

Photie Man

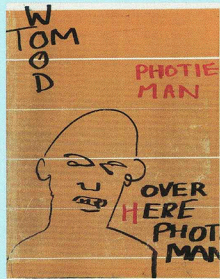
Tom Wood

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There are few templates for the kind of collaboration that photographer Tom Wood and the artist Padraig Timoney have made. Certainly there are no parallels with the many photographers who work briefly and clinically, vainly producing books or exhibitions that don't merit publishing or hanging, "the kind of photography that just doesn't matter", as Lisette Model would have it.

When Wood produced his first book, *Looking for Love*, it seemed a concise chapter in the work of a searching, persistent photographer. It was a portrayal of familiarity and love in a bar at the edge of the River Mersey in Liverpool, a drama led by a people in a difficult land. It was a meditation on staring, convincing, risking ... needing. In the photographs, catharsis was both explicit and inferred. Fights spilled around the frame, never straying within. There was a sense of pressure too, of the briefest of chances for love or intimacy, with a simple flashlight holding the exchange of glances. For all its drama, the book appeared measured and formally preoccupied.

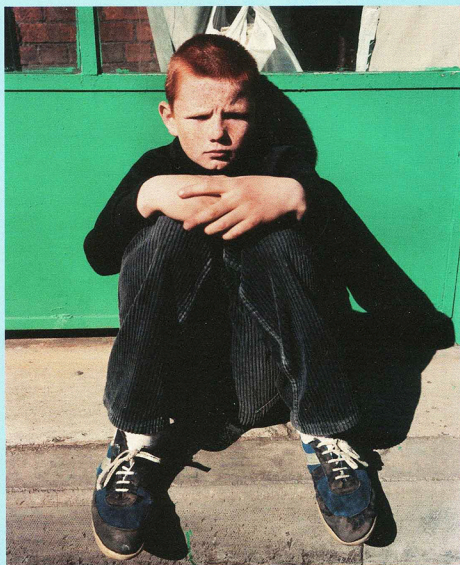
Those aware of Wood's work knew these pictures to be a partial account, one of a number of parallel projects that he had nurtured. Beyond the occasional published appearance, there was

seemingly no goal, clearly no agenda, but somehow a purpose and an urgency to respond, acknowledge and perhaps understand the lives of the people he lived amongst. There was a close affinity with Sudek and Sander, and the wish to build a response over time.

Then came the search for colour and the gathering of chance and life of the determined street photographer. The omission from *Looking for Love* seemed to be the wider lives of the people in the pictures. Perhaps as an account of Wood's work, it was singular and abrupt. It is not surprising then, that *Photie Man* has become a vehicle with which to liberate and realign both the familiar and the lesser-seen photographs Wood has been making since the early 1970s.

The publications that already exist provide a spine for *Photie Man*. Images from the bus book, *All Zones Off Peak*, Weinand's *oversize People* and *Looking for Love* conspire to become the foundation for more subtle or irrelevant images. There is an abrasion in the selections – a willingness to lose detail and sharpness to gesture, light and mood. The kind of pictures often dismissed because of their untidiness – their technical abrasiveness – bed in against the most refined, tonally beautiful street portraits. At the heart of this book, there is an attempt to marry these qualities, to create a dialogue between Wood's pictures and Timoney's formal sensibility.

For much of his time on Merseyside, Wood worked with portraiture, photographing on the streets and in the institutions of Liverpool. Portraiture is often a slow, deliberate process, confounded by the transience of the sitter. It is a temporary closeness, a gathering process, and often yielding a poor harvest – and rarely the harmonising of a photographer's sensibility and a subject's independence. More, it is when something is betrayed. Those few occasions when photography becomes secondary and we are left with people, themselves in the world, shouldering that world. Wood's



portraits often show relationships – kinships, family bonds spanning generations or the confusions and knowingness of youth. There are the workers, young and old, the mothers and children, the mothers who are still children, too many children.

The earliest portraits are black and white, perfectly rendered. They are coupled with colour pictures, a move that somehow extends their reach. For all the busyness and impact of the colour street pictures, there is the clarity of complexion, detail and purpose in the portraits, forever an anchor. Perhaps there are obvious balances too – a child on a bus with her grandfather reaches out to the photographer, in a way that the woman in the previous image, though sharing the same hair and shape, no longer seems able to in her middle age. Yet there are also occasions that constitute a leap of faith. They shouldn't work together, but somehow they do. A middle-aged couple feed a baby in an unkempt park, and over the page a gang of children stand semi-formally after play. A hooded child withdrawn against a city wall reappears as a

struggling pupil in a classroom. It is these bridges across the book that become everything. Photography – like the city – can be tender and vulgar. Ideas can fail or progress our understanding of how we are. Sometimes it's enough to try – as Beckett said: "try again, fail again, fail better". Sometimes it's enough that the pictures are in the world. **KG**