

IN GOOD FAITH

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Having spent five years photographing pilgrimage sites in France, Ireland and Poland, **Alys Tomlinson** created an extraordinary and award-winning series combining portraiture, landscape and still life. She talks to Tracy Calder about her work.



At first it seems strange that a photographer who describes her upbringing as 'liberal, leftie, atheist' should spend years chronicling pilgrimage sites in France, Ireland and Poland, but if you chat to Alys Tomlinson long enough her motivation becomes clear. 'I have always been driven by curiosity; I get fascinated and slightly obsessed about things,' she explains.

Faith was never a part of her childhood, so to do the subject justice she signed

up to a two-year MA in Anthropology of Travel, Tourism and Pilgrimage at SOAS University of London. 'I just felt it was such a difficult subject to tackle that I wanted to get some depth and perspective on it by studying it formally,' she says. 'I got a very thorough theoretical grounding and it opened up a new way of thinking.' Alys had never really heard of the term *ex-voto* (Latin for an offering left in a church or shrine to give thanks or request help) until she attended a seminar, but it struck a chord and eventually became the title for her award-winning series.

Ex-votos come in many forms including

candles, wooden crosses, rosaries, handwritten prayers, statues and even hospital crutches. These material offerings play an important role in a pilgrimage, so it's no surprise they feature heavily in Alys' project. But if you have seen the images used to illustrate her win at the Sony World Photography Awards in 2018 you'll know it's the portraits from the series that receive the most column inches. This is somewhat misleading. 'To tell the story of these places I needed three elements: faith, people and the landscape to work together, because these people leave these pieces in the landscape,' explains Alys. >





◀ 'The portraits carry the series but they need to be punctuated with the still lifes, and then the landscape images give a wider idea of the environment.'

Looking at the series now, it's hard to believe Alys spent three years struggling to make it work. To begin with she travelled to Lourdes in France, having been inspired by *Lourdes*, a film by director Jessica Hausner. The movie focuses on a Catholic organisation known as the Order of Malta, which dates back to the 12th century. Every year members of the Order come to Lourdes from all over the world, bringing the sick with them. 'The men wear these kind of black boiler suits and the women are dressed in these black cloaks,' she explains. 'They are incredibly striking and sweep through Lourdes, taking it over for a week every year.' To Alys, these people looked like they were straight out of a film set and it was this sense of other-worldliness she found hard to resist.

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Lourdes is extremely well known as a pilgrimage site – in 1858 a young peasant girl is said to have witnessed a series of apparitions of the Virgin Mary here – and the town now receives an estimated six million visitors a year as a result. 'You go there and it's very commercial on lots of levels,' says Alys. 'There are loads of trinket shops and gift shops and it can be quite overwhelming in that sense.' Surrounded by so much vibrancy and busyness it's no surprise she initially decided to shoot Lourdes in colour. But despite her best efforts the pictures seemed to lack a certain depth. 'I was shooting colour with a medium-format camera, but at the time

I didn't really know which direction I wanted to take the project in,' she admits. 'I think in the beginning I was trying too many different things and I needed to just pare it right down, because it's the simplicity and stillness that make the series work.'

All this changed when Alys returned to Lourdes with a large-format camera (a Sinar F2 she bought off eBay for a few hundred pounds) and a fresh approach. 'When I went back it seemed so obvious that I should have been shooting black & white film from the beginning,' she says. 'I find with a lot of personal projects you almost have to get it wrong to get it right – things don't happen easily or quickly.' Switching from colour to black & white was 'a bit of a last-ditch attempt,' but Alys was determined to explore all avenues before throwing in the towel. 'I believed there was more there, and I stayed really interested in the project,' she explains. 'Something kept drawing me back, particularly to Lourdes.' >

◀ Having planned her next trip to coincide with the Order of Malta annual pilgrimage, Alys returned to France with her loyal assistant, Marie-Cécile Embleton. 'When I went back with a different approach the images started having the kind of mood and feel I wanted,' she recalls. 'When I got the first contact sheets back I was really excited – I remember texting my assistant some screengrabs and she was like, "You've cracked it. You've finally cracked it!"'

