



Angkor Wat, in all its majestic glory. MARTIN REEVES

SHOOTING A PARALLEL UNIVERSE

JOEL QUENBY

HE was a punk-rocker who, true to form, quit art school on his first day there – albeit “after seeing a teacher tear up somebody’s painting in front of the class and trample on it”. Which, when you think about it, is surely one of the most punk-rock teaching anecdotes you’re likely to hear.

Nowadays, Martin Reeves comes across as a gentle English soul. And, actually, the aforementioned walkout is likely more of a testament to his non-confrontational nature than a propensity for phlegm-gobbing conflict.

But one thing niggling him is the repetitive way journalists write his story.

“I really want to get into using some

different terminology,” he says via email, “... the same lines always seem to turn up!”

I can take a hint, Martin. I can’t promise anything but I’ll strive for titanism, okay? (I may even try it gymnosophically.)

Reeves deserves something a bit different because he has been so innovative in pursuit of his art.

His stunning images garner acclaim for their haunting, spellbinding quality. Sometimes called Tolkienesque, they’re described by Reeves as “enigmatic, dreamlike” and “otherworldly, possessing an ancient quality”.

“Look carefully,” instructed *Art Asia* magazine back in February. “It’s just black-

and-white film, yet it transforms sheltered tribes and tree-covered temples with a soft, wintry [sic], almost medieval light.”

But, to take a quote completely out of context: It’s not just black-and-white film.

Regarding Reeves’ fairytale-like visions logically leads to discussion of the photographic technique that helped achieve them: shooting with an infrared film stock, discontinued by Kodak since 2007, which captures light invisible to the naked eye – “beyond the confines of our visual spectrum”, as Reeves has it – mostly using an old 1972 Nikon F2 SLR rig.

“On seeing the unique effects, so right and immediate, many viewers have asked

why no one had done it [shot Angkor in infrared film] before [1992],” pondered *Art Asia*, before continuing: “It’s a good question. In fact, it wasn’t used seriously by another photographer in Asia until a decade later.”

That’s an interesting if vague statistic – but having posed the query, *Art Asia* then eschews attempting an answer.

Instead, the review beats a retreat to safer ground, reverting to heaping praise on the photos’ “delicious and delicate subtlety”, waxing lyrical about their “sense of calm”, both “weightless” and “intriguing”.

It concludes that Reeves’ portfolio is “a parachute into a hidden universe”, which, if it were true, would either be inconceivably



terrifying or represent the greatest discovery in the history of humankind.

Sorry, Martin: Yes, your stuff is damn good – and, true, your book, a 14-year labour of love, is entitled *Angkor: Into The Hidden Realm* (2007) – but, really, taking credit for transporting man into a parallel dimension

SOME OF HIS ANGKOR PHOTOS WERE CHOSEN BY HIS MAJESTY THE KING OF CAMBODIA

is a bit of a stretch. (Only jesting; it's a nice enough metaphor, really.)

