

**Ghost Town: A Reflection On My Practice and Graduate Project**



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## Introduction

This thesis will be a reflection about my practice drivers and the motivation for me as a photographer, explaining my methodology and techniques. I will also investigate the themes surrounding my own work, considering my own experiences. This will be used to further inform my visual language as well as exploring the works of artists which inspire my practice. My previous work and personal experiences have focused me to become interested in trauma and place, which I will explain in detail within Chapter One and explore through the examination of two chosen artist in Chapter Two. I believe trauma and place can be captured through the photographic medium and through painted landscapes, I will be expanding on this in Chapter two by examining the work of two artists, Chloe Dewe Mathews's 'Shot At Dawn' (2014), and the paintings of Tile Hill, Coventry by George Shaw. Chapter Three will focus on my current project, exploring concepts of place and how I intend to show the relationship between trauma, place and the theory of aftermath photography (Dewe Mathews, C. 2014) through my photographic practice.

I come from the city of Coventry which is one of the most bombed locations in England, from the events that transpired over Coventry's Blitz, (McGrory, D. p.67, 2015) during World War II. After the war, the council progressively rebuilt the city with modernist buildings that were deemed progressive at the time. These brutalist grey structures leave me as an observer with the feeling of a cold and empty city. This is something I will show through the examination of paintings focused on Coventry by George Shaw in Chapter Two. I now live in Rotterdam, a city which is renowned for its bold, modern architecture which was also reconstructed after the events of World War II. I also feel that Rotterdam is very similar to Coventry in a lot of ways architecturally as it also hosts post-war buildings that were deemed modern when constructed.

In Chapter Three I will discuss my current project which details the relationship between myself, my hometown and a friendship. To summarise the project, a dear friend and I have begun respectively photographing our environments, mine being the city I currently inhabit, Rotterdam, and Fintan's being specific places in Coventry, the city where we met aged 16 and where Fintan still lives. The pictures Fintan takes are directed by myself, they highlight places in which I can recall particularities of architecture, memories from my youth spent in Coventry, I then highlight certain feelings these places inspire in me now. This project explores themes of friendship and a shared history, the particularities of a community that is no longer mine and my youth spent in

Coventry. I will give an account of a traumatic and formative experience from my time spent in Coventry in Chapter One, which is the foundation of my focus on place and trauma in my work.

WARNING: There are two images within this Thesis which are graphic and violent in nature, taken from a police report.

#### Chapter One: **Coming from Coventry**

Throughout this chapter I will explain some of my past experiences, how they have helped to inform and develop my photographic practice, and my perceptions of the themes which inform my photography, such as place and trauma. I will also establish a connection between the cities I have lived in and how my experiences within them have made their own contributions to my practice as a photographer.



Figure 1a & 1b: *The aftermath of my armed robbery.* Coventry Hospital, UK

On April the 2nd 2013, I was at a friend's house around 20 minutes walk from my childhood home in Coventry, it was around 10pm when my mother called informing me that it was time to come home. A friend who lived close to my home was allowed to stay out later, so I left alone and began walking. I needed to get back quickly, as I was already past my curfew so I decided to cut through a local skatepark. The skatepark itself was dimly lit, and upon entry I realised there were 6 figures by one of the exits sparking lighters and on their phones, so I decided to aim for the other exit, this exit could only be accessed by cutting through the children's park which is fenced off either side. When going through this final stretch of the park, I was stopped by three ski-masked figures in front of me, so I turned back on myself and found three behind me, there was no escaping at this point. I was then pushed against the fence forcefully and instructed to hand over my belongings, whilst having a large handgun pointed at my face. Through rage, terror and anxiety I attempted to fight back only to be met with the barrel of the gun striking me in between the eyes by one of the assailants, the outcome of which is seen in Figure 1a & 1b.

My personal ideas of the themes of my work has evolved from the connection I have previously made between place and trauma, specifically this attack which changed my life significantly. Since then, I have never really felt safe within a city, nor like I belong there which is the major contribution to what I understand as a feeling of not belonging to a particular place, more of a witness to the cities. I was sixteen years old when this happened, the event caused lasting anxiety and some PTSD, which I have since sought help and been treated for. I noticed during the mugging, that one of the muggers caught a glimpse of my face and began backing away, which I found curious. I could not recognise them due to their faces being covered. After they stole my possessions, they also asked where I lived and that they would “find me” if I sought help from the police, so I provided a fake address. They then ran off into the night, and so did I.

I ran past multiple homes of my relatives, in my panic I had only one thing on my mind and that was getting to my home, which was less than 10 minutes away. When home, the police were called and I was taken to the hospital where I was put under anaesthetic, and had 18 stitches after my police interview on what had transpired. I then had to return the next day to consult with a plastic surgeon to minimise scarring. When looking at a police lineup of people who had potentially mugged me, I recognised a familiar face, a boy my age named Fidel. Fidel was in my year at school, we somewhat got along, although we were in very different social circles, but when I saw him in the lineup I didn't realise that he was the mugger who had recognised me, backing away not wanting to be known. I thought perhaps he was there just by coincidence. The remainder of school was very difficult for me, I was isolated from others as there was worry for my safety and it took a toll on my studies. It was at this point where I began to struggle with the attachment I have to the city I grew up in, as ever since this happened I have felt unsafe in my hometown and have only ever wanted to leave it.

