

Based in London since 1995, Glen Erler’s forthcoming first monograph Family Tree records his return visits to California to find the family and locations remembered from his youth. From a still-life of a blue towel on the ground where he once played freely with a childhood friend; to a study of his niece in the same jacuzzi where she nearly drowned at thirteen months old; to a parting view of his father on their last meeting; Erler very gradually pieces together a portrait of his past. At first viewing, it is a document of his family’s life within the physical landscape of Southern California; however a quietly haunting exploration of the emotional landscape of a childhood remembered emerges.

Glen Erler

of the marks left by a loved one’s presence, now out of reach. Erler’s book is a very personal journey to understand how fragments of his memory and family history continue to define his character, his present, and future.

Family Tree can be seen as a continuation of the themes developed in Erler’s previous series Age 13-18. This book further explores the tension between home and family remaining a permanent anchor in one’s life, despite the need for independence and the continuous redefinition of one’s own personal identity throughout adulthood. Erler has produced a quietly understated but powerful meditation upon themes of family history, loss, memory and belonging. It is a work that needs to be returned to repeatedly and slowly, in order to fully appreciate its delicate grace. My sincere thanks to Glen Erler for sharing his thoughts on the development and making of Family Tree.

The final section of the book contains photographs taken over a ten day period following Erler’s father’s death: a record of the people who surrounded the photographer at this time, alongside studies of the rooms his father rested in and the objects he used during his final days. In these closing photographs one witnesses the painful tangibility

Helen Trompeteler: *The overall colour palette of your work is highly distinctive, with the bright Californian sun lending intensity to the subject detail of each image. In many photographs such as ‘Coral On Her Way To School’, ‘Aunt Tootie At Aunt Joyce’s’ and ‘Logan Laying By The Pool’, light and shadow are used to beautiful effect, and the resulting abstraction adds to a sense of fragmentation or dislocation from one’s immediate surroundings. Can you expand a little on your technique and how this very specific light anchors the project?*

Glen Erler: For this project, I chose to use a medium format film camera of which I had experimented with not long before I started Family Tree. I shot the same film stock for the entire project. The light I wanted to incorporate into this project was based on memory. It played such a large part of my daily life. There is a lot of freedom involved in a warm climate and therefore this project needed to represent that aspect. I often view this type of light as heat rather than warmth. The warmth was inherent and is associated more with a colour palette but there’s a calmness and quietness that I nearly always felt present and it was important that this came through in the photographs, but to me, this is more connected to the aspect of heat.

I’ve printed all of the work on analogue paper until the death of my father. I used a different paper for ‘The Last Ten Days’ section of my book as it was a

different emotional period for me, and the coldness of this alternative paper proved more suitable.

In a way, the light just is....but also this project is based, in part, on memory and we think memories need to be clear and definite, but there can also be vagueness and questions left to be answered. I felt that the light also had to represent that aspect. What’s in the shadows is as important as what’s in the light. Or, what’s visible and seen is as important as what isn’t all there.

HT: *In previous interviews, you have discussed the level of construction in some of your images, with the use of specific clothing, or placement of objects and individuals within the physical landscape. I’m interested in how far you feel you can push this boundary before potentially risking the emotional meaning of an image? To what extent are you documenting a specific physical landscape, and to what extent are you projecting visual confirmations of your own memory, your own emotional history onto that landscape?*

GE: I feel that the more an image is constructed, so to speak, for me, the emotional content and meaning is even more present. The more I work on it and put it together, the stronger the connection. I’m not a journalist and therefore I don’t feel it’s my job to always document reality in an entirely truthful manner.

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I'm often constructing images based on memory but also I hope that the image(s) feel and look complete. That in turn is aided by the person in the photograph and what they themselves are able to give. In the case of Family Tree, my family members were photographed in places where I remember them most or in situations that were meaningful to them or to myself and that related to this project. Saying that, there always needs to be room for chance and what comes to mind at the time of taking the pictures.

I'm often dealing with limited time, of both the person I'm photographing and my own. There are cases with this project and with some of the other smaller projects where the image is of simply what it is. It is still important to the story in its own way; otherwise, I wouldn't have included it. I've taken plenty of images that were nice to look at but didn't relate to the project enough to include. All of this is a growing process. I can only hope to keep getting better and clearer with what it is I'm trying to do.

HT: *In a few words, can you expand on how envisioning Family Tree as a book from the beginning shaped the project's development? Will you feel a sense of completion when the book is published, or do you see Family Tree developing further, into new directions?*

GE: It was an amazing yet surreal experience to hold Family Tree in my hands a few weeks back. I was heavily involved in every aspect so to see it actually come to life was a great feeling. There are always a few things that could have been changed and improved upon but I would think that's normal. I'm not sure where to go with Family Tree. This part is done. It's in book form. There are always things happening within the family structure but I think if I were to do a continuation, it would be approached from a different point of view. I would think anyway.

I felt it was a book from the beginning because of the depth of the direction I was heading. The first images I took were of my Aunt Holly holding a photograph of her daughter Dinah who had died of AIDS. Those images led me in a direction which I knew would dig deeper than I had previously gone. It just seemed clear. A lot of my previous imagery as with much of Adolescence and Age 13-18 was in a way, similar and a part of Family Tree but without such a strong connection.



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They were lots of separate pieces of a pie whereas Family Tree is singular and connected throughout.

HT: *The layout of your book allows the viewer complete freedom to experience each photograph with no title or explanatory text, and one only encounters titles and your own thoughts at the very end of the book. Would you like to expand upon that decision a little further?*

GE: Family Tree turned out pretty close to how it was initially envisioned. Not exactly, but not far off either. The text is very important and has always been a part of the original make up of the book idea. I didn't want it to overpower or take away from the images. I felt it was important to give the reader some insight into why I took the photographs but at the same time give the choice of reading the text when and if they wanted.

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HT: *As a photographer with a young family, can you say a few words on the relationship between your commercial commissions and your personal work, and how the two may influence each other?*

GE: I've done Family Tree predominately for my kids. I truly hope I can somehow make it better for them and their future by making this book. At the very least, they can look back and have some form of an understanding of what my life was like and to see some of the family members they didn't have a chance to meet or spend much time with. They were with me when I took some of the more recent images and I think they'll be able to look back later in life with memories and connections to this book for themselves.

There is no real master plan here regarding commercial work. I think we all try to bring our way of working into commercial commissions and hope clients want that from time to time.

HT: *How has the experience of making Family Tree developed your own practice?*

GE: Family Tree has very much helped me to learn more about being quite specific in my approach to picture taking. Again, it's a progression and we can only try to keep refining what we do.



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Helen Trompeteler is Assistant Curator of Photographs at the National Portrait Gallery, London, where she has contributed research to major exhibitions including *Man Ray Portraits* (NPG, 2013) and curated a diverse range of historical and contemporary photographic displays. She is the Editor of <http://camera-portraits.com>