

# PUTTING THE FOCUS ON WOMEN

The subject matter of Hannah Starkey's evocative photos is reflective of her upbringing among strong female role models in 1970s Belfast, discovers Pavel Barter

If you visit the office of the Northern Ireland secretary Karen Bradley, you'll see a photograph of a grey-haired woman in a restaurant, next to a mural of carp fish. Her back is to the viewer. It's an unusual image that poses more questions than it provides answers. Why has this person turned her back to us? What is she contemplating? Before this picture graced Bradley's wall, it was in the office of Theresa May, and the late Labour MP Tessa Jowell had it prior to that.

Hannah Starkey is unsure why her untitled image, which is part of the UK government's art collection, is so popular with female British politicians. "They choose what artwork they want in their offices. It interests me they all chose that particular picture," she says.

Starkey is at home in east London, in a converted studio in the back garden. There are photos of her work on the walls; book shelves piled high with photographic tomes; and a dog basket for Digby, her whippet. "My husband built me this shed," she says. "Isn't that the most romantic thing? It got me and all my stuff out of the house."

The 47-year-old from Belfast is familiar with politics and diplomacy. In 2016 she did a portrait of former Irish envoy Geraldine Byrne Nason for the Irish Cultural Centre in Paris. Last year she photographed Yvette Cooper, a British MP, for an exhibition celebrating the centenary of UK legislation that gave equal rights to female politicians.

"I wanted to photograph a powerful woman in an emblematic way," she says of Cooper's picture. "It wasn't a straight portrait. I wasn't trying to make her younger, more attractive, or any of the things that women are generally held ransom to. There's no beauty retouching."



The theme of women in states of composure and reflection has continued throughout her career and across a new compendium of her work, *Photographs 1997-2017*. But it all began with the women who surrounded her as a child in Belfast, particularly her industrious mother, who sold clothes at local markets.

"Paramilitaries made their own disguises in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s," she recalls. "They cut their balaclavas out of jumper sleeves – one eye would be wonky. It's amazing

they were ever taken seriously. My mum started to sell balaclavas. She had them factory-made in England and sold them for £1 in the markets. She couldn't get them fast enough. Those and fingerless gloves. She literally changed the face of terrorism."

As a child, Starkey accompanied her mother to the markets, and found herself surrounded by headstrong women. She recalls being deeply affected by the Peace People, a women's movement launched in 1976 to protest against violence.

Women are the sole subjects in Starkey's work. Some turn away from the camera; others wear masks or gaze beyond the frame, lost in thought and oblivious to the viewer's gaze. The photographer describes her work as a reaction to the objectified and hyper-sexualised representation of women in photography.

"[My subjects] are refusing to be observed, in a way. That opens up a lot of interpretations. Some people think they are bored; others that they are lonely. I find it amazing that a

woman cannot be in a space without being active in some way for the camera. These are women in deep states of reverie."

She dabbles in abstraction to create layered images with multiple meanings. In *Prism* (2008), a female figure sits alone in a cafe, her form dissected by a glass-beaded curtain. *Mirrors*, from 2015, features discombobulated characters reflected in what appear to be smartphones.

Although she engages in reportage – she documented the Women's March

in London two years ago – her pictures are mostly staged and stylised. She finds her subjects from among friends or from the streets; she selects locations, props, and creates an unseen narrative.

These images are produced as large prints, a metre or so in size. "In the digital and smartphone era we tend to see photographs on a small scale. My pictures create a space that allow you to decipher the photograph and meditate on its meaning. There are things to look through, and parts that

**Capturing the moment** Starkey, left, and examples of her work, above

will confound the eye, so the consumption of the image is a lot slower."

Starkey's preoccupation with the still image began aged 14, when an innocuous injury at convent school in Belfast caused a haemorrhagic stroke. "I was messing around and banged my head. About three months later, after a lot of headaches, I couldn't find my right arm. I tried to tell the teacher what was wrong, but it came out as a babble

because my speech had gone. It was like one part of my brain had disconnected while the other kept functioning."

The accident triggered dyslexia, which the school counteracted by giving her a camera. "You've found your calling," her mother told her. Starkey decided to look beyond the surface drama of the Troubles and create deeper portraits of her city. *Butterfly Catchers* (1999) depicts two teenagers roaming a blitzed scrapyard. *The Bone* (2011) features two girls gazing down on the murky rooftops of Belfast.

"I saw my local community on the global stage and through a global media," she says. "There was a discrepancy between the reality and the mediated reality. Journalism and photojournalism is one of the noblest careers, but the news feed can accelerate or hype reality."

During her studies in Edinburgh and London in the 1990s, Starkey was inspired by the female photographers who preceded her – Dorothea Lange, Diane Arbus and Cindy Sherman, among others. Yet students were steered down specific paths: fashion, advertising, art or photojournalism. Starkey wanted something different. "Coming from Northern Ireland, I felt as though I didn't have to fit into anything. I was looking for a type of freedom where I wasn't categorised."

Her decision to transcend the narrow definitions of photography paid off. Her graduate show in 1997 attracted the interest of advertising (Saatchi & Saatchi), fashion (*British Vogue*), and the art world. She is now represented by galleries in New York and London. Her work can be found in public collections at London's Tate, Imma in Dublin, and Belfast's Ulster Museum. At a recent show in New York, her prints were priced at £15,000 (€17,500) each.

Parenthood made Starkey rethink her work. In *The Company of Mothers*, a 2013 exhibition, featured women in urban environments with their children. In recent times, she has photographed females her own age, whom she considers under-represented in art.

As she potters around her east London studio, she wonders about returning to Belfast. "There's so much I carry from my personal history that I would like to visualise," she says.

Both women and men can relate to these moments of quiet reflection in big cities, a theme found in the urban landscapes of the American painter Edward Hopper. Starkey's preoccupation with solitude is sometimes reflected literally. She can be found in some of her own photographs, gazing down the viewfinder, reflected within multiple layers of narrative.

"They hold up a mirror," she says. "Maybe you too can project yourself into that space." ■

*Photographs 1997-2017* (Mack Books £40) by Hannah Starkey is out now