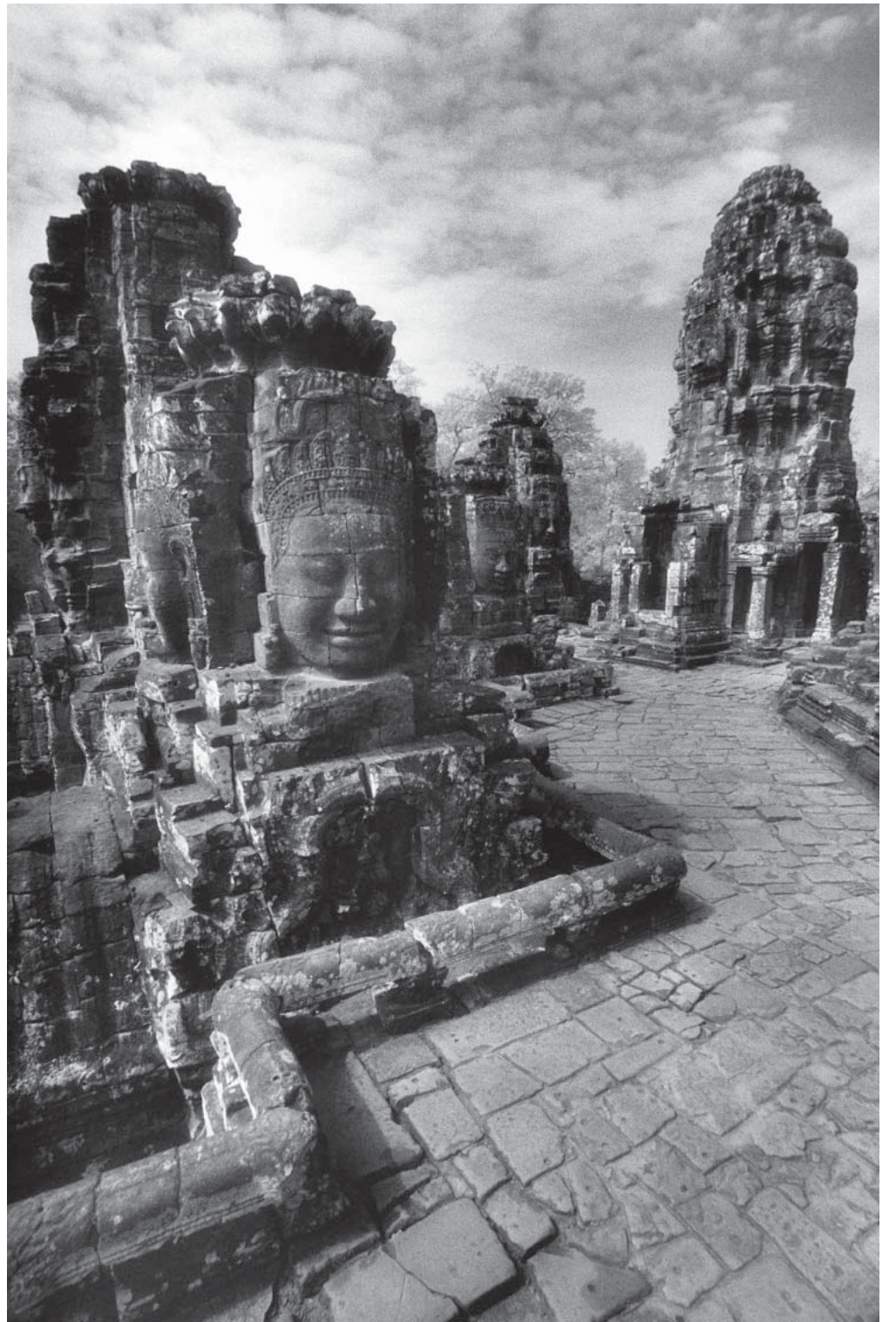
"Red Eye Reeves" can, however, take credit for receiving a tacit Cambodian royal seal of approval. Some of his Angkor photos were chosen by His Majesty the King of Cambodia as gifts to give on a state visit. They've also

been immortalised by regional design maestro Bill Bensley within Siem Reap's five-star Hotel de la Paix.

