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DDSBs (Discarded Dog Sh*t Bags)

by John Darwell

Julia García Hernández

There is something perverse about a photographer launching his new imprint with a book of photographs on the base subject of waste. Low in value as subject matter and low to the ground as waste matter, bagged animal excrement is elevated into our line of sight by the dog walker who flings it into the trees, and by the photographer who transforms the lowly and discarded into a collectable limited edition photobook. In presenting his book in its own black doggy bag John Darwell returns the shit to us, to take home and to treasure. In a gesture that is done with more humour than judgement, he performs a metamorphosis.

A metamorphosis occurs within the pictures also. Weighted with organic matter and of a limited colour palette, the plastic bags sit like birds in branches, or mating pairs on the ground. And like birds, the bags multiply. In the zoomorphism that Darwell performs there is a satisfaction in returning to the natural world the organic that has been prevented from decay by human folly. Like a little guide to British wildlife, the book is pocket-sized and grass green with most of its left hand pages blank for the twitcher's notes. The letters on its cover are sunken, dissolving into the green ground just as canine excrement should be. Its full title is only revealed when the book is turned over and, even then, the reader is protected from offence by the replacement of the letter 'i' with an asterisk. The logo of a newt wrapped around the imprint name *mynewtpress* continues the book's play with word and image. In this format Darwell gently asserts his polemic.

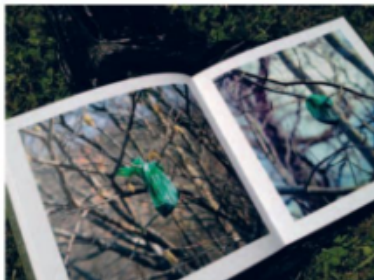
DDSBs was launched this year at the Arles festival. It comes out of the long-term project *1000 Yards; Or So* that chronicles Darwell's daily walks with his dog along a stretch of river in Cumbria. His observations of a single shoe left on the grass, of tyres caught up in a tree, or a balancing twig, are small studies of things, natural and man-made, that make up his local landscape. Using a similar visual language for *DDSBs*, Darwell obsessively re-photographs an artefact that has become increasingly ubiquitous, and presents it as a repeated motif of idiosyncratic human behaviour. This project extends beyond the local to cover open countryside, beauty spots, parks, cities and suburbia across the UK. It signifies a collective mental state, not only of a nation but also of a Western society which, when persuaded to be socially responsible, has become environmentally

irresponsible. A misguided action has become an international phenomenon that Darwell has already begun to record.

Darwell's photographs can be read as a barometer of our age registering the 'stuff' that is overlooked, deemed unphotographable, or unworthy of our gaze. His projects are encoded with the indicators that signal 'where we are at'. He shows us places of metamorphosis that fluctuate between one thing and another.



The locations in *DDSBs* are non-specific, identifiable neither as urban nor rural. The discovered artefacts that mark the fringes of the dog walker's path are both organic and synthetic. The action of the dog walker is both responsible and reckless. Towards the close of 2013 a selection of work from Darwell's recent projects will form part of a group exhibition at Liverpool's Bluecoat. This exhibition will examine a new vocabulary of landscape exploring themes that are familiar across Darwell's practice. *DDSBs* confirms Darwell's interest in human behaviour, and the patterns of behaviour, that at first appear eccentric but which form part of the bigger picture of human impact on the environment and our natural world.



DDSBs is produced as an artist edition of 200 + 15 artist proofs, signed and individually numbered. £25 plus £5 p&p. It is available by emailing John through his website www.johndarwell.com

Soft Estate at the Bluecoat in Liverpool will run from December 2013 to March 2014 and will tour to Spacex, Exeter.

Sheffield Tinsley Viaduct is published by Café Royal Books in an edition of 150 with an introduction by John Darwell. It is the first in a series of Darwell's previously unpublished archive pictures, and the last black and white photographs he took before moving into colour photography. www.caferoyalbooks.com

For an overview of his projects since the early 1980s see *John Darwell: Committed to Memory* (Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery, 2007) which accompanied the retrospective exhibition of the same name.

John Darwell is Reader in Photography at the University of Cumbria in Carlisle.