

This month's Intelligence discovers that women are making a big impact in the changing world of social portraiture; looks at the work of 19th century French photographer Camille Silvy, a social networker ahead of his time; finds a supply of old Soviet rangefinders; and studies Apple's iPad for size.

Lisa Visser thought social portraiture was "so appalling", she decided to give it a go herself. "I wasn't sure if the mums would like to see their child looking quite vulnerable, but they have been really popular," she says.
Image © Lisa Visser/Hamilton Studios.

REPORT

The female touch

Women are taking social portraiture by storm, scooping many of the major awards, and shaping the direction of the industry. Miranda Gavin investigates why.

Things are changing in the world of social portrait photography. Traditionally it was a male-dominated industry, but women are now making a more visible impact, entering the arena in greater numbers and scooping the top awards from professional organisations such as the Master Photographers Association (MPA). This year, for example, the only fellowship awarded by the MPA was to female portrait photographer Jo de Banzie, while last year Lisa Visser received a Fellowship and the title of Portrait Photographer of the Year.

It's a fairly recent trend, though, and there's still a long way to go, especially at the top level. Of the 65 fellowships awarded by the MPA, only eight have been awarded to women, half of which were in portraiture categories. At the associateship level, just below that of fellowship, 42 of the 190 gongs were awarded to women.

One of the key factors in the change has been the advent and rapid growth of digital cameras, which have revolutionised making and selling social photography - especially family and children's portraiture. "Photography doesn't appear as complicated, which used to put women off, but the technology is no longer a barrier," comments Aspire's director,

Catherine Connor. "The digital camera has given women the opportunity to have more freedom. They've got more confidence."

Connor worked as managing director with business partner Annabel Williams of Annabel Williams Contemporary Photographic Training Studio for more than a decade, and recently bought her out. Now rebranded and trading as Aspire, Connor will continue to train the next generation of photographers.

"Photography is changing and women get it," she says. They get childhood; a female will understand the aspects of being a teenager and how they feel - not only in the picture, but also how they feel being photographed. I think that women understand what I call the final destination, that's the home. It's not just about taking a picture, it's about designing that picture so that it fits within the interiors

and style of the room. A woman gets that immediately and does it instinctively. She's not intimidated or scared to flick through an interiors magazine and absorb it, whereas many guys may feel a little more self-conscious. I think that's a real advantage. There are men who do this, but women seem to do it with more ease."

Su Kaye from Radlett has followed in her father Paul's footsteps. He is a well-known studio portrait photographer, while she has gained a string of professional qualifications, including an MPA Fellow she received in the 1990s. She set up a studio independently in 1991.

Coming from a primary school teaching background, Kaye works mainly with local families and young children. She has also seen "lots of young mums taking up photography". For some, it's more of a fun hobby and a second income,

she says, while others turn it into a business. Another group of women, who Kaye describes as "like us oldies", have been in the business for years.

"We're seeing a stride forward from a younger generation of women coming into photography," says Connor, "and also from the other end - a lot of women coming into our training programme are having a career change and want to do something different. They're in their mid-40s, they've been successful [in a previous career], and they're willing to work very hard."

They also have the advantage in that they are often selling their services to women, because although women aren't always in charge of the household finances, they tend to be the decision-makers as regards to home decoration and commissioning family portraits. "I think we are seeing a real change

where women are really seeing what women want," Connor adds.

Professional standards

In order to stand out in such a highly competitive market, social photographers have to distinguish themselves and "produce something that consumers can't". From Connor's perspective: "The consumer is looking for a picture. What I mean by that is something pictorial, something that has a real reference to somebody's lifestyle, something that marks a moment." When it comes to photographing children and families, both Visser and de Banzie have created identifiable personal styles with high production values, but the images they produce differ widely.

Outgoing president of the MPA and head of the associateship and fellowship qualifications, Desi Fontaine is a fellow of both the MPA and the Society of Wedding and Portrait Photographers, a social photographer, photography trainer and mentor. Commenting on de Banzie and Visser's bodies of work, she says: "They're at the other end of the pole as far as styles are concerned. Lisa came up with quite an imposing, dark look – it's not fun and smiles and laughter, it's a very studied look and a very special way of printing, which really hasn't been used before on children. It made her work really stand out and is the reason she became Portrait Photographer of the Year and received her fellowship last year.

"Jo's is as different as it could possibly be. Hers is much more of a lifestyle sort of look. There are so many lifestyle photographers out there at the moment who are really just taking snapshots and not making something special of it. The ones that are really good are the ones that take it to a different level. Jo has a fine-art background; she pushes the boundaries, breaks all the rules and the work is just amazing," Fontaine adds.

Lisa Visser was awarded the British Professional Photographer of the Year (2008), and won the MPA Under 5 and Classical Photographer of the Year categories. A specialist in children's portraiture she has been based at Hamilton studio in East Grinstead since 1999, though she started in 1988 as an in-store children's portrait photographer. Visser returned to portraiture just over a decade ago, after a career



Jo de Banzie describes her work as "family documentary". She produces photobooks that create "a narrative, where family dynamics are more important than the single image". Image © Jo de Banzie.

break when she had children. Taking her son to be photographed in a studio, she found that the photographs were "so appalling" that she picked up her camera again. "As a mother, I tend to take the sort of images I like and that I think other women will like, because it's the women who are bringing their children in to be photographed and that you're going to be selling to afterwards."

Working from a studio, Visser creates "emotive" portraits adding textures and tones using digital post-production techniques, but "that's pretty much it". "I wasn't sure how people would take the look of

the portraits," she says. "I wasn't sure if the mums would like to see their child looking quite vulnerable, which is the way I photograph them, but they have been really popular. It's not always about wanting an updated picture of their child, but about wanting a piece of art on their wall. It's not just the photograph, but how I'm going to present it; it's not just the frame and the mount, but how it's going to look in the home."

Documentary style

De Banzie has been "in the business since art college", but took a career break to raise her family. Starting

out in commercial photography, the London-based photographer entered the social arena in 2002. Describing her work as "family documentary", she veers towards the fine-art market and is interested in "producing a body of work – a narrative, if you like, where family interactions and dynamics are more important than the single image". Her projects can be "quite large and involve a heavy time investment at the shooting stage and later with post-production and book design".

As well as receiving a fellowship, de Banzie has a British Institute of Portrait Photographers Under 5s Photographer of the Year (2006) and Annabel Williams Photographer of the Year (2008). For her, creative and technical abilities are only two aspects important for success in social portrait photography. "Good business instincts, an appetite for hard work and the emotional intelligence needed to navigate the client relationships" are also key factors.

"As a woman, often commissioned by someone's wife, I'm probably less threatening to the husband than a male photographer would be," says de Banzie. Certainly, women are often at an advantage when it comes to working with young children as they are frequently mothers themselves, so it is familiar territory. But while the experience of having raised a family is certainly helpful, I think the ability to remember how it feels to be a child is more important when it comes to building empathy with the child you're photographing."

With social portrait photography undergoing something of a renaissance, women are set to become key players in shaping the way it evolves. It's not just a numbers game, but is due to a number of factors, including greater access to affordable technologies and ways of working that make the most of women's experiences and skills. But when it comes down to it, at least on one important front, the playing field is level, for as de Banzie sums up: "I don't think there's any gender distinction when it comes to creativity – the ability to see and compose transcends that." *BJP*

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