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‘In Service’: a series of images by photographer Julia Fullerton-Batten

Commentators tell us that more photographs have been taken in the last 10 years than in the previous 150 years of photography’s short history. Inevitably, these same commentators opine, the quality of the imagery has suffered as a result and we are currently experiencing a steady decline in standards as a myriad of snappers broadcast inferior imagery across each and every vehicle within the digital media. But perhaps this is merely another stage in the logical progression of where one particular branch of photography was bound to lead; the inexorable result of Cartier Bresson’s “decisive moment”, to the contemporary version of the photojournalist, the citizen photographer.

Since the inception of photography, practitioners have striven to capture the critical moment in a sequence of action, and thus, the essence of an event. Until relatively recently, the capacity to do so has been limited to what has been technologically possible at the time. Consequently, movement, or perhaps more accurately the inability to freeze action, has been photography’s supreme challenge.

The reason being that, as an audience, we have an insatiable desire to be able to contemplate the exact moment an event occurred, to have captured and held the pivotal point beyond which lives have been changed irrevocably. Consider Robert Capa’s sequence of the D Day landings or Harry Benson’s image of Bobby Kennedy’s assassination or Joe Rosenthal’s iconic photograph of the American flag being raised on Iwo Jima; each simultaneously memorable, meaningful and evocative.

As a viewer, we contemplate the single image in full awareness that significant events have occurred prior to the shutter being released and further, that there will be consequences to what we are witnessing. But we also know that what we see in a truly great photograph of this type is the essence of an event; this is the key moment and that is the quintessence of photojournalism. Being in the right place at the right time helps but being in possession of the appropriate equipment, technical ability and aesthetic skills is essential and these are the elements that separate the accomplished photographer from the casual snapper. Granted, there probably have been more images captured recently than ever before but these are mostly transitory, frivolous and fleeting, intended to capture a moment certainly, but of little lasting significance, intended to titillate and entertain in the short term not illustrate, inform or educate long term. And there is nothing wrong in this per se; to each his own. Indeed what this need to generate an abundance of imagery demonstrates is our desire to record and disseminate our perceptions of our world through visual means.

And this in itself is a pivotal point, it suggests that as consumers of photographic images, we just might be receptive to deeper levels of meaning in the photography ... and Julia Fullerton-Batten’s work provides us with a prime example of that which is on offer within the discipline of fine art photography.

In her series, “In Service”, Fullerton-Batten explores the underbelly of Edwardian Britain, specifically the class divisions inherent within that particular society and how these manifest themselves in the relationships between employer and employee, across the divide that separates the rich from the poor. Her choice of historical period is critical and well advised; it not only contextualises but enhances her subject matter.



The Butler and the Princess

The Edwardian era was short but significant, only lasting from Queen Victoria's death in 1901 until Edward's demise in 1910, but witnessing massive social and political change throughout Britain as the old aristocracy began to lose their power base and the working class began to seek empowerment through the democratic and ultimately political process. Fullerton-Batten has chosen the period that immediately precedes the carnage of the First World War as her backdrop, a time when the last vestiges of the old order were still precariously in place before being swept away for ever. Her theme is inequity; the division between the richest and poorest in society is vast and hundreds of thousands of men and women are forced to enter "service" in order to escape the poverty trap. There are echoes of the worst excesses of medieval feudalism and 19th century slavery in this arrangement and Fullerton-Batten is quick to recognise this in her carefully crafted photographs.



The Lady's Maid

Fullerton-Batten's series, "In Service" explores abuses of power and status and the exertion of control in Edwardian Britain by referencing a variety of mainstream genre from the last 60 years and this enables her audience to engage with her work on a number of levels. Our widely held – but ill informed – perceptions of the period evoke idyllic

visions of a tranquil island nation, England as a green and pleasant land where policemen salute the public, the economy is essentially rural and everyone is happy knowing their place in the stratified social structure.



The Chambermaid's Secret

But Fullerton-Batten presents her series in a manner that triggers conflicting emotions in her audience and causes darker thoughts to surface by framing her photographs within contexts that resonate with our collective visual language. She pays homage to the American B Movie, the Mills and Boon bodice ripper, the novels of George V. Higgins and Raymond Chandler, the naïve but quintessentially British perception of the glamorous American gangster and more recently, the art of the 1930's railway's poster and the paintings of Jack Vettriano. As an audience, we are initially comforted by a visual context that we recognise but this merely serves to lure us into Fullerton-Batten's photographs before she confronts us with the grim reality of their content.

Interestingly, she captures the essence of the stereotypes that were used to illustrate the dark practises that these images portray and thus, successfully expose them as abusive, misogynist and predatory.



His Secretary

This is a lurid, vividly coloured world of two dimensional characters placed in hyper realistic settings with the depth of a cinemascope movie.

There is an atmosphere of quiet and resigned desperation about these images that suggests parallels with the paintings of Hopper and Munch; these people are trapped in gilded cages of their own making, the initial attraction of their present circumstances have come to haunt them, they are hoist with their own petard. There is a deliberate detachment from reality evident in Fullerton-Batten's series, remoteness between the various elements which suggests a surrealist influence; Magritte's buildings and structures, Dali's compositional style and elements of Giorgio de Chirico's distinctive metaphysical style.

We also see a latent sexuality in Fullerton-Batten's photographs; there is most definitely a sense of predator and prey in several of these images and we can readily identify both the cat and the canary in any particular scenario and we are encouraged place our sympathies appropriately.



The Wet Nurse

On a technical level these are highly accomplished photographs. Cinematic in their conception, they remind us of the golden age of the Hollywood movie with their use of lavish sets, vivid colouration and striking characters. The depth of field and use of colour saturation enhances this impression as do the use of dramatic lighting, clean lines and clinically clean, uncluttered settings.

