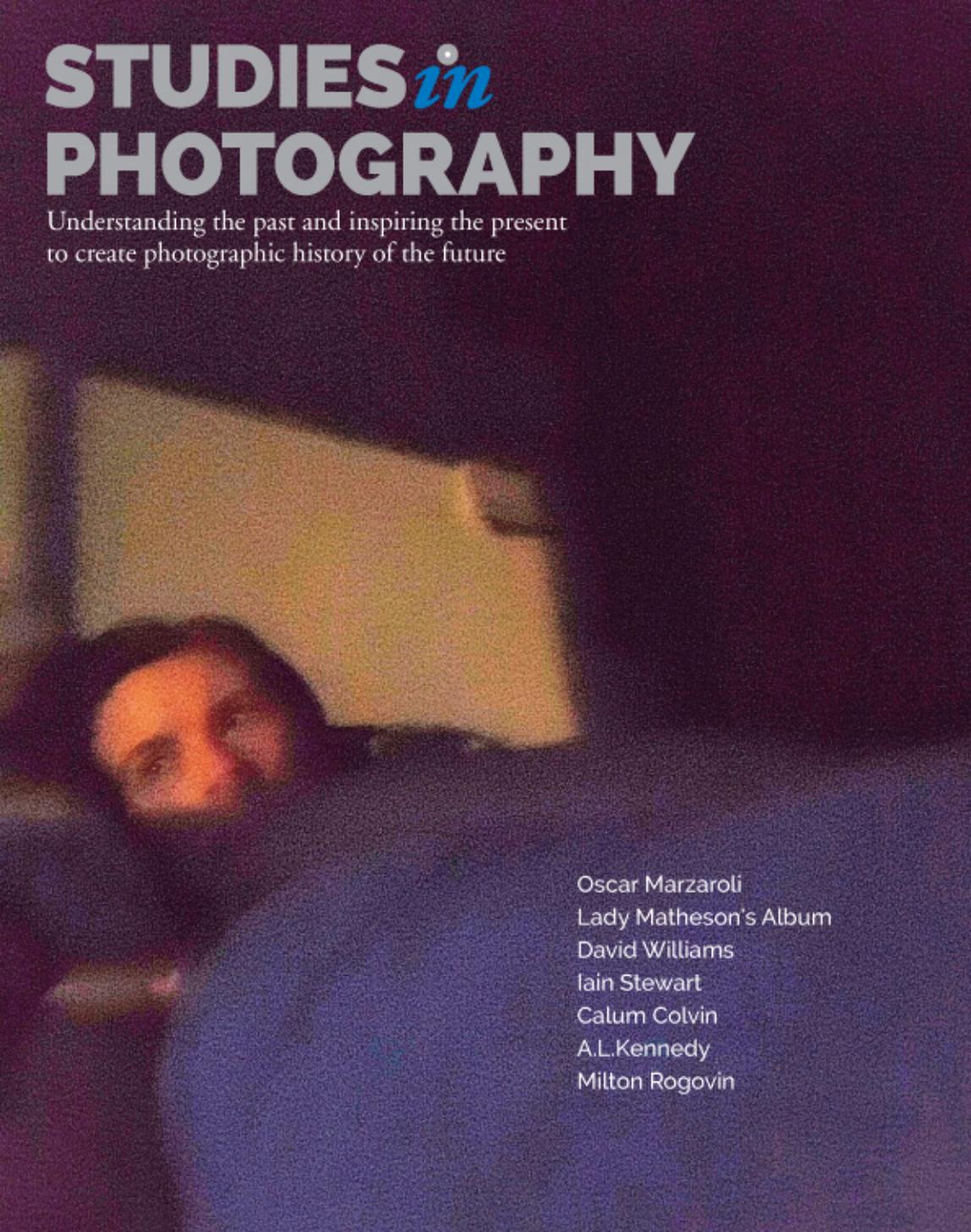


STUDIES *in* PHOTOGRAPHY

Understanding the past and inspiring the present
to create photographic history of the future



Oscar Marzaroli
Lady Matheson's Album
David Williams
Iain Stewart
Calum Colvin
A.L. Kennedy
Milton Rogovin

Review

Noni Stacey

Women Photographers from The AmberSide Collection,
Stills Gallery 2020, 15 November 2019 – 8 March 2020.