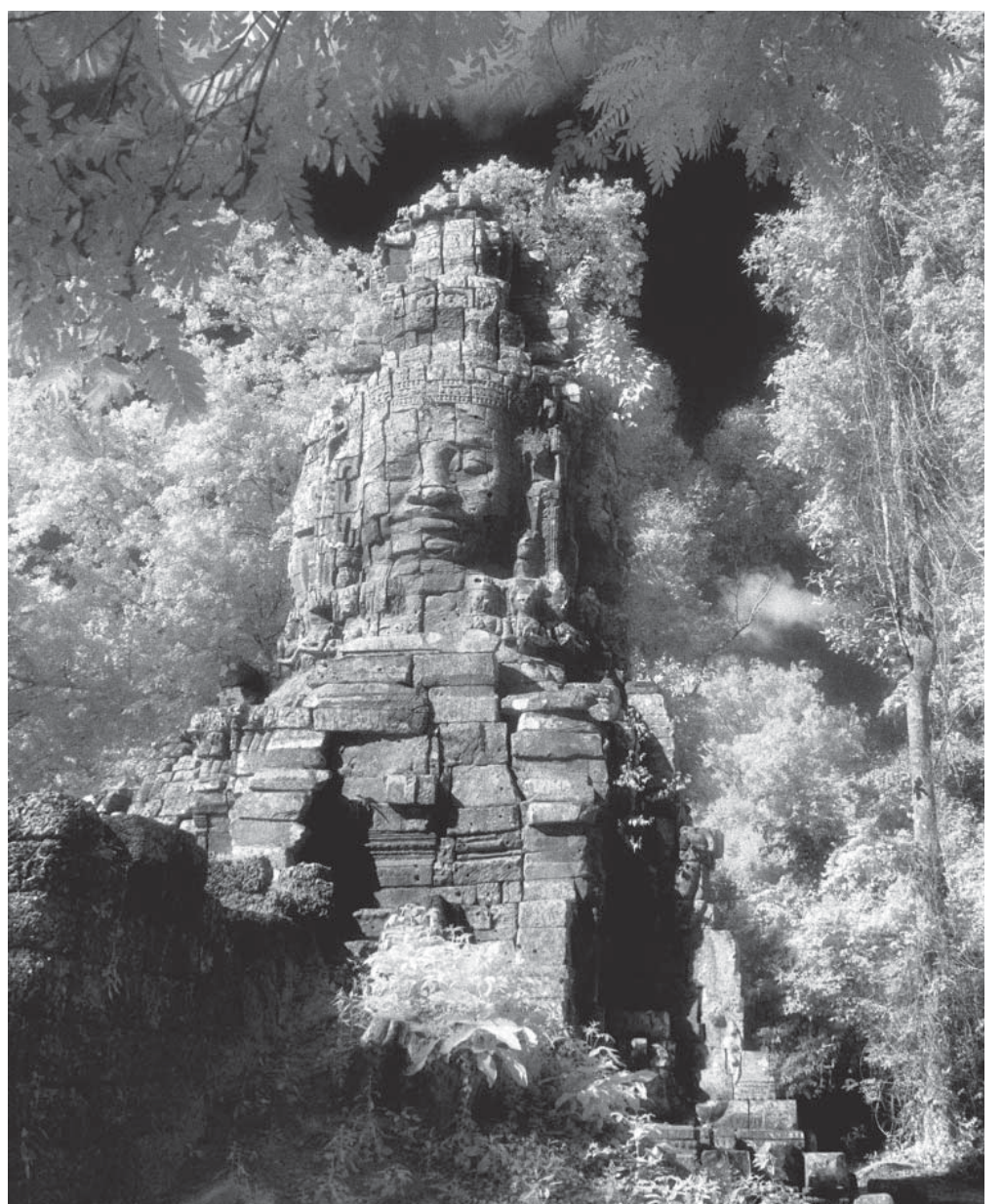
However, Reeves regards his career highlight to date as being chosen, along with a group of lauded lens-bearers, to contribute to a book called *9 Days In The Kingdom* (2007); a weighty coffee-table tribute to Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej on his 80th birthday, for which Reeves photographed the ancient cities of Sukhothai and Kamphaeng Phet and some hilltribes near Chiang Rai.

The oft-writ and spoken plaudits his work receives speak of a genuine mastery of the interplay of light, shadow, angles and overall composition – a remarkable achievement for someone largely self-taught.

The chorus of praise resonates further when you meet this gentle-mannered, humble fellow (photographers are often at least as precious and ego-maniacal as writers, in my experience) and learn that he has previously had to resort to working as a labourer on



Well-known late-12th century temple, Prasat Bayon. MARTIN REEVES



The atmospheric west gate of Tha Prohm. MARTIN REEVES

building sites back in London when strapped for cash.

