

That's Not A Real Camera

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I work across analogue, digital and mobile photography, moving between them according to the demands of a project. Each brings its own tempo, material logic and way of shaping an image. In recent years, the mobile phone has become an essential part of my practice, not as a lesser substitute for a camera, but as a way of working within the conditions that continue to redefine what a camera is.

The phone camera occupies an odd position within photography. It is the most widely used photographic tool in history, yet it still carries a residue of suspicion within serious photographic discourse. Its accessibility is often mistaken for a lack of intention. Because it is everyday, it is assumed to be casual. These assumptions reveal a lingering hierarchy of tools, one in which legitimacy remains attached to apparatus.

Photography has always been shaped by its technologies, from large format to 35mm, from colour film to digital sensors. Each shift has altered not only what photographs look like, but what is culturally valued within the medium. Yet the field continues to reward visible signs of seriousness: specialised equipment, technical control, and the aura of difficulty. The more elaborate the apparatus, the easier it is for the image to be read as deliberate.

This becomes most visible in how mobile photography is positioned within the field. It is frequently separated into its own categories, its own awards and its own exhibitions, as though it requires a parallel space rather than existing within photography as a whole. Dedicated platforms support it, but also reinforce its difference. The issue is not absence, but hesitation. The medium has already shifted, yet the structures around it continue to hold it at a distance.

There is a precedent for this. When colour photography entered artistic discourse, it was dismissed as commercial or amateur. It took sustained work from photographers such as William Eggleston and Stephen Shore to demonstrate that the everyday, rendered in colour, could carry conceptual and aesthetic weight. What was once marginal became central.

What makes the mobile phone distinct is that it is not simply another camera. It belongs to a wider image culture in which production, circulation and reception have become inseparable. As Lev Manovich has outlined, contemporary image culture is defined by its networked structure. Images are encountered as part of continuous streams, shaped by platforms and patterns of attention. Meaning emerges not only from the image itself, but from its relation to others.

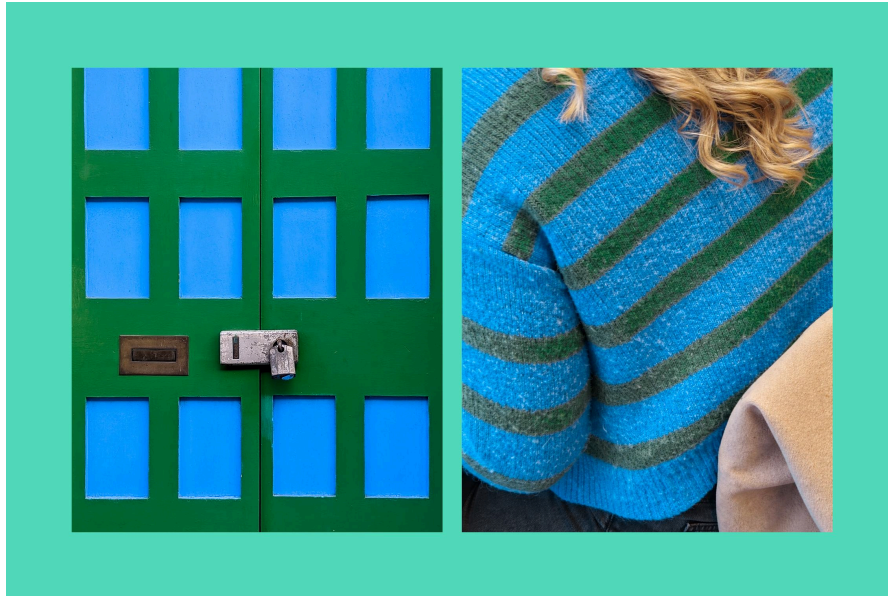
If the tool is now widely shared, then difference no longer resides in access to equipment, but in how the world is perceived. What separates the photographer from the everyday act of taking pictures is not the device itself, but the ability to recognise when something becomes an image.

My project *Double Takes* emerges directly from this condition. The images are made exclusively on a mobile phone, but more importantly, they are shaped by the ways in which the phone has altered how I look. They are drawn from everyday environments, where small alignments, repetitions and coincidences begin to register through sustained attention. These pairings often carry a quiet sense of humour. A posture repeats in an object, a colour reappears in an unrelated scene, or two spaces unexpectedly mirror one another. The images suggest that everyday environments occasionally behave as if they are aware of their own visual logic.



Baguette Legs, 2026. Part of the series *Double Takes*. © Robby Ogilvie

The work draws on traditions of observing the everyday, from the colour sensibility of William Eggleston and Stephen Shore to the social observation of Martin Parr, and the attentiveness to ordinary space found in the writing of Georges Perec. But it also engages with a more recent condition, one in which images circulate, repeat and reappear across different contexts.



Soft Grid, 2026. Part of the series *Double Takes*. © Robby Ogilvie

The pairing of images reflects this. Meaning is not contained within a single frame, but emerges through comparison. The viewer is invited to recognise a connection, to complete a visual thought. In doing so, the work mirrors how images are now commonly encountered, not as isolated compositions, but as sequences that invite pattern recognition.

There is a tension within this. The ease with which images align, and the speed at which connections are made, begins to suggest a world that is already legible as image. The everyday starts to feel composed, as if it exists in anticipation of being photographed.

It is here that the role of the mobile phone becomes inseparable from the work itself. Its presence is not neutral. It enables a form of responsiveness, but also reinforces the conditions that produce it. The device does not simply capture the world. It participates in shaping how that world is perceived.

To continue to position the mobile phone as secondary is to misunderstand the conditions under which photography now operates. The question is no longer whether images made on a phone can hold artistic value. That has already been demonstrated. What remains unresolved is the reluctance to acknowledge the implications of a tool that has reshaped both the production and reception of images.

This is not an argument against other forms of photographic practice. I continue to move between analogue, digital and mobile processes, each offering different ways of engaging with time and attention. But the persistence of hierarchies that place one above the other feels increasingly out of step with how images function in the present.

This position is not abstract. My image *Colour Divides*, which received the 2026 Sony World Photography Awards Open Competition award in the Object category, was made on an older Google Pixel 6. The significance is not the device itself, but what it represents. The image was not an exception produced despite the limitations of the phone, but a result of working within its conditions.



Colour Divides, Winner, 2026 Sony World Photography Awards, Object, © Robby Ogilvie

If earlier moments in photographic history required a shift in what could be considered a valid subject, the present moment requires a shift in what can be considered a valid tool. Not as a gesture of inclusion, but as a recognition of reality. The dominant conditions of image making have already changed. What remains is for photographic discourse to catch up.

References

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