

## Shooting Youth photography exhibition

Knowle West Media Centre

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**Review by Dr Shawn Sobers**

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In Roland Barthes' influential book about photography, *Camera Lucida*, the French theorist writes, "Ultimately, photography is subversive, not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks." The new photography exhibition at Knowle West Media Centre, *Shooting 'Youth'*, is subversive therefore for a number of reasons. It is an intelligent photography exhibition, which encourages you to appreciate the images and think at the same time. It contains central threads of ideas which have influenced how the photographs have been taken, style following content.

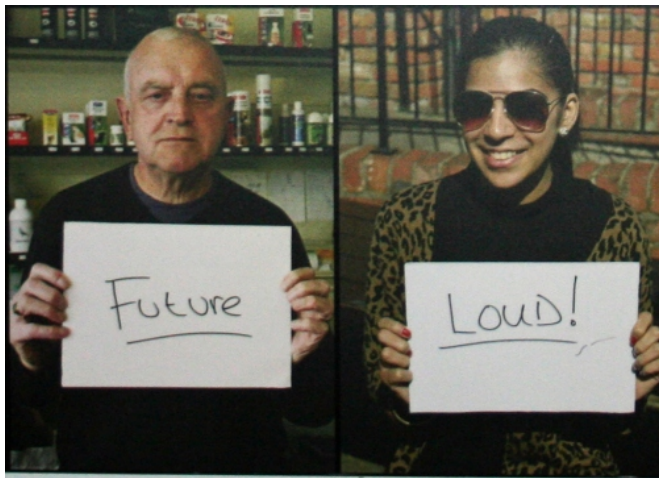
The work on display is thoughtful, sensitive, well crafted, subtle, and to borrow from Barthes, pensive. The exhibition is subversive also for the fact that all of the images have been taken by young people, in an era when to be merely young is often to be labelled subversive; blamed for riots, anti-social behaviour, illiterate text speak and being intimidating, when all they may have done is stand on a corner wearing a hooded top.

It is this idea, of challenging superficial assumptions of others, that informs the work of **Kiri Tierney**, who has two displays in the exhibition. "Breaking the Stereotype" is a series of twelve symmetrically arranged images of a young man, seen in the first image dressed smart casual, then seen in the subsequent images with his body exposing a multiple array of tattoos. Rather than being purely decorative, his tattoos are all codes of his personal philosophies and beliefs. The work challenges the audience to consider, what do you see, and what do you imagine you see? Tierney's second display, 'Facial Awareness', is a montage of a face consisting of parts from different people, speaking to the paradoxical notion that humans are all the same and at the same time all different - which ultimately makes us all the same in our difference.



Kiri Tierney - Breaking the Stereotype

**Sabrina Chowdhury's** exhibit, 'The Truth About Youth', challenges the sitters of her portraits directly with the task of summing up young people in a single word, writing their answers on a held up piece of paper in a style reminiscent of the artist Gillian Wearing. The fascinating element of the results Chowdhury elicited is how all the young she photographed contained words which were predominantly honest and self-aware, (carefree, fun, lost, naughty and rude), whilst the older people she asked wrote words of encouragement and idealism, (potential, inspiring, future and (again) potential). This is not to say that the words provided by the adults are not also true (the word 'potential' hides a multitude of contrasting meanings), but the straight forward honesty of the young people's quotes strike as refreshing - saying to the world, no we are not perfect, but neither are you, and neither is the world.



Sabrina Chowdhury - The Truth About Youth

The theme of teenage parenting is the subject of two bodies of work in the exhibition, that of **Lucy Fulford** and **Callen Hale** (the accompanying text tells the viewer that Hale himself is a teenage father, which interestingly is a demographic we don't hear much about). Both photographers take different approaches to representing the girls (only girls are included, none of the dads). Fulford presents a sensitive and upbeat set of environmental portraits, representing the girls as friendships groups, as mothers with their children, and importantly, also as individuals, which is an aspect of their identity often forgotten. The series presents a positive and fun representation, in very natural and casual poses in real life locations, working as a counterbalance to the more problematized representations often seen in mainstream press. Hale's work is equally as optimistic and upbeat, presenting a set of accomplished portraits of the young mothers with their children in a studio setting, in the style of high street commercial photography, which he has achieved in a convincing way.



Lucy Fulford – Teenage Parents Project



Callen Hale – Teenage Parents Project

The work of **Rachael Heapey** turns the lens onto a senior citizens dance group rather than young people, and has captured a beautiful and sensitive set of portraits and documentary images. Simply presented, with large formal portraits of the dance partners together, and smaller documentary photographs of dancing in action underneath, the series is heart-warming, fun and energetic, showing there is plenty of life and high spirits left in the elders of our communities. Heapey's work compliments the teenage mums images well, spanning ages and experiences, both showing life is to be lived to the full in the face of any challenges that may arise.



Rachael Heapey – Young at Heart

Not all of the work in the exhibition looks at the subject of age in a direct way. **Matt Green**, Tom Hawkins and Mateo Ocasta each exhibit more abstract and impressionist work, pointing their cameras out into the fabric of the world, rather than

concentrating so much on other people. Green presents a highly accomplished series of photographs titled 'Different Light', offering fleeting glimpses into life, fragmentary views of time passing – traffic, texture of tree trunks, abstract light trails, and cloud formations, amongst other things. The photographs are all confidently produced and evidence that Green has good technical control of his chosen medium, to make the ordinary extraordinary to the eye.



