

I M A G E

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BLESSED ARE THE MEEK

Nick Meek's breezy images and relaxed approach belie a highly successful advertising career, finds Shana Ting Lipton

There's an unmistakably hazy, idyllic and at times retro quality to Nick Meek's photographs, which betrays his roots in the era of analogue photography - while also suggesting an ease and fluency with the now-ubiquitous digital form. Meek - who has won accolades such as the AOP gold award, and worked on campaigns for Absolut Vodka, BMW and Starbucks, among many more, - got his start at 19, assisting photographers at Rodley Studios in his native Leeds. One of them was top London commercial photographer Graham Ford whose gear Meek recalls with reverent clarity - a 10x8 wooden-bodied Dearnorff camera with beautiful red bellows. "Nobody in the North of England would use anything as archaic as that," he says.

Fast forward to the latter half of the noughties and while many commercial photographers were making the transition to digital, Meek was moving in the other direction. He had purchased a large format camera and was experimenting with shooting exclusively on 10x8 film - a phase which, while enjoyable, was too expensive to keep going for long. "We used to laugh that every time we pressed the shutter it was the same price as a bottle of Bollinger," Meek jokes. "I think it was like 37 quid every time you went click."

Even so, Meek's experience with analogue has influenced his work. "I feel lucky I was schooled in the traditional sense of filmmaking, of developing your own film," says the photographer, who divides his time between Los Angeles, the French Alps and his studio base of London. "When you shoot digitally there's a tendency to use all the tools in the box when actually you don't need to."

And while he was initially reluctant to start working with digital, he willingly gave in when representatives from Phase One allowed him to run some tests, comparing images shot on film and digital side by side. "I want to be able to get a big print right in front of my face as close as possible - to see every hair on the horse's back or every feather on the eagle's head," he explains. "My style and way of controlling colour has evolved over the last few years in such a way that it can kind of only happen digitally."

Wanderlust

Meek's photographic adventures have seen him capture atmospheric landscapes all over the world - in fact, back in 2000, on the heels of his first commercial campaign after landing in London (ads shot for Orangina), he set off for Poland with a friend, not realising how quickly his career would take off. He ended up fielding communications en route from his then newly-appointed agent Siobhan Squire, whilst touring the cheap hotels and youth hostels of Eastern Europe, and shot eight campaigns in his first year under her stewardship.

This wanderlust remains central to his work. Rather than taking inspiration from other photographers, he loves photographing the alternative lives he'd like to live. "When I'm sat in London and it's a bit rainy outside and I think about the French Alps or the American desert, the great American road trip or American National Parks, I have this vision which is not necessarily a realistic vision but a romantic vision," he says. This vision, come to life, includes everything from London's Gherkin ensconced in a snowy mountaintop (for NSPCC), to an explosion of magenta and orange flower petals in a Costa Rican village (for Sony).

His visual travelogues have taken him on journeys from Japan to the Himalayas, as well as throughout the United States, from Palm Spring and West Virginia, to the Hoover Dam and Monument Valley in the South West, as well as California's Yosemite National Park. In the latter, he set out to produce a modern rendition of Ansel Adams' rich black-and-white landscapes, selecting the same spots in which the famous photographer stood, but shooting with a digital back on his wood and metal Alpa. Initially he was disappointed with the results but, three years later, he revisited the Yosemite shots and applied the same colour tints he'd seen in backlit transparencies in the British Museum's ornithology department. "They'd been illuminated every single day for decades and the colours were completely messed up; the Tungsten light behind the transparencies kind of burnt the edges," he recalls. "They just looked really beautiful."

His most whimsical series is *Call of the Yeti*, a project shot in 2009 showing his girlfriend suited up as the mythological hairy mountain creature by the Mer de Glace glacier under Mont Blanc and the statuesque trees of Les Bois. It's all done with a tongue-in-cheek sensibility, characteristic of a man who's against "taking it all incredibly seriously", and who shakes off being labelled an artist because it imposes a mandate for justification and meaning.

He brings a similar sense of lightness to his commercial work too - around the same time as the *Yeti* shoot, he bought a studio in London and, despite the heavy investment this represented, immediately set out to "have a little bit of fun with it". "We found these really badly stuffed animals and photographed them in a very cute way," he says, and he dubbed the series *The Freaks*. He ended up winning a commission for a series of 18 ads for Ford when an art director at Team Detroit in the US saw the campy series.

In fact Meek has several car campaigns under his belt but, true to form, backs away from the title 'car photographer'. "Right from the beginning I think people decided I was a car photographer just

because I shoot landscapes and they can be quite sweeping, big areas," he says - but he adds that he's usually given plenty of creative control over such campaigns. "When the creative work comes from ad agencies, a lot of the time it's so dialled into what I would be doing with my personal work."

