

GABRIEL ISAK
THE BLUE YEARS



In 2018, I stood on a stage at an art fair in Stockholm to speak about a subject that for a long time, the world has chosen to keep in the shadows: mental health. It was there that I first met Gabriel Isak. For Gabriel, that moment was a catalyst. It was a realization that the melancholy he had been documenting through his lens for nearly a decade wasn't just "art" in the aesthetic sense — it had been his lifeline, his survival strategy, and his roadmap out of the dark.

I came to that stage not to talk about my background in photography, but to discuss loss. I was hoping to build a legacy through the power of imagery. Together with my co-founder, Scott Shillum — who suffered the devastating loss of his twin brother to suicide — I established The Photography Movement (TPM) after losing three close friends to that same, silent epidemic. We did not want to raise awareness and funding through traditional channels, but through our shared passion for photography. Tired of the inability of the traditional world to provide a vocabulary for the weight of depression, we built this movement using the power of imagery. In order to break the silence around the sensitive subject of mental health, we need to spark conversations that words alone simply cannot start.

At TPM, we have seen firsthand that the camera can cut through language barriers and get to the heart through the power of visual communication. Through our exhibitions, workshops, and talks, we work with people from every conceivable walk of life.

For much of my life, I have personally struggled to express my thoughts and feelings

through language. I know the claustrophobia of having a world of emotion inside you that feels trapped behind a lack of vocabulary or a fear of your words being misunderstood. For me, imagery became the first communication medium that truly made sense. I see the same process today, perhaps more clearly than ever, in my work with photography students at an SEN (Special Educational Needs) school in London.

There is one student in particular whose story I carry with me. He has the literacy level of an eight-year-old; he finds the structure of a written sentence nearly impossible to navigate. The pressure of verbal communication often leads him to retreat into himself. Yet, when he picks up a camera, a transformation occurs. He becomes fluent. His compositions are sophisticated, emotionally resonant, and deeply accomplished. He proves every day that the human soul can communicate in many ways, and that what some people perceive as a weakness can actually be expressed as a superpower in another medium. To witness these students communicating so clearly through the power of imagery is more than just heart-warming. It is a validation of the human spirit's need to be seen.

This is exactly what Gabriel Isak has achieved with *The Blue Years*.

Gabriel's work arrives at a time when we are visually overstimulated but emotionally starved. As a contemporary artist, he performs a radical act of subtraction to help us clear the deafening noise of our own internal chaos. The most striking element of his work is his choice to envelop his subjects in deep-sea blue bodysuits. It is a bold, symbolic choice that

elevates his photography into the realm of high surrealism. By doing this, he effectively strips away the "self." Devoid of facial expression, or the cultural signifiers of clothing, these characters become anonymous vessels. They are the everyman or everywoman.

This de-personalisation is where Gabriel's genius lies. The subjects have no identity and the viewer is forced to inhabit them. You do not look at Gabriel's characters; you look *through their eyes*. The deep blue of the suits acts as a psychological anchor, mirroring the weight and depth of the blue years, while providing a clean, symbolic language for the viewer to navigate. This is not minimalism for the sake of fashion; it is minimalism for the sake of focus. He removes the distractions of the physical world so that we can finally confront the emotional one.

At The Photography Movement, we champion the concept of Visual Therapy. Gabriel's journey is a masterclass in this practice. He describes these works as a way to take back control of his story, rather than being led, helplessly, by his depression. This is a crucial distinction. In the depths of a mental health crisis, one often feels like a passenger in a vehicle with no brakes. By picking up the camera, Gabriel has taken the wheel of the car. He has documented his journey through the shadows, traveling the world to remote and hard-to-reach places to express his feelings. Not to wallow in them, but to map them and find his way out through visual expression.

This collection represents nearly a decade of courage. It is a testament to the transformative power of the creative act. It is a search for clarity that bridges the distance between the

crushing isolation of depression and the healing power of connection. Gabriel has turned his private pain into a public light, with an expressive, visual monologue that transcends borders and languages.

After nearly a decade spent "in the blue," Gabriel was able to return to the light. He has proven that photography did not only allow him to capture a moment in time; but also to create his own future. The medium has allowed him to preserve the memory of his struggles while simultaneously releasing them.

My suggestion is that you do more than just observe Gabriel's world as a spectator. Engage with it as a participant. Let these images be a starting point for your own internal conversation. If you find yourself in your own "blue years," look at these faceless figures and know that your story, too, can be composed and shared. Gabriel has shown that while the journey through one's psyche is necessarily solitary, the act of documenting it ensures that none of us has to walk through the darkness alone.

In *The Blue Years*, Gabriel Isak has given us a mirror. In its reflection, we can find the strength to polish that mirror, to speak, and be understood, without saying a single word.

Steve Wallington
Co-Founder, The Photography Movement

In the Shadows

I fell deep in the dark and could see nothing but the shadows I was facing. I looked into the depths of the shadows and wondered if I would ever see the light again. I was trapped in the dark and my internal world became my external reality.











