



'Untitled', October 1998

Everyday heroes

For two decades, the photographer *Hannah Starkey* has attempted to capture the ordinary experiences of women. She tells *Liz Jobey* why the subject continues to fascinate her



'Untitled', March 2004



'Untitled', May 1997

Nineteen-ninety-eight was a great year for Hannah Starkey. She had just finished an MA course at the Royal College of Art in London and her graduate show of photographs had gone down a storm. Within the next few months she had won a raft of awards, been included in Charles Saatchi's latest exhibition of Young British Artists and, most valuable of all, her MA show had caught the attention of Maureen Paley, whose gallery already represented two young photo-based artists, Wolfgang Tillmans and Gillian Wearing. Paley offered to represent Starkey straight out of college.

Twenty years later, with Starkey's reputation firmly established and a new book of her work about to be published, I ask Paley what had struck her about those early pictures. "Her compositional excellence," she says immediately. "Her work had a kind of agency about it, and an element of surprise. But what was interesting is that though the works were photographic, I felt that in the way she framed the figure she was conscious - even if it was in the *unconscious* mind - of classical painting. There were elements in the works that dealt with painterly concerns and I found that very much of interest."

The pictures, only seven in all but each printed large at 122cm x 152cm (4ft x 5ft), showed young women in different urban settings - a club, a café, on the bus. The scenes were both familiar and generic and, because of their rich colour palette and subtle lighting, had something of the cinematic about them. They seemed to be pictures from the everyday but, as Paley points out, their formal composition, the figures beautifully balanced in the frame, held the viewers' attention with a mix of documentary realism and staged theatricality.

"After my degree show, I got a lot of attention," Starkey says while sitting in the "pod" that serves as her studio in her garden in east London. "Vogue came to me, i-D, Saatchi & Saatchi. It was this whole kind of, 'Vroom, you can do whatever you want.'"

But two decades on, her choice of subject matter has remained the same. Starkey is committed to representing the experiences of contemporary women (she still finds most of her sources in London, where she has lived for nearly 25 years) and presenting them as bold, attractive, colourful images that make a strong connection to the viewer, particularly the female viewer, who might recognise something of her self within them.

Starkey was born in Belfast in 1971. She was an only child and her mother brought her up pretty much single-handed because her father, who was an architect, spent long periods working away. "She was a can-do woman," Starkey says. Her mother's independence and the hard life of other women she saw in Belfast gave Starkey a kind of grit - what Paley describes as "boldness" - which translates as directness in her approach to people and to her work.

Her commitment to configuring the experience of women as they go about their everyday lives has only grown stronger. Now a mother of two teenage girls, her advocacy for women within her own profession and across the wider social and political spectrum has become more forceful, whether speaking to programmes such as Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* or to students.

"When you work with photography and have women as your subject, you are constantly asking what is the space between a mediated reality and the actual reality," she says. "And I think we're at the point now in the digital revolution where the image is king. The image is the currency we work with - the picture-perfect selfie, the personal profile image, all that. In a way, photography seems like 20th-century technology but it still shapes us from a very early age. It gives us a subliminal language that we're very



'Untitled', July 2012



'Untitled', March 2013



'Untitled', February 2013



'Untitled', August 2013

COURTESY OF HANNAH STARKEY AND MACK

◀ sophisticated in. I think Instagram has really educated us in photography too.”

Her daughters, she says, are “very savvy about understanding how an image is made - whether it’s been photoshopped, or perfected, or stretched, that kind of thing. But they’re still influenced by them, and they’re so seductive. Yet there is no education in any of the schools, no mechanism set up to teach young people how to deconstruct and defuse the power of these images. And we know that the discrepancy between the virtual life and reality can cause depression, feelings of inadequacy, all that.”

As for older women, she says, they don’t figure at all. “As a middle-aged woman now, I am absolutely *amazed* that I don’t feature anywhere in our mainstream visual culture. There aren’t any pictures that I relate to as an older woman. If I’m not on the visual landscape, then I have no currency. I think we’ve lost perspective. We’ve got so used to always seeing that same type of young woman, whether she is advertising pizza or Gucci.”

But her own photographs, she agrees, are not protest pictures. “My pictures come out of a sort of defiance *against* the kind of image that’s too easy to read about a woman, that either overtly empowers her or exploits her,” she says. “I want to encourage an understanding that we need to construct a new way to represent women. We mustn’t be stuck with the myopic visual language devised by grey, middle-aged white men who think far too much of themselves.”

These days she no longer hires actors, as she used to, to stage a scenario, but finds her subjects in the street, approaching women and asking if they will appear in her photographs. In this, she says, the smartphone is a huge advantage: she can show them some of her pictures and give them an idea of what kind of thing she wants them to do.

“I used to be far more specific in my mind about the character I was looking for,” she says, “but in recent years more often than not my breath has been taken away by a woman who’s walked past me or I’ve seen in the street. When you see a woman, just doing her own thing, maybe on the way to work, there is something about her self-confidence - not necessarily her visual attraction but her energy - that you just want to capture. You want to take it and be able to express it in a picture. Maybe that’s what my pictures are doing, reflecting what I am engaged in as I move through my own life.”

