

Harry Gruyaert's best photograph – waiting for a Belgian parade

'My friend Cartier-Bresson hated using colour, but it helped me to capture the banality of Belgium'



Interview by **Sarah Phillips**
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'It's hard to work in the place you are from' ... Commemoration of the Battle of Waterloo, Boom, Belgium (1988).
Photograph: Harry Gruyaert/Magnum. [Click to enlarge](#)

I was living in Paris in 1965. One day, while making my way to a place called [Pictorial Service](#) to get some film developed, I noticed a guy I didn't recognise in the lift. There was something special and strangely transparent about him. I thought: "That must be [Henri Cartier-Bresson](#)." He was known for his ability to photograph people without them noticing. Later, when I joined the picture agency [Magnum](#), we got to know each other well. He was a nervous but witty man, never taking himself too seriously. He didn't want to be a hero or play the big guy – he hated all that.

Cartier-Bresson: A Question of Colour
Somerset House,
London
WC2

Until 27 January
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He also hated being asked to use colour for an assignment. Maybe he would have been more interested if it had been possible to play with it the way you can now, but back then it was limited in scope. Once, when he came to see a [show of my colour work](#), he suggested sending me two of his prints and a box of pastels so I could hand-colour them. I refused. "Henri, I'm not a painter," I said. I suppose he was just curious to see how it would look.

Given our friendship and his complex relationship with colour, I am honoured that this image currently hangs alongside two of his works – [one taken in New York](#), [the other in Tennessee](#) – in a London exhibition devoted to his [photography](#) called [A Question of Colour](#).

His reluctance to use colour certainly didn't stop me. Back then, a lot of photographers only used it when magazines commissioned them, meaning the medium had not really been explored creatively. So, throughout the 1970s and 80s, I photographed countless Belgian festivals and processions, which were prone to spectacular alcoholic excess. This image, taken at the height of summer in the town of Boom in 1988, shows people waiting for the carnival to pass them by. It's part of a series I did about my native

country: I had a complicated relationship with Belgium because of my strict Catholic upbringing. It's hard to work in the place you are from: you're less on the lookout for inspiration. But because I no longer lived there, I was able to work.

I had used colour in Morocco and India, places so vibrant they seemed to demand it. Previously, everything back home in Belgium had seemed grey to me. But when I discovered the beauty of banality, I was able to capture Belgium in colour. This shot works because of the movement of the people, the way they are hidden by balloons – and of course the colour.

CV

Born: 1941, Antwerp, Belgium.

Studied: School for Photo and Cinema, Brussels.

Influences: 1970s Italian movies, the paintings of Matisse, and [William Eggleston's 1976 Moma exhibition](#).

Top tip: You cannot learn to be an artist; you either are or you're not.

• Roots by Harry Gruyaert is at Botanique, Brussels from 13 December to 3 February 2013.

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