

On a rainy January evening I stood amongst a group of tourists on the corner of Delancey Street and Orchard Street in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Traffic beeped and groaned past us, hurtling on and off the Williamsburg Bridge. Lin, our tour guide, beginning with theatrical flair, introduced the family we were there to learn about—The Moores. Bridget and Joseph Moore arrived in America in the mid-1960s and had moved to 97 Orchard Street, where The Tenement Museum is now housed, in 1869. We were told, when we entered the house, to explore through our eyes not our hands, no photography was allowed. Following Lin we turned the corner onto Allen Street and entered the building through the back courtyard. We heard how Bridget had washed the families clothes there, water and outhouse toilets were considered luxurious amenities. As we climbed the external staircase, which today overlooks the incongruous neon palm trees that top Chinese restaurant Congee Village, we were to imagine ourselves as Bridget, in the 1870s, carrying buckets of water, groceries and children, up and down daily.

Hannah Starkey the Belfast-born, London-based photographer had suggested I take the tour. When I told her I moved to New York a year ago she said, “New York’s brilliant don’t you think?” Without giving me time to answer she continued, “It’s such a good idea for a woman to do that. To step off into a new adventure, a new reality and set up life somewhere else. Everyone should do it. That can be really exciting.” Returning her focus to the tour, reminiscing had stoked her excitement. “I went on the Irish tour last time I was in New York, it’s all about what happened to the Irish when they first emigrated and what their lives had been like. It was just fascinating. There was a part that focused on the way they were depicted in illustrations, before photography was commonplace, the Irish were drawn in a really grotesque way, exaggerating their features...I highly recommend the tour. You’ll love it”

I did love the *Irish Outsiders* tour at the Tenement Museum, but how did Hannah Starkey know that? We had just met and had been talking for just shy of ten minutes when it came up. This I realised is what Hannah Starkey is good at: sizing women up. Throughout the course of the interview she teased little bits of information from me, I could feel her building them together in her mind like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, her inquisitiveness was ferocious.

Hannah Starkey was born in 1971 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. At the time, Ireland was engulfed in The Troubles, an ethno-national conflict that began in the late-1960s and is deemed to have ended with The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 (a year after Starkey’s graduation from the Royal College of Art). To have grown up in a world of segregation must have impacted her I prompted, “It was normal for me, actually. I think when you are born into something it is your norm. I didn’t really see it as anything extraordinary until I left,” she left to study photography and film at Napier University in Edinburgh in 1992. But it wasn’t normal—“I hadn’t realised how oppressive it probably was. When you grow up in it, you are indoctrinated to some extent. It was a very segregated society; the Catholics and Protestants. There were two youth clubs, two schools, and two discos. It taught me a lot about the dangers of segregation, the damage that comes from not knowing the other and the ignorance it can breed.” Her mother, realising the corrosive nature of these political and religious divides had ensured that the family lived amongst a community that was both Catholic and Protestant. Offering a positive spin Starkey shared “It also teaches you a lot growing up in a place like Belfast. To always trust your instincts. To be curious about people—because lack of curiosity results in what you’ve come from. I also have a dark sense of humour, which was used as a coping mechanism for the reality of life. What else can I say about Belfast? Oh, yeah and I can talk the leg off a table!”

ORTHODOXY

A CONVERSATION WITH HANNAH STARKEY

Words Shonagh Marshall

And she does. As the daughter of a Northern Irish woman, who also emigrated to England I found talking to Hannah Starkey familiar. The pattern of the conversation, the talking over each other, the interwoven slithers of dark humour and the inquisitive open-mindedness all reminded me of my family. I have often wondered how my mother, who grew up amongst such oppression, was able to welcome ideas around representation. Talking to Starkey I began to realise that for these women, it was important to their own identity to display a staunch rejection of the injustices of the world to which they were born.

Hannah Starkey therefore chose to concentrate on representing women in her photographic work. After graduating from Napier University she went to the Royal College of Art in London to study for a masters in fine art. Her graduate show exhibited seven large-format photographs of women. One of the most well-known, depicts a young woman gazing into a mirror. Reflected in the background is an older woman with rollers in her hair. On the table in the foreground is a packet of cigarettes, a lighter, a coffee cup, juice, ketchup, salt, pepper—perhaps she is in a diner. In the window, what looks like a red bus whizzes past out of focus. Is this young woman looking at herself? Is it narcissism, or introspection? Then you notice, trapped beneath her fingers and the surface of the mirror is a moth. Like breadcrumbs, so much information is arranged in the frame. Here lies Starkey’s power, her pictures, and the women that she captures, are entirely un-straightforward.

