

RESIDENCY JORDAN BASEMAN

*Ilsa Colsell discovers power
and honesty in the films of
Jordan Baseman*

Baseman is protective of his subjects; there's a bond of trust that has been built over several meetings and there is no joking about the very real events and trials that pour forth from their mouths.

Always off-camera and rarely heard or referred to, Baseman himself fades out as his subjects talk openly about their lives. The process can become one of a confessional with a confidence developing between camera and sitter, says Baseman.

Preliminary conversations establish the interview format and explain details such as where the finished work might be exhibited. Filming might take place over several weeks, or be completed in a single shoot, depending on when the conversation naturally ends. Baseman sometimes asks questions

but often the subject needs no prompting at all; most people decide what they want to say and are keen to get on with it.

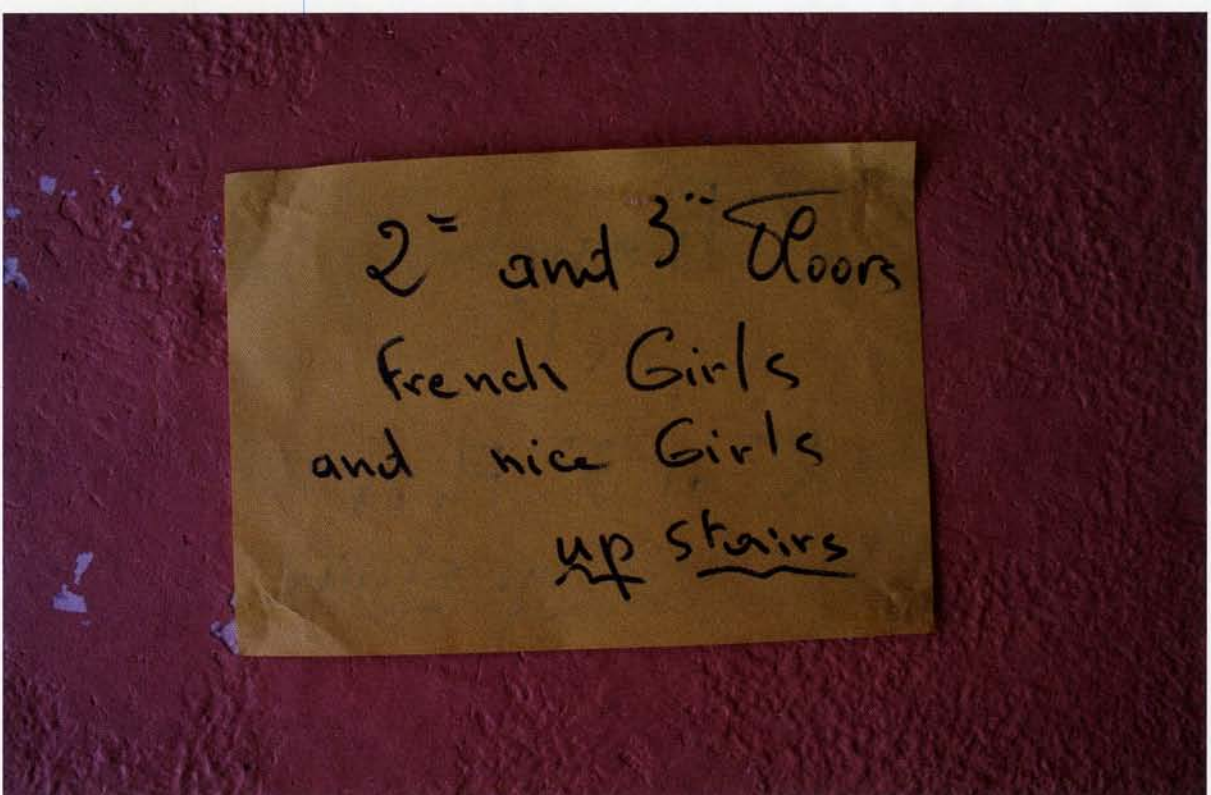
With each case, the result is a patchwork of meetings edited into the subjects' free-flowing description of their life or chosen event. There is no intention to create a linear or chronological format. Edits are evident, with subjects and their thoughts jumping from one to another with no attempt to cover up or invent.

There is an honesty in Baseman's work that shows a strict moral sense of 'rightness'. No words are added, only distilled from the exact recordings of a willing participant. Each sitter is made very aware of the context in which the film will be shown; not to be aired on television, it is a heavily edited, crafted interpretation of personality and character.