He recalls one creatively fulfilling assignment in particular for American Airlines, working with "uber art director" Mark Reddy (then with McCann Ericsson) who acted as a sort of mentor, shepherding him through a commercial photographic road trip around the States to capture the reinvention of the golden age of flight. Other commercial shoots have seen him free-diving with sharks and shooting with polar bear-hunting Greenlanders - his advertising career has been "an amazing thing", he says, "people commission you to do the most remarkable things".

He's also shot some plum jobs for magazines too, with Wired sending him off to NASA to sit in a space shuttle for a shoot. But while he's worked with some of the biggest names in the business - including *Newsweek* and *The New Yorker* - he says he's not shooting as much editorial these days because it's not as creative as it once was. Surprisingly, perhaps, he says it's actually more restrictive than ads these days, because "editorial work comes with increasingly tight briefs".

Either way, he also keeps shooting personal projects, including a recent series called *Line of Contrast* which depicts the double-edged technology behind both spaceships and weapons of mass destruction. Shot at the White Sands National Monument in New Mexico, which is enveloped by military installations, it went on to win the Non-Commissioned Environment Series prize at the 2015 AOP Awards.

Like much of Meek's work, *Line of Contrast* is evocative, expansive and cinematic, which makes me wonder if he'd like to try his hand at filmmaking. He laughs it off, though adds that I'm not the first person to ask because "people seem to think that every other commercial photographer at the moment... that we're all directors for some strange reason". He begs to differ, and says he wants to keep focussed on "creating beautiful still images". "I still feel like a baby as far as my photography career is concerned," he says. "I've got so much to learn as a photographer."