#### **After the attack:**

When attending university years later (2018) I became very interested in subcultures, and began to pursue it as a topic for my photographic practice inspired by the fashion and subculture and the photographs from Derek Ridgers' book *78 - 87 London Youth* (Ridgers, 2014). The series began as a documentation of those still associated to the Punk scene, based in Plymouth. This project was one of my favourites to shoot, due to its often chaotic environments, interesting subjects and the free spirited lifestyle that often went hand in hand with the Punk scene. After the academic year concluded at university, I returned to Coventry to work through my

summer as a labourer at a garden centre. During this summer, I still wanted to continue working on my social documentary photographs of subculture and so I began looking into 2-Tone. The 2-Tone subculture originated among young musicians in Coventry often from working class or immigrant backgrounds, who grew up listening to 1960s Jamaican music. They combined influences from ska, reggae and rocksteady with elements of punk rock and new wave into their music. Its name derives from 2 Tone Records, a record label founded in 1979 by Jerry Dammers of The Specials, and references a desire to transcend and defuse racial tensions in Thatcher-era Britain: many 2-Tone groups, such as The Specials, The Selecter, and The Beat (all from Coventry & Birmingham) featured a mix of black, white, and multiracial people. The most well known band which originated from this scene would be the Specials, who have had numerous hits but none more well known than their 1981 song 'Ghost Town,' which even featured in Guy Ritchie's 2000 film, *Snatch*.

By growing up in Coventry, and having a relationship with my father where we heavily connect over music, I already knew all of this from our bond over music. After all, it is the musical heritage of our city. I began exploring the series at a place called the 2-Tone Village, which is an area just outside Coventry City centre, which celebrates Coventry's 2-Tone heritage. It features a cafe, bar & live venue, a restaurant, hall of fame and a sub-culture shop. It was my first day photographing the area, when I met Neville Staple, one of the lead singers from the Specials. We got talking, I took his photograph, and he mentioned that he would be happy for me to take his photograph, and that he would help me in capturing more photographs of what remained of the 2-Tone scene.



Fig. 2, *Neville Staple, 2-Tone Village*. August 31st, 2018.

In Figure 2, you can see the photograph I took of Neville Staple which remains unedited and unused. This photograph was taken on the 31st of August 2018, the next evening I read news headlines which stated, '*Specials singer Neville Staple 'devastated' by grandson's death*'. I was shocked to read this. I was even more shocked when I read that it was Fidel who had been stabbed to death. I felt sudden conflict in pursuit of this series, as well as a return of my anxiety from the effects of my mugging and so I stopped the series. It reaffirmed my connection of trauma and Coventry, like I could not escape what had happened, even by sheer coincidence.



**Encountering Lockerbie:**

During the final year of my bachelor programme I started photographing a photo project in Lockerbie, Scotland. The project began with photographing the youth of Lockerbie, a town where in 1988, Pan Am Flight 103, a regularly scheduled Pan Am transatlantic flight from Frankfurt to Detroit via London and New York was destroyed by explosion, killing all 243 passengers and 16 crew, before landing on the small unsuspecting town of Lockerbie, killing eleven residents below. The photographs taken in this series were both portraits of some who grew up after the bombing, and landscapes of the small Scottish town and the crash site. The portraits of the youth from this series stand as reference to 'Trauma and Transcendence' theory (Boynton, E. Capretto, P. 2018, p, 42), a theory which questions whether trauma can be assimilated through generations. This can be usually seen from instances such as from a parent whom has received significant trauma in their life, and their child carrying the same trauma. This was the theme which inspired the entire project, and the basis of my interest in the events which so heavily affected Lockerbie. From my time in Lockerbie, it felt as if it had a particularly empty feeling to it, especially when arriving as a tourist. If not for the disaster Lockerbie would not be known for many people around the UK, nor the world if not for the tragic event in 1988 which seemed to push this small town of 4000 people into the headlines.



Figure 3: *A young resident of Lockerbie, Scotland.*

Figure 3 is a photograph I took in Lockerbie when shooting my graduation project in January 2019, and pictures a young man in the town square in harsh winter sunlight. I spoke to the young man about the town, wondering what his thoughts and feelings were about it but he mainly asked me questions, such as; “*why on earth would you ever come to Lockerbie?*”. He strongly made clear his viewpoint on the city, which was that of loathing and disappointment, all he wanted to do was escape. I asked if there were many tourists but he said there were only dark tourists who come to view the crash site, where the houses were rebuilt. He told me that the town never really passed the trauma from the bombing, and that many people still feel very strongly about it, even those who were not yet born at that point in time.