There is one photograph in this exhibition at Stills Gallery in Edinburgh which always makes me smile, Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen's *Girl on a Spacehopper (Byker)*, taken in 1971. I had a spacehopper and enjoyed it for a while until my loyalty was teased by a bicycle. The giddy combination of bounce, glitter, and wild, tousled hair enthralls at first sight but with a longer look there's something slightly unnerving about the girl's expression being hidden in a deserted street. She is suspended in mid-air. The Byker estate was on the cusp, too. Konttinen moved there in 1969 and stayed for seven years taking photographs of all around. This is a portrait of a community in flux as the streets of two-up, two-down houses were razed to give way to high-rise blocks, commonly dubbed 'cities in the sky.'

This work is an example of community photography, of engagement at a local level. Konttinen knew the people in the photographs – and as they grew used to seeing her around; the photographs reflected their lives back to them. Born in Finland, Konttinen's move northwards from London in 1969, where she had co-founded Amber Film and Photography Collective the previous year, corresponded to the group's own shift to Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Amber's documentary films and photographs are the backbone of their AmberSide archive and have been used in Side Gallery touring shows - another facet of this community focus. Her later photographs of interiors and portraits, in colour, as part of the revisiting of *Byker* feel both intimate and more formal. I was struck by the couple dancing in traditional costume, celebrating their culture in their front room on a housing estate that became a photography studio for a day.

Tish Murtha – known for her *Juvenile Jazz Bands / Youth Unemployment* series – worked as a community photographer at Side Gallery. She documents the grim downtime of the long-term unemployed at a time when this necessitated repeated visits to the cold, comfortless official spaces of the 'dole'. As Murtha said, she photographed those who were not usually in the picture and in doing so pushed for recognition of those who were excluded and marginalised. This presented a challenge to the mainstream news photographs of labour unrest in the 1970s that focussed almost exclusively on the flashpoints and protests. It is a poignant reminder that these boys have been thrown together in unemployment whereas their fathers and grandfathers found camaraderie in the workplace.

Displacement is a thread running throughout this exhibition. In Grace Robertson's *Mothers' Day Off (1954)* the women have a sense of abandon: this feels like a workplace matriarchy. The *Picture Post* photojournalist went along on the one-day trip to Margate – a day out for the women which made a change from sinking a pint in their Bermondsey local. This South London area would soon be reshaped into large modern council estates, as part of the post-World War II re-imagining of British cities. A tide of people would disperse further around the south of England. Robertson said, 'I knew that at that moment that I was capturing a bit of history and that it was all going to be broken up.'

Martine Franck's *Northern Survey* provides a sharp contrast, showing the leisure pastimes of the class that favours the culling of animals of a weekend. Side Gallery had invited Franck and her partner Henri Cartier-Bresson to document the north of England. While Franck relied on her contacts with the so-called aristocracy, photographers at Side, including Konttinen, Chris Killip and Graham Smith, introduced her to the people, places and stories they were documenting, which was at variance with the former – for example, the gathering of sea coal on the beach.

Women Photographers from the AmberSide Collection is eclectic in terms of subject matter, and diverse in location and social and cultural associations. Susan Meiselas became a photojournalist at a time when women photographers in the news area were a rarity – this story of revolution in Nicaragua was her first assignment for Magnum Photo Agency. Her interest in the revolution is long-term: she has made repeated visits to the country to track the changes since the overthrow of dictatorship by the Sandinistas. She took the decision to use colour film at a time when photojournalism was in the main black and white. To my mind, this draws the eye into these images and references the everyday, rather than aestheticizing violence. The use of colour provides a sharp contrast in the jarring image of a man and woman hurrying along a street, past a body alight, cloth clenched to their mouths to stem the stench of burning flesh.

In Mexico, Graciela Iturbide's *Juchitán* series celebrates the sinuous confidence of the women who were described by Judith Keller as, 'economically, politically, and sexually independent.'¹ This was collaboration by proximity. Iturbide captures this independence in strong, close portraits, some shot from below, emphasizing the physical strength of the women, as in her iconic image *Our Lady of the Iguanas (1979)*. Amber founder Murray Martin came across the work of Iturbide in 1987 – and exhibited the work. Iturbide in turn arranged a tour of Konttinen's *Byker* work in Mexico.

