

# **OPEN EYE GALLERY**

## **ARTIST INTERVIEWS**

**28 OCTOBER – 18 DECEMBER 2016**

## **JERWOOD/PHOTOWORKS AWARDS 2015**

**JOANNA PIOTROWSKA  
TEREZA ZELENKOVA  
MATTHEW FINN**

All interviews have been conducted by Open Eye Gallery's first Writer-in-Residence, Pauline Rowe.

Pauline is also facilitating a series of workshops that respond to the exhibition through an accessible and joyful engagement with creative writing and poetry.

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#JPA15

## ARTIST INTERVIEW: TEREZA ZELENKOVA

**Pauline Rowe:** You have spoken previously of a dark romanticism in your work – can you say where this started in your imaginative life? Was it something that came before your interest in photography?

**Tereza Zelenkova:** The romanticism... well I am a hopeless Romantic but in the reference to the movement. I actually just glanced at wikipedia and realised I am 200 years late with my work in terms of innovation!

*"characterized by its emphasis on emotion and individualism as well as glorification of all the past and nature. The [Romantic] movement emphasized intense emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, placing new emphasis on such emotions as apprehension, horror and terror, and awe—especially that experienced in confronting the new aesthetic categories of the sublimity and beauty of nature. It considered folk art and ancient custom to be noble statuses, but also valued spontaneity."*

And the darkness is probably inherent to this. To answer your question, it is not something that I set to do or intentionally mimic in my practice, it's just always been a natural part of me and my photographs merely reflect that. I don't know where it comes from, but it extends from the art, music and literature I like, to how I navigate in personal life as well.

**PR:** Can you say something about the important symbols in your work? Carved stone, Christian imagery, trees, caves, streets, steps, locations related to folk-lore?

**TZ:** That's quite broad question as there's a lot to say about each of these. I think that a lot of these have something to do with rituals that people engage in and then how these relate to one's surrounding landscape and nature.

**PR:** I'd like to ask you about Prague – it's something you've described as *"a city on the threshold of different worlds or realities"* and also that *"the city's heartbeat has been heard loudest through the voices of its ethnic minorities."* Could you say a little more about that in relation to your work as an artist?

**TZ:** Yes, I've been thinking about Prague through the work of a German-Jewish writer, Gustav Meyrink who was influenced by many esoteric things. He was an occultist. Reading him is a bit like reading magic realism. He was interested in alchemy and he writes philosophically but also has a sense of humour. What I like about Prague is that it's a city of mystery and astrology and astronomy with its narrow streets. It's quite small with medieval parts. I think about Prague before the Jewish ghetto was demolished, before the second world war. It has historic roots as the centre of Europe. It also has a strong German influence. Have you been there?

**PR:** I haven't. No. You've talked about the German influence and also that it's a city of mystery and metamorphosis in a way....what you *do* convey in your work is story – layers of story...? Could you say something about narrative and photography and your thinking behind that?

**TZ:** Yes, this is something I've been thinking of when I make my work. The stories behind the images are important. There is a Germanic influence in Prague from Rudolph II on. There's always a struggle between what the image is able to say and what you get from the image without text. How much can you say and how much is actually lost. Sometimes, framing a fragment... Sometimes when I work it's more like a diarist. I want to include the stories behind the images. I have a writer working with me and this introduces a different voice. My work allows for imagination and different interpretations.

**PR:** You capture places which feel as though they are moving into the dark or towards darkness (e.g. Elizabeth Bathory's Bedroom, Stairs) while leaving the viewer at the threshold uneasy and anxious. Are you aiming to create this unease – if so, how does this link with images of the land – of your own country?

**TZ:** I quite enjoy the photography's relationship with polarity of light and darkness. When you're printing from a negative, the dark areas of the picture are formed by the light hitting the sensitive paper, so it's actually the bright light that creates the darkest tones. It's kind of similar like looking directly into the sun and getting blinded by that. For me that reflects on a lot of other things in the world and opposites that somehow complement each other or are actually the same thing. I can think of many cultural references that it embodies for me, for example like Arthur Rimbaud writing that you need to lay down into mud to see the stars, or alchemistic "as above so below", and ultimately Georges Bataille writes a lot about

darkness as excess of light. So that's one angle of why I am attracted to the dark abyss within an image. The more obvious one is the sense of ambiguity of what lurks inside these dark openings and what might be looking back at you. (apropos "When you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back at you", Nietzsche). The image that I'd like to present is of a place that has its secrets, a place that can't be overseen with a single glance and might be even fictional and one has to employ a bit of imagination to complete its image. I am looking for a sort of inner landscape rather than for the outward manifestation of it. The work is a lot about people's relationship to the landscape of their home and how they create stories around it and so I am just trying to continue in that tradition by creating my own perspective.