Figure 4: *An empty parking lot.* Lockerbie, Scotland

Whilst exploring Lockerbie in early 2019, I found many parts of the town to be almost derelict in appearance, providing a feeling that it had been abandoned, some of the imagery I captured was intended to show this, such as in Figure 4. There were few people who would be around the town to approach, and those who were around seemed abrasive and did not want to talk with me. The young man from Figure 3 explained this to me. He stated that the local townspeople had adopted this feeling towards “outsiders,” after so many journalist plagued the city following the events in 1988. The inability to speak to the residents gave me a feeling of emptiness, and gave me the feeling that there was still trauma in the city. The remaining trauma was reinforced by the young man in Fig 3; he stated that the topic of the disaster was avoided at all costs in conversations and that it was a taboo to speak of. Although Figure 4 is a photograph of a parking lot, much of the town looked the same as what this image portrays, a town with no-

one present. To me it felt cold and empty and my feelings about the town are reflected in the photographs.

My time in Lockerbie aided me to form a connection between trauma and place, and pointed me in the direction of Aftermath photography (Dewe Mathews, 2014), which I found when exploring Chloe Dewe Mathews' series, *Shot at Dawn*. I realised that my work from Lockerbie was in fact an exploration of Aftermath photography, pictured to capture the relationship between trauma and place. Aftermath photography, or 'Late Photography' (David Company. 2003, p.27) addresses the traces of violent or catastrophic events, such as disasters, terrorism, and warfare, as well as picturing moribund military sites. Aftermath photography (Antonio Monegal, 2016) concentrates on another inherent quality of the photographic image, its stillness. In contrast to the destructive event that has occurred at some point in the past, aftermath photography typically captures the stillness and the silence of what comes next, in this instance my photography concentrates on those of whom grew up after the disaster incurred, and the structures in the town of Lockerbie.

My own project has now begun to manifest into something new, the new direction this is taking is more reflective for myself and somewhat personal. It depicts the cities I have lived in previously and currently, Coventry and Rotterdam. Below is an example of the images, which show my own image inspired directly by a photograph taken by a friend in Coventry (Figure 7 & 8) and the project will be further discussed in Chapter Three.



Figure 7 & 8: *Tales from the Riverbank*. The left photograph, taken in Coventry, UK by Fintan Collins.

The right photograph, taken by myself in Rotterdam, NL as a response.

Chapter Two: ***Artistic context: considering my practice in relation to the work of Chloe Dewe Mathews and George Shaw***

In this chapter I will be analysing the photo series, *Shot at Dawn* by Chloe Dewe Mathews and the intricate paintings of Coventry, by the artist George Shaw. My intentions for this chapter are to implicate the themes of my own practice and apply them to both of my chosen artists. I will be concentrating on how the two artists portray similar themes in their respective practices.

**Chloe Dewe Mathews:**

Chloe Dewe Mathews' series *Shot at Dawn* records photographs of sites across Europe, specifically Belgium and France, where around 1,000 British, French and Belgian soldiers were executed for cowardice and desertion in the first World War. The project was shot between 2012 and 2014. It comprises of a collection of twenty-three images, of locations at which individuals were shot or held in the period leading up to their executions (Dewe Mathews, 2014). The images in the series do not have titles, but the names, times and locations of the soldiers deaths appear alongside the photographs. All were taken as close to the exact time of execution as possible and at approximately the same time of year. Dewe Mathews researched these cases for months before publishing the information to the website made for the photo series, trawling through courts-martial documents, using old aerial photographs and from monastery diaries provided by historians (Dewe Mathews, 2014) to pinpoint the precise locations where each man was executed. Academics, military experts, museum curators and local historians enabled her work, and although many of them have dedicated their lives to researching aspects of the subject, none have comprehensively visited the sites of execution in such a systematic fashion. By photographing these sites, Dewe Mathews is reinserting the deceased individuals into those spaces by titling the work with the specifics of the soldiers times of death, adding their presence back onto the land through her photography, so that their histories are not forgotten, creating a memorial for the executed soldiers. The 23 photographs produced for the project are studies in stillness, absence and care. Whether a slag-heap, the back of a primary school, churchyard, town abattoir or half kempt hedgerow, Dewe Mathews shows, similarly to my previous practice in Lockerbie, that these places have been altered by a traumatic event and is shown through the still and empty imagery.



Figure 9: A photograph from Chloe Dewe Mathews book, *Shot at Dawn*.

This ordinary-looking landscape (Fig. 9) is imbued with melancholic power, shown through the cold early morning light, and also shows the time of year through its colour and the bareness of the trees. Dewe Mathews provides this in the photograph not only to highlight the themes of the series, but also to let the image speak for itself through an unnerving winter landscape. Figure 9 operates as a metaphysical memorial dedicated to the young man executed there on a cold February morning in 1916, as the series itself serves as a monument to all the young men whom were executed for cowardice or desertion during the Great War (Mathews, 2014).

