

## **Polly Borland**

### *Carousel*

Interview published in *HotShoe* no.144, October/November 2006, pp.60-63

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Polly Borland migrated to the UK from Australia in 1989 where she had established reputation as an editorial photographer. She won the John Kobal portrait prize in 1994 with an image of a transvestite in Brazil. Since then, she has photographed actors, musicians, intellectuals and politicians, including Kylie Minogue and the Queen. As well as these commissions, she pursues her own documentary projects, most notably the *Adult Babies* project, a study of infantilists – ordinary people who dress up and act like babies for emotional fulfillment. Her current project, *Carousel* is a study of eccentric individuals who define the streets of her hometown of Brighton.

JA You've been living Brighton for eight years now. When did you start taking pictures for the *Carousel* project?

PB Only this last year. I've been working with Zoe Bedeaux who's a stylist, on this project. We did a commercial job together down here in Brighton and we decided to do something for *iD* magazine. That's when the *Carousel* project was started, around May last year. I approached Crane Kalman Gallery with my work and suggested it for an exhibition. He contacted me about four months ago and wanted to put on a show on to coincide with the Brighton Biennial. We'd only shot about six to eight images which meant we had to do a lot more to bring it up to about twenty-four images, so we only really completed the project in the last four months.

JA That's a relatively short period of time, is this something that will be ongoing?

PB Yes. Zoe and I would like to do a book. I've also been planning to go and hang out on the Palace Pier and do a photo-essay around there. It's an idea I've had for the last eight years and never done. But for me this work is almost more interesting. We've used various locations around Brighton, and photographed the local, eye-catching "talent". It's based on how they adorn themselves and express themselves through clothing, rather than what they do. For me this is great because I can wander around the streets and just find someone. It would be rare that I would go out and not find anyone. It's something that could be done almost in our spare time because it's not too demanding. On the whole they're done on the streets – there's been no lighting involved, no tripod, just a Mamiya 7, light-meter and a reflector.

JA That sounds like quite a traditional view of the lone, wandering photographer, but you like to involve other people in the production of work. How do you find working with other people?

PB A lot of the work I've done in the past has been alone or with just an assistant. These sorts of collaborations involve combining two different creative people and working things out as we go along. Zoe and I pre-planned a lot of the original work, and it was very much her idea to use people and clothing, and even some of the locations, and I just concentrated on the photography rather than the content, whereas in the past I've been very conscious of the content that I've generated myself. This way affords me to be a bit more relaxed and also it's just fun to be working with other people. Obviously I had the input during the editing process so I'm very much helping to guide what goes into the show and therefore what comes out of the show.

JA It's quite interesting that you've managed to combine a commercial project with a gallery commission, and many other photographers must be extremely envious that you have some very interesting commissions yet you are still very much committed to your personal documentary projects. How do the two coincide?

PB I think one informs the other. Stylistically my personal [documentary] work is quite different. I've got a show next year at the Michael Hoppen Gallery which is very different. It's about a giant girl called Gwen who features in the *Carousel* series. It's similar to the *Adult Babies* work but not as reportage-based: it's much more personal. The work is "created" rather than "found". I see those projects as quite distinct from my portrait work. Although there are similarities, both in style and in content, the personal work explores things in greater depth, and stylistically, it's not constrained to a formula.

JA What do you mean by a formula?

PB Commercially, how much you get out of a job depends very much on time. For instance, if you are doing a portrait and you only have only five or ten minutes with the subject, you have to go in knowing exactly what you want to do and how to achieve it as best as possible. So obviously over the years I've come up with some kind of working formula, so creatively it doesn't necessarily stretch me. Also the emotional involvement is not that great: It might be the first time you've met that person so you don't necessarily have an emotional connection with them. You might admire what they're doing or the way they look, but the depth of the relationship probably isn't there because you just don't know them. My personal projects are all about getting to know the individual and exploring different aspects of them on an emotional level as well as an artistic level. Because of the time constraints of this project, we haven't really been able to revisit the people. In a way it gives a freshness to the work. I would put these images into the portrait category of my work although it isn't really commercial because it wasn't shot for commercial motivations, but the images utilize all aspects of my working practice.

JA I suppose it's street photography really, which there hasn't been much of very recently. Is this a new place for you to work?

PB It is really, and I've loved it because of its spontaneity, and it's about working with what you've got. There's a wonderful collection of people here. One of the first things that drove me to take photographs was a sense of collecting. It

was almost like I was collecting people. It's like having swap-cards when I was a child: You can literally determine what's on the card. It's not only collecting cards or the photographs but it's collecting the things you're photographing. These portraits are indicative of that desire: This collector's zeal has always motivated me.

JA I think that instinct to collect and hoard is common throughout all photographers. Martin Parr who is a prolific collector is absolutely typical of that. So this is getting back to the essence of photography for you?

PB For sure.

JA I think Brighton has a wonderful identity. Is it similar to your native Australia?

PB I do, and that's why we settled here. Brighton reminds me of the grandeur of St. Kilda beach in Melbourne which also has a real variety of people; the similarities are definitely there. For me there's a freedom down here that I didn't find during my ten years in London. A lot of people come here and it's a perpetual holiday for them. You can abdicate responsibility a bit more easily because it's got the holiday atmosphere. And so you tend to get this freeing-up in the way people dress that you wouldn't necessarily get in the big city.

JA How would you compare the photography scene in Australia to Britain and Europe?

PB In Australia you can't really specialize due to the population size. The Australian scene can't sustain the level of the weird and wonderful in my work. Now, I work editorially, hold exhibitions, do reportage, publish books and children's books, which is fantastic. In Australia I would probably be doing all of those things, but I don't think the subject matter would be as interesting. There is incredibly interesting subject matter in Australia, and I have done projects and there are lots of other things to study, but there's no context or sustenance for that

kind of weird and wonderful imagery, such as *iD* or *Face*. You just couldn't afford to live covering the kind of subject matter that I do, in Australia. Despite the technology, Australia is isolated just because of the distance. Australians still have an isolated, inferiority complex. I'd come to too many dead ends and I just had to leave.

JA     Going back to the *Adult Babies* project, how on earth do you go about making contact and gaining the trust of such an extraordinary community?

PB     A friend of mine told me about this club in London called the Hushaby Baby Club and I just rang them up. They were very open to publicity. The *Independent on Saturday Magazine* commissioned me to do the article and I spent a weekend photographing them although they all wanted their faces covered. Six months later I decided to expand this into a proper project. I spoke to each of the babies that I'd connected with the first time around and I explained that they would have to show their faces and actually, they were all in agreement. Access depends on whether you're trustworthy. They trusted me and I've never given them a reason not to: I've honored and respected them. They became unmasked right from the word go. That project means a great deal to me. I still know some of the men and they mean a great deal to me. It's the only document of that sub-culture or fetish that I think is in existence and it's a very comprehensive document. Sometimes things become more acceptable as time moves on, and I hope this is the case for the sake of the men that practice this. I hope people won't find the images so hard to look at, but then again, I quite like that my images might not become more acceptable!

*Carousel* was exhibited at Crane Kalman, Kensington Gardens, Brighton, from 3<sup>rd</sup> October to 5<sup>th</sup> November 2006