

'I want to create a space for women without judgment or scrutiny'



ABOVE
Untitled, May 1997.
All images courtesy
of the artist
and Mack

For more than 20 years Belfast-born Hannah Starkey's artfully constructed portraits have captured the gestures of everyday female experience. She's trying to find new ways of seeing women, she tells *Sean O'Hagan*



Clouds, September 2015.



'Pussy power', Women's March, London 2017.



Untitled, October 2004.



Untitled, September 2006.

When I first started out, photography was very male and not really considered art," says Hannah Starkey. "I didn't set out to have a feminist agenda, it was more that my interest in making work about women comes from the simple fact that I am one. That commonality of experience is at the heart of what I do as an artist."

Now 47, Starkey has been making images of ordinary women for more than 20 years, her complex, cleverly choreographed portraits blurring the lines between portraiture, documentary and staging. A new book, *Photographs 1997-2017*, is a selective survey of an artistic career that started in spectacular fashion when her MA show in 1998 caused quite a stir in the London art world and has since settled into a quiet, consistently attentive exploration of female experience that also implicitly questions how women are represented elsewhere in our profligate image culture.

Though her photographs appear at first glance to be traditional observational documentary, they are deftly choreographed. Often she reimagines what she has observed on the street or in cafes, clubs and bars, using women she has hired to meticulously create stilled moments of female reverie, togetherness or

“**Things are opening up: so many young women are expressing themselves through photography now**”

fleeting interaction. The results are both truthful and artfully constructed, capturing the small gestures and glances of everyday experience while also subverting traditional notions of documentary and street photography.

"In the beginning, I wanted to create a hybrid out of the different approaches I had been taught," she says, "by somehow bringing together the emotive language of documentary with the slickness of advertising and the observational style of street photography. I think I've become more reflective and considered, but the performative element has been a constant." Having "wandered into" photography via a vocational

course at Napier University in Edinburgh, Belfast-born Starkey went on to study for an MA at the Royal College of Art. There she found her subject and her hybrid style, influenced, she says, by Peter Galassi's book, *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort*, which laid bare the anxieties at the heart of the American ideal of home through images by the likes of Nan Goldin, William Eggleston and Cindy Sherman. Her MA show featured seven large-format photographs of young women interacting, their style and compositional skill self-consciously referencing both classical painting and elaborate film stills. It caught the attention of London gallerist Maureen Paley, who left a note for her at the college and has represented her ever since.

"That graduate show set me up," says Starkey. "Suddenly I was in demand and simultaneously I became very aware of the different space that women occupy in the photography world, both as practitioners and subjects. I have been acutely aware of that ever since, the ways in which women are constantly evaluated and judged. My gaze is not directed in that way. A lot of what I do is about creating a different level of engagement with women, a different space for them without that judgment or scrutiny."

With two teenage daughters of her own, she is concerned about the tyranny of selfie culture and the ways in which young women are "being targeted much earlier as consumers and told constantly that their value is in their looks". At the same time she is inspired by how younger female photographers are making their presence felt. "It just feels like things are opening up because so many young women are expressing themselves through photography."

Though Starkey has always been an implicitly political artist, the concluding series in the book – images of protesters at the Women's March in London, 2017 – is the closest she has come to more overtly activist photography. Here, too, the images have been created using technological post-production, allowing her to distil the experience of the protest into more formally constructed photographs. She is, she acknowledges in the afterword to the book, "interested in the psychological truth more than the photographic truth." That, perhaps, is the essence of her hybrid way of seeing.

Photographs 1997-2017 by Hannah Starkey is out now (Mack, £40). Starkey will give an artist's talk and sign books at Tate Modern, London, on Wednesday

Photography

Harlem street life and ping pong in Leipzig

From New York in the pre-civil rights era to the messy interiors of war veterans' cars – and a table that's not used just for tennis

Sean O'Hagan



It was a year marked by impressive debuts, many of which, intriguingly, featured black and white photography. Taking her cue from the films of Eric Rohmer, the young Swiss-born photographer Senta Simond impressed with **Rayon Vert** (Kominek), a series of cool, monochrome portraits of posed female subjects who also happen to be her friends. The results are both intimate and formally striking.

American photographer Raymond Meeks explored male intimacy and adolescent bonding in **Halfstory Halflife** (Chose Commune), which distils the work of several summers spent photographing American teenagers on the cusp of adulthood. The setting is a forbidding creek in the Catskill mountains into which the boys leap, testing themselves in a long-established rite of passage that Meeks renders both sensuous and mysterious.

There is a dreamlike quality, too, to Matthew Genitempo's **Jasper** (Twin Palms), a meditation on self-enforced solitude made in America's mid-south. Genitempo spent time in the Ozark mountains, gaining the trust of men who had retreated into

the forests to live off-grid in often harsh conditions.

The disturbing images in Matthew Casteel's acclaimed first book, **American Interiors** (Dewi Lewis), were made clandestinely while he worked as a valet park at a veterans' hospital. Over several months, he shot the messy interiors of their cars and the detritus therein – porn, guns, fast food, overflowing ashtrays – can be read as a metaphor for their dislocated lives.

In **Caspian: The Elements** (Aperture/Peabody), British documentary photographer Chloe



'Poetic': Roy DeCarava's *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. © The Estate of Roy DeCarava/David Zwirner Books

Dewe Matthews delves deep into the landscapes and people of the Caspian Sea. Using the region's rich natural resources – oil, rock, uranium – she explores the religious traditions and communal practices, including bathing in crude oil, that endure in an area more often defined by its contested geopolitics.

Irish photographer Eamonn Doyle made a bold move away from street photography towards a kind of sculptural conceptualism with **K**, an elaborately designed, limited-edition photobook that comes with its own soundtrack in the form of a 10-inch vinyl record. It's one for serious photography book collectors, as is **TTP** (Mack) by Hayahisa Tomiyasu, who obsessively photographed the daily goings-on around an outdoor ping-pong table from the window of his student apartment in Leipzig. The result is a small gem of human observation.

For me, the best catalogue of 2018 was the eponymous **Masahisa Fukase** (Editions Xavier Barral), which accompanied the retrospective of his work at Foam, Amsterdam. A constantly surprising homage to the self-destructive genius of postwar Japanese photography.

The Sweet Flypaper of Life (David Zwirner), by Roy DeCarava with text by Langston Hughes, is a kind of poetic photo-novel about everyday life in Harlem, originally published in 1955. Groundbreaking on initial publication, it remains a beautifully realised fusion of words and images.

Closer to home, **Photographs**



1997-2017 (Mack) gathers two decades of work by the influential Northern Irish photographer, Hannah Starkey. Her signature is a kind of heightened everydayness that often approaches the cinematic – deftly choreographed portraits of women caught up in moments of reverie or intimately observed interaction. A subtext throughout is the way women are represented – and reduced – in the mainstream. Cumulatively, it adds up to a quietly forceful riposte to the male gaze that still dominates photographic representation.

'Sculptural conceptualism': an image from Eamonn Doyle's *K*.