



Salve, David James Grinly, Sierra Metro, 2022

**Fifty-Six Minutes and Twenty-Nine Seconds.
Interview with David James Grinly.
February 2022**

It is a Monday afternoon, the usual dreary weather you expect when in Edinburgh. I'm off to meet with the artist/ Photographer David James Grinly (born in Alva, Scotland). I was already feeling rushed for time, as I blatantly forgot the time it takes to saunter down lieth walk, where gallery Sierra Metro is holding the exhibition.

David's career started when he studied Time Based Art in Dundee, where he then went on to complete a master's in electronic imaging. Since then, David has worked commercially as a photographer whilst teaching courses at Stills gallery and Edinburgh college. Many of his hours are dedicated to personal projects such as his book Alva and his most recent exhibition Salve. With roughly ten years to finalise each project.

Would your work have a different approach/development if you were born in the early 2000s? It's a question I'm constantly thinking about, and I would love to hear your thoughts?

That is a super question. I need to understand the complexity that younger people want to engage with because I was born in 1981. Where most of my youth was spent without a mobile phone. And now I'm watching my niece and nephew grow up in a virtually orchestrated world, so there's a natural transitional generation. I know that which is probably why I'm old-fashioned in my work. I didn't have all these gadgets and found it somewhat weird.

This may be why you spend a lot longer creating your work?

Yeah, it's strange to be aware of one's age, especially being a teacher. I'm teaching kids who have always had a smartphone, meaning they always had quicker access to the internet. And I don't want to sound like a grouchy old man when saying this, but I did have to go to the library to access information, don't get me wrong, the internet's amazing, and I'm constantly googling away. However, my experience with time is very different to someone who is sixteen/seventeen.

We can get access whenever we want, and there are not any boundaries. Our age may define our experiences.

This is the thing; my experience of a photograph is a pretty painful and violent cutting of time. However, when I speak to younger people, they find that quite alien. They are puzzled. I recognised that it takes me much longer to sit and think about the different work possibilities. I can't decide there and then; I must realise how many mistakes it has. Then take it apart and do it all again, and in doing so, it allows specific knowledge to interact with one another. It's not to say that someone who does their work in a day is negative; it's just my way. I enjoy making and looking at it.

I remember my English teacher telling me about Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary; It took Flaubert over eight years to write, and I couldn't believe it. At that point, I was into Alan Ginsberg, William Burroughs etc., so anyway, the teacher gave me his copy of Madame Bovary, and I tried to read it a few times when I was younger, and I just couldn't handle it. But I returned to it 10 years ago and read it all through.

Does that sort of broaden your understanding of time or photographic time?

I feel old because I know why it took Flaubert eight years to write Madame Bovary. After all, you need eight years to write it, but for example, in Jack Kerouac on the Road, I wonder if id enjoys it again.

There's a time for everything; you tend to notice it with older people. They have a deeper understanding of photographs. Time means so much more. Especially when it's running out.

I got covid at the beginning of the lockdown, and due to covid, I had to get all these miserable tests, and the doctors discovered that I have emphysema. Which was sort of a weird facing of mortality, to an extent. If I don't stop smoking, I have, give or take, 10 years left. I'm 40 right now, and usually, we assume that to be the middle of one's life. Usually, you expect to get to 80. But when someone says you will only make it to 50 if you don't quit smoking, it's scary... What if I can never stop, which means I only have one more project left. You still must live daily with Instagram telling me shit every five seconds. And there's this weird thing about how I respond to them. Even if I do only one more project, I think I'd prefer to make it in the same way. I don't think I'd feel so rushed. I would like to see maybe three or four arrangements of the exhibition, maybe while making the next, and hopefully, I'll stop smoking, start running, and perhaps last a bit longer.

Goat yoga?

I may have an Instagram site where I tell you spiritual truths.

Or grow your hair long?

Yeah, so, I don't know how relevant that is, but I think that sort of mortality and having a body, having a body that will age, hurt and die, does change your views. You're facing the potential end of your life.

Someone's literally giving you a life sentence.

I am aware that my age and perhaps also the strange mortality that comes from learning about a degenerative disease does change the way you experience life. Your attention, like sitting and talking with someone, also makes it a different kind of experience.

Would your work also hold truth or honesty? Would you agree?

Absolutely, if you're going to make something, you probably do, and I appreciate someone allowing that type of bearing, a level of reflection and interrogation of yourself.

There's more emotion if you put yourself in, right? Then, if you write or create complete fiction. Maybe that's partially true, but if you put a bit of yourself in.

That's it; you're always trying to put a bit of yourself in. Whenever you create something about yourself or whoever, it's fiction. Because you are writing fiction of you, but it's a subject, it's me as the subject. Enough of a matter that someone can identify with. So, they can have an experience with the artwork.

Some people would completely agree, and others may be hesitant or disagree. What are your thoughts on this? Can we avoid the truth?

It must be mediated by this notion of or a psychoanalytic of a subject or a modernist idea of the subject. If there isn't a subject, there's just the Cartesian subject. Modernism changed how we were able to think of an I. When you say, I am the one who is speaking, who the fuck is this I. That requires a much deeper analysis and reflection than merely saying, don't put yourself into the work or, on some level, you can't avoid it.