**PR: You've also said that each image has a meaning...some of the work you've done around landscape – it's also as if you're uncovering clues.**

**TZ:** It's very common- sandstone – emblematic landscape of the Czech republic – and a lot of it. I didn't realize how emblematic this thing was. I was not concentrating on the sandstone landscape although a lot of things I'd photographed had to do with sandstone. It is interesting to the people and it invites sculpture although it also erodes unlike marble. For the size of the territory it's a small part of the Czech republic. It is interesting to see how people reacted with the landscape and their sensitivity to nature, working with it as opposed to destroying it – the symbiosis of people with the land. Together, the natural and human element – the opposite to globalization. It is not so long ago since that sensitivity was lost.

Sometimes I feel more like a diarist, to include the stories behind the images. I have a writer working with me (through the Jerwood-Photoworks award) so there is a sense of different voices and interpretations. I don't want to work in a way that is too didactic or theory-based. Working with someone else allows for imagination and different interpretations. Sandstone is easy to carve into.

**PR: You have written about Kopic, a man who carved symbols of Czechoslovakian nationality and history into the sandstone rocks behind his farm, the following:**

*"This man's quest proves to me that art can be political but also therapeutic and a way of dealing with great injustice and that the most important examples of such art are often found not in contemporary galleries but in places where they're least expected."*

## **What does this mean for work that *is* in galleries?**

**TZ:** I don't see my work as political although this is the most political work I have ever done. It seems a most reasonable way to resist globalization. The way people are moving and migrating. We are becoming scared of our own cultural heritage. How can we respond to this? It seems the most positive way is to examine your own roots and share them. The work is political because it's about identity and legacy. How much influence does the place have where I grew up? It stays with you.

There are political artists always working with more spontaneous expression outside of the polished gallery world. It is most interesting to discover when someone did something for themselves. I was born in Czechoslovakia in 1985 and it was divided in 1993 but the split wasn't a traumatic thing.

**PR:** You have said the working title is 'the land with the secret heart beat'– can you say something more about this?

**TZ:** Again this is from Gustav Meyrink when he talks about Prague being "a city with a secret heartbeat" but the translation isn't quite right and I couldn't use the original language as it would be pretentious. What matters is the sense of what's below the surface.

**PR:** You have written about wanting to photograph the death mask of Gustav Meyrink. Will you do so? Can you say why this is important to you?

**TZ:** I have actually photographed it few weeks ago. It was quite powerful experience to hold this in my hands and also to meet its current owners. Gustav Meyrink is a really important writer to me because he wrote stories that deal with esoteric and occult subjects, creating the upmost mysterious and poetic visions of cities and their inhabitants. His writings about Prague cause one too many people to look for places that exist only on the thresholds of reality.

**PR:** The sense of differing realities and ambiguity in your work is important. Are you interested in how the viewer responds to this and could this response influence how you develop your work?

**TZ:** Of course I am interested how the viewer will react but I am not creating this work in terms of trying to reach specific audience. I don't really think about my audience when making work, that's not my motivation.

**PR:** You have described the two influential themes that provoked the image *The Unseen* as the automatism of photography (linked with nineteenth century spiritualism) and the Czech fairy-tale *Goldielocks*. In that tale the 12 princesses cover their hair when the prince is looking for Goldielocks amongst them. In your image the family of women have their heads completely covered and the top of the covering is flat. It suggests accusation, perhaps waiting death. Can you say more about this, especially as there are few human figures in this exhibition?

**TZ:** I think you are placing a lot of your interpretation on this image. Albeit it's interesting one, it wasn't my intention to produce the reading of accusation. The flatness is caused by the crowns worn by each princess and I really just liked the effect it produced. For me the image is more about a slightly surreal family gathering in pre-war rural setting suggesting some involvement with spiritism and ghosts.