Her graduate show was a triumph, Maureen Paley, the London art dealer left her a note (I asked what the note said, but Starkey had forgotten.) Paley, who once explained “Being a tastemaker—someone who invents the future—requires a delicate balance. You need to be of your time—if you’re too far ahead you’ll be misunderstood,” has represented Starkey ever since. With the body of work Starkey created she hit the timing exactly right. The images she produced quietly and subtly poked holes in the way women had been represented through the medium of photography throughout History. “Effectively what I did was incorporate a hybrid of everything I was interested in, from documentary photography, fashion photography and advertising. I would take the parts of the language that were relevant to me, for example advertising is quite slick and documentary is about emotional cues. Rather than being categorized as a fashion photographer or an advertising photographer, I wanted to do my own pictures and hoped they would be applicable to many outlets. The success I thought lay in creating a really arresting image, that held your attention.” She’s right but it also lies in this scrabbling of visual signifiers, it isn’t immediately clear what kind of picture you are looking at and when you look harder in fact it’s irrelevant as it doesn’t fit into any of the prescribed silos anyway.

Starkey said “I think I benefited from positive discrimination, it was a time when there was a push for women to gain prominence.” In the twenty three years that followed she has continued to make work that depicts solely women. In her large scale images, usually 4 x 5 feet, she creates a constructed world where the subjects, placed in an urban landscape, do not engage. You can’t help but question: what are they thinking? Where are they going? Who are they? “In my images the subjects aren’t actively being observed, they are detached. They are in their own interior realities or interacting with other women in a space.” In the early work the women photographed are actresses but as time passed Starkey chose to shoot women she found in the street. “The creative process is so intense, and when I am working on ideas I am really receptive to what’s around me. I think not only about what internally affects me as a woman, but also what I outwardly observe. Sometimes this can be something that’s played out in the street. For example, today I was walking through the City of London and someone had fallen off their bike. The first people to the scene were women—I don’t think women are any more compassionate than men, but in my world I only see women—in this scene I noticed acts of kindness, generosity, and empathy. I might take that as inspiration, well maybe not someone being hurt in the road, she was fine by the way, but something like this in that it is a scene that I have observed. I would then

use it to communicate emotions through one of my images. Once I have the germ of an idea it begins to grow. I notice locations that might be good for it and then I walk past a woman, or I see her on the bus, and you think, “yep! She would be perfect for this idea.” It’s a mixture of my experience and trying to find a way through my female subject matter to articulate that. Making it seductive enough that you as the viewer want to spend time with it.”

In a time when we are surrounded by images, the modes of communicating through photography have changed drastically since the late-1990s. But Starkey’s images stand out just as much as when she started, they subtly evoke the complexities of womanhood. “Photography as a medium can be very exploitative towards women. I think young women are way more self-critical than I ever was, it didn’t ever cross my mind. It comes from this constant exposure to perfection, to excellence, the kinds of unattainable things that women are supposed to be today. I have two teenage daughters and I can see how images influence them and I see how they protect themselves. I educated them on how photography works and how Photoshop is used. The image is so powerful and it communicates so fast that you don’t even have time to digest and protect yourself from it, you just absorb the messages it holds subliminally.” Over her career Hannah Starkey has worked amongst advertising, fashion and fine art—seeing each as fertile ground to communicate her vision of women. “I think advertising has changed, particularly beauty advertising, today they tell you about a problem so they can sell you the solution. They encode the photograph in a very particular way. But what’s the fallout of that? I always want to make images of women that are much more empathetic and give the viewer much more to go on. When I have worked amongst advertising it is my mission to try and get relatable women into the images and to construct a picture that carries a message beyond scrutinising, judging or sizing yourself up to the woman featured. My women are not interested in the camera, they are not necessarily concerned with being observed in the way that women have been conditioned to be observed.”