*Shot at Dawn* receives its name from Dewe Mathews' methodology, where she takes each photograph as close to the documented time of the soldiers' execution as possible, which was typically, at dawn. I feel that Fig. 9 conveys emptiness, absence and trauma through this documentary-landscape image. Dewe Mathews does this through the vacant nature of her imagery, which creates an often despondent feeling for the viewer and the imagery itself through the lack of people in her landscape photograph, these feelings are also conveyed with the story behind the image, where men were shot for responding to their own fears and desperation.



Figure 10: A photograph from Chloe Dewe Mathews book, *Shot at Dawn*



Figure 11: Text which accompanies Fig.10 from Chloe Dewe Mathews book, *Shot at Dawn*



Fig. 10 communicates Chloe Dewe Mathews' themes of *Shot at Dawn*, as each image serves itself as a sepulchral monument to each of the victims executed across the lugubrious landscapes photographed throughout the series. This dismal image draws your gaze through its natural vectors, following the traces of the pathway and then around to the open and fogged rural landscape. Fig. 10 is displayed in the book and on the website for the series with a short list of names and two sets of dates and times, (Fig. 11). By doing this, Dewe Mathews pushes the memory of the fallen soldiers into fruition creating a connection between the landscape photograph and the themes of the book, forcing the viewer to become witness to their execution. If this was not added, it could be said that these images would be more disconnected from the themes Dewe Mathews is depicting throughout the series. The photographs provide a sombre feeling, which reflect the tragic themes of the project.

In an interview for Photomonitor (Allen, 2016), about *Shot at Dawn*, Sarah Allen talks to Dewe Mathews about *Shot at Dawn* in detail;

“Executions at dawn were believed to rob the victim of as much time as possible but equally, as Paul Fussell notes in his essay *The Great War and Modern Memory*, the time of dusk or dawn were equally moments of heightened ritual anxiety on the frontline. Shrouded in the half-light of dawn, Dewe Mathews' ostensibly banal scenes are pregnant with this sense of anxiety and unease. Although the name of the soldier and their time and place of death appear alongside the photographs, each scene is devoid of human subject. Yet a spectre lingers.”

Mathews comments that, “The landscapes I photographed are empty and unremarkable, they are notable only because of the human stories that took place there. And yet, I think the emptiness and absence makes those soldiers even more present. Your mind fills in the gaps.” Further in the interview Dewe Mathews comments on her relationship to aftermath photography, “Quite a lot of aftermath photography you can see tangible traces of past violence, shells left in the land. Thinking about that form of photography really highlights the absurdity in my activity as I'm looking for traces where there are no traces. By photographing the site I am projecting the execution back onto the place.”

**George Shaw:**

George Shaw is an English contemporary painter who was born in Tile Hill, Coventry in 1966. He is noted for his subject matter exclusively portraying different suburban scenes taken from a half-mile radius around Tile Hill, a post-war social housing estate on the edge of Coventry in the West Midlands where Shaw grew up, before leaving when he was eighteen years old.

Shaw's paintings are completely devoid of human life, there are no discernible geographical or architectural features that might evoke a particular town or region; these images could have been taken from any one of a myriad of similar estates in England. The only painting where Shaw famously has a figure depicted, it is himself urinating against a tree. Shaw's paintings, are both extremely personal and extremely detached. Shaw is a painter of nostalgia but it seems to me that his aim is not to conjure up a rose-tinted past, but to have the viewer witness the effects of the passage of time on his former home through the changes of the housing estate in Coventry. Nostalgia is not necessarily a happy feeling, nor is it sad, it is the sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition such as in Shaw's case, youth. The sense of nostalgia Shaw emits through his work can be reinforced by a quote taken from an interview between Shaw and Guardian writer Tim Jonze (Feb, 2019), "It's more the increasing distance between myself and the place I grew up".

Anna Campbell for the Burlington Contemporary Art Magazine (Campbell, 2019) speaks of some of the methodology Shaw uses for his paintings;

'Shaw's medium of choice is Humbrol enamel – a utilitarian paint traditionally found in aeroplane modelling kits. With this humble hobbyist's material, the artist crafts elegiac hymns to the Tile Hill council estate in Coventry, where he grew up. In his mid-career retrospective at the Holburne Museum, Bath, Shaw's visions shine out of the dimly lit gallery like beacons. Farrow & Ball coats the walls: 'a corner of a foreign field' indeed'.

Shaw also utilises a ritualistic method, originally he takes a board of primed MDF, stands it up against the toolbox on his table, secures a photograph of the site he's painting onto the surface and copies from photo to painting but more recently he has developed into working on canvas.



Fig. 12: *Scenes from the Passion: The Fall*, by George Shaw. 1999.

Fig. 12 shows a painting by Shaw, named *The Fall* from his series *Scenes from the Passion*, the derelict landscape painting depicts a row of garages near Shaw's childhood home. Shaw showcases its absence and abandonment to the viewer with the broken doors and littered ground, in this empty yet honest painting. Being born in 1966, Shaw painted this landscape at thirty-three years old, I believe it offers insight to the passage of time he faces in his own life as well as to the area which is clearly dilapidated of the area. Naming the painting *The Fall* reinforces Shaw's theme of time and implicates his own memory: The Fall were a British band formed in 1976, which Shaw has cited as a heavy influence during his youth, which references Northern working class pop culture, as the Fall were popular to those who were associated to this class during Shaw's youth. The reflection of the puddle could also signal Shaw's own reflection on the area he grew up in, and his own place within this landscape in a study of absence. Shaw often revisits areas, and captures them in different lights years later to show the progression of time in the forsaken area of Tile Hill.