**PR:** Does your work have feminist aspirations and, if so, how?

**TZ:** I think you have to be a feminist if you are a woman in today's society. In my work I've been really interested in woman as a type of medium that connects the irrational and rational worlds or let's say combines emotions and reason in very powerful way. I find it curious that a lot of spiritistic mediums were women as we somehow seem to be closer to the otherworldly side of being, perhaps we are much more intuitive and attentive to the invisible world. This is something I am trying to portray with some of my photographs of women.

[openeye.org.uk/blog/#artist-interview-tereza-zelenkova](http://openeye.org.uk/blog/#artist-interview-tereza-zelenkova)

[www.terezazelenkova.com](http://www.terezazelenkova.com)

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## ARTIST INTERVIEW: MATTHEW FINN

**Pauline Rowe:** To get started - I'm really interested in how the camera and photography has framed and supported your relationship with your Mum. Can you remember the moment this made sense to you (i.e. was there a starting point you consciously remember) - was it when you first received the camera? And do you feel that the work is a joint (equal) collaboration with your Mum? And would she agree with you?

**Matthew Finn:** I'd been giving a camera several months before I started photographing my mother. I remember well the first photograph I took, at least the first one I printed in B/W. She was sitting on a dining room table chair positioned close to the patio windows so she could get the fresh air from the outside whilst looking onto the garden. It winter 1986. The light was bright but soft and cast lovely shadows onto the wall behind my mother.

As I said I'd had the camera for a while before this picture. What started the project was moving from our council flat to the semi-detached home that all the photographs are taken. We moved in the spring of '86. I think that first photograph and the new surrounds were the springboard to the series and its continuation.

The idea of the collaboration is an interesting one. At first I was just practising, using my mother as a figure within the frame. Once I moved away to University, several years after the start, that's when it became a series worth investing in. Also the images seemed fresh each time I visited as they offered a sense of time compared to the daily images taken before I moved away.

I was starting to look at Nan Goldin and Sally Mann and was struck at how different approaches could be taken to long term projects. I liked the idea of something that was tangible and accepting at the same time.

As time went on and I showed my mother the images she became aware of angles, her best side, quality of light, the closeness of the lens. I started to notice that she was coaxing me into the image she wanted. She knew how she wanted to be portrayed. This for me was a collaboration; it was unspoken we just continued with what I call a dance.

Photography became everything to us. I would not go back home without a camera and film and would be disappointed if the light was poor. I would have my camera ready first thing in the morning and photograph around my mother's daily routine. We did this for 29 years in that house.

We never spoke about the project much. It was our routine. I had a camera and we made these images together. We needed each other. Would my mother agree on ideas of collaboration? I don't know and now I never will.

**PR: What is it that photographers can see that those of us who aren't photographers miss?**

**MF:** I don't know if photographers do see things differently. What you're left with is a trace. Putting work in a gallery is to do with confidence and acceptance. There's a hierarchy about having work in a gallery that social media can't have. Photographers see very small things in detail of what they want to photograph. It's the opposite, in fact of what you suggest. I want to see the same as everyone else so that the audience can recognise it. It depends on the type of work you make. I like to make work about everything around me – family, students – photos where people can find something of themselves.

**PR: You mention (in the Jerwood/Phortoworks interview) that in the Winter of 86 the light was casting lovely shadows onto the wall behind your Mum. Is photography about your relationship with light – or how you see the light?**

**MF:** I love light and how light cast shadows. I'd never seen Van Gogh paintings before I saw them in the Musee d'Orsay in Paris. There is a vividness of colour that I couldn't replicate in life. It's the same in Peter Greenaway films – with their sumptuous sets. Black and white made sense to me. Home for Mum was very brown – it didn't lend itself to colour, but it did to light. Mum used to smoke – smoke is wonderful in light – and she used to drink – a crystal tumbler in the light is wonderful too. I don't think I've changed from that constant in my work. To be good a photograph needs good light and a good subject. It's only in war or when a singular event happens that you *can't* aestheticise – then you can get away with no subject and poor light.

