

Teenage kicks

Niall O'Brien's intimate images of a gang of teenage punks are a testament to the power of documentary photography

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Berlin, 2009

"I WANTED TO make a film about youth culture," explains Niall O'Brien, the Dublin-born photographer and filmmaker who's been documenting the lives of a gang of affluent and erudite adolescent hardcore punks for the last three years. "My idea involved a group of kids who all had something in common. I first met a kid named Turkish. After seeing his group of friends, I just felt like I'd been given a gift. I couldn't have created a better gang if I'd tried." The project began as a concept-driven vox pop documentary, entitled 'Superheroes'. But soon O'Brien began filming Turkish's posse without any fictional or overly romantic conceit, and the footage burgeoned.

Over the next three years, O'Brien gradually grew closer to the crew. Such intimacy is only allowed to a privileged few and has to be earned. "At first they couldn't understand why I wanted to hang out with them and take pictures," O'Brien says. "Every time I went to photograph them, they quickly grew bored of having me around and just acted as though I wasn't really there." While on a personal level the kids' nonchalance was problematic it also meant he never influenced anything that happened within the group, essential in documentary terms.

The captivating that emerged transmit a sense of camaraderie and closeness that recalls the work of Nan Goldin, Ryan McGinley and Corrine Day. Over time, the photographs progressed beyond voyeurism to provide intimate portraits of real people rather than subculture stereotypes. "There have been definite turning points," says O'Brien. "I gave myself up for arrest a year ago and that's the kind of thing that really gains you respect in a group like this. For me it was just the best way of avoiding getting mauled by police dogs."

Now he's compiling a huge archive of images into a solo show opening in February at Art Work Space (artworkspace.co.uk). He's also presenting the first in a triptych of films focusing on the group's three protagonists at the OneDotZero film festival. The first film was inspired by a voicemail Tim left on O'Brien's mobile after they became separated from one another during a debauched jaunt in Berlin. "The message inspired me to do a portrait," he explains, "to create a contrast between this violent voicemail and a softer depiction of the guy that had left it." O'Brien reveals the strange beauty behind the gang clichés. Despite evidence to the contrary, the kids really are alright.



Luke, Berlin squat party, 2009

"Luke's this gobby punk with an opinion about everything – he just rants and rants. He's a good guy though. Before the group wouldn't really talk to me, but then Luke comes along: 'Alright mate, yeah, yap, yap, yap...' By forming that relationship I started to stitch into the group more." NIALL O'BRIEN

*“I’m just there letting
it all happen - nine
times out of ten what
does happen is total
madness.”* NIALL O'BRIEN



“My rule is that I don’t interfere.
I’m just a follower. I don’t say, ‘no’,
I don’t say, ‘this is sketchy’, I just go
with it, you know?” NIAL O'BRIEN



Above, Josie, 2009. Left, disused primary school in Kingston Upon Thames, 2009



*Above, Luke in Kingston Upon Thames skatepark, 2009
Below, Berlin, 2009*



Xavia, sixteen year old homeless punk who sleeps under a bridge in Berlin. He always carries his rat around with him



*“In a way
I’m part of
the group.
But I would
never
encourage
them to do
something
just for the
sake of it.”*

NIALL O'BRIEN

“I’ve
never felt
intimidated
by any
of them.
They’re good
kids, really
good kids.
I just hope
people will
see that.”

NIAL O'BRIEN