Alys could have shot the entire project in Lourdes, but she wanted to see if there were any visual connections between here and other Catholic pilgrimage sites. Her decision to visit Ireland was born out of curiosity. 'I had always wanted to explore Ireland, but the famous pilgrimage site of Knock is similar to Lourdes in that it's quite commercial,' she says. Having carried out some online research she came across the village of Ballyvourney, where in the sixth

century a woman is said to have discovered a herd of nine white deer, as foretold by an angel. She founded a convent on the site and is said to have had the power to heal. 'A lot of this has to do with healing, both emotional and physical,' says Alys. 'The site is a big deal; it's the centre of the community.'

But despite its local appeal, Ballyvourney has a very different feeling to Lourdes; it's much quieter for a start. 'You might sit there all day and see one person pull up in a car, get out with their rosary beads, do the rounds and get back in,' she says.

With her keen eye, it didn't take Alys long to notice thematic connections

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between Lourdes and Ballyvourney. 'There were strong connections in terms of water, stone and forest,' she recalls. Misty forests, rivers and unusual rock formations were common but what Alys was really looking for were small pockets of tranquility. 'I wanted to find quieter areas that had a purity and sense of other-worldliness,' she reveals. Once she had found these pockets she was struck by the effect they had on her. 'I'm not religious but there is a sense of peace, calm and stillness you get when you're in these places, partly because they are imbued with this enormous history and faith,' she says. 'There is a sense of being supported and understood that you don't necessarily get in everyday life – or at least it's not easy to find.' The feelings she experienced ranged from slight detachment to a deep connection with the people and landscapes she encountered. 'I was very moved in my own way,' she admits. >



Her next port of call was Grabarka in Poland, an orthodox Christian site where in 1710 an old man is said to have received a vision telling him to lead local people to a mountain, build a cross and pray to be spared from an outbreak of cholera. 'Again I found the site via online research,' explains Alys. 'I saw this incredible picture of a forest full of wooden crosses and I just had to go there!'

Once more she found similarities between Grabarka and the other two sites. A stream circles the bottom of the hill where pilgrims bathe in the hope of being healed, for example. Nothing is ever removed from Grabarka, so offerings litter the ground, slowly decaying. Despite this rather bleak mood, Alys didn't find the site particularly gloomy. 'All these sites are emblems of hope, both for the local communities and the people who go there,' she says. 'They are hopeful places, even though they are quite stark and mysterious.'

Using a large-format camera meant

she had to be slow and considered in her approach – something that suited the subject matter well. But setting up a 5x4 camera and vanishing under a black cloth doesn't go unnoticed. 'It was kind of a spectacle, but it meant that people were interested in what we were doing,' she explains. 'It made them understand how serious we were about the project.' Having spotted someone who stood out – whether due to the way they dressed or an expression they exhibited – Alys would approach them, outline the project and make an appointment to photograph them later in the day or on the following day. 'I would set up my gear in advance, because at that point I knew the kind of spots that would work,' she explains. Once ready, each portrait session lasted about 20 minutes, but in that time Alys managed to capture something

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distinctly other-worldly in her subjects. 'I wanted them to look strong, in control and powerful,' she reveals, 'so I asked them to stare directly into the lens.' Her subjects emanate strength and resilience, but also seem deeply rooted in the landscape.

Having invested so much time, energy and emotion in the project, I'm interested to know if it has led Alys to reconsider her religious beliefs. 'I have more respect for religion and more respect for people's beliefs now,' she admits, 'not that I disrespected religion before, but I never really understood it. I see a strength in people who believe that I not only admire but also quite envy. It's a shame I don't have that – I absolutely get what it can bring to people.'

Ex-Voto (ISBN 978-1-910401-27-9) is published by GOST Books, price £35. Work from the series will be exhibited at HackelBury Fine Art gallery in London (7 March to 18 April), Chichester Cathedral in Sussex (2 March to 23 April) and Side Gallery in Newcastle (6 April to 9 June).