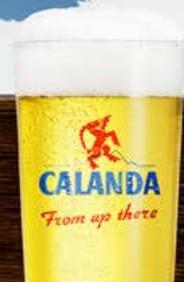


American Airlines Runway
© Nick Meek



CAT WALK

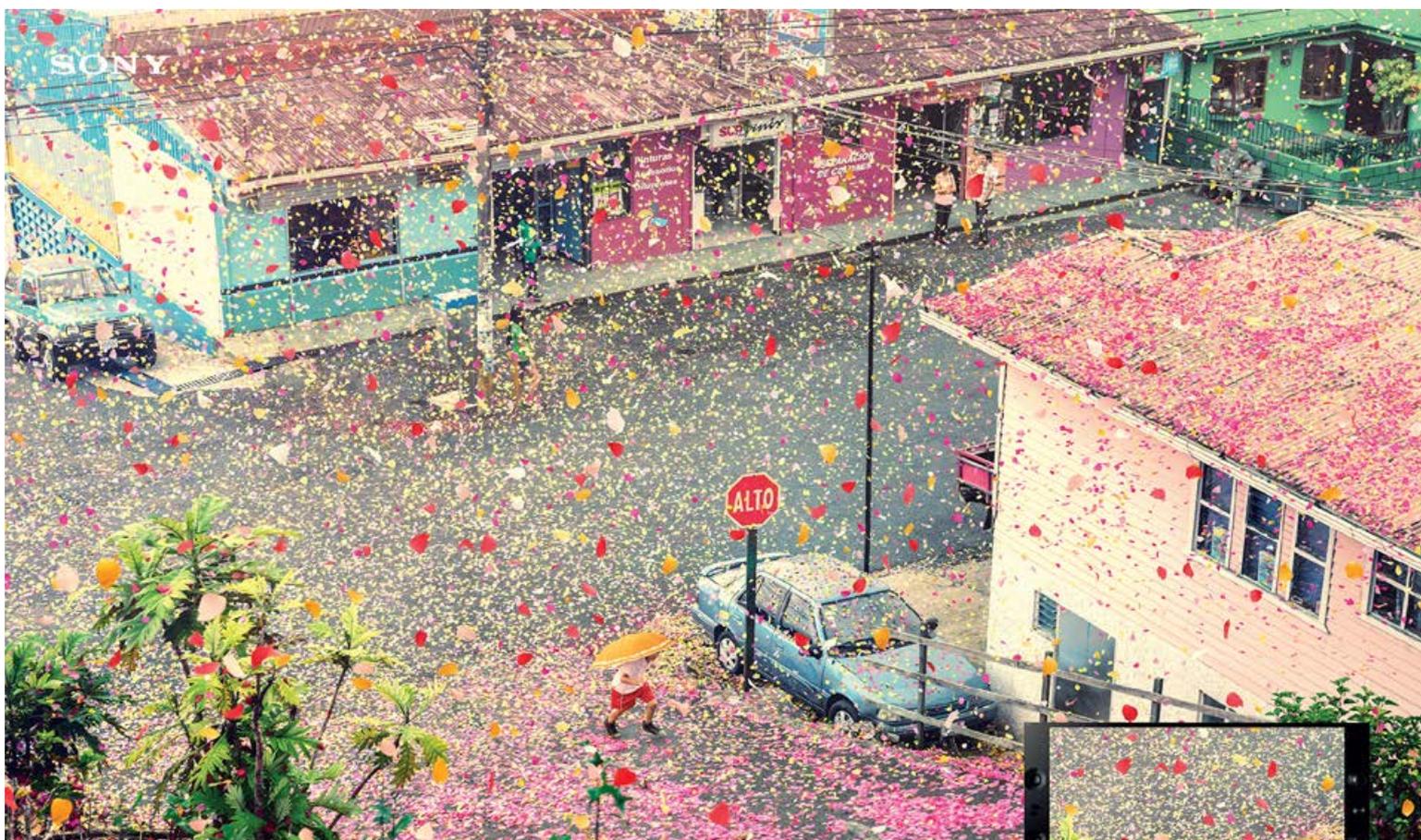
HOW WE SEE IT



Calanda Cat Walk
© Nick Meek



Puma Horse
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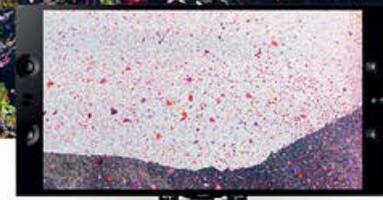
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Sony Bravia Street
