

Liam Bailey by Ben Hawkins –

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Liam Bailey and civil insurrection go hand in hand. In 1991, just months before the collapse of the USSR, Georgia declared independence. Liam, on-hand to photograph the World Juggling Convention, found himself in the midst of a bloody civil war. A few years later, following an unpopular trade agreement between Mexico and America, several towns in Chiapas, Mexico, were taken over by guerrillas calling themselves the Zapatista National Liberation Army. Bloodshed inevitably followed, as did Liam, who was in Minneapolis on assignment before being rerouted. It's perhaps no surprise that future assignments would include crazy golf courses and model villages...

Now a successful commercial photographer with a great long list of blue chip clients and awards to his name, it's something of a miracle that Liam stumbled upon his current occupation, such is the haphazard course of events that led him here. "I trained as a chemist," he begins, "and I also used to play football at a reasonable level. So between training and a postgraduate degree I went to Camp America in the States to teach football. I was in charge of problematic children from the project areas of Chicago, we were in the middle of nowhere and we had one football between us. Luckily, there was a huge

box full of old SLRs and a darkroom. So I commandeered the box, handed the cameras to the kids and spent six weeks taking pictures and processing them. Of course, they pointed the cameras at each other to start with, but they soon started to focus on trees and the sea. At that point the idea of photo therapy really hit home for me, and I learned the process of how to move your eyes around and investigate."

After wrapping up his postgraduate studies, Liam indulged his desire to travel and embarked on an around-the-world trip. It was then, he says, that photography became a necessity. "I got to Hong Kong but was out of money, so I went to the Far Eastern Economic Review, a magazine that paid for library pictures to be held. I rang them up and they said they were interested in pictures of 'commercial banking buildings around South East Asia'. So the next few months were spent taking pictures of banks. They'd go through the contact sheets, pick out a few pictures and pay \$6 for each picture held. That was it! I suddenly realised that there was a possible income to be had from being a photographer."

Now with the bit between his teeth, but needing cash in his pocket, Liam decided to get a 'proper' job. "I worked for the BBC for three years as an Aston operator, putting type on screen to live programmes, which is the worst job

in the world for a dyslexic typist," he laughs. "But when I got thrown off Match of the Day for confusing Graeme Souness and George Graham and an array of other mistakes, I was gently eased out and went freelance for ITV. I was working the night shift, which really meant doing very little other than caption writing. Then when the first Gulf War broke in 1990 I was the only Aston operator working that night. It still goes down as probably the worst set of examples – things like writing mujahideen in seven different ways in one night, and having the director say to me things like, 'Okay, bring up Kofee Anan... bloody hell, he's not a bloody coffee bean'. So suddenly I was out. At the end of that session I was exposed as the total fraud that I was and my career was over."

A lucky break subsequently saw Liam reunited with his fated photographic destiny. "I went to the World Clown Convention in Bognor Regis, which doesn't sound very inspirational but it proved to be." He took his clown pictures to the British Journal of Photography, who were so impressed they gave him a cover and a few spreads inside the magazine. Within weeks he was whisked off to Georgia, where his chance encounters with bloody civil insurrections began, and a chance encounter with the wife of now-defunct photo agency Select saw him rubbing shoulders with the likes of Simon Norfolk and Dario

Mildereri. "Very inspirational photographers in the emerging parts of their careers," Liam recalls.

So I was pitching ideas, going off and shooting them, and hopefully coming back with something usable."

A steep learning curve was now the only obstacle standing between Liam and a successful career. British art darlings Gilbert and George were the subjects of three shoots, "because I cocked up the first two shoots", and both his Georgian and Mexican exploits saw his work published in high profile publications such as The Observer. His next task, getting off the dole, had proved a little more problematic. Until now. "I'd been signing on for so long I was up to the executive job club, for those who'd been out of work so long they didn't know what to do with them. I applied to be an artist in residence at Lewisham College and got it. It was for a year and I got £5000, an exhibition, office, phone and a direct link to the design agency that worked for the college, who very kindly took me on. Two years later I got an agent, who opened up a whole new world of people who liked black & white photography in the corporate sector. I was being asked to shoot people in my own style but in a business context, which paid quite well."