Fig. 13: *Scenes from the Passion: Late* by George Shaw. 2002.

Similarly to Figure 12, Fig. 13 shows the same row of derelict garages from a different viewpoint, three years later. The now more patchy grass and weeds growing at the base of the doors suggests that they have not been used for a long time. In contrast to Fig.12 the grey garage doors are now scrawled with graffiti, piles of copper leaves accumulated against the closed doors and sprinkled over the grass and muddy track indicate that it is late in the year as well as late in the day as the title of Fig.13 suggests. Both of these elements further adding to Shaw's theme of the passage of time. In an artist's statement given to the Tate in 2004 Shaw describes his paintings, as a form of mourning for the person he was when he was younger:

"An enthusiastic, passionate teenager who read art books and novels and poems and biographies and watched films and TV and listened to music and dreamed. They are paintings of places that were familiar to me in my childhood and adolescence, places in which I found myself alone and thoughtful. They are places in which I forgot things. ... I paint the paintings of all the times and all the thoughts I lack the language to describe. For the one single moment that I can recall, I feel a dull sadness for the thousands I have forgotten." (Tate, 2004)

I find that Shaw's paintings are careful compositions made up of concrete observations, scenes of stillness, unreliable memory and similarly to Chloe Dewe Mathews photographs in *Shot at Dawn* acting as a sepulchral monument, Shaw's paintings serve as a memorial to his youth. Shaw wrote on his website, *Notes for the New Life* (Shaw, 2001), 'if I'm honest enough I could say I was suspended between autobiography and fiction'.

### **My Practice:**

Throughout my own practice I have been heavily inspired by the works of both Chloe Dewe Mathews and George Shaw, and I have been working on incorporating this into my visual language. Both of the artists seem to represent similar themes in their respective practices, themes which explore the passage of time, trauma, place and stillness amongst others.

I find Shaw's work resonates with me for many reasons, one being the direct relationship I have with his work due us both coming from Coventry and the city itself being his subject matter. I find this major contribution to my own work as my own practice is now drawing comparisons between Coventry and Rotterdam. Another reason I relate so much to Shaw's work would be the way Shaw implicates a sense of his own nostalgia, which he portrays through his paintings, offering themes of time which is shown when it is considered that he has exhibited Tile Hill repeatedly over his artistic career, often revisiting these locations and repainting them. I find it interesting that the major themes in Shaw's work are the passage of time, memory and nostalgia as they all relate to the work I have been producing. I have been instructing a friend from my teenage years on taking photographs in Coventry, so that I can compare them between my own landscapes in Rotterdam, but all of the places I am instructing Fintan to witness, hold memories there for myself during my time spent living and growing up in Coventry. This is where I implicate the trauma I experienced in Coventry (described in Chapter One), by having Fintan as my witness to explore the city, I can then explore this memory of trauma somewhat removed, detached and vicariously through him.

Shaw relates his feelings towards his paintings of Tile Hill to pop culture from his youth spent in Coventry, "I just wanted to make a painting that had all the feeling of the Beatles' *In My Life*, or *I'd Rather Not Go Back to the Old House* by the Smiths." I find this inspiring to my work, as previously I have worked on capturing pop and sub-culture in my own photography as I have mentioned in chapter 1, Shaw adds some of these inspiration of pop culture to the titles of his

work, such as with *The Fall*. I enjoy the way Shaw uses his own youth culture as a foreground to his work, and am developing this aspect in my own project.

