and raised in the Midlands of the UK, initially expected to be doing for a career – he had started with grand plans of being a graphic designer.

"I suppose over time my reputation has developed as an educator, especially in the areas of things that are emerging, and things that are new," explains Galer, speaking down the line from Melbourne.

This passion for the cutting-edge was what first set him down the career path to becoming a professional

shooter. Realising that image making was more immediately satisfying than graphic design could ever be, Galer ditched plans to study pure design and instead elected to major in photography. Absorbing himself in image-making in an era when the darkroom was still king, Galer's grounding was soon set.

With a career in documentary photojournalism beckoning, he began his final assignment—a documentary project on the last working coal mine in the Rhondda valley in Wales, primarily shooting Kodak Tri-X. However it wasn't to be.

"I finished and got myself a job photographing products with a bit of work in the dark room as well," he remembers. But it was not really what I imagined a career as a photographer would be."

So he started planning his escape.

TALES FROM THE ROAD

Wanting to do editorial work, but faced with a shrinking market, he realised his attempts to pitch work would fall on deaf ears. "I realised a lot of the weekend magazine spreads of traditional, long-form photo essays were getting smaller and smaller," he explains.

But ever resourceful, he had a plan. "I had a love of motorcycles, and I wanted to travel, so I rolled the two together.



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LEFT: Captured at Artists Point in Monument Valley, USA in 1998 on Galer's 22-month circumnavigation around the world on two wheels.

BELOW: Miners at the last working coal mine in the Rhondda valley in Wales.

BOTTOM RIGHT: The first digital SLR, Kodak's DCS with a Nikon F3.



It was the year of Live Aid, so in the summer of 1986, with my best friend Max, who I was renovating a house with, sold the place and we used some of the money to buy two used BMW motorcycles to ride to Australia for charity."

The trip took 22 months. "Max would write and I'd be the photographer, and we'd create stories as we went," explains Galer. The journey would take the two from the UK to Australia via Europe, The Middle East, India and South-East Asia in a journey not too dissimilar to the one Ewan MacGregor would do some twenty years later in his landmark TV series *A Long Way Round*.

Once they reached Australia, the two riders waited for warmer weather in the Northern Hemisphere before hitching a ride on a Swedish container ship across the Pacific to the US, then crossing the country and arriving in New York. From there they hitchhiked on a boat across the Atlantic to Liverpool and eventually home. In total, they had travelled 67,000km and raised \$30,000.

But the trip didn't just give Galer a few extra stamps in his passport and a few more miles on the bike, it also gave him the break he was after.


"The trip broke the ice for me. The next time I rang media outlets and told them about what I had done it was like a lightbulb going off. I was invited to their offices to show them my images and they were immediately interested."





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Galer's involvement with Australia could have ended here. But while waiting in Melbourne he had met his future wife, Dorothy, and fallen in love. A return Down Under was inevitable.

THE NEXT STEP

"You couldn't pay a mortgage with the money I was earning at the time," Galer admits bluntly. But the grounding he was getting was priceless. He was learning to write, as well as improving his photography skills in the field. And despite the money, the door was open as a writer with his work being regularly published in motorcycle magazines in both the UK and Australia.

But at the same time, he knew if it was a struggle now, it would always be. "I was basically a bum," he laughs. "I knew if I was to have a family I would need to have a reliable source of income, so I thought about what job would allow me to travel and take photographs, and teaching seemed to fit the bill." So he decided to enrol in teacher's college in the UK. It was a decision that would change his life.

Galer's first teaching opportunity was perfect: teaching 16 and 17 year olds the photography component of a foundation course on the outskirts of London. But there was a problem. "As a new teacher I started looking at what the existing educational resources were like," he explains. He wasn't impressed.

"The existing resources were very dry and technical, and I knew I needed to keep it as simple as possible and not fill the students' heads with too much technical information while they were learning to be creative." So he created his own. It would go on to form the basis of his first book *Photography Foundations for Art and Design: A Guide to Creative Photography*, first published by Focal Press in 1995.

Meanwhile, technology was moving on too. Computers were becoming widespread and by the time he arrived at his next teaching job, London's NESOT in 1992, digital photography was a growing part of the commercial imaging scene.

One of the lecturers, Adrian Davies, was working closely with the R&D department at Kodak. "Trucks were turning up loaded with Kodak DCS cameras, the first digital SLRs," remembers Galer. Featuring a customised camera back with a digital image sensor mounted to a heavily modified Nikon F3 body, the idea was the college would explain to professionals what digital photography was, with the hope that they might spend \$30,000 adding a DCS to their kit.

"It was a bit of a hard sell for a camera with 1.3 megapixels I suppose," laughs Galer. The era of digital photography had arrived and he was instantly smitten.

This shot appeared on the cover of Galer's *Photoshop CS5 Essential Skills* book. "It is one of my favourite street images," he says.



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ABOVE: Sony's radical DSC-R1.

RIGHT: Georgetown, Penang, Malaysia - captured as part of Galer's *Landscape Revisited* series (exhibited as part of the Lumens festival in Suzhou, China and Federation Square, Melbourne, in 2013)

BELOW: Gilber Namala (Milgarri Community, Knuckeyes Lagoon, 11 Mile) Captured in support of Sony's Eye-See Project.

THE IMAGE EDITING REVOLUTION

The DCS idea may not have stuck, but the arrival of the Mac computer and Photoshop 1.0 set the foundations for the hardware and software that would follow. The darkroom would enjoy another 10-plus years of commercial relevance. Then, cameras such as the Canon D60 and Nikon D100, and a new software update in Photoshop CS, which incorporated Adobe Camera Raw for the first time, changed everything again.

"Previous versions of Photoshop were integral to the desktop publishing industry," says Galer, "but, for me, it was the advent of Adobe Camera Raw in 2003 that really marked the end of analog capture."

Eager to learn more, and aware of the potential of the software, Galer began studying. And so began a love affair with the venerable image-editing program, eventually leading to him becoming a recognised Photoshop and Lightroom authority. To watch him explain the software now to an audience is akin to watching a composer perform – an absolute mastery of every facet of the software.





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TECHNOLOGY

Galer has continued to keep his finger on the pulse of camera technology, not just with Adobe, but also as an ambassador for Sony imaging. It's a role he's held since 2013, and involves work as one of just two global ambassadors in the region for the company's line of mirrorless cameras and lenses.

"I'd always been interested in Sony because they never seemed interested in copying anything Canon and Nikon were doing," he says. "They have always made amazing imaging sensors too."

As you might expect, Galer's personal kit represents the cutting-edge of Sony's imaging technology. In his bag you'll find an A7R III, an A6500, and an A9, with a selection of Sony lenses. And even with some of the best camera gear in the world, he'll always find space in his camera bag for a compact tripod and rocket blower as well.

It's easy to forget just how far cameras and software have come in such a relatively short time. After all, that Kodak DCS only came out 26 years ago, a relative blink of an eye. Yet for someone whose focus has always been on looking ahead to the next generation of camera and image editing technology, surely it must seem like the endless pursuit of something new must get a little tiresome?

"Not a chance," says Galer, laughing. ☺



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Free Photoshop and Lightroom tutorials, actions and presets are available on Mark Galer's website, markgaler.com.

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