

MY PHOTO OBSESSION



READER PROFILE: DARREN NISBETT



Darren has worked in web design and e-commerce for ten years, and is no stranger to Photoshop. It wasn't until he picked up a DSLR and discovered RAW files that his passing interest in photography grew into a fully-fledged passion. "I love processing images," he says. "I know everyone goes on about getting the picture right in-camera, but for me the RAW file is just the start of the creative process. I've learned a lot, and even joined a camera club, where I entered competitions to help push me. But I think this project has seen me rebel, with images that are different to anything I'd normally enter into a competition."

► To see more of Darren's work, visit www.darkoptics.net



A quarter of a century after the world's most notorious nuclear disaster, **Darren Nisbett** twice visited the scene of the crime, determined to capture its eerie stillness. Behold the ultimate dereliction project...

*“I wanted to capture the **sense of forlornness**, silence and the overpowering grey of the concrete and asphalt and its **interaction with the plants and trees**”*

What sparked your interest in Chernobyl?

I've always been interested in places off the beaten path, and especially with places to do with history's darker moments. I spend my spare time exploring and photographing abandoned buildings, as well as castles and Victorian graveyards. Trips abroad have included Pompeii and Auschwitz. I went to a travel expo a while back and watched a presentation by a company that took small tourist groups to Afghanistan, staying with local people and visiting historic sites, and aside from the dangers involved the trip looked really interesting. After that, I started looking on the web for other places that people went to on tours. I wasn't specifically looking for Chernobyl, but when I found out that you could get tours there, I knew I needed to go and see it for myself.

Did you know much about the incident?

I can just about remember it on the news and have seen it reappear in documentaries and even video games, but didn't really know too much about it. I got more and more interested once I'd decided to visit, and read deeper into the events and terrible aftermath for the people surrounding the explosion.

You've now visited twice...

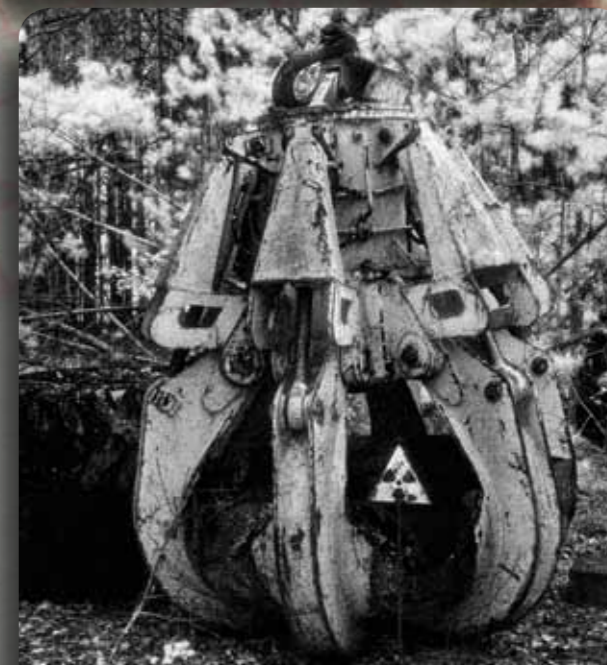
I decided to go back and add more pictures

Left: Chernobyl's amusement park was never officially opened. These bumper cars stand faded and rusty among patches of radioactive-contaminated moss.

Below left: This derelict building in Pripyat was used as HQ for the clean-up operation just after the explosion.

Right: Pripyat city rises from a sea of trees, while empty school corridors, broken TVs and robot claws used during the clean-up blot the landscape.

► Turn to see more of Darren's eerie Chernobyl images...