As we talk Starkey is sitting in her office, which is a shed in the back garden of her house in London. Crowning her head, mounted on the wall, is a sign that reads ‘Up to no good: “You’re a lovely person to talk to,” she tells me. I feel flattered and wonder if this is how she gets the woman to be at ease in her photographs. Something strikes me about the relevance of photography as such a new technology and her choice to use it. The contemporary nature of the ever evolving field is something that really turns her on, she tells me that’s why she thinks her images work so well. Exuding contagious passion she exclaims “From this magic box you come away with a picture and everyone says ‘Wow that’s amazing, how does that look like that?’ Honestly I don’t know how it happens. Maybe it’s something to do with my relationship to the medium, my understanding of the language, the timing, and my ability to capture the intensity of a moment in the space I am photographing. The fact that you have brought all these elements together and the energy that comes from that transcends it from being merely a picture into something more penetrating. It gets into your memory and so succinctly communicates something you can’t communicate in words.” I feel such an affinity to what Starkey is saying when she interrupts herself “this is really naff what I am saying” I feel a little embarrassed. She continues, “But I have found that is the truth. We are really at the beginning of it as a medium there is much more exploration into how images affect us, what does repetition do for example? It is the beginning of us really understanding how to harness such a powerful medium and use it positively. If you can encode an image in a particular way, so that it carries a particular message, not necessarily an overt or literal message, then you can understand the power of that and why people remember pictures 20-25 years later. I think it is because it made them feel a particular way at a particular time.”

It is a good time to be talking to Hannah Starkey. She is readying for her first major solo show at The Hepworth Wakefield which launches in October, it feels like she has been reflecting. “There is a lot of new work being generated that I have been

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thinking about for 20 odd years. It is interesting doing a survey show, because you look at where you started and then make work that sets up a conversation between that, your influences now and how the pictures have developed. It’s a lovely process not only to take stock, but also make new photographs in response to the work that’s gone before. It’s not closure as such, but a certain kind of maturing. I feel the need to do it, it’s almost like making peace with yourself in acknowledging you’re the one who’s going to be standing back as you want it to make sense to the viewer.” She has also been working alongside the education department at The Hepworth to come up with what she is calling ‘Photography: A Guide for Girls’. “This aims to encapsulate everything I was talking about earlier. There’s no education around image culture for 13 to 14 year-old girls and they are the ones who are most affected by it. Our aim is to get some modules into the education system. The girls who are participating are the Hepworth’s Arts Ambassadors, a scheme which brings students from backgrounds that haven’t been exposed to art and galleries. I was totally one of those girls so I know the powerful benefit of seeing something that just makes you feel special, that you have a connection to. Showing you there is something else out there, a higher pursuit perhaps. It’s a beautiful commission.”

Since September Starkey has also been in place as Guildhall’s first Artist in Residence. It was supposed to be until the end of November but when we speak it is December and she is still there. I get the distinct impression she won’t leave until she feels her work is done. Guildhall, a municipal building, is situated in Moorgate which makes up part of the financial area of London. The brief was to make a body of work around the theme of Celebrating City Women. Of the commission she said, “I feel the weight of history”, this area of London is the oldest, where in 43 AD a settlement was established which grew to become London. I really want to represent the present and the contemporary in relation to History, particularly in how women have made inroads into the city. Women now occupy more senior positions, I find it interesting to observe how they occupy the historical space that was traditionally solely male. It is such a dense subject, the city and the women in it. As soon as I started to research the city and attend women’s groups I found it was way more complex than I had originally thought. I have become interested in ideas of power. It is ultimate power working in finance and to be able to photograph women in the context of that significant power, that patriarchal power, is interesting. The remit is to be completely representative in terms of women that I chose to feature. To think about class, race, age and to some extent gender and sexuality. For the first time, because it is a commission and the commission is to celebrate women in the city and that means every woman, I am not frightened of tokenism. Obviously I can’t represent every woman, that’s not possible. But today representation has become a really important issue and that makes total sense to me. People are demanding to see themselves in the world reflected back to them.”

We end our conversation by returning to talk about visual culture today. “What I find strange” Starkey tells me “is how it normalises extreme beauty but at the same time sells us dissatisfaction by showing us the perfect images. It doesn’t surprise me if a sixteen year-old says they are going to get fillers. You are being told that your value in life is how you look so you probably think that’s a very good investment. It’s just so fucking radical, before we all just used to get the same haircut.” I ask Starkey if she’s read any articles or the book written by Jia Tolentina. “No” she says, “I will look her up.” The next morning I received an email “I found the Jia Tolentino article, then I found this” she embeds a link for the book ‘Trick Mirror’ written by Tolentino “she’s such an interesting thinker.” I remembered something Starkey had said: “It’s all just a look, the Kardashians will disappear in another few years and their look will be taken over by another look which will be mass produced and sold to young women to buy shit. As an artist you’re always battling with the *status quo* or the orthodoxies of the time, which is what makes you rethink the status quo and try to subvert it in some way. To me the subverting was to make quite quiet, intimate, intriguing pictures of women.” I quietly think to myself that Hannah Starkey is the real deal.