In fact, Reeves has not been working as a photographer lately.

Artists often have tempestuous, on-off relationships with both their muses and their craft, as with so many great love affairs. Though rather than hacking his ear off during an absinthe binge, then running howling, puking and naked into filthy cobblestone streets to post it to a prostitute, Martin's simply had a bit of a break.

"I was getting lost in the business side of it," he admits.

"I woke one day to the realisation that I was spending 95 percent of my time on the computer following up with research and trying to promote myself, sucked into the competitive world of business that 'professional' photographers had to survive in, and hardly any time taking the actual photos.

"I miss those days of wandering around with complete freedom and absolutely no agenda – something I will indulge myself in again..."

Instead, Reeves has been adding moving strings to his artistic bow, shooting three-minute 16mm promo "interstitial" films for *The Discovery Channel* – of Vietnamese hilltribes, Japanese sumo wrestlers and Filipino mummies (as you do). He's currently doing one such segment on Her Royal Highness Norodom Rattana-Devi, who previously wrote a foreword for his book.

He also tinkers with a documentary he's been making about Hmong tribes-people for the past nine years.

Reeves has had time for reflection: "I think I realise now that my portfolios portray a time that will never be seen again – a lucky period before mass tourism, when ancient sites were deserted and steeped in magic and mystery, and minority people were still curious about a muddy bed-headed lanky foreigner stumbling into their village."

He's planning his return to stills photography on a secret project in "a place that I have never been to, but always wanted to visit" towards the end of the year.

After all, he has one final fridge-full of that magic discontinued infrared film, which was always notoriously tricky to deal with at the best of times, having to be loaded into the camera inside a lightproof bag.

So how long does Martin expect that especially sensitive remaining stock to last?

"Good question. I have no idea how much time I will have before it spoils.

"I periodically test a roll to check for any fogging on the emulsion – and, so far, all is fine."

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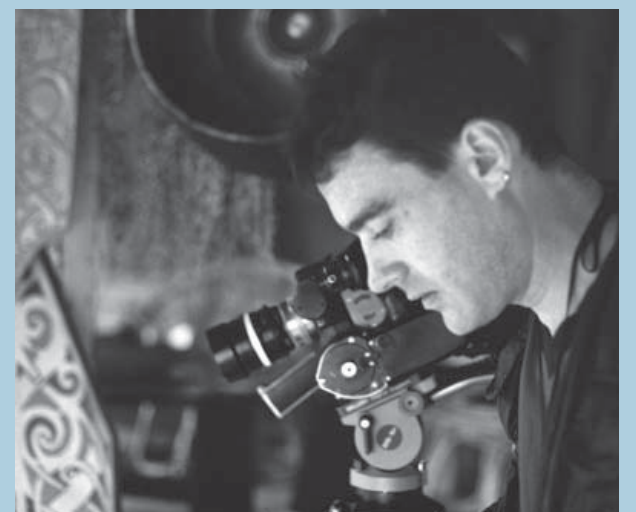
I arrived at Angkor in 1992. The chatter of machine-gun fire from remnants of the Khmer Rouge occasionally punctuated the drone of a jungle that had reclaimed many of Angkor's temples – left

unattended during two decades of turmoil and civil war.

Over the course of five days, I came across barely a handful of people.

Colossal-faced gateways draped with undergrowth rose from the forest floor – like those in romantic 19th century Angkorian photographs, lithographs and sketches. This interaction between man and nature – ancient stone brought to life by roots that trace the lines of Angkor's architects – fascinated me from the moment I laid eyes on these monumental ruins.

By 1995, Siem Reap's relaxed feel, with its colonial houses and Chinese shop-fronts, began to be overshadowed by the development of hotels, shops and restaurants ready to cater to the influx of visitors. I realised the isolated charm of Angkor's magnificent temples and local people would soon disappear, and an urgent desire took hold of me to photograph them in their natural beauty before the chance was lost forever."



Martin Reeves. PHOTO SUPPLIED