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Robert Richfield

Robert Richfield, Forth Bridge, North Queensferry, Scotland, 2002



This is a short excerpt from an interview conducted by Howard and Kathy Bossen with Robert Richfield in West Newton, Massachusetts, June 3, 2010.

Robert Richfield received an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1972 where he met Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind. For several years in the 1980s Richfield worked as Siskind's assistant and printer. The interview was done as part of the research Bossen is doing for his exhibition and book project *Molten Light: The Intertwined History of Steel and Photography*. It focused on Richfield's 10-panel panorama Forth Bridge, North Queensferry, Scotland, 2002 as well as his working technique. This excerpt begins with comments about Richfield's mentors.

Richfield: I worked for Aaron for four years. I traveled widely with him. I printed every day. ... And I used to have these marvelous lunches with Harry and Aaron. At one point, Harry said, "Oh, color photography is like a good gin martini. At first it's a little strange, but once you get used to it there's nothing like it." So I bought my first color film—so did Aaron as a matter of fact—and I've worked in color ever since.

I've always made things in multiple... I loved the idea of photographing what was behind me. It was a really curious thought.

Kathy Bossen: Meaning?

Richfield: Most photographers photograph what's in front of them. I would find this spot and I would look all the way around. And unlike most traditional panoramas, which are just the foreground and the distance is cut away to make the horizontality... I actually photograph each tranche, each slice of the picture. ... At first, I used to make the pictures rather simply; there were diptychs and then they became triptychs, and then they became 180 degrees, and then they became 270 degrees.

Howard Bossen: You said you photographed the Forth Bridge many times. (Interview note: Richfield photographed the Forth Bridge several times between 1996 and 2002.)

Richfield: ... I first saw the bridge from South Queensferry. It was the combination of every sort of building project I ever had as a little boy. It had everything. It had these amazing steel shapes that I'd never seen before. It had extraordinary arches. Everything around the Forth Bridge is completely under-scaled, in comparison. It's like something out of a Godzilla movie.

Richfield: I exposed twenty-two sheets of film and I ended up using ten of them.

HB: There are twenty-two distinctly different frames?

Richfield: There are eleven pieces.

HB: Eleven distinct frames, two exposures each.

Richfield: Right. I use the whole negative because I butt them together.

HB: I imagine getting that transition from one frame to the other to appear essentially seamless is difficult.

Richfield: It's very difficult. That required years of experience, because you have to do a lot of instant calibration. It's easy with long lenses, but with short lenses there's always problems, optical distortion and so forth. But there's no way to photograph a bridge like that with a long lens.

KB: So it's not like there's a vantage point that—

Richfield: Sometimes I move. I change focal length lenses. I do subtle things. I double things up. For instance if you can imagine a rail station and it's granite block, and there are arched windows—well, I find a seam and go back to that later on and make a frame from that seam going away, but maybe with a shorter focal length lens. But when you put it together, your brain sees it as a continuum.

HB: We'd like you to talk about the technique you used in making the Forth Bridge panorama, and also the time it took.

Richfield: The first thing to understand, it takes a long time on site to make a picture. The film I used had a very low ASA and I over exposed it. So exposures tended to be long. And also I used a very small aperture, 32, 45, 64. So it required a heavy tripod. I used a view camera. I used to use a Linhof Techni-kardan because it folded up. I had the camera milled out; the rise and fall and swings and tilts were way beyond what the Linhof factory in Munich had designed the camera for. And Schneider came around

with lenses that had very large image circles. So I used to use lenses that were designed for an eight-by-ten camera, in order to cover.

HB: Used that on the four-by-five.

Richfield: Right. I would have to clothespin the bellows so it wouldn't infringe on the image, to vignette it. Even though I had a bag bellows, I would have to hold it all up, prop it all up. Sometimes I would tape it up, you know. I used to be precious about my equipment; but as I got older, I just treated it as if it was a hammer or a monkey wrench or a buzz saw.

HB: When you say your exposures were long, do you mean a minute long or ten seconds long?

Richfield: Two minutes, two minutes. And often with the light varying, I'd have to quickly compensate with my mind, go a little longer, open it up, because a light meter wasn't much use. You just tend to do it by feel.

I would just walk, move around various places and find a spot where I could go all the way around, where I could get the highest point and the lowest point, and eliminate the detritus that I wasn't interested in. And sometimes it took a long time to find the right place. It would be very frustrating. I can't tell you how many times I've been in North Queensferry. And we'd go and I would finally figure out the right spot and it would rain. A boat would come along and tie up right in front. There's just all these variables that you can't control.

HB: Patience is key.



Robert Richfield, *Widnes, England, 2008*

Richfield: Once I got started, then a lot of times I'd have to wait. And waiting has its own problems, because you would make two or three exposures and all of the sudden the sun would pop through and the sky would change dramatically. So a cloud which was very dark and beautiful, like sitting at the top of the bridge like sort of a grey tuft of heavy cotton sitting on the bridge, it would be gone and there would be a blue patch there. So all that required various calculations. I would usually start in what I would consider to be the most difficult panel. It wasn't necessarily the middle; it was just the part that I knew that was going to be the most trouble. It was directly backlit or it had some highly reflective material. I would work a little to the right and work a little to the left. If something happened that was particularly good behind me, I would go around. And I would always remember where I left off.

HB: Did you make notes?

Richfield: No, just in my mind. ... I would just think about these things. And once I had the full picture, two exposures of each, then I would often repeat it, take the same thing again. So at times, I used to

think I was crazy. You know, I would shoot a whole box, a fifty-sheet box of film on this thing; but I was determined. And the first few times, it was very discouraging because I just couldn't figure out how to do it.

HB: You said the first few times; you're now talking about the bridge?

Richfield: The bridge. It was just the distance across was so great. The thing was so high, and yet it came on land and went up. The topography varied so much. The distance was so far. The sky was changing. The water was always moving. And I finally hit it. It just finally worked.

Howard Bossen is a professor of journalism at Michigan State University and an adjunct curator at the MSU Museum. He is the author of two books: *Luke Swank: Modernist Photographer* and *Henry Holmes Smith: Man of Light*. Kathy Bossen, a retired educator, works on *Molten Light: The Intertwined History of Steel and Photography* as a research assistant and intellectual muse.

Robert Richfield images provided courtesy of Alan Klotz Gallery, New York, NY.