

FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

Glass Man speaks with London-based photographer CHRISTOPHER ESPINOSA FERNANDEZ about how he zoomed in on people to create a unique record of lockdown

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Christopher Espinosa Fernandez did the unthinkable during the lockdown – in his *Isolation 2020* project he created imagery that is reassuringly calm. Before the restrictions were announced, Fernandez understood the importance of this collective experience so he took to photographing people from all walks of life isolating at home through their windows. He hoped that the project could be significant in “10 or 20 years’ time”, aiming to shoot six homes in order to fit the suitable criteria for an editorial. Two years later, he’s shot over 80 households.

It all began with a sign stuck in his window that read, “Bored? I know I am – professional photographer looking to document your isolation from over here”, followed by his Instagram contact details. A mere 20 minutes later, Fernandez received his first of many requests. The distance between Fernandez and his sitters removes any vulnerability, insecurity or self-awareness in his portraiture. “There’s something about having your photograph taken and not being in the room with them ... speaking to them over the phone but they couldn’t really see me or anything.”

Having worked with eminent British photographer Rankin for just over two years, Edinburgh-born Fernandez is familiar with working alongside top models and actors. But as he explains, “It doesn’t matter if you’re a professional model or whatever, I feel, like, the first five or 10 minutes is always a bit awkward if you don’t know the person. It’s never super-comfortable right away. But that wasn’t the case with [my *Isolation* subjects]. I remember speaking to this one guy and asking if we could pretend he had just got out of the shower. He took his shirt off straight





away. On top of that, I was surprised by the amount of people who wanted to take part in general. To have a guy come round and take photos of you, it's a weird thing to do."

It's unsurprising so many people contacted Fernandez. Other than boredom, we were all craving some form of contact and communication. Under Fernandez's gentle guidance, mundane everyday life is elevated to cinematic quality, whether it's a couple in bed watching something on their laptop, or a guy chatting to his mate out of the window, a woman cradling a cup of tea, and another sat balancing on her window ledge. Instantly you begin to form narratives and ask questions. Are they seeking respite from a house with too many flatmates and not enough rooms? Are they catching a breath after a stressful day juggling home-schooling and work? Are they concerned for someone? Are they concerned for themselves?

The cliché goes, a picture tells a thousand words, and this is true of Fernandez's *Isolation 2020* project. Before he discovered photography he favoured film, studying animation, and later film and television. He chose not to pursue it as a career because it's not "something you could do easily on your own, it's all about filling out risk assessments and doing lots of paperwork. I figured that I could do photography and create a scene in the

pictures ... I don't have to explain myself." In Fernandez's imagery the picture speaks for itself.

The rich tones of the night are where the photographer's artistic flare really shines. "The best way to describe it is when you're walking past someone's house and there's that nice glow. You take a glimpse in." Don't be fooled that the "nice glow" comes easy though: "The hardest part of the project, but the one I'm most proud of, is that I had to use the existing lighting in their house. I would have to tell them to move some lights around, turn lights off or on until everything was perfect. Directing-wise, because all the images are staged, I would be directing them over the phone, telling them to sit or walk around, or do certain actions."

It was the people that were the driving force behind this project, he says. "The biggest thing for me is that I love talking to people. It really kept me going." Fernandez most enjoyed how the project enabled him "to meet the vast plethora of people who were all so different", from a 93-year-old artist and member of the Royal Academy, to a research scientist and a mum of seven children. Fernandez's imagery does not come from the position of a testing eye looking through a magnifying glass or an aloof peer into a dolls house – you feel equal with everyone he shoots.

Fernandez's empathy for the human experience extends further. Having gained popularity on UK radio and in the international press, he decided to start selling prints of *Isolation 2020*. With the profits raised from the project, he wanted to give back to the key workers who were running the country but was wary of donating to a foundation or charity because "you could whack money into an account and never seen any direct impact".

Instead Fernandez partnered with various brands including Le Labo, L'Occitane, Dishoom, Pho and many more to create luxury hampers worth more than £300 and raffling them off to key workers. "I'm very aware the NHS isn't a charity, but everybody was complaining about the lack of funding, so if there was something I could do to help then I should."

Two years on, *Isolation 2020* is renewing itself. With many more stunning images and anecdotal stories to share, it only seems right that Fernandez should publish a book. "This project has always been a completely collaborative effort and I hope that it will serve as a memoir of such a unique and challenging time for all whose hands it will fall into. In order to fulfil this goal, I am setting out to raise £15,000."

This is where you, the reader, comes in, Fernandez is "grateful for any contributions, big or small" via his Go Fund Me page. The "money will contribute to printing costs, paper and designer fees. It goes without saying, this project has made no money, and in keeping with this theme, I will be donating a percentage of any income made on the book to a mental health charity that has supported those struggling in the UK".

While we wait and donate towards the book, you can view a selection of imagery from this project at the Pilgrim Hotel in Paddington, London. Since then, he's created two more documentary-style projects, *Wild Swimmers* and *Overexposed*.

It's safe to say Fernandez has come a long way from his high school photography class shooting friends on a digital camera at the skate park.



Nonetheless, his childish curiosity never abates. Whether he's plunging into cold waters, surfacing uncomfortable truths or offering a beacon of hope, Fernandez's innate wonder finds beauty in the world where you're least expecting it. "The whole point of those pictures is that you do feel a bit nosy. It's interesting because when you glance into people's windows, we think 'what kind of books or stuff do they have? How is their home different to mine?' I think inherently everyone is a nosy parker."

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