

# Dream come true

Following an impressive series of entries, Italian photographer **Simona Bonanno** has won this year's Amateur Photographer of the Year competition. She speaks to **Oliver Atwell**

**IT'S BEEN** a tough 12 months for the judges of AP's annual Amateur Photographer of the Year competition. Every year the entries get better and better, with photographers from all over the world sending in their interpretations of the month's theme. The 2011 winner had a difficult act to follow, as Ireland-based photographer Sean Slevin's technically accomplished images saw him top the overall competition in 2010. However, 2011 belongs to Italian photographer Simona Bonanno, who wins £5,000 worth of Canon photographic equipment.

'I'm so happy,' says Simona from her home in Italy. 'Winning APOY is, obviously, a great honour. Until the last round I thought that being first in this competition was a pipe dream. It was challenging, stimulating and exciting, and it allowed me to mature photographically through each round. I also learned a lot by examining the photographs of the other competitors.'

However, 2011 wasn't the first year that Simona had tried her luck in the competition. In fact, this is the second year that the APOY judges have seen her images. 'APOY was something that I came across by chance on



## Round 4

Simona's simple yet effective macro shot of grass (Macro in nature)

Round 2



the internet,' says Simona. 'That was in 2010. It was frustrating because by the time I discovered the competition, it was already the penultimate round. I ended up coming third in that round, though, so I knew I had to make sure that I entered from the start the following year.'

Simona entered every round in 2011 and her consistency paid off. She was placed in the top 50 for all ten rounds, winning round 5 (Creative wildlife), and coming third in rounds 2 (Inside a building) and 9 (Black & white).

'I was really impressed by the choice of themes for each month,' Simona continues. 'There was enough information to give you an idea of what the judges wanted to see, but also enough scope to interpret the themes in an individual way. Seeing my images share space with so many different interpretations of the same theme was inspiring. The images from all the other entrants were very strong.'

### IN THE BEGINNING

Simona was born in Messina, Italy, in 1974, to a family firmly entrenched in the arts. As a result, her passion for all things creative was in many ways predestined.

'A large majority of my family were and still are involved in the arts,' says Simona. 'My grandmother was a painter, as was my grandfather. Other members of my family have jobs like photographers and interior designers. It was my mother who gave me my first camera, a Nikon F3. What appealed to me about photography right away was

### Simona's shot taken inside a cinema and featuring her aunt and grandmother (Inside a building)

the ability to freeze a single moment – to be able to capture a fraction of time for ever is a magical notion. But that leads onto the other thing that fascinates me – photography's tenuous relationship with reality. Things in photographs seem almost unreal. You don't know what happened before and after a photograph, so anything is possible.'

Simona's passion for image-making led her to study photography at art school, somewhere she was able to develop her creative vision.

'It was when I was studying that I really began to grow as a photographer,' says Simona. 'I attended art school in Italy and then in Paris. In those early days, geometric shapes and lines fascinated me. They became the main focus of my images and it was through those ideas that I began to understand the basics of composition and framing. More than that, though, I began to realise there was a real virtue in simplicity.'

After graduating, Simona took a break from photography to develop her career. 'When I finished my studies, I trained for my job,' she says. 'I'm a graphic and web designer, as well as an illustrator. All these things help to inspire my photography. However, another reason for me taking a break from photography was that I really didn't feel motivated. That was largely due to the fact that my photography tutor at art school kept telling me that while I had a flair for photography, it would be better for me to try my hand at something else. He was always unhappy with the fact that

my photographs were too creative! Some people are incredibly resistant to art-based photography. They'd much rather see something more straightforward.'

While Simona now uses a Nikon D80 and Canon EOS 7D, her initial forays into photography involved her working with film. 'I started taking photographs before the rise of digital imaging, in around 1998, so I was working with film,' she says. 'That then led to working with slides, particularly Kodachrome. The natural-looking colours fascinated me. It's a look that people are still attempting to replicate using digital cameras.'

Several years later I came across those same slides that I had been working with back in the '90s. I took them into a photo lab to get them printed, but when I got them back I was horrified. The colours were so different to what I had seen all those years ago. The quality had really degraded. It was then that I decided to switch to digital imaging. I already had experience working with post-processing software due to my job, so it wasn't a problem for me. I was lucky in that starting with film gave me the confidence and technical knowledge to move comfortably into digital imaging. I think it really helps to have that grounding.'