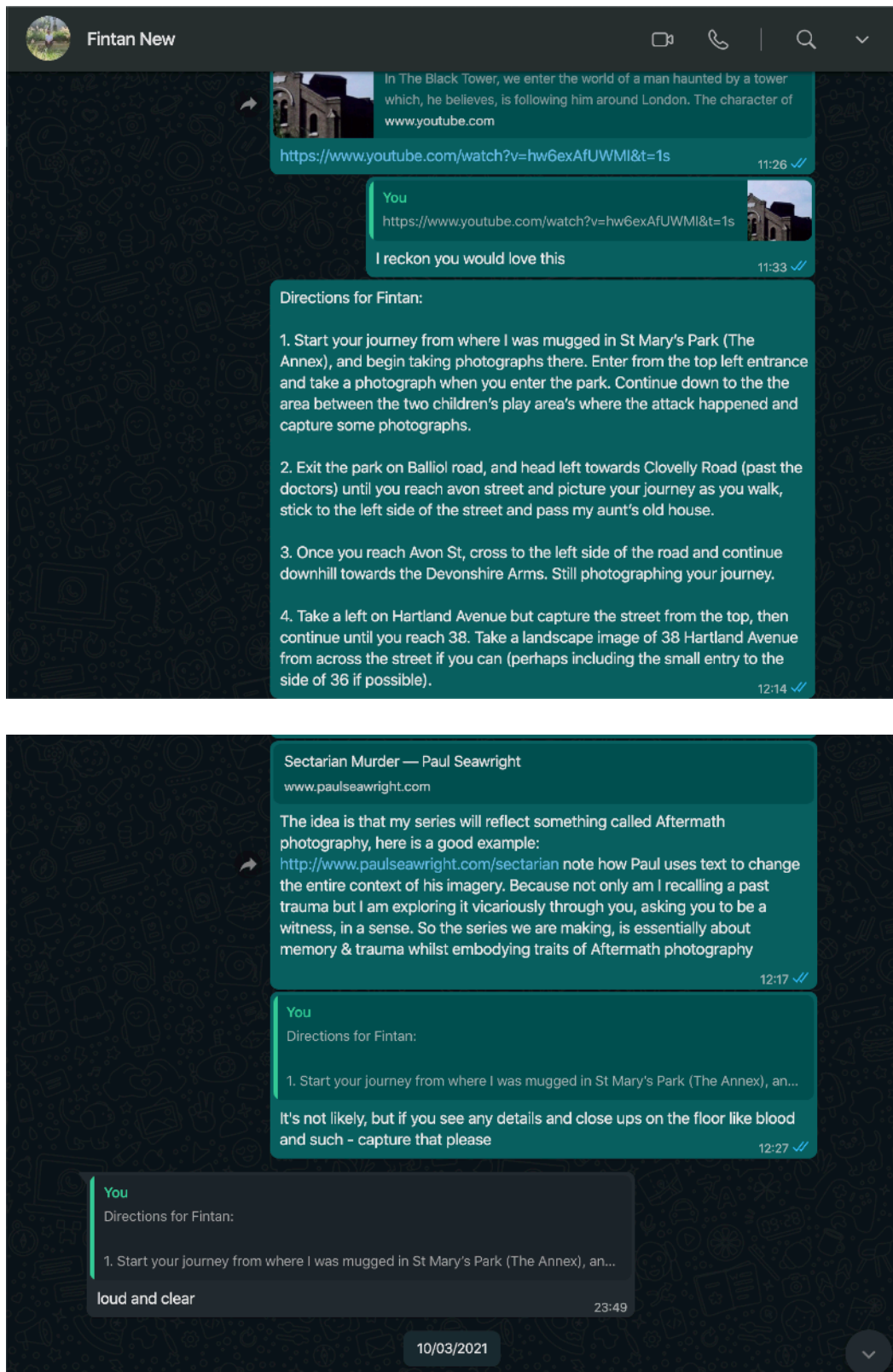
There are numerous ways in which *Shot at Dawn* influences my practice, such as the way Dewe Mathews' mournful landscapes can convey feelings of emptiness, memory and stillness without there being any specific traces of the histories she is showing, in her imagery. Dewe Mathews does this with accompanying text to her stark documentary landscapes which provide the viewer with questions about the significance of the landmarks she creates, creating a new and informed viewpoint and sense of narrative for the viewer. To accurately express myself through my own imagery, I will experiment with Mathews' use of text within her own photographs, into my work, to better convey my own themes of place, memory and connection and will describe this in detail in my next chapter. Dewe Mathews and Shaw also differ as Shaw celebrates dreams in working class circumstances. His own dreams and his own history, whereas Dewe Mathews is more about exposing the tragic events which happened to others, and recovering lost history. Shaw's whole message is more sentimental than Dewe Mathews, as he was there and Dewe Mathews has commented about having no personal relationship with *Shot at Dawn*.

### Chapter Three: ***We Share The Same Skies: Details Of The Project***

My final major project for this masters focuses on the connection I have between the city I grew up in and the city I live in now, I found myself taking photographs in Rotterdam whilst associating them with particular areas and structures of Coventry. I want to highlight my relationship with these places, and I find that these cities feel familiar and comparable in many ways and I will attempt to provide the comparison I find through photography. To engage with this fully, I have asked a friend (Fintan Collins) from Coventry, England to photograph parts of the city I recall, or where I have specific memories of, so I can explore similarities through photography and also explore my memories through Fintan. After each shoot, I will reflect upon the similarities between my photographs and those taken in Coventry. Fintan and I have begun respectively photographing our environments, mine being Rotterdam and Fintan's being specific places in Coventry directed by myself, where I can recall distinctiveness of architecture, memories or a certain feeling, from there I will form my own photographic response. Another method I have been using is taking photographs and then describing particular elements to Fintan so that he may go out and photograph "blind" from my imagery. The associations between the cities came from coming across certain structures in Rotterdam which inspired particular memories of my time in Coventry, so by adding another layer to this process (Fintan's photographs of Coventry) it became apparent that I am emotionally mapping my memories of Coventry into Rotterdam, through the images Fintan and I both capture.