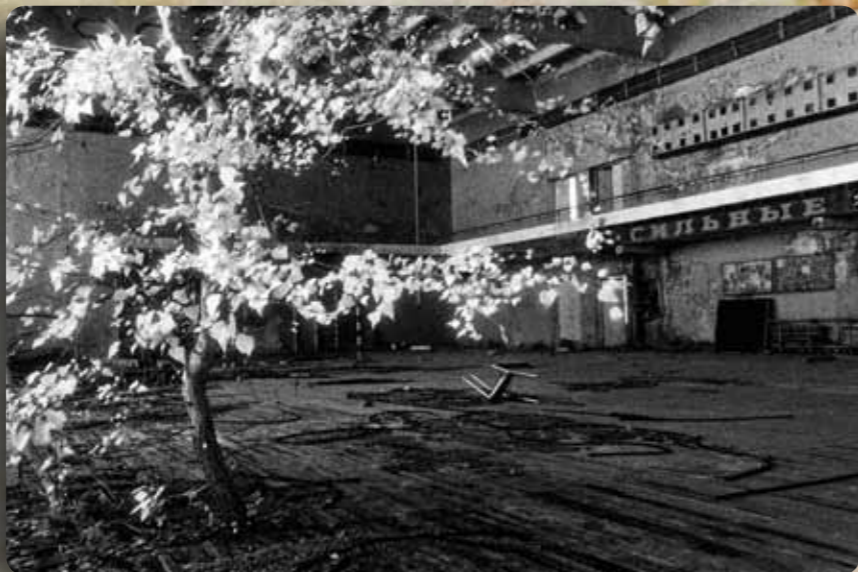
to create a body of work specifically in infrared. This was mainly inspired by my image of the tree growing through the floor of the sports hall, which for me symbolised my feelings of Chernobyl – the grey of the neglected and abandoned city and the glow of nature adapting to whatever we've thrown at it. On my return, the devastation of the Chernobyl accident was even more apparent because of the terrible disaster in Japan and the effects on their nuclear reactor that were unfolding at the same time.

How do you organise a trip like this?

I booked through a specialist agent called Lupine Travel. There are only a few agencies that can organise the permits you need to enter the armed checkpoints, but they helped with a lot of the paperwork. I read a lot on the web from other people that had visited Chernobyl, in order to build up an itinerary of the specific locations that I wanted to see. The guides know the city really well and helped to fill in the blanks, like which school was the most interesting. They were also very knowledgeable about the area, the lives of people before the accident and the work that has been done around the power plant, so I learned a lot as well. It wasn't just about the photos.

What were your first impressions of Chernobyl?

I went there not really knowing what to



This is the shot that inspired Darren's project. A single tree grows through a rotting gym floor, the chlorophyll of the leaves glowing against the dark peeling paint on the walls.

expect. The roads up to Chernobyl were full of holes and the driver had to swerve around them, but the rest of the scenery looked quite normal. Chernobyl itself has an almost military feel to it, with most of the workers in combat fatigues. Around the town there are silver-clad pipes everywhere, snaking over roads and around buildings, to replace the underground water pipes that were contaminated after the accident.

I think because I'd read so much about the disaster, fallout and the state of Chernobyl and Pripyat beforehand, I had

a lot of visions in my head. It becomes real though when you actually see the scale of Pripyat and realise that it was part of a city with around the same number of people as Birmingham or Manchester. The entire population going about their daily business until one day they were all told to leave their lives behind with two hours to pack their belongings... it's pretty humbling.

A lot of looting has taken place since the evacuation, and this combined with exposure to the elements gives Pripyat a real post-apocalyptic feel. You get an overwhelming sense of being alone – walking through the buildings with glass breaking beneath your feet, the sound of water dripping through the ceiling and knowing that there's still at least traces of an invisible poison in the air.

What did you want to capture?

It wasn't until the return trip that I really focused on what I wanted to shoot; the sense of forlornness, silence and the overpowering grey of the concrete and asphalt and its interaction with the plants and trees.

On my first trip in August, it was the end of summer after a particularly long heatwave and Pripyat itself looked overrun with the wild forest. April was the beginning of spring, with ice still visible in places, and there was a much

»Turn over to find out how Darren processed his Chernobyl images...



Pripyat was once home to around 50,000 people, all of whom were given 2 hours to pack following the incident. This welcome sign once stood proud – now it's a poignant reminder of what used to be.

The ferris wheel has become a symbol of the Chernobyl disaster and has even featured in several video games. It rises above the trees and is visible from miles around.



obsessed!

Miles flown? «Roughly 5600 miles over two trips»

Like the ferris wheel, the 'Azure' swimming pool has also featured in several video games. Looking down from the diving board at the empty tiled grid of white porcelain was a dizzying experience!



OBSESSED!

Time spent editing? “I don't want to even think about that!”