**PR: You say your 'Mother' project started when you moved from your Council flat to the house where all the photos are taken. What was it about this move that was important to you and your Mum?**

**MF:** It was a Council estate where you rented from the Council – it was rough and getting rougher. We lived in a top floor maisonette. To move to a house with a garden was amazing really. I was 16 and there was space to manoeuvre. I'd just left school. I hadn't done particularly well, although I did enjoy school. The move came at a time when I was trying to figure out who I was. Photography worked on a lot of levels. It was instantaneous. The immediacy and the freedom. Slight independence. The camera exaggerated that independence and I enjoyed it. I couldn't imagine *not* finding the camera. There are lots of things that made the work the way it is. The TV series *Butterflies* by Carla Lane – there was a lot in that series of a singular woman dreaming of a different life. I wanted to isolate Mother from the rest of the family. So we could have time together. The longevity of the project cuts through the question of how to avoid sentimentality. Here you see a person ageing.



**PR:** You talk about practising, using your mother in the frame. You were looking inside your house rather than outside – do you think this is unusual?

**MF:** Duration makes it unique. As a working-class boy there's no way I could make certain types of work. Here you have a subject, you can keep on doing it and there are many of the same (Images). This is how we'd communicate. It's ritualistic. This is what would be happening. It's my point of view – as I lived in the house. We all had our own space. Lots of photos were taken from my mother's routines and it's how I had a conversation with her. It became important – part and parcel of our routine – taken for granted. My mother was a willing participant in this 'dance'. In many ways she was directing me. I valued the time – it was over 30 years of her life – an incredible gift. I never questioned it or worried. Mum lived with her brother for 76 years and they had very defined roles in the home. He earned good money. There was a traditional division of labour. He provided Mum with security. Uncle paid for the house (£33,000 in 1986). He changed the destination. Mum couldn't afford boxes of photographic paper. He was my father really. There was a confidence mother had. I wanted to portray mother as a heroine.

Once I moved away to University it became a project worth investing in...

**PR:** Is there a sense in which the photos are your life, not just evidence of it but how you see and understand – maybe remember your life? Do we find self-portraiture here?

**MF:** Photography is everything. I don't think it's particularly healthy. I look after my mother. There's no escape. It's so full on now in the last few years. If I start showing the work I don't know if people like it. It's public. I feel compelled to push it further. I want her to be recognised. Absolutely.

It is common. Dementia. There was not time to think about it. I was in Texas in 2014 and Uncle needed a pacemaker. But they didn't operate in time and he was dead. 21<sup>st</sup> May. This was a catalyst when her brother died. She has mixed dementia and he had been protecting her. She won't stop moving. There are two images I've taken in the Home. We can't collaborate now. Before, it was a photographic device to entrap my mother, and she could leave the house. Now she's mentally trapped in her own mind and physically trapped in the Home. I've taken photos on my phone, soft images for me, but they don't mean anything.

**PR:** How did the greater gaps of time help with the series?

**MF:** I don't think it will be chronological. We are moving through time but not chronologically. It's more a walk through the house to give a sense of change,

time, taste, environment. A sense of semi-detached Englishness. Not in terms of the North – that’s just a back-drop. I never wanted it to be a kitchen sink drama. There are some clues, but very few. Maybe more of Uncle wearing a flat cap. But if I had put mother in the city – images in Leeds – that would have been very different. Everyone knows the punchline. The edit constantly changes. I don’t want it too obvious.

**PR: Can you say more about how looking at Nan Goldin or Sally Mann’s work helped you to consider or think differently about your own work?**

**MF:** I like the duration. Emmet Gowan’s work is an incredible series. Beautiful lyrical work of his wife Adrienne, showing the fragile nature of the skin. Photography shows you physical change. I liked the Seven Up TV series – there was a sense of a different life. An honesty and openness. The thing with this type of work is the inevitability about what will happen. Honesty.

I didn’t expect to be here 30 years later. The work will help. I photographed Uncle. How they occupied the space together. Mother will be a book. I’m working on that. Flexibility can change images on a wall but not in a book. Through the Jerwood-Photoworks award I’m working with a very good anthropologist, Elizabeth Edwards, who works like a detective and sees the work differently. She’s agreed to write the foreword for the book. I’m happy to collaborate.

