

Colour and black and white

Lucinda Douglas-Menzies boasts an impressive over seventy photographs in the National Portrait Gallery Collection, which is a real achievement for a photographer specialising in the art of portraiture. It is testimony to a life dedicated to the medium and especially analogue photography. In conversation she discusses digital cameras as 'useful' and at times appropriate for certain commercial work, but her natural element and sharp focus is captured by real negative roll film.

The idea or urge to create this recent thematic set of portraits of South East Asian writers came to her circumstantially, in a similar fashion to her other series such as the thirty-eight notable *Astronomers*. It was put in motion by what she regards as a successful portrait, that of Delwar Hussain which was commissioned for the publication, *The Gentle Author*. This portrait shows him smiling broadly, with his home as backdrop; behind him, in the mass of personal items is a statuette of the dancing Hindu God Nataraj (Lord Shiva), a coronation mug, a framed photograph of the Taj Mahal and a reproduction of *Cheetah and Stag with Two Indians* by George Stubbs, 1764–1765, from the Collection of Manchester Art Gallery - their dual pristine white turbans cutting a bizarre stance against the lyrical British countryside. The inclusion of these items together with this celebrated painting, commissioned by the Governor-General of Madras, who donated the cheetah to George III in 1764, provides a convenient overarching context for the project. Seated to the calm, clear left hand side of the space, his hands and arm form a diagonal up through to the window frame. Looking closely we can see the compositional reference points that take us there; the newel post of the bed he sits on and the spot lit knob of the chest of drawers, with these hints, Douglas-Menzies implies the intimacy of the bedroom and the privacy of getting to know Hussain in a privileged manner.

Hussain therefore set the scene and provoked her desire to study a group defined by skin, location and literature, and she quickly realised that what she should concentrate on was the quality of skin tones as rendered in black and white photography. The subtleties of her hand printed images are seductive and expertly rendered. As James McNeill Whistler said of Gwen John; *she has a fine sense of tone*. John had attended Whistler's art school in Paris in 1898, teaching her the art of tonal relationships, Douglas-Menzies has spent thirty years honing her skill in defining similar tonalities.

Each portrait in this series led to another, seventeen in all, with the non-Londoners sitting to her in the upstairs morning light of a local restaurant room. These latter subjects have no extraneous detail for us to analyse and connect to their character or writing, instead they transfix us with their eyes, whether the dreamy, abstracted look of Neil Muckergee's white rimmed billiard balls, the soft curves of the scarf around his neck echoing the heavy lids, the regal pose balanced with the soft focussed vertical light trails behind him. Or similarly as we encounter the untrammelled beauty of Rajasthan born, Cardiff-raised 'biker girl' Nikita Lalwani, whose shiny leather jacket's press studs form a white dotted triangle mirroring her face, chin and beauty spot. Her persona and public success augmented by her wild generosity in donating her £10,000 *Desmond Elliott Fiction Prize* money to *Liberty*, the human rights campaign in 2008.

Douglas-Menzies's camera eloquently records in a non-judgmental way, allowing us to get acquainted with the sitters from an open perspective. Romesch Gunsekera looks straight at us, with an unflinching, direct gaze, a vague smile on his lips, as if it was *he* weighing *us* up. The narrative, processional picture to his left, replete with elephants, horses, and men and women in profile, balances and reiterates the curve of his cocked hand. The light on this shape, like a Paisley curl, is picked up in the central lit strand of his abundant hair, the intense, dark pool of shadow on his left side makes the white of his eye glow like phosphorescence in the dark sea.

Ever strict with herself, only twelve exposures from a single roll of film are permitted. The challenge is to capture the portrait in one of the frames: a *decisive moment*, as Cartier Bresson would say. To recognise the moment, moreover to set up the circumstances for that situation to occur is the crux of her skill. It is not enough to have aptitude and technical knowhow - Douglas-Menzies was

first apprenticed to the architectural photographer Jeremy Whitaker and later worked in the press - one must also have the instinct to permit the magic to happen, and recognise it when it does. Given her first camera at the age of ten, the excitement and thrill of what was going to appear on the film remains constant, although nowadays she works with a Hasselblad. She finds the limited palette of the twelve shot film exhilarating; *I like not knowing what I've got*, it seems to be a way of forcing her concentration, of easing herself into the 'zone' that is a contract between photographer, sitter and the unknown magical ingredient that records the aesthetic gelling of the experience. Her sitters are invited to view and discuss results and if there is disagreement on the chosen portrait, it is rare. The long-sleeved dark clothes that she requested for sittings in this series allow the skin tones to sing out and the mid tones to breathe, and with this work Douglas-Menzies offers us a panoply of colour, yet all in black and white.

Liz Rideal, 2015