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Sony Bravia Volcano
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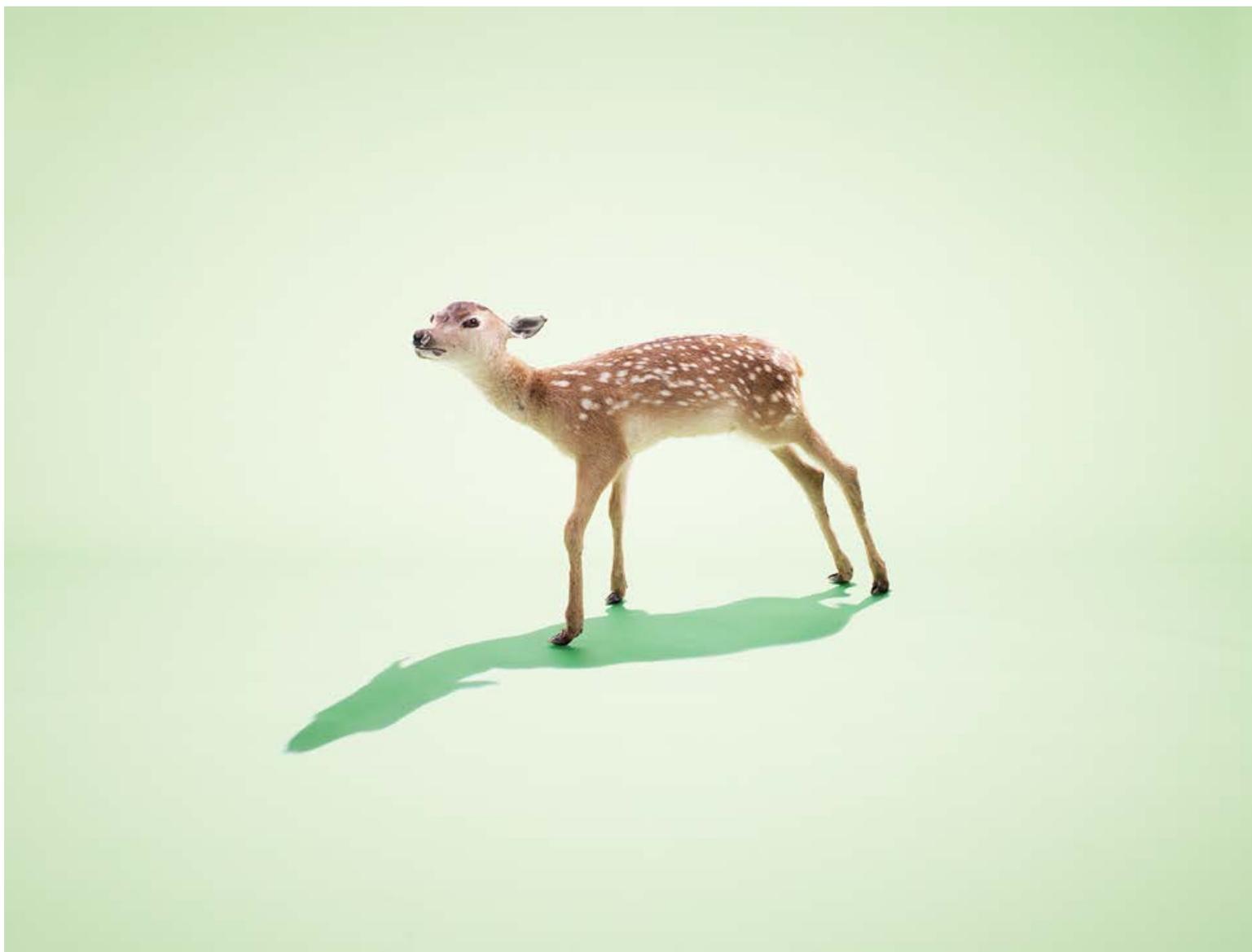
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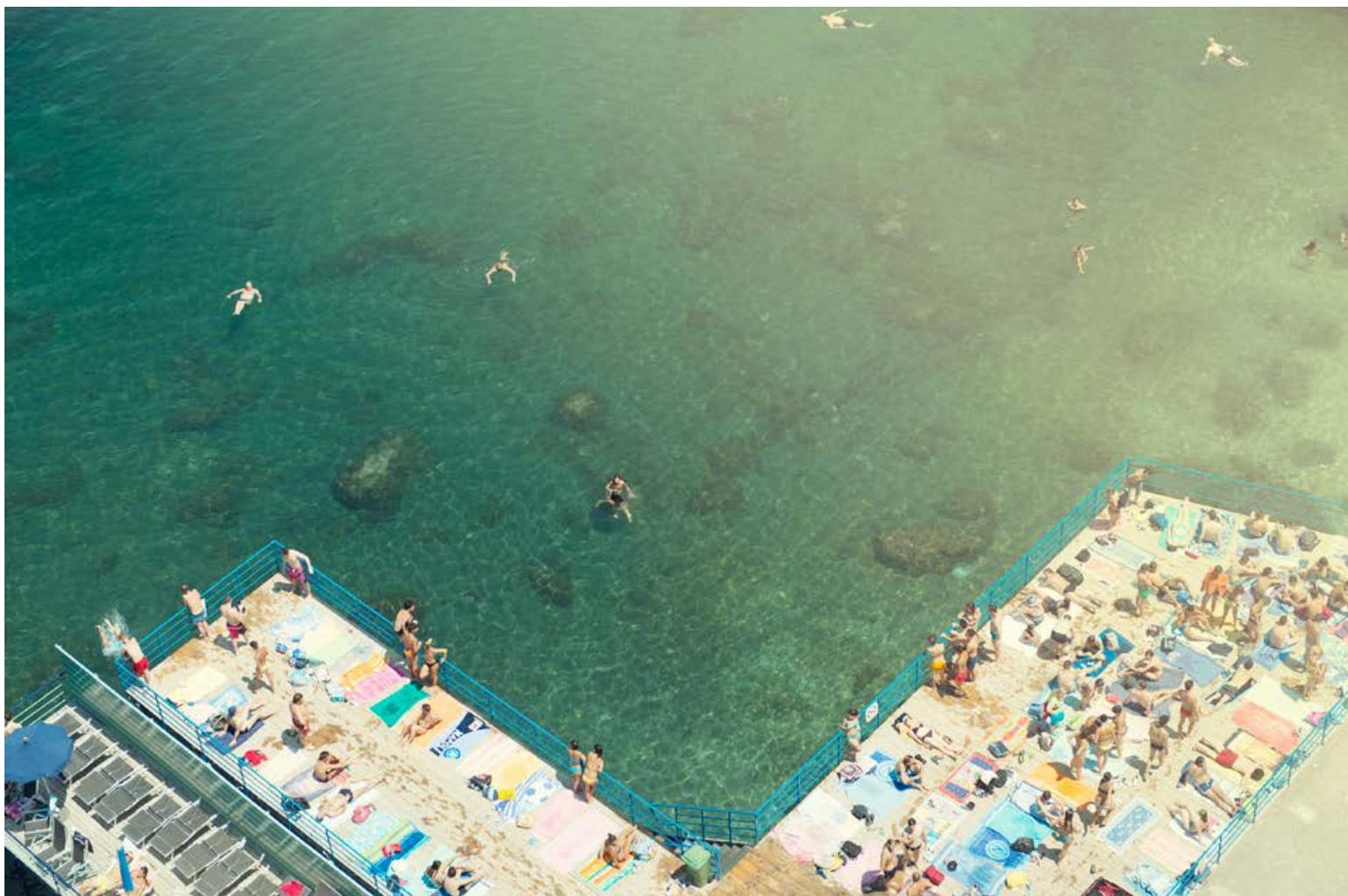
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