Whatever is in your thoughts is going to come out.

The way I think about it, for example, with the Alva project, is all those fictional stories on which I write and then take the pictures are as much or more me than me. Maybe I need to write it down more. But even writing down fiction or openly writing something that is not valid. You're still approaching a fundamental truth of existence or something by writing as such.

We can't avoid the truth; it's like saying your parents tell you when you're lying, "the truth always comes out".

The truth comes out when you walk into an exhibition and don't know what's there. What are you looking at? It's an experience of a reality you don't yet recognise.

Almost as if you're looking in a mirror, taking your glasses off, and you, like, what is that? Who is that? But it seems a little like me.

Yeah, that's another excellent way of thinking about that for me.

Do people understand what your works are about when they initially view them?

They get it a little, but they don't get how I arrived here. So, I don't think people understand it initially, but how could you immediately get all that?

Is it only a visual understanding?



Do they need to know all the ins and outs? There's a new book by Stephen Shore, and it is his memoir of making photographs, but it had this great quote in the first few pages where he's talking about someone interviewing Robert Frost. He says, "tell me what your poems are about," and Robert Frost says, "You want me to say it worse?" It's a funny one. Even if someone doesn't get where I'm coming from or all the history. When you stand in front of those 14 panels, is it generous? Does it make you feel something? Which draws your attention to you paying attention? To the fact that you're paying attention to our photographs and the specifics. The relationship to time.

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So, I think those parts together, and the little bits to read in the book, if people are willing to spend a little time, even though they don't know all that detail of how I arrived there, there is enough work to grab your attention. If you're willing to give it attention.

Yeah. But that's like everything if you're willing to give it consideration. For example, the whole Instagram is 8 seconds per image. You either do or don't want to think deeper about it.

That's the exciting thing if you are flicking through your phone and if what you do pause on is someone with a fancy car. The exciting thing for me is that it has arrested your attention. So, what people might take from that strange alter piece, as if those images contained their attention, and then wonder why they did so, rather than cars or cute puppies. It's that, and it's that informatic culture, challenging and bombarding, maybe because of my age. I don't know. I want to concentrate on a thing that someone has thought an awful lot about, but I find that experience quite rewarding when I'm able to pay attention. Opposed to zooming through pictures of reality or infographics about whatever sort of short form. It doesn't do justice. Instagram, that method of battering through, is an excellent way to pay attention. When you exhibit something, you allow people to sit for a little while. Even if it's 10 minutes, 10 minutes is way longer than eight seconds.

It gives you a chance to go on a deeper level. Allows your mind to think rather than look at an overload of puppy cuteness.

Which is a distraction, really. Which is fine.

Whereas I feel, if you go to the exhibition, it's almost pausing time.

Exactly how I want it to be. So rather than fill time with something distracting, you fill it with something more generous. Which is a unique opportunity. Responsibility is there. I feel uncomfortable doing an exhibition with images which are merely a distraction or simplistically political. I enjoy people not knowing what my work is about. I hate to go to collections where I know what it was about five seconds after viewing. That's a terrible thing to do. What that does is just confirm something that I already know. It's not to say I think differently from everyone else. Human beings can believe differently over much more extended periods. So, I've already learned that I don't need to challenge myself to think. This same thought I had yesterday when scrolling through the Guardian. There should be something in an exhibition that you don't immediately understand or can't. It's not knowledge that works in the same way as an article. It's not journalistic. You must take responsibility as the person creating the exhibition. So, people don't get bored. And people will be bored and put off by the fact they don't understand. However, that, for me, is a risk worth taking. You could do work that revolutionises people instead of distracting yourself with Instagram posts.

Even if you don't like what you've seen, it's made you think or brought something new to your attention. It's not ordinary what you will see today or tomorrow.

That's it; there's an aspect of the challenge. I was talking to someone about it the other day and what other artworks have an influence other than the 15th century or altarpieces. I was thinking about Goodbye to Language by Jean- Luc Godard, it's almost painful to watch because it's 3d, but the 3d effects don't align. And it's showing the product, of course, it's enormously pretentious and all that, but the visual texture of it, you can feel it pressing onto your eyeballs when you watch it. I don't love that film, but there's something of the willingness to challenge us. I remember going to see it in the cinema and everyone coming out as if they had just been punched in the eyes, and there's something about that. The sort of level of challenge that, to me, helps define art. If someone's willing to challenge. I don't want to watch the Avengers; I can also go watch the Avengers, but it's vital that we now sound like an Instagram spiritualists. We must hold space. We hold open the possibility of seeing something you need help understanding. And it may or may not reward you for thinking more about it but at least try to understand. And perhaps it doesn't interest you. That's also fine but having the space to go and see something I don't get is important to me, and I enjoy it.



Fifty-six minutes and twenty-nine seconds, a nearly finished coffee and the interview, have ended. It took just under an hour, but it flew so quickly. I grab my bag, head for the door and begin that same walk. Distracted by every passer-by. Some rushing, some drifting.

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*What is time for them?
What is time for us all?
The inevitable race, which*

we are all in.

Perhaps we should all start living as if death is one inch away from shaking our hand. Forget all day-to-day chaos. Pause within time, appreciate every moment, and love the dreaded. Take any experience before it becomes a distant memory you wish had lived.