



Patchwork pictures

Mark Murfitt takes dozens of shots of one location to create his striking joiners. He gives **Gemma Padley** a glimpse into what he does, and explains why this is the only style of photography that gets his creative juices flowing

FOR MANY photographers, a single image skilfully composed and carefully tweaked to bring out the best of the original file is enough to satisfy their creative urge. While blending two or three exposures together is common practice among landscape photographers, piecing together dozens of separate files to create a patchwork, collage-style composition or 'joiner' image is a little less so.

One photographer who goes crazy for

this style of photography is Mark Murfitt, who lives near Kingston upon Thames in south-west London and has been creating his joiners for several years. Mark, whose background is in computer software, has always taken pictures, but took up photography professionally five years ago after he decided he needed a job that afforded him more creativity.

'I started taking photographs for the church down the road and this sparked

my passion for doing photography full time,' he says. 'I began by taking portraits and photographing weddings. One day I remembered an article about joiner images I'd read in a magazine many years ago, and I decided to give this technique a go. I was fascinated by how an ordinary scene could be transformed and shown in such a different way. I had no idea how to go about doing it, but through trial and error I gradually worked out how to create the joiner images.'

With their roots in the photography of David Hockney, joiner images are known for their slightly abstract look due to the often ad hoc placement of photographs at odd angles and uneven exposure from frame to frame. While Tim Coleman explained how to create a photo collage from a single image in last week's *Get the look* (AP 4 June), Mark's approach is to use tens of images that he then joins together in Photoshop.

'I like to turn my photographs into works of art,' says Mark. 'I love creating these



types of images – it's what I do in my spare time. The multifaceted look of the image really appeals to me. In a place like London's Piccadilly Circus, sights, lights and noises bombard you, and in my images I try to recreate these feelings pictorially. I like to think of my joiners as a collection of individual memories. As I'm putting the images together, I'm filled with a childlike sense of excitement as I never know how the final result is going to turn out.'

SUBJECTS AND LOCATIONS

Creating his joiner images from both urban and rural locations, Mark primarily takes his images in London. Initially, he concentrated on photographing popular tourist attractions. 'I've covered most of London's most famous landmarks, which have been well photographed, to say the least, but not necessarily in this way,' he says. 'I've photographed St Paul's Cathedral, Oxford Circus, Piccadilly Circus, Buckingham Palace and Trafalgar Square, to name just a few. I've got family in Cornwall, so when I'm

visiting I try to take pictures to create a joiner or two when I'm home.'

While he enjoys photographing both landscapes and cityscapes, Mark explains that each requires a slightly different approach. 'In cities there are an awful lot of things constantly moving, and if you're not careful you'll end up capturing the same person or car in several frames,' he says. 'Consequently, when photographing urban environments, you have to be quick to avoid duplicating people. The opposite is true for shooting landscapes where the pace is much slower. Ultimately, you can photograph anything as a joiner and it will look unique.'

Once at his chosen location, Mark thinks carefully about what will work compositionally and usually walks around the location a few times to work out the best way of capturing the essence of that place. 'For my image of Piccadilly Circus, for example (see pages 30-31), I must have walked around five or six times trying to find "Piccadilly in a photo",' he says. 'It's no good

Above: Tied boats in Cornwall, 13 photographs

coming out of the Underground and just pointing the camera randomly. You've got to stand somewhere you think will provide the best view of the subject.

'When I started creating these images, I wanted a very clean picture without any distractions,' continues Mark. 'I didn't want any passers-by walking into my shots or cars driving past. In the Piccadilly Circus joiner you can see that there aren't any cars in the foreground. It took ages to take all the shots because I had to wait for a moment with no cars before I could fire the shutter. However, I realised that including people brought the joiner to life. The images became journalistic and reportage in style.'

'I photograph what I see in all its beauty, in all its ugliness,' he continues. 'I try to remain true to the scene in front of me, and in somewhere like Oxford Circus people are an integral part of the scene.'

CAMERA SETTINGS

Shooting handheld and setting his Canon EOS 5D camera with





➔ a 28-70mm lens to aperture priority – usually to between f/5.6 and f/9 – Mark allows the camera to determine the exposure. The exposure will vary from shot to shot, depending on the brightness of the part of the scene being photographed. Consequently, some of the shots are blown out while others are quite dark. This adds to the overall graphic, patchy look of his joiner images. 'I prefer to shoot on sunny but cloudy days,' says Mark. 'I love blue skies with clouds – they look so powerful in an image.'

'Once I've chosen the area to photograph, I'll move my camera over each part to check that the shutter speed my camera is giving me doesn't go below 1/60sec,' he explains. 'If the shutter speed goes below this, there's a chance the image could be blurry since I'm handholding the camera.' Mark will adjust his ISO setting to make sure his shutter speed is short enough and uses auto white balance as he likes the colour casts that are often created.

