



**PHOTO
PROJECTS**

All at sea

Borrowing from the style of David Hockney but using modern digital techniques, Michael Hallett has produced a series of extraordinary composite images of classic British seaside locations

PICTURES Michael Hallett & WORDS Tim McCann

One shot is never enough for Michael Hallett - this is a man who has set about challenging the concept of photography with iconic imagery he calls 'photo construction'. It's a style many of us are familiar with and see in the creation of panoramas and even in David Hockney's photo collages. Beyond the artistic merits of combining a selection of images together, the drive behind this approach for Michael is his attempt to convey a more meaningful and faithful sense of space and location that might not otherwise be adequately captured in a single frame.

"It came about at the same time as digital imaging was first emerging," he says, "My wife asked me to come and photograph her allotment and I soon

● Portland Bill

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realised one image wasn't enough so I took five and pieced them together on my computer and produced what I thought was a true depiction of what it felt like to be there."

Drawing on his career in as a photographic historian, Michael, a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society, immediately saw the potential in photo construction and began setting up a long-term project called "Seaside," which involved photographing all aspects of life at the coast, from the bleak rocky peninsula of Portland Bill in Dorset where Michael spent his childhood, to the kitsch and nostalgic scenes of Blackpool seafront, complete with donkey rides and boarding-house life.

"When you take a single picture you're essentially a voyeur," says Michael. "In other words you're standing on the outside. When you're taking a picture which is a photo construction, whether it's 180 or 360 degrees, you're in the centre of the scene. It's giving a

much greater indication of space and the sense of the location you're shooting."

Sense of place and sense of time are key themes in the "Seaside" project, where images are laden with the movement of time within the picture and also the memories we all have of these and similar locations from our childhood and throughout our lives. "Everyone has their own recollection of the seaside because none of us live that far from it."

Not all the images in the "Seaside" collection are reflections of the typical British seaside promenade. The style spans documentary and landscape, with

Michael using a blend of the associations we all have with the coast in each style. One of his photo constructions might depict a cluttered dining room table at breakfast, for example, immersing the viewer into the sights and sounds of the scene, while others are taken of remote locations devoid of human contact where our senses are soothed by wide open spaces, deep colours and texture.

Many of the images are close to Michael's heart, not least because they're of locations he grew up in. "The Portland Bill construction I had planned in my head a long time before I took the images," he says. "It was taken in



midwinter deliberately, because the light becomes so low and yellow it creates the right mood for the image."

Other constructions are created in a more haphazard way. His ambitious attempt to shoot a construction featuring an ocean-going yacht weren't all in vain when he created the "At Sea Outside Dartmouth" image, which conveys the movement of the sails and immerse sky above a rolling English Channel on a summer's day. "With this type of shot you've got no idea what you're going to get. Photography is all about being curious, just try it, if it doesn't work, delete it and try again."

Michael's seaside constructions are all about contrast. One minute you can be beneath the bright blue skies of the English Riviera on the south coast and the next inside the lower Ballroom in Blackpool gazing at the opulent splendour of this British seaside icon.

"When I walked into the ballroom for the first time I said "Wow". People ignored me and using a high ISO setting meant I didn't need flash to capture the shots I needed for the construction. On one level you're talking about great skies while, with the ballroom image, it's all about grand designs. When I walked into the lower Ballroom that was the spot

I found myself in and I stuck with it. A lot of the time I'm looking for a vantage point where I can have foreground and background elements to accentuate the sense of depth."

The methodology Michael uses to create a photo construction is not locked into a rigid system. "To be honest there's very little precision in what I do at all. I can't tell you that I start from left to right or top to bottom - there are no such rules and I believe photography doesn't have those sorts of rules. A lot of it is to do with intuition, while I also have to be systematic about what I do. The difficult aspect is working out the physical"

“Michael’s constructions are a like a mosaic of light and colour that show a complete scene ”

extent of the image - how much sky to put in and so on - and later on when I'm working in my digital darkroom to know when the construction is complete and when to stop."

Michael works hard to produce components for his constructions that are compatible in terms of colour and density. Sometimes he might use automatic exposure, but more often he'll resort to manual settings to try to compensate for exposure differences in shadow and highlight areas. Any disparities that might occur are later smoothed out using Levels and Curves in Photoshop.