I first met Fintan Collins when I was sixteen years old, I had just left secondary school (high school) and enrolled into Sixth Form (for the non-British readers, this is a form of schooling which bridges the gap between secondary school and either a career or university study). We shared two classes together and bonded over our love of music, cinema and culture. This was five months after my mugging, and although my face had healed, I carried an intense scar between my eyes. Our friendship grew throughout this time, and I confided many of my feelings about the attack in Fintan, which I believe was an important part of my healing process. Fintan is also an artist, he studied and obtained his Bachelor of Arts at Plymouth university. He began studying a year before I did, and was a big contribution for me choosing Plymouth as my own university to study towards my own bachelor degree and because of this, I feel he has had a lot of influence over the photographic work I have created, so adding Fintan to my process feels honest to the work and my method of creating this series.

Fig 14 &amp; 15: An example of the instructions given to Fintan for our collaboration, 2021.



**Process:**



In Figures 14 & 15 you can see an example of an exchange between Fintan and I through the app, Whatsapp. The exchange shows an explanation of the route I wanted Fintan to follow which leads him from the place where I was mugged, to my old family home, the exact route which I took after the mugging. I always give a detailed set of instructions without providing him with any of my own imagery but discussing locations we both know well, which in turn reinforces the depth of the relationship we have together. When sending and receiving photographs from Fintan I have tried a few different methods, but find that giving him direct instructions works better when I have a vision in mind. I have also sent Fintan to locations which seem significant when showing Coventry in a way which seems honest to where we grew up.

Figure 16: *The flats next to school, Fintan Collins 2021.*



### **Back Stories:**

In Fig.16 you can see a large block of flats, where Fintan and I attended Sixth Form was right next to this area. The apartment block is not far from his home currently, nor my childhood home. Fintan and I both discussed photographing the area, as it aligns with the project

and reminds me of various post-war buildings I have encountered in Rotterdam. When we spoke about the building on the phone, I realised that we referred to a known recent history of the building. We spoke of a man that lived there whom had attended the school Fintan and I attended many years ago, around the same time as my father did. Robert Brown killed two young brothers, aged two and six in a hit-and-run crash whilst under the influence of cocaine, he was jailed for nine years. A week before the crash Brown had been released from prison for possessing an offensive weapon. He hung himself in prison some time after, but so did the father of the young boys. I find it somewhat odd that we associate this trauma with this place. We knew Brown lived here only from knowledge which was given to us after the event, by relatives and friends when discussing the tragedy. Before this the only association we would have given the building was that it was known for being unsafe to be around. This narrative adds a context to the image such as Dewe Mathews does in *Shot at Dawn*. Albeit horrific it is something I may add to be shown with the imagery as it shows a shared history and knowledge of where we came from. Dewe Mathews' images derive their power in part from their stories which she connects to the image, my own photographs also draw a lot of inspiration from stories and true events, it would make sense to include these when displaying my own project. Although I am still working on my method for this, as Shaw tries to convey narratives through his titles, but leaves it for the viewer to decide. A lot of the inspiration for this project also came from my walks around Rotterdam, I found myself gazing at structures I found on my exploration of the city and being reminded of similar ones in Coventry, which in turn prompted these memories to arise. It reminds me of Finnish Architect *Pallasmaa* (2005, p. 40) who labels his encounters with place as an experience;

“I confront the city with my body; my legs measure the length of the arcade and the width of the square; ... I experience myself in the city, and the city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city, and the city dwells in me.”

Pallasmaa expresses situationist values (Tate, *Situationist International*) through this quote, a theory that human behaviour is a factor of the situation, rather than the traits a person possesses. I find that this could be said about my inspiration coming from the structures of Rotterdam, and also exploring these values through Fintan's photography in Coventry as that is still his situation.



Figure 17 & 18: *Strange Town*, 2021. Left photograph pictured by Fintan Collins, right by myself.

### **Editorial Decisions:**

The editorial choices I make when matching my photographs come from a variety of factors, but above all else it is about my own memory and the feelings they inspire. I find that it better displays a theme of place when memories are inspired from encountering different structures in Rotterdam, which remind me of my youth in Coventry or particular events that have transpired. You can see an example of this above in Fig. 17 & 18 where I have matched these photographs. The left photograph was taken by Fintan originally, then I explored Rotterdam until I found the inspiration for my response pictured on the right.

I have been drawing influence from George Shaw for the titles of the photographs in my project, as well as reflecting on my own past trauma, and as the series is inspired by memory it seems appropriate to do so. As I mentioned in chapter two, Shaw titles many of his paintings as references to pop culture during his youth spent in Tile Hill, which the subject matter of the paintings. Using this knowledge of Shaw's use of pop culture and the similar themes we have in our projects, I began to consider which music I associate with Coventry and found myself thinking about my father and his undying love for Paul Weller and his previous bands, The Jam and The Style Council. But it also led me to think about the Specials, and my coincidental relationship with

Neville Staple, which is why I named this thesis Ghost Town. Even if it is an obvious name to choose.