COMPOSING AND PREVISUALISATION

Sometimes taking as many as 100 photographs per joiner, Mark explains that the number of images he takes varies from scene to scene. 'One joiner may comprise 50 separate images, but another could have approaching 180,' says Mark. 'It can take me days to put something like that together.'

When deciding how many images to take, Mark says it is a case of making sure the entire area in front of him is photographed, even if this means duplicating images. 'I might take 100 images and perhaps a quarter of them

will be duplicates,' he says. 'I'd rather overshoot than undershoot, though, and have a gap in the joiner. One of the biggest frustrations is when I've assembled a joiner image and there's a black space in the middle where I haven't photographed part of the scene. If this happens, I have to throw the joiner away as I'm never going to be able to recreate that missing piece. Going back to the location to "fill in the gap" feels contrived.'

Not taking the images in any particular order, Mark works quickly with an intuitive sense for working his way around the scene. 'I probably get all the pictures I need within a few minutes,' he says. 'Sometimes I'll work from left to right or top to bottom, depending on what I feel the best approach is at the time.'

For example, when shooting St Michael's Mount in Cornwall (see page 32), Mark photographed the mount first and once he knew he had a couple of good shots, he moved the camera to the left to capture the sky, making sure there was some overlap with the mount. He then shot the walkway in the distance and the rock, and finally the seaweed in the foreground.

'You always need to have a reference point to allow you to join one image to another afterwards,' he says. 'When I started creating the joiner images, I was meticulous about making sure that every individual image looked right compositionally, but after I started putting the separate images together I realised they are part of a whole and it is this that is important. The most important thing is photographing the scene in its entirety at the time.'

'I prefer to shoot on sunny but cloudy days. I love blue skies with clouds – they look so powerful in an image'



Right: Piccadilly Circus in London, 33 photographs



ALL PICTURES © MARK KIRBERT

Left: Langdale Tarn in the Lake District, 42 photographs

PUTTING THE IMAGES TOGETHER

Unsurprisingly, since the joiner images comprise many individual files, they are huge and take up a lot of computer memory. Each Photoshop canvas can be upwards of 110,000 pixels. 'Each PSD file can be one or two gigabytes,' says Mark. 'Anything above 2.2GB is a large

document format called PSB. This supports documents up to 300,000 pixels in any dimension. Quite a few of the joiners are PSB files.' When he was starting out, Mark found he had to keep increasing the size of the canvas he was working on in Photoshop. 'On one occasion, I remember the canvas maxed out at something like 35,000 pixels wide and 25,000 pixels high,' he says. 'My

poor computer was creaking at the hinges!' Now, with a top-of-the-range iMac desktop computer with the fastest processor available, 16GB of RAM and three terabytes on two external hard drives for storage, Mark is able to store and produce the joiner images with relative ease, 'although it can still take 40 minutes to render the large joiners', he says. Producing his images at 72ppi, if Mark needs a print-quality file he will convert the joiner file to 300ppi.

'I use Lightroom to tweak the images to a certain degree and then import them into Photoshop, ten or so, at a time,' he says. 'I'll start out with a huge canvas and in a jigsaw fashion piece them together manually by eye.' Some of the joiners are almost square in format, while others are more panoramic. Mark's decision about how he will join the images together (to create a horizontal or vertical final image) depends on the subject or scene in question. 'Some joiners work better as a horizontal rectangle, while others need to be upright,' he says. 'A scene where there is a tall building, for example, is one such occasion.

'Trying to align the images can be tricky,' he adds. 'I'll line up the main subject and then fit the other images around this, leaving a certain amount of black around the final image to create impact. You've got to have a focal point, otherwise the joiner lacks focus. I keep each individual image within the joiner straight and I don't rotate the individual photographs at all to try to make them fit together. Consequently, the joiners can look disjointed. To a greater or lesser degree I'm interpreting the subject matter, although I try to remain true to what I saw at the time.'





Mark applies various filters to the images in batches to create his trademark dramatic contrasty look before joining the images together. He is reluctant to say too much as this is part of his secret process, but he does mention the importance of colour in his joiners.

'The silvery-blue colour in these images is the "UK look"; he says. 'My aim is to create joiner images of cities across the world. I'd love to photograph New York, which I

envisage having a blue colour, or Seville in Spain, which would be a dusty orange. Each country would have its own colour and look.'

Intent on taking his passion as far as he can, Mark plans to try different types of joiner images. 'I want to create macro images in this style,' he says, 'and I'd also like to try night joiners. As a photographer, you're looking to show things in a different way. I didn't set out to have a particular style – I just do what

Above: St Michael's Mount in Cornwall, 29 photographs

Below: St Paul's Cathedral in London, 19 photographs

I do – and this has become my style.

'I believe it's important to have a healthy disregard for where your abilities end,' he adds. 'The world has always been changed by people who challenge the boundaries of what they think they can do. Ignore where you think your limitations are and do what you want to do anyway – and then see what happens.' **AP**

To see more of Mark's images visit his website at www.joiningphotography.com