Within this context, it is clear that both parties have particular agendas and use the situation as a means to their own ends. This is not malevolent; it builds up the push and pull of exchange. We all want something out of our conversations.

Baseman's choice of sitters reveals a very human selection process with all the same peculiarities you might employ as you pick your way through a party, sidestepping those who don't meet your particular criteria.

Despite the revealing nature of his films, he has only ever been requested to remove a work from exhibition once, not because of untruth or defamation but fear that the truth as told in the film might have harmful consequences. Now, apprehensive of the accusation of exploitation, the artist scrutinises each film individually at the pre-screening stage, giving his subjects the option of absolute veto. Interestingly, it is often the case that the filmed portraits, however intimate or penetrating of a subject's life, causes



2nd and 3rd Floors
French Girls
and nice Girls
up stairs

elation to those filmed, even when shortcomings or negative aspects of character are revealed.

The lack of any additional critical narrative by Baseman sets these films apart from the familiar 'shockumentary', steeped as they are in a simplistic morality and delivering gratuitous and fatuously detailed accounts of extraordinary events of human suffering to a passively sympathetic audience.

These films cannot be easily described as storytelling, as together, they portray that lifelong collection of acquaintances we acquire over many years. Some of these acquaintances are tragic raconteurs of spectacular misfortune, but for the main part, they are like the rest of us who have had a handful of engaging encounters and events in our lives that we enjoy sharing with new people along the way, perhaps embellishing or down playing in the telling.

In response to a commission by ArtSway and The Photographers Gallery (now newly ensconced in Soho's Ramillies Street), Baseman has made

for the future, taking into account the types of services he prefers to offer, and the kind of clients he prefers to deliver these services to. He describes his profession as a service not dissimilar to the many other types of business in Soho's streets.

The third commissioned film, 'The Dandy Doctrine (A Delightful Illusion)', departs in format from the others with a more direct filming of the subject in his own home, the camera periodically panning inquisitively over his possessions. His is a familiar face who has flamboyantly adorned the streets of London for many years and as he endearingly delivers his numerous musings on the impossibility of a dandy's life and the wider impossibilities of life itself, the viewer might walk away feeling they have glimpsed, if only briefly, the inner thoughts and workings of a man they had assumed deliberately impenetrable and artificial.

This sense of greater access, of a kind of illusory trade of emotions, is where we feel comfortable as a viewer. Whenever someone confesses vulnerability,

All images: 'Dark is the Night', 2009, production stills



three new films working with Soho's residents. All three sitters were discovered or recommended by others as the filmmaker strolled through the crowds at The Soho Festival in July 2008.

Two of the films have soundtracks of anonymous voices that overlay the different varieties of footage of Soho's cityscape. 'Nasty Piece of Stuff' illustrates the streaked light show of a speeded-up dash through dark yet bustling streets. The bright and erratic film is played only during moments of speech. A black screen falls between each pause. Through this visually fast-paced film, a man describes his first sexual experience in London prior to the legalisation of homosexuality in 1967. This candid retelling of an ugly, brutal, emotionally scarring event, is pitched against the vibrantly overpopulated tourist area we are invited to imagine as having a liberated reputation at odds with its real heritage.

The second film, 'Dark is the Night' records the voice of a man, talking pragmatically about his life in London. The footage that plays alongside his story, is of Soho streets late at night, largely unpeopled, abandoned and poorly lit, alluding to the expectant nature of a city street as it waits to entertain, to service or simply to be used. It is perhaps fitting that the speaker in this film is a transsexual prostitute who talks with equal measure of practicality about his hopes and aspirations

we are forgiving and joyful at their humanity. Unfortunately in our keenness to show how empathetic we are, how emotionally intelligent and how caring we are, it also demonstrates our propensity for a judgemental superiority to be drawn from the misfortunes of others.

Baseman's films are powerful and well-crafted; his subjects engage and provoke. Sometimes it takes a third person to specially filter events and edit life for our examination in order to listen to the stories of others.

Collectively, the films have an insatiable capacity for searching, and if there is a moment where all of our desires are fully exposed to succinct aphorism it's in a quote from 'The Dandy Doctrine (A Delightful Illusion)', 'I want what you want...', he says, '...I only want to say the words you want to hear.'

*Ilsa Colsell is a writer based in London.
Jordan Baseman, Dark is the Night, ArtSway, Hampshire,
21 February-5 April*