

# Brian Griffin

## +The Industrial Revolution

**I**T CAN HAPPEN, although not often, that the creator of a new way in art, subsequently imitated by countless others, can be almost completely forgotten until rediscovered after their career has effectively ended. Brian Griffin is one such photographer, and although he has rarely been heard of outside Britain and France, his work has been essential in shaping the photographic imagery of our time.

One reason for his name failing to filter through to Australia lies in his choosing to lay down the still camera forever, sometime in October 1990, to take up the movie camera instead. Griffin had been a celebrated and widely-copied photographer for almost 20 years, the kind that art college students most want to be like, and he decided the time had come to put all of his energies into film.

By then he had reaped the kudos of numerous **D&AD** awards, a nomination as **Photographer Of The Decade** in Britain, the **Photographic Book Award** of the Primavera Fotográfica in Barcelona, and a special showing during the Rencontres de la Photographie in Arles along with the **Freedom Of The City**. Griffin brought out 8 books of his work in the decade from 1978 to 1988, and two of these won

awards too. But because they were all self-published under his own imprint, they rarely found their way outside Europe. However, his last bookwork, **Work**, is available by mail order and Griffin is considering one last big exhibition of his photography as a final gesture of goodbye to the medium.

I visited Griffin in the offices of his production company, Film Produktion Limited, in the southeast London district of Rotherhithe. The discussion started with some observations about how his photography business was perceived during its heyday.

"We were an odd little appendage, really," Griffin observes, "because we were a little commercial yet artistic as well. We didn't fit any categories. We sort of bridged the gap between the galleries and exhibitions and creative photography, and also the commercial world, so people didn't know how to take us. But we were totally successful in commercial terms."

"At the same time it also felt sort of lonely. We weren't attached to either world to any great extent. When I say we, I mean this was a little studio—myself, an assistant, Cornelia [the administrator], a little team. When I was a photographer I covered a lot of area in terms of the way

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I solved the problems I had to solve. I was essentially a commercial photographer, even though my commercial work would always go on gallery walls. I would turn my commercial work into my own work, by taking it personally.”

“After I left art college. I wanted to create my own vision and I found my own way of seeing things and the world. I covered a lot of fundamental territory that makes for interesting images, so I didn’t leave a lot of room for other people to do what I was doing better.”

After a short career in engineering in the Black Country, in the north of England, Griffin went to art school, graduating in 1972. He comes from a working class family, lived in an almost clichéd little Victorian terraced house, and had left school at 16 for an apprenticeship in a metal engineering factory. One day, the factory foreman asked him, “Have you ever done photography? I’ll bring you in my photographs,” and Griffin was subsequently indoctrinated into the world of camera club photography. As a means of escaping the life of the factory floor, he applied for admission to photography college and discovered from the response of other students in his class that he was actually rather good at it.

After graduating, Griffin joined the staff of a business magazine titled **Management Today** which was art directed by the legendary Roland Schenck. It was to prove an extraordinary training ground in what was barely considered a desirable form of photography to be in.

“When I started, if you weren’t a fashion photographer and you did all that other stuff, you weren’t considered a commercial photographer. Then in the 1980s, if you said you’d just done an annual report for Hewlett-Packard, people would say, ‘Oh

that’s **interesting!**’ If you’d said that in ’72, the response would have been, ‘Oh, you’re doing **that** stuff are you?’”

It was a case of Griffin being in the right place at the right time, both decades. Schenck’s dedication to graphic excellence was the making of Griffin as a photographer. If he was sent to photograph a figure in business and did not come back with something extraordinary, the young photographer was sent straight back to do it again... and again if necessary. He rapidly developed the ability to see familiar things and types of people in a new and wonder-filled way.

Griffin recalls how he tried to achieve the right mental state. “I had to try and remain as naïve as I possibly could, almost destroy my experience, to try and return to being a little boy every time and view the world in that way. It’s like stepping into the jungle, not knowing whether you’re going to be eaten or not. I’ve always preferred to take the unknown route and to feel I am on my own, a bit alone.”

Inspiration came not only from the world of work and business management, but also German art, music and film. Roland Schenck was originally from German-speaking Switzerland and he pointed Griffin in the direction of his own cultural heritage. “Basically I enjoyed the German Expressionist cinema, anything from Lang to Murnau, to Pabst. I bought a book called **The Haunted Screen** by Lotte Eisner, which was about the cinema of that period and it became my bible through the ’70s.”

“Then I got interested in the German Romantic era of painting, especially Caspar David Friedrich, then the Expressionists up to the Second World War like Otto Dix, Max Beckmann and Georg

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When the business boom came in the early Thatcher years, Griffin was acknowledged as **the** expert in photographing businessmen and business. People in business then had an urge to do things bigger and better than their competitors, in a state of continual one-upmanship, and their annual reports had to be flashier than their competitors'. Margaret Thatcher was promoting a design-led economic recovery. Graphic design became the sexy new career of the 1980s, and it seemed that design consultancies were springing up on every street corner.

Besides photographing for corporate clients like Hewlett-Packard, Bayer, Sony, Kodak, Smirnoff, the multi-national hotel chains, major banks, drinks companies and distillers, Griffin also worked on advertising campaigns for cars and clothing, album covers, and for Japanese fashion designer Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons.

The creative high point of Griffin's photographic career lay in the City of London **Broadgate** project for the building development company Rosehaugh Stanhope. It was the epitome of his exploration of new ways of photographing mundane subject matter. Griffin conceived **The Big Tie** series of photographs for a corporate promotional publication, and ended the series off with **The Big Bang**, a photographed explosion in the middle of the building construction site.

The collaborative aspect of that project, and the multimedia art performance work that Griffin had done with his photographic presentations at Arles and the Edinburgh Festival, exposed him to

the joys of combining talents with other creative people. Griffin's first directing commission for TV commercials came in 1989, and, he says, "It just took off."

Griffin said goodbye to photography in 1990 to devote himself totally to film and has not looked back, winning **BAFTA** awards for his commercial for Forte. At present he is working on a short feature to enter in his beloved Berlin Film Festival, and considering whether and when to stage his last great show of still photography. ♣