### Conclusion:

My father lived in Coventry for most of his life, and after my mugging, he and my mother decided to move to a village outside of Coventry which was still accessible, so that I could attend Sixth Form and we could stay close to family members. My father has worked for Ford motor company for my entire life, enabling my brother and I to grow up with financially secure parents. Since my mother also works, this enabled them to grow to a much more comfortable situation than when they grew up. All of the music of Paul Weller has reverberated through the walls of each place I have lived, and will always remind me of my father. One of the most notable songs of Paul Weller's career as a musician would be, *That's Entertainment* (1980) released by The Jam from their fifth studio album, (Sound Affects, 1980). The song itself is a testament to the heartaches and repetitiveness of working-class life, and it deeply reminds me of Coventry and my parents growing out of the working class.

<i>A police car and a screaming siren A pneumatic drill and ripped up concrete A baby wailing and stray dog howling The screech of brakes and lamp light blinking</i>	<i>Days of speed and slow time Monday's Pissing down with rain on a boring Wednesday Watching the news and not eating your tea A freezing cold flat and damp on the walls</i>	<i>La la la la la la La la la la la la La la la la la la La la la la la la</i>	<i>Reading the graffiti about slashed seat affairs  I tell ya that's entertainment, that's entertainment</i>
<i>That's entertainment, that's entertainment</i>	<i>I say that's entertainment, that's entertainment</i>	<i>Waking up from bad dreams and smoking cigarettes Cuddling a warm girl and smelling stale perfume A hot summer's day and sticky black tarmac Feeding ducks in the park and wishing you were far away That's entertainment, that's entertainment</i>	<i>La la la la la la La la la la la la La la la la la la La la la la la la La la la la la la</i>
<i>A smash of glass and the rumble of boots An electric train and a ripped up phone booth Paint splattered walls and the cry of a tomcat Lights going out and a kick in the balls</i>	<i>Waking up at six AM on a cool warm morning Opening the windows and breathing in petrol An amateur band rehearsing in a nearby yard Watching the tele and thinking about your holidays</i>	<i>Two lovers kissing amongst the scream of midnight Two lovers missing the tranquility of solitude Getting a cab and travelling on buses</i>	<i>La la la la la la La la la la la la La la la la la la La la la la la la  La la la la la la  la</i>
<i>I tell ya that's entertainment, that's entertainment</i>	<i>That's entertainment, that's entertainment</i>		

*That's Entertainment, The Jam, 1980*

One of the most repetitive and annoying noises in a city is the sound of a '*pneumatic drill*' as it tears up the ground beneath it. The repetitive nature of the '*blinking light*' to end the verse on a minimalist slice of British working-class life. Weller drops another working class woe of not being able to pay the heating bill, the condensation is the damp on the wall. Weller concludes the song with, '*La la la la la la,*' the constant repetition of this line could be a way in which Weller further emphasises the mundane and repetitive nature of life for those in the working class. I worked with my father at Ford for the summer after I graduated from my bachelor programme,

and I understand the repetitive nature of what working in that environment feels like. The tasks faced daily, comprised of collapsing boxes, prepping large logistical containers to be refilled with car parts and the upkeep of the workplace, then rinse and repeat.

Many of The Jam's and the Style Council songs are of a political nature, with Weller being from the small working class area of Sheerwater, Woking, he was inspired to sing about the inequalities of this life. This is where I associate the photographs Fintan has taken of Coventry with the music Weller has produced, as it is both surrounded in nostalgia and its lyrics seem poignant when I examine Fintan's images. It is something I will use throughout my series because it feels very personal to me. If you look back to Figures: 7, 8, 17 and 18, you will find that the names of these photographs are also songs written by the Jam.

Although it feels rather obvious for me to use Ghost Town as the name for this thesis, and also potentially for this project, it is because I heavily associate the band with my attack. The song was written about Coventry, which is why I feel that it is obvious, and yet it does feel poignant. This thesis has been an exploration of what are the drivers for me to create this project, and I believe it has helped me celebrate the position I am now in, my escape from working-class Coventry. But also, it has been a reflection of where I came from, and an investigation of the drivers which have motivated my practice, through past experiences and personal history. Fintan's implication in this project helps me reflect on Coventry, as I am still witnessing the city vicariously through him and his photographs, and empathising with the dreary environment of Coventry. This project is a mourning of difficult circumstances, bad architecture, street violence, and a friend who still remains in a city I hate. But mainly it is also a feeling that enduring and imagining and making something out of those circumstances, still counts and gives me something special.

The next step for the project is to consider the ways in which I could present it, which I believe would be fitting as a book or an exhibition. As a book, I could it would be easier to tell a story, my story, and detail the histories of the places in photographs which hold memories. I also feel I could do this with an exhibition, although in my opinion a book seems more personal. Trauma impacts people in different ways.

Objects and people have the habit of invoking memories of trauma within individuals. What is sometimes overlooked are places in the world that have the same effect. Regardless of their difficulties I had discussing my own past, it is my ambition as an artist to ensure that these reminders of trauma remain everlasting to more than just the owners. This project serves as an obituary to a past life, and as a contributor to a new one.

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