

By Liao Fangzhou

In 1962, British-born Ian Berry joined international photographic cooperative Magnum Photos at the personal invitation of its iconic co-founder Henri Cartier-Bresson. Today, Berry continues to be one of the collective's most long-standing and respected photographers.

The Magnum Masters, an ongoing exhibition at the Shanghai Center of Photography, presents Berry's seminal works from South Africa in 1960, which earned him membership in the agency, and *The English* from the 1970s.

Last week the Global Times interviewed Berry, between his signing autographs for fans.

GT: When you shot *The English*, you called England the easiest country to photograph. How has that changed? How about China?

IB: China is very easy to shoot, because the people are more friendly. I tend to take people as I find them, and I don't arrive with a preconceived idea – I tried not to. I just enjoy being there. If I were younger, and didn't have a family in England, I would come and spend a couple of years here.

And they used to be very friendly in England. When I first photographed the English, I had just come back to live in England, and I have lived in Africa, France and briefly in New York. My eyes were still fresh.

Last year, a publisher approached me and asked me to reshoot in England. I am still thinking about it. But I don't want to be pessimistic about a country. It's the same about South Africa.

When I was in South Africa, mostly, everyone was optimistic because there would be a change in government and it all would be better. Actually, it's not. In some ways, it would be harder for England now.

GT: How do you define making progress in terms of photography?

IB: I was asked to do a lecture recently on the changes in photojournalism, and I kind of thought about it. Actually the changes mostly have been technically and with the disappearing market for photojournalism. But visually, the changes aren't so great.

It's very hard for a young photographer now to make a living doing photojournalism, so a lot of young photographers turn to some sort of art photography, which is not very exciting. If a lot of it comes from just setting something up and going back, there is no eye involved, there is no visual, especially a country like China with a great visual history – a history of painting, of drawing, of line drawing. It's a pity.

We are really looking for young Chinese photographers. We get a lot of submissions, but most are photographers who looked at American photography and the so-called art photographers, and they copy it. It doesn't work.

It depends very much on what you feel photography can contribute. For me, photography gives a great possibility to record social situations. It's terrific for telling people on one side of the world to people on the other side, and bringing people's understanding closer. That's my interests in photography, and for me that's what the camera does best.

GT: Do you still see photographing as an act of hunting?

IB: I do, and quite honestly, I'm not being original – Cartier-Bresson first said it. I worked around Paris with him. He said to me once: "Photography is not really an intellectual pursuit."

The intellectual basis is doing your research and getting yourself at the right place at the

right time, but shooting is like being a hunter.

For the right moment, you seize the moment, but at the same time, you have to make a shape. You have to put it into a good shape to make it interesting. That is a very intuitive thing. It depends on your reaction, but it really also depends on your eyes. How well you can compose very quickly.

He also said: "Look, if I take one good photograph a year, I'm lucky." I was young, I thought I could go out and shoot more photographs every day, but it's not true. He was actually very accurate.

You look back and you find a lot of pictures you like. But definitive pictures that really worked, not just because it was a good moment, but because it was a good shape, are very rare.

GT: What can we know about your latest projects?

IB: I started 10 years ago to do a project on water, and I traveled all around the world, shooting. I sailed up and down the Yangtze, the Nile, the Mississippi, and I looked at people in Central America, Africa and Asia.

It comes a point when you are repeating yourself. The faces are slightly different, but the situation is the same. I am trying to develop the concept. It's quite difficult.

So in the meantime, I do other projects. I'm doing a project all over Europe now – the traditional church, whether it's Protestant in England or Catholic in most of Europe, is going down, and Islam is coming up.

We have cities in the north of England where the incoming people mostly from Pakistan and Bangladesh are in the majority of the local indigenous British people.

GT: How has Magnum changed over half a century since you joined?

IB: When I joined Magnum, it had a smaller number of photographers, so it was more cohesive and we had very much in common. We have more or less the same beliefs and views on what we were doing.

Now, because of the change of market, there are some conceptual photographers and art photographers, so we don't always get along together.

But there's not much we can do about it. It's amazing that it lasts so long. Because we have a meeting once a year at the end of June, and we fight like hell in a dozen of different languages.

We talk about why we are losing money; we talk about what we should do to make more money. We don't talk about photography. So we lost a lot in that perspective. I still have friends, but I guess we have some photographers I would not recognize on the street. Time's changed. We have to change with it.

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The Magnum Masters, a new exhibition at the Shanghai Center of Photography (SCOP), presents Ian Berry's seminal works (below and bottom) from South Africa in 1960. Photos: Courtesy of the SCOP

▶ British photojournalist Ian Berry on photography, new projects and Magnum

Reframing and refocusing