The train yard contained both passenger and freight engines, and Darren used the high contrast of the infrared camera to enhance the rough textures of these rusting hulks of metal.

greater sense of space and sombre stillness. Setting myself the project really got me focused on the kind of shots that I was looking for and the story that I wanted to tell.

What kind of techniques did you use?

The infrared filters transform what you see with your eyes to a dream-like image. Sometimes it's a real shock to see the image displayed on the LCD, but for me it adds another dimension. The chlorophyll in the plants reflects the infrared radiation that we can't see, causing them to glow in blues and greens in the image. This looked particularly apparent on the moss that's everywhere in Pripjat. I was also curious to see if plants contaminated with toxic radiation looked different in the IR images, but there wasn't really any change.

Any memorable moments?

The funniest piece of advice my guide gave me, on the way to Pripjat's abandoned railway station, was: “Don't lick the radioactive trains”. I had visions of the Darwin Awards, where there always seems to be at least one person that dies from putting a square 9-Volt battery on their tongue to see what happens. I spent

the next few hours in the train yard trying to resist the temptation. A lot of the time the radiation meter that the guide carries beeps away in the background, and mostly the levels are fairly safe, but there were certain patches of moss, metal objects and vehicles where the readings shot up, audibly showing their contamination.

How much post-processing was involved?

Being infrared, the RAW files needed a fair bit of processing. From my Canon 5D the images come out in various shades of red and orange and from the 450D magenta and green. I have a set of custom profiles that I use to reduce the white balance further than the 2000k that's available in Camera Raw. Then I tweak the

camera calibration and curves further to separate the colours. Finally I convert to greyscale using the colour sliders so that I can emphasise the shades that I want to stand out in the final image. Opening the RAW file in Photoshop, I use a combination of layer blends and masking to start to build up the atmosphere and use Alien Skin Software's Exposure to create the halation effect, which was one of the characteristics of high-speed infrared film.

What will be your lasting impression of Chernobyl?

There are parts of the city now that are infamous, like the swimming pool and ferris wheel that are featured in the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* video game. It's very surreal to see something that you think of as fiction when it's actually the same in real life, a bit like being on a movie set. I feel privileged to have been able to see it. The scale of the area within the exclusion zone will stay with me too. The accident and explosion at the plant lead to a disaster that uprooted a whole city, and the death and illness of a lot of people. It's humbling to see the after-effects and to meet the people that still work there, despite the risks to their health, either directly in the power plant or in education and general services. I hope that showing my pictures and contributing to the charity in some way will help the people who are still affected by what happened 25 years ago.

» Turn over for our analysis of one of Darren's best pictures...

GEAR INSIGHT

“Lots of my lenses have found themselves on eBay...”

I shoot with an infrared-converted Canon EOS 450D with 10-22mm wide-angle lens, and a Canon EOS 5D Mark II and a few Heliopan IR filters with 17-40mm and 24-105mm lenses. It's taken a bit of trial and error to settle with those lenses - some reflect light internally, which causes hotspots, and lots of my lenses have found themselves on eBay quite quickly. I also have a Gitzo Traveler tripod, which I take everywhere, as well as a Canon Speedlite with homemade IR filter that looks like it's been dropped (I've tried to repair it with a roll of gaffer tape).

DARREN'S BEST SHOT

This kindergarten was next to the Chernobyl plant and, as Darren describes it, is now like walking into a dark fairy-tale...

1 QUALITY OF LIGHT

The derelict kindergarten was surrounded by tall trees, which acted as the perfect filter for the low raking sunlight. This diffused light has added definition to the peeling paint and debris on the bare floorboards, which merely adds to the sense of loss and decay. As if this photo wasn't eerie enough already...

