



Restoration



Secret garden

FEATURE

All images
© Adriano Henney

BEYOND THE MASK

Childhood visits to his nonna and an artistic uncle who showed him the city's lesser-known corners inspired **Adriano Henney** to document the real Venice away from the tourist clichés and commercial veneer. Charlie Thomas reports.

Look at Adriano Henney's square-format photographs of Venice and it's difficult to place the time period in which they were shot. Each one is a snippet of an aspect of Venetian life: a dimly lit alleyway leading to a church; a man poring over the lines of his gondola; the archway of a building undergoing restoration. They could have been taken at any point in the last 60 years. This timeless quality is perhaps at odds with a city undergoing such vast change, but it's something Henney is passionate about exploring.

Born in the Veneto region and with strong family connections to Venice's waterways and backstreets, Henney has been documenting the city for years, presenting the work, titled *Venice | Beyond the Mask*, in two exhibitions. We caught up with him to chat about his approach to shooting, his inspirations and how the beauty of Venice lies beyond the main tourist attractions.

How did you start out?

I started messing around with my dad's camera when I was very small. I was introduced to photography then, but one of my uncles was a professional artist based in Venice, and my appreciation of art in general was really through him. I always carried a camera with me wherever I went. And then when I was doing my PhD, I was taking black & white photographs of specimens and stuff like that and developing them in the darkroom, so that was where the passion had its beginnings. >



San Giorgio at dawn

'My intention with these photographs was essentially to present a collection where you can't tell the period when they were made.'



Fenestrations, Campo Santo Stefano



Reflections study VII

◀ Where do some of your inspirations come from?

As a scuba diver, I had been captivated by underwater photography and I tried my hand at that first. That prompted a desire to concentrate on improving my photographic skills, but I soon discovered that, as I only liked diving in warm water and I couldn't afford to always go diving in the Maldives, I needed to find an alternative. So, I thought, how do I hone my skills? I began to focus on landscape images, and I undertook a long-distance mentoring programme with Jonathan Chritchley. During that process,

I came across Michael Kenna. I have to say that a lot of his work has influenced my own approach to photography, and one thing in particular: capturing that stillness, the tranquillity and almost mystical emotion, which really resonates with me.

How did your Venice project come about?

Well, I was born out there and I have a profound love of the city. My mother was Italian, I had a lot of Italian family there, and it was mandatory every summer as the firstborn grandson to go and spend the summers with

my nonna. Deep emotional and cultural roots were established in those years, the influences of which feature strongly in my life. I first saw Venice through the eyes of my uncle, the artist. He took me to places that in those days were not frequented by tourists and that were completely off the beaten track.

Beyond the Mask wasn't something that was planned. I shot Venice in a workshop with Jonathan back in 2015, but also in visits a couple of years before that, and I started to accumulate a collection of images that came together in a portfolio. Some were



Gondola builder, Squero di San Trovaso



Gondole abstract study I



Gondole abstract study IV

conventional subjects, but a lot were different views off the beaten track, and I wanted to bring them together into a project.

Where does the *Beyond the Mask* title come from?

What we've got here is something that looks beyond everything that you normally see in front of you – the cliché views. Typically, when you go to Venice, you're presented with the opulence of everything that is on show. But the real stuff that is the city's foundation is really behind all of that. And very often, we're prevented from investigating this because

Venice's obvious beauty distracts us; you don't look beyond that to see the real fabric of everyday places that may lack the visual impact of popular attractions, but where beauty also lies. And that led to the title.

What is it specifically about black & white that appeals to you?

My thoughts are similar to those of many photographers who have been asked this question. With black & white, you're stripping your subjects back to their simplest form. It allows you to interpret a photograph personally, unlike with colour, which does the

work for you. Other people have been much more erudite in the way they put those words, but basically, for me, colour can be a potential distraction. What I want to do is focus on the subject and offer the viewer the opportunity to look at and interpret what's in front of them in their own way, creating a very personal connection with the image.

How has Venice changed since you were a kid?

Well, the tourism and the commercialisation there now is rife. But Venice is a paradox: it needs tourism to sustain itself, and yet >



Cà Maria Adele, Dorsoduro



Promenade, Burano

< tourism in many ways is actually contributing to its destruction. These are huge, huge question marks that need to be addressed politically and socially if the city is to survive.

Another major issue is that the indigenous Venetian population has dipped below 50,000 for the first time. I think we have similar parallels in this country with people in Cornwall and the Lake District, places where tourism is such that it's overtaken things, and the locals can't afford to live there. And in Venice, it's exactly the same thing, only more so I would say.

I guess most tourists probably don't seek out the real Venice, do they?

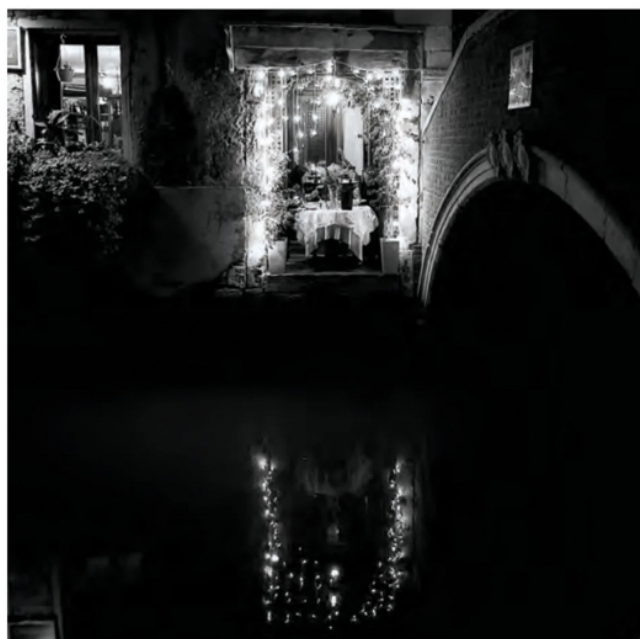
I don't want to disparage them in any way. I think the reality is that people will go to Venice and spend maybe two or three days there. It's rare to go to Venice and spend a week there, walking around and not being worried about getting lost, because you'll always find a way around – it's an island so you can't go very far. And my intention with these photographs was essentially to present a collection where you can't tell the period when they were made. They're current, but in my view, they do reflect

a timelessness. And that's because they capture the fabric of the city. That is what it is built on: the foundation that needs to be looked after if it is to endure.

'Typically, when you go to Venice, you're presented with the opulence of everything that is on show. But the real stuff that is the city's foundation is really behind all of that.'



Gates and Ferro, Fondamenta de la Canonica



Intimacy



Two gondolas

AN ALTERNATIVE VISION

Adriano Henney was born in the Veneto region of northern Italy but was raised and educated in England. His interest in photography was kindled as a child while playing with his father's camera and has remained a hobby ever since. After pursuing a research career in medicine, the opportunity arose to devote time to develop his photographic skills further and to focus on photography as a second career.

Venice | Beyond the Mask presents 30 black & white pigment prints that offer an alternative vision of the city to that typically portrayed. Masks have been part of Venetian culture for centuries and are central to the traditional costume worn during Carnevale. Here, the mask is applied as a metaphor to the city itself – a mystical and magical place, whose true identity remains largely invisible.