The composition and content of Fullerton-Batten's photographs is not dissimilar to that of the classic 18th or 19th century painting, to the extent that we might be looking at a contemporary version of an allegorical image. Visual clues, instances of homage and cultural references are found in abundance; and the series also contains many of the elements which would feature in a visual history of the 20th century as it draws from cinema, television and theatre. Intriguingly, although undoubtedly contemporary in their construction and execution, Fullerton-Batten's work reminds us of those early images of Oscar Gustave Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson who pioneered the use of multiple exposures to construct a complex composite image. There are also parallels with the work of American photographer Gregory Crewdson who's all encompassing, filmic approach involves the construction of elaborate sets complete with complimentary lighting within which he composes his cast of characters; Fullerton-Batten provides her own version with a decidedly darker twist.

Fullerton-Batten presents her audience with a paradox; beautiful photographs with repugnant themes. Simultaneously, her work repels, intrigues and attracts in equal measure and we must remind ourselves that these are images which depict the sordid aspects of life in London for many in the early part of the 20th century. This is not some geographically remote, historically distant past recorded in a series of fading analogue images. Fullerton-Batten has performed a difficult feat, achieving a delicate balance of disparate, essentially contradictory elements to present her audience with a fatally flawed mirage; the veneer of sophistication masking a civilisation which contains the seeds of its own destruction. She achieves this through the application of contemporary techniques and instantly recognisable

and accessible cultural iconography which force us to reconsider elements within our own history. These are powerful images which will change our perceptions of those who inhabited this Edwardian idyll.

Perhaps we are witnessing a period of rampant image making as more and more of us continue to capture the minutiae of our everyday lives. No matter; as the quantity of imagery we produce increases, so it seems does our ability to separate the mundane from the meaningful and our appreciation of those images which demonstrate the photographic practitioner's ability to produce high quality, thought provoking work.

This is effectively validated by the work of Julia Fullerton-Batten.

We also asked Julia about her background and how she approaches her work and received some interesting responses to our questions:

Interview with Julia Fullerton-Batten



Who and what provided your earliest influences as a fledgling photographer?

My father was my inspiration to become a photographer. He photographed us children incessantly, but he was also keen on shooting street scenes wherever he went. He especially enjoyed the opportunity to add on an extra weekend when he was on business trips in the USA, Europe or Asia. As a child I was always impressed to see him disappear into his makeshift dark-room and later on find the family bath full of B&W prints in the final rinse.

Can you provide us with some information about your experience as a photographer; where and how did you train for example?

I was born in Germany; my mother is German and my father English. We moved to the USA when I was two, then back to Germany when I was eleven. My parents divorced when I was sixteen and we moved with my father to England. Obviously with this peripatetic background, we benefited in many ways, but not all as I had a third, steep learning curve to finish my secondary education in England. It could have made a career choice difficult, but for me it had been obvious for a long time – I wanted to be a professional photographer.

I decided to do a Diploma course at the Royal Berkshire College of Art in Reading. After graduation I chose to be an Assistant. For five years I assisted quite a number of professional photographers engaged in a wide range of genre. I learned a lot, both technical and in a business sense. I developed my own photographic style, built up my portfolio and entered many competitions.

Some shots that I took in Vietnam won awards in competitions. This proved to be life-changing for me. Shortly after the awards a German agent signed me up and soon afterwards won my first commercial assignment for me.

After a few years doing purely commercial work and winning more awards, I started shooting my own personal projects, the first of a series that became 'Teenage Stories'. This, fortunately for me, established my reputation as a fine-art photographer.

What prompted you to begin work on the series, "In Service"?

You will note that there are two threads that run through my projects – the trials and tribulations of women from adolescence to those of a more advanced age; and, more recently, social issues ('Unadorned, 2012' and 'Blind, 2013'). The content of all these projects relates to the present day. I thought that it would be interesting to take on a period assignment, not too distant in the past, an era people of today are still able to comprehend, but still related to my current choice of themes.

I chose the Edwardian era, which was dubbed 'The Edwardian Summer', but was, in fact, a time when the divide between rich and poor was enormous, with no welfare services to alleviate the sufferings of the poor. The poor

escaped from a life of potential poverty and misery on the streets of cities and in impoverished hamlets to become servants. But life as a servant was not always that easy, certainly not as it has been frequently portrayed in many TV programmes. 'In Service' illustrates my observations of the fate of some of the women and men who went into service in the homes of the rich.

How did you go about sourcing your models and settings?

Cast, as it was, in a past era, 'In Service' required a lot of background research regarding clothing, props and locations with regards to differentiating the style and also sourcing these items. We are fortunate in the UK in having many older buildings that retain the relevant architectural style and also period furniture, decoration and accoutrements. The choice of the three locations that I finally ended up using were broadly determined by logistical considerations and, of course, cost. Sourcing the clothing and the props was more difficult. Here I had a few people researching the Internet and prop hire stores. We sourced my models in the usual way; as I prefer to use 'street-cast' models, I and an agent advertised online.

Do you tend to work alone or do you have technical/administrative assistance available?

I do not have permanent staff but hire freelancers with specific talents as and when I need them, this applies to technical personnel as well.

How do you work as a photographer; do you work on a freelance basis/are you commissioned/do you work in commercial and/or fine art photography?

Broadly speaking I am all of the above – freelance, commissioned, commercial and editorial work, and fine-art photography. My involvement with each of these categories varies with time, but the closest to being a constant is my engagement with fine-art photography.