2 SIGNS OF YESTERDAY

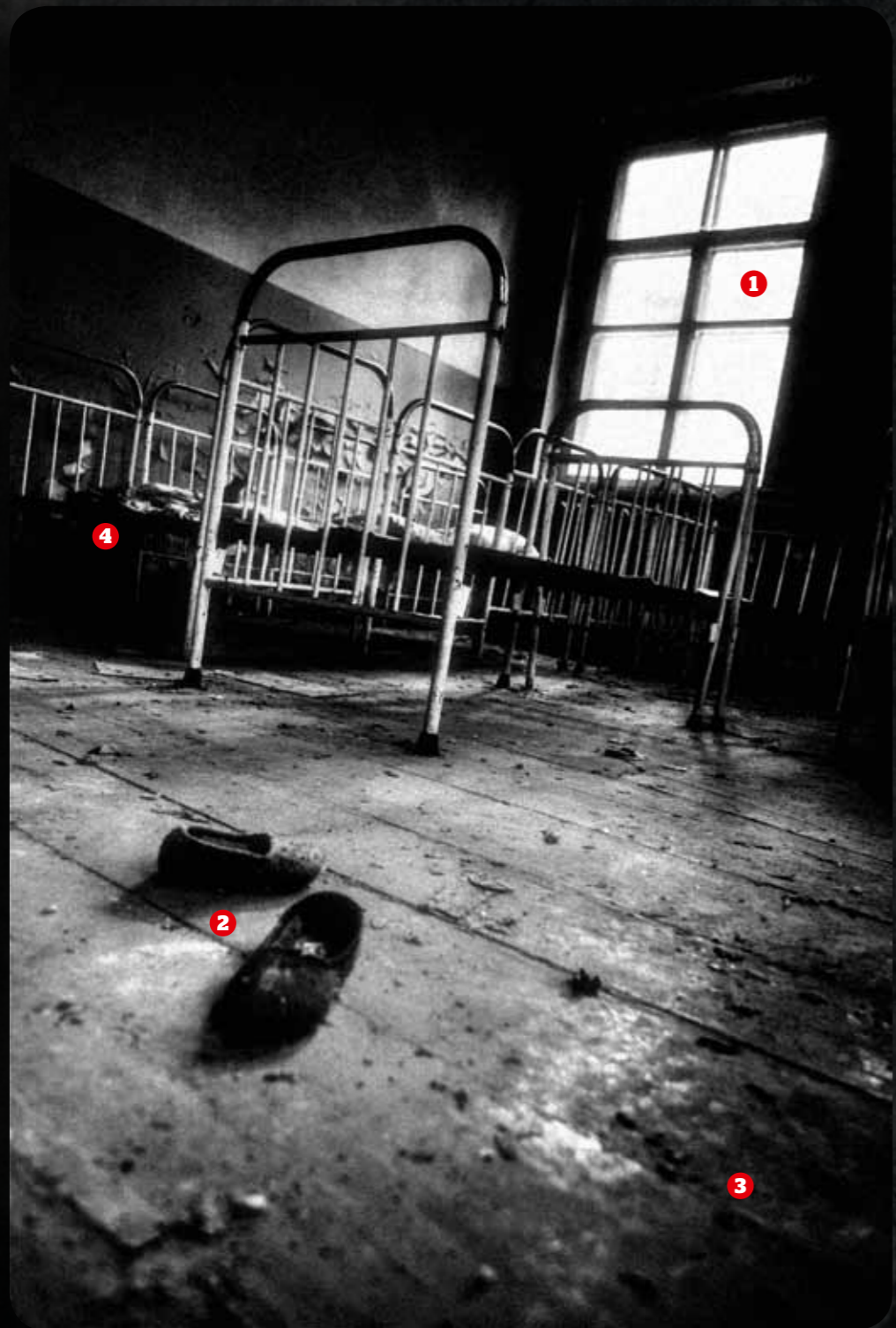
This lone pair of forgotten slippers adds so much to Darren's shot. Not only does it add foreground interest, which anchors the shot and acts as a stepping stone to the beds, it also adds a human touch that lends this shot its poignancy.

3 CHILD'S EYE VIEW

Darren opted for a low angle-of-view in order to emphasise the slippers and textures on the floorboards. This also gives more of a child's perspective to the shot, which is pertinent seeing as it was taken in a former nursery and so home to dozens of happy kids. Spooky stuff.

4 MAIN FOCAL POINT

Row after row of small child-sized beds set out in lines, the frames cold and rusty... echoes of the stark images of Romanian orphanages that swamped the media in the early '90s, anyone? The bed covers were laid out in dirty bundles, while slippers and old dirty toys were left looking sad and unwanted on the floor. **DP**



EXHIBITION

'Chernobyl's zone of alienation', Darren's debut solo exhibition, will take place at Rhubarb & Custard, a boutique gallery based in Eton, Berkshire from 1-31 July. For more info, visit www.darkoptics.net/exhibition

OBSESSED!

Total shots taken?

“Exactly 2254!”