Matt Green - Different Light

**Tom Hawkins** is also a photographer fascinated with the visual interest in his everyday surroundings, concentrating for his series on broken windows and the glass protection of a local community centre. The beauty of dereliction has long been a fascination for photographers and Hawkins' work falls within that tradition. Close-ups of fractured glass, peering through the rippled patterns of re-enforced glass onto the outside world, and abstract views of twigs and branches intermeshed with security fencing, offers a subtle comment on the often unseen dynamics within community spaces neighbourhood living, and the reality that any system, whether it be a physical building or human relationships, requires constant maintenance.

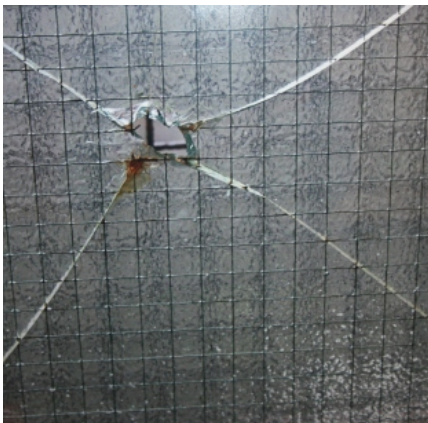


Image: Tom Hawkins - Untitled

**Maseo Ocasta** presents a pair of urban landscape documentary photographs, showing people going about their everyday lives in the shadow of their concrete surroundings – one of the back of a group of people walking past a wall of graffiti, and the other of a Muslim woman on her phone stood in front of a derelict shop next to a massage parlour. The diptych is titled 'Not my Property', offering perhaps the suggestion that, in city life especially, people just get on and make do living their

daily lives, even if they have no control or influence over their environment. Ocasta's work is deceptive in appearing at first glance to be straightforward slices of life, though offering more hints and details of narrative on closer inspection. The work would benefit from being printed much larger to draw some of the nuances out of the images for audiences to fully appreciate.



Image: Maseo Ocasta - Not my Property

**Lewis Saunders** explores the idea of narrative in a more direct way, presenting the most mixed media body of work in the exhibition with the creation of a comic strip, employing dramatised photography techniques along with creative writing, graphic design and post-production image manipulation. Titled 'Beware of the Giantess Kate', the storyline follows the fortunes of the title character who, when accidentally drinks a magic potion, turns into a 200ft woman. Going on a rampage through the now tiny city of Bristol, Kate uses her new-found power to wreck havoc and destruction, before eventually returning back to normal size, with very little remorse of her actions. The comic strip is a good fun dramatic romp, in the surreal tradition of the b-movie Hollywood classics from the 1950s, (the subtitle of comic strip is 'The Attack of the 200ft Woman from Earth'). In that same tradition, Saunders' work has a healthy refusal of trying to communicate a moral or serious message, which is as refreshing to see in a young people's exhibition as more serious subjects. Both light and shade are needed in successful exhibitions to provide surprises and a sense of journey, and this inject of humour creates an effective balance celebrating unashamed imaginative creativity and youthful playfulness, which still needs to be celebrated.



Image: Lewis Saunders - Beware of the Giantess Kate

(The Attack of the 200ft Woman from Earth)

The final body of work in the exhibition is from **Liam Charlton**, who presents a thoughtful series of portraits titled 'Hopes and Dreams'. The work shows people of all generations - from a teenager through to an elder gentleman - all holding props which hint at their aspirations for their futures. The work speaks to the idea that ambitions never die and people should not write off their lives or give up their aspirations, that there is always more to strive for in life. Charlton offers only the photographs to the audience and no text detailing what exactly the aspiration was for each sitter and what the props mean, which was an excellent curatorial decision. Not knowing exactly what props are alluding to, (though admittedly some are more obvious than others), allows the audience to make up their own minds, encouraging us to look closer at the people in the images and making connections with the props as visual hints, rather than having to rely on accompanying text interpretation to do all of the work for us. Making the audience look closer at the images, at the people represented in them, encourages us to work it out for ourselves, which is just as it should be, rather than having information spoon fed to us with no effort. This is what Barthes had in mind when speaking of photography's quiet subversive nature, encouraging the audience to leave the room thinking a little more about certain aspects of life than before they entered, the photography working its magic on us in a subconscious fashion.



Liam Charlton - Hopes and Dreams

This marriage of photography and young people is interesting, happening at a time (in digitally active societies) when photographic technologies are ubiquitous in daily life, unquantifiably more ubiquitous than photography in advertising and print media that we have been used to for generations. Easily captured on mobile phones and games consoles, and as equally easy to exhibit and distribute using social network platforms, photography exists in every corner of our existence, as common as the material texture of our surroundings; we no longer even notice them. (How often do

you actually look at adverts on the internet?) Young people are at the cutting edge of technological photographic revolutions without even realising it.

This exhibition is a timely reminder that good photography, no matter how technologically advanced, resonates deeper with an audience when the thing that the camera has been pointed at has been thought about and considered, even if thought about after the split second act of actually taking the photograph, which may have been purely by instinct. This exhibition contains good work of that nature, and is part of Barthes' quiet encouragement of subversive photography, that which is and makes one pensive, rather than merely mirroring life, also asking questions of life, in a quiet subtle way.

The exhibition is open until Christmas 2011.

*Review by Dr Shawn Sobers, Senior Lecturer - Photography and Media, University of the West of England. 31 October 2011. Photos of exhibition taken by my 10 year old daughter Mahalia.*

<http://beyondproject.wordpress.com/2011/10/31/review-of-shooting-youth-photography-exhibition-at-knowle-west-media-centre/>