**PR: The way you describe your Mum as responding to angles and light – that she ‘knew how she wanted to be portrayed’ – gives a strength to her place in the work as collaborator rather than simple subject. Almost that she became more of an artist?**

**MF:** Mum had no artistic ambition. That would have been so out of kilter, growing up in the second world war. It wasn’t a working-class option...It still isn’t. There’s a need for backing, which is why the Jerwood award helps. I have a burning desire to show my mother to the world. I suppose I need my uncle. He was my patron.

**PR: I want to pick up on what you said earlier – about your photography of your Mum being like a ‘dance’?**

**MF:** Yes there was a sense of movement – ‘too close’, “to the left,” ‘to the right,’ – but it was not a power struggle. But an act of theatricality. It became so embedded in routine eg. cooking Sunday lunch, there was tremendous security. A lot of time the photos were punctuations. We needed to spend time in the living room. There was a rhythm, an instinct – something not happened for a while. Always thinking of

an audience. It was 25 years before I showed anyone the work – Bridget Copeland from The Guardian and Dewi Lewis.

**PR: You also said earlier “photography became everything to us” ?**

**MF:** Everything I do is collaborative. I’ve been working with students for over 20 years. In some ways I prefer to work closer to an auteur (film theory)– but there are no commercial constraints, because I want to do a certain kind of work– to uncover peoples’ lives. You can do this in 20 pictures over 20 years. I only take photographs in places and backgrounds real to the person – with students it’s the college or their home. Now the reason for doing it is more for my mother – with the award and because of Jean’s (Mum’s) illness.

**PR: Given how you work, what do you think of work in a studio?**

**MF:** It is false. False emotion. You have to construct an emotion. The context is part of the whole. I wouldn’t want that backdrop to be denied or to be taken away. One exception I can think of is Richard Atherton’s photos of his Father which he took in his studio. Also I haven’t been based in Leeds since 1989. I was only 3 years in the house, the rest of the work came from me visiting.

**PR: What about technical stuff?**

**MF:** All the work with Mum is on Leica Rangefinders. I do everything myself but I need a dark room now. Photography costs. Technology changes. You can’t teach technique any more given digital technology. For me what’s important is image, sequence and narrative.

**PR: What does it mean to be a winner in the Jerwood-Photoworks Award? What did it help you to do that would have been difficult otherwise?**

**MF:** My wife entered my photographs into the competition, not me. Martina sees the potential of the work and she wanted it to be recognised. It’s a finished body of work. I showed it sensitively. It’s inconceivable that young people now would make work like this. I had a range of ten projects on the go – all long term. I’ve been taking photographs of Prague since 1987. And my wife’s family. It only occurred to me recently that I took the first photo when my mother was 50. It’s only 5 years off for me – to reach the same age. How might I continue? – I might give my son a camera and see what he makes of it.

**PR:** In her essay “The Greys” Elinor Carucci says your work seems “curiously closer to the work of women artists than men..” – what do you make of this?

**MF:** All my adult life it has impacted. I was always a quiet back-seat passenger. Mother would talk and talk and talk. Maybe photography was my way of getting into the conversation. Whether they are self-portraits or not – I suppose there is a reverse mirror image of me in the same moment in time. Physically there in each scene though I am not visible.

**PR:** Your work conveys change, time, fragility – is there anything you’d like to add?

**MF:** It all starts with the quality of light and then the every day things Mum would do. What mothers do for children. We see this in poor countries, mothers walking miles for water and hardship. When Mum worked she would get 2 buses and walk miles to drop me off at her sister’s before she took the same journey to work. She worked in a Jewish Textiles firm and later in a Bakery where she made cakes and sandwiches. It was important to document this labour – what mothers do. Regardless. A motherhood that’s not touchy, feely.

**PR:** Are there Catholic sensibilities at play in your work?

**MF:** I suppose there’s something of the quality of light, backlight. I love Easter and Christmas and there are certain values that are important. Trying to be a good person.

**PR:** Do you know how people receive the work? Does it matter?

**MF:** I like to talk to people where the exhibition is shown. The response in Bradford and Belfast was good. I suppose Liverpool sits the closest (in terms of the city). There’ll be 19 photographs in the exhibition and somewhere between 60-80 in the book from an edit of 400. It moves all the time. I have thousands of prints and 40 boxes of negatives. It needs an archivist.

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