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*Women Photographers from
The AmberSide Collection*

This exhibition looks out as it looks in. The Finnish photographer Laura Junka-Aikio's unnerving portrait of a family crowding in a tent with a child buried up to his neck in sand. The disquiet in this series is underlined by the fact that this is holiday time, for this is *Camping in Gaza*. Izabela Jedrzejczyk's *Jungle Portraits* of people who frequented the Northumberland Arms pub – known as 'the jungle' – as the photographer did herself. This is what multiculturalism looks like – not new in this case, not forced, but a consequence of the flow of people in ports through trade and shipping. These affecting, still photographs were shown in the pub and referred to by the locals as a 'rogues gallery.' Side Gallery has always encouraged photographer/curators, such as Jedrzejczyk.

I found this exhibition interesting but have a couple of queries – I do not see the point of showing one Diane Arbus image and think there is a case for showing more work from fewer photographers, if the collection allows. This archive exists to show us how things *were* and how they *are*: serving as an historical yardstick. Ella Murtha says: 'My mam loved to develop and print her work, it was an art form. I would wake up regularly to the smell of chemicals because she had been up all night, printing while I slept, and amazing black and white images hung from makeshift washing lines all over the house'.² These words conjures up a picture in my mind – and exemplify the balancing act that women performed, and the passion that drove them to produce this work.

Noni Stacey's book *Photography of Protest and Community: The Radical Collectives of the 1970s*, is published by Lund Humphries (2020).

Notes:

1. Judith Keller, 'This World of Women', *Graciela Iturbide: Juchitán* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007), p. 2.
2. Ella Murtha, introduction to *Youth Unemployment*, *Tish Murtha* (Liverpool: Bluecoast Press, 2017), p. 5.



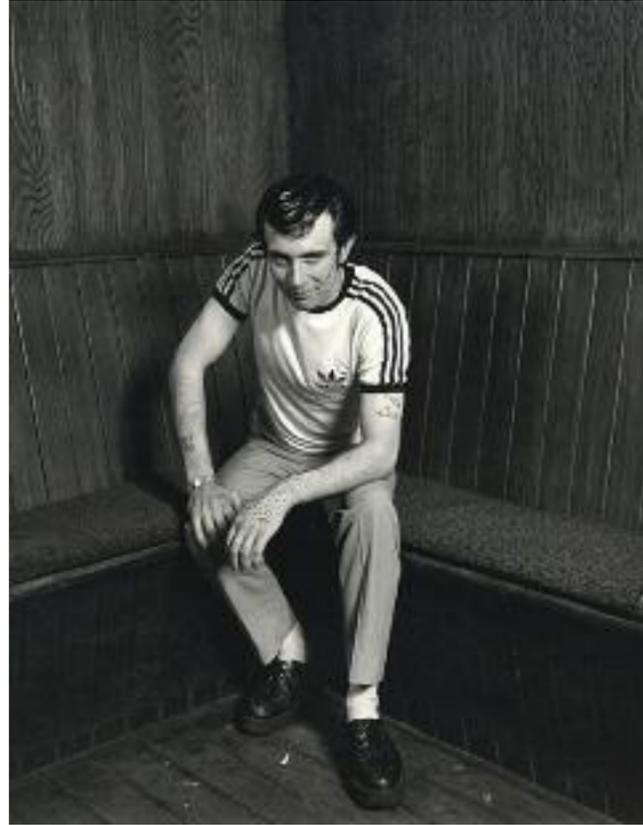
Above:
Laura Junka-Aikio
Beach, Gaza,
July 2003.
© Laura Junka-Aikio.

Left:
Tish Murtha,
Youth Unemployment
(1981),
© Ella Murtha,
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Review

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Top right:
Izabela Jedrzejczyk,
Untitled (1980)
from the series,
Jungle Portraits

Right:
Izabela Jedrzejczyk,
Untitled (1980)
from the series
Jungle Portraits

Opposite:
Sirikka-Liisa Konttinen
Girl on a Spacehopper,
Byker 1971
© Sirikka-Liisa Konttinen,
courtesy Amber/
L. Parker Stephenson
Photographs.