However, that's not to say that Simona has completely abandoned film altogether. 'Film is a difficult thing to give up,' says Simona. 'Once you've shot using film, you never forget the magic of processing negatives and producing prints. I have a darkroom in my home – I just wish I had more time to use it.'

To see more images by Simona, visit her website at [www.simonabonanno.com](http://www.simonabonanno.com)

**GETTING THE SHOTS**

Everyone has a different method of finding a subject to photograph. Some actively explore a scene or subject until their preconceived ideas of it are fulfilled, while others allow chance and random encounters to take over. However, for Simona it was a little of both.

'When I saw the APOY themes at the beginning of 2011, I was able to look back at some of my previous photos and see what inspiration I could find,' says Simona. 'That helped me determine what I needed to go out and shoot. There were other times, though, when I would come across a shot by chance and it would fit into an appropriate theme further down the line. It was like a game, and it was a real challenge.'

'As the competition progressed, I had to select one image when I was top of the APOY leader board and that was incredibly difficult. As soon as I'd selected an image to submit, a thousand things would go through my mind. I would doubt myself and question if I'd really made the right decision.'

Looking through Simona's images, it's difficult not to notice her penchant for shooting in monochrome. 'Black & white is something that fascinates me,' says Simona. 'As well as being atmospheric, it forces you to see the essence of an image. It draws people's attention to a subject. That's not to say that I don't enjoy working with colour. It's just that I tend to see the world in black & white tones.'

Simona's only colour submission was for

round 8 (see right). 'The entry for Shooting skies was in colour because I felt it needed those tones to represent the magical atmosphere of the location, which was the Strait of Messina between Sicily and the southern tip of Italy,' says Simona.

'I used a Holga CFN 120 medium-format film camera with an expired film. The shot is actually a double exposure. I was trying to recreate an effect known as a Fata Morgana, a mirage that gets its name from the Italian phrase derived from the Latin for mirage and the name of the Arthurian sorceress Morgan Le Fay. The belief is that the mirages often seen in the Strait of Messina are fairy castles and false land that are created by Le Fay to lure sailors to their deaths.'

**FAVOURITE SHOTS**

There are two shots that Simona favours over all her other entries. The first is Simona's dramatic image of a bull (see below), her entry for round 5 (Creative wildlife). 'Every year I spend a week in Camargue, in southern France,' she says. 'It's a wonderful region where there are a lot of wild animals, such as horses, bulls and flamingos. I've been fascinated by bulls ever since I saw an exhibition that displayed Picasso's drawings of bullfighting. He was able to represent the bull's power with just a simple line drawing. It was important for me, when photographing the bull, to show its power and elegance. Another major influence on the image was the Palaeolithic

Round 8



ALL PICTURES © SIMONA BONANNI

**Above: A double exposure of the Strait of Messina (Shooting skies)**

**Below: Simona's abstract portrait of a bull saw her take first place in Round 5 (Creative wildlife)**

cave paintings in Lascaux, southern France.'

Simona is also particularly fond of her entry for round 2 (Inside a building), a picture that holds a particularly personal relevance for her (see page 20). 'The two women featured in that image are my aunt and grandmother,' she says. 'My grandmother wasn't exactly happy about being photographed in the cinema, but when she saw the photo she loved it. I believe that if she were still here today she would be incredibly proud of me.'



Round 5



# APOY Amateur Photographer OF THE YEAR COMPETITION 2011

## SIMONA'S SHORTLISTED IMAGES

- Round 1 Shooting trees
- Round 2 Inside a building
- Round 3 Streets and walkways
- Round 4 Macro in nature
- Round 5 Creative wildlife
- Round 6 People at home
- Round 7 Away from home
- Round 8 Shooting skies
- Round 9 Black & white
- Round 10 Shooting at night



**APOY  
2012**

We will be publishing details, including themes and closing dates, for APOY 2012 in AP 4 February. We've Samsung and Jessops prizes worth £5,000 for the overall winner, plus ten monthly prizes for first, second and third-placed entrants. In total, there will be £25,000 worth of Samsung and Jessops prizes so don't miss out! Details will also be published at the beginning of February on our website at [www.amateurphotographer.co.uk](http://www.amateurphotographer.co.uk)