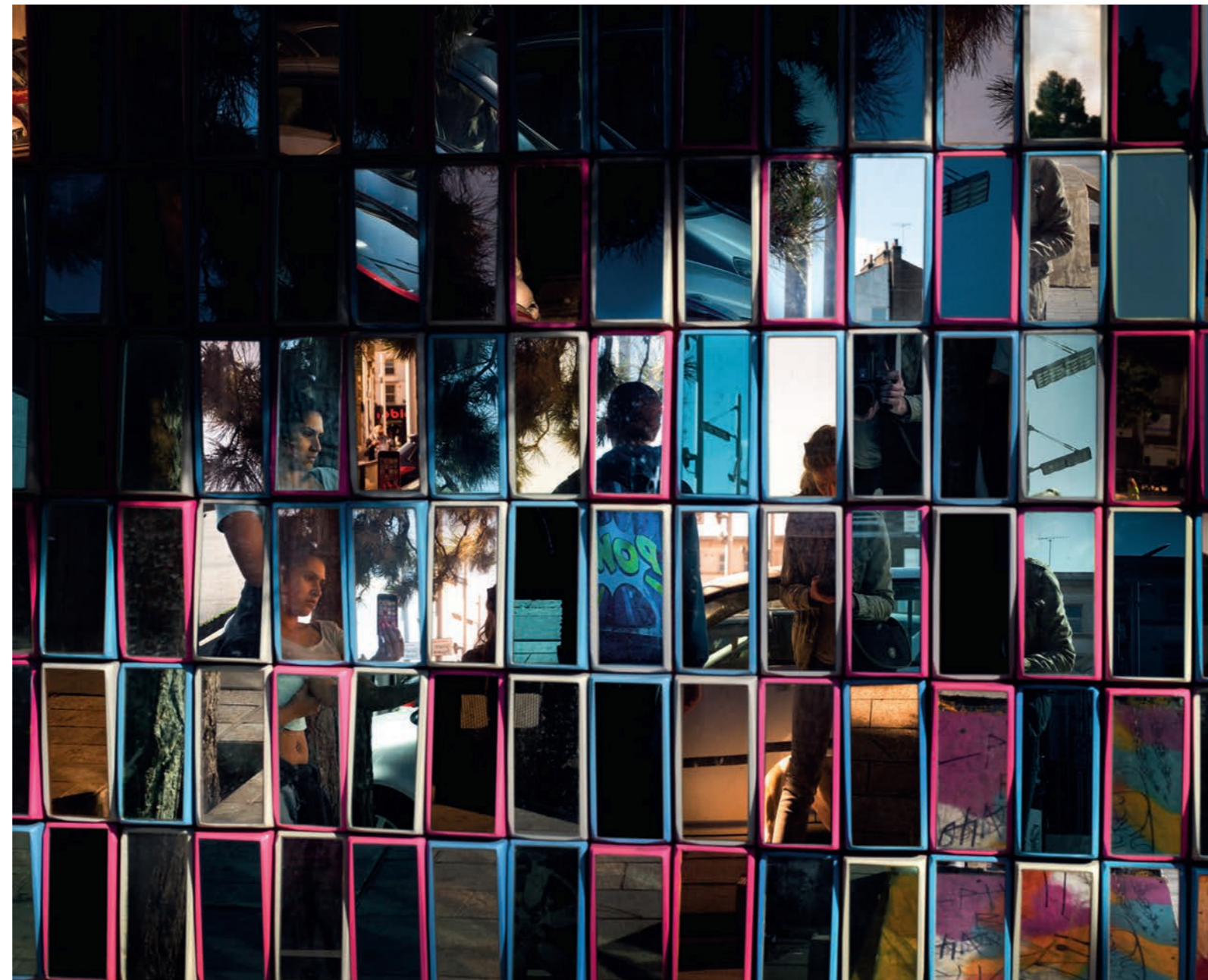
She refers me to a series she made in 2013 entitled *In the Company of Mothers*. “That was just me thinking about the women who in one way or another I have known most of my life. You try and make a picture that has the everyday and the accessibility to it, but is also somehow heroic. I think that’s what I was trying to do with those pictures. But I wanted to keep the women grounded in scenarios that would be normal to them.”

The most recent photographs in the book were taken on the Women’s March in Trafalgar Square last year, and in this sense history has come towards Starkey. The #MeToo movement and the coming together of like-minded women to improve the lot of their own and future generations must have been a vindication, if ever she needed one, of her decision to stick with her subject.

“When I was a young photographer, I didn’t see why I should be defined by my gender, but then it became really important to me to take my position as a female photographer with a female perspective. Up until my mid-twenties, I didn’t see why it was necessary, and then suddenly I did. I thought, ‘Yeah, absolutely. If I’m going to become a talented photographer, well that’s where I’m going to put my talent.’” **FT**

Liz Jobey is an associate editor of FT Weekend Magazine. “Hannah Starkey 1997-2017” is published this month by MACK; mackbooks.co.uk

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‘Mirrors’, 2015



‘Pussy Power’, Women’s March, London 2017



‘My clothes are not my consent’, Women’s March, London 2017

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