With dozens of images to work with, Michael manually arranges them in Photoshop with each one displayed as a separate layer. As a general rule of

thumb the longest side of the image is designed to cover an area of the scene that is around one metre in size.

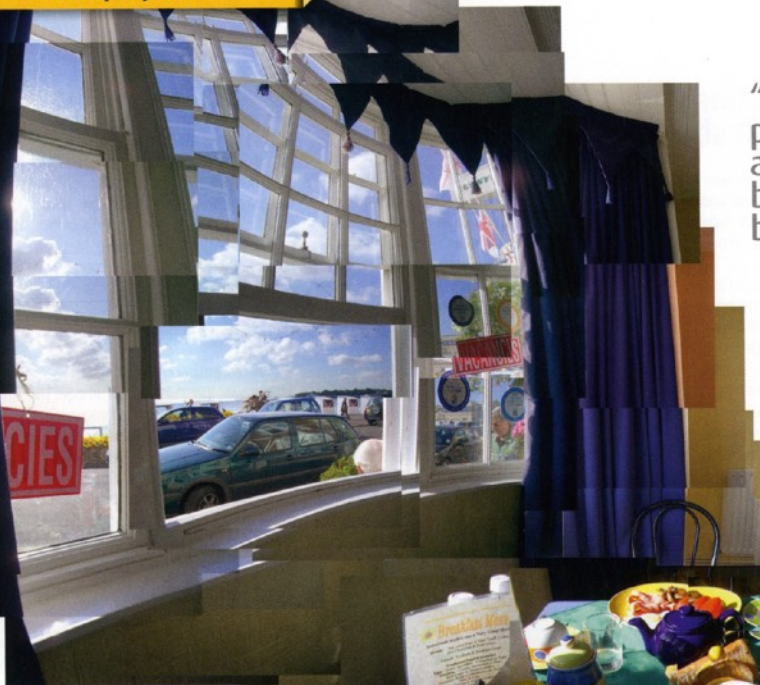
"The last thing I'm trying to do is to merge the separate images," says Michael. "What I'm doing is emphasising the differences and extremes. This draws attention to colours and textures in the different images making up the construction that might otherwise be overlooked if everything were seamlessly merged." In this way Michael's constructions are a like a mosaic of light and colour that show a complete scene but also draw the eye into discreet areas.

"My photo constructions don't physically take up a day, but it does take up the 'brain space' of a day," says

Michael. "You're not much good for anything else after you've put sixty to eighty images together! Frequently I'll start in the afternoon to create a rough cut, and then I'll leave this overnight and will maybe tweak it the next day. Then I produce an A4 print and hang it over my fireplace and leave it there. Maybe nothing else happens to the image, but sometimes you spot aspects you want to change and so I go back to it in Photoshop and make any necessary alterations.

"The construction I found really difficult was the 'Portland Bill' image. The shapes I was getting in the foreground were all wrong and there also wasn't the yellowness I thought there should be, so I added this later on. Sometimes I've made an image look too complex and have gone back to it and taken everything apart. Knowing when to stop tinkering is the real skill." 





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Any digital camera can be used to create the components for a composite image, and the DSLR is ideally suited to the task. Copies are then taken of each image and opened in Adobe Photoshop, where Michael pieces the construction together by assigning each image to its own layer.

Some adjustment is made to exposure and colour but Michael is keen to point out that his constructions are not about producing seamless joins; rather they are designed to emphasise differences within the scene, with each image drawing the eye and speaking for itself, while also contributing towards the overall feel of the whole image.

To view more of Michael's photo constructions and find out more about his career in photography visit him online at www.michaelhallett.com. You can also download a screensaver of the Tower Ballroom construction at www.casiology.co.uk/hallett



Weymouth

With Michael busy compiling his photo constructions together for a new book to be published later this year, his thoughts are turning to new projects. Seeing himself primarily as a storyteller, Michael is using photo construction to build narratives that tell a story about a particular event, place or group of people. By using digital ISO speeds of up to ISO 3200, he was able, for example, to document and record scenes captured in the "Waiting for the Weston Carnival" construction without

being noticed.

"I suppose I want people who look at my images to become surrounded by the landscape," he says, "with each photo construction offering a more involved sensation of what it was like to be there. I want them to have the impression of seeing the subject from the inside looking out – extending an awareness of time and space." ❁

■ Turn the page to find out how to build your own photo construction.