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Marilyn Stafford / Stories in Pictures 1950-1960

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Interviewed by **Helen Trompeteler**

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, USA, in 1925, and following studies at University of Wisconsin, Marilyn Stafford launched her photographic career in New York in 1948 when she was asked to photograph Albert Einstein by friends making a film about him. From there on, her photographic career took her across the world, starting in Paris in the 1950s, where she received commissions from a number of Paris fashion houses and also photographed street children living in one of the city's notorious slums, Cite Lesage-Bullourde, near the Bastille. In 1958 Stafford traveled to Tunisia to document the Algerian refugees fleeing France's 'Scorched Earth' attacks. In the early 1960s she went on to travel widely in Lebanon, later publishing the book "Silent Stories: A Photographic Journey Through Lebanon In the 60s". In the mid-sixties Marilyn Stafford settled in London, where, as one of a handful of women photographers, she helped pave the way for future female photographers working on Fleet Street. In 1972 Stafford travelled to India to photograph Indira Gandhi, India's first and only woman Prime Minister. Stafford's many further visits to India included photographing Hampi, a Unesco World Heritage site, for the Indian Art and Architectural publication MARG, and the Adivasi Ghotul Muria and Warli Tribes. Marilyn Stafford's internationally published work spans from 1948-1980 and covers a broad scope of subjects and periods of modern history.

Below, Helen Trompeteler spoke to Marilyn Stafford about her life in photography, and the background to some of the series of photographic works which are included in exhibition 'Stories in Pictures 1950-1960' at [Art Bermondsey Project Space](#) from 27th June – 9th July 2017.

HT: *Thinking about your careers before photography, did your early training as an actress and early emphasis on storytelling influence you as you first began your career in photography?*

MS: I was studying as a child in the Cleveland (Ohio) Playhouse Theatre from the age of nine, and we had a very fine teacher who taught the Stanislavski method of acting – how you go out and study people and reactions, and you learn a character from the inside out. In the beginning I wasn't thinking in terms of photography at all, but I always clicked away with my box brownie. The theatre offered through the words of writers that I liked, who had something to say, a means of expression.

When I went to New York, I did some off-Broadway work and a little early television. I had friends who were film makers who introduced me to film, and we would often go to the Museum of Modern Art in New York which had a marvellous film club. I went to see all those wonderful early films at the Cinematheque and the visual linked with words was very interesting to me.

HT: *What kind of cinema influenced you at this time?*

MS: I believe I see every photograph I take as a cinema-story. In a way if I had really been courageous I might have even thought of doing cinematography but at the time I didn't have that kind of thinking process. But I learnt a lot through early cinema and these points of reference came back later – Battleship Potemkin, Ivan the terrible, Eisenstein...and of course the early French films.

Later when I met Cartier-Bresson, I found that he too was influenced by such films. His advice was the same as Eisenstein's – "shoot shoot shoot – cut cut cut" – and that was the way Cartier-Bresson presented stills photography to me. And of course he would shoot myriad rolls of film to get one picture. And of course I did the same.

HT: *After your time in New York, you arrived in Paris in the early 1950s. At this time you found work in fashion photography. You made this kind of work your own – taking fashion photography out into the streets – can you tell me more about your approaches to this work?*

MS: In order to stay in Paris I had to work – and I was able to get a job in public relations for the designer Elsa Schiaparelli, who was a very big haute couture designer. She and Chanel were the groundbreakers of early couture, releasing women from the stuffy clothing that they wore.

Later I got a job doing PR and photography in a fashion public relations business whose clients were the young ready to wear houses, and the fabric manufacturers whose fabrics were used by the haute-couture houses. I was there at the right time, just at the beginning of the ready-to-wear in France. But my mind wasn't on fashion, it was on seeing what was going on outside – so I took the models out – to my streets not their streets. At that time photography was done in posh gardens, and posh restaurants, beautiful town houses...I wanted to bring real everyday life to those pictures.

HT: *A significant part of your archive from your years in Paris is also the photographs from the Cite Lesage-Bullourde and Boulogne-Billancourt which give such a rare insight into what was one of the city's poorest neighbourhoods. Can you tell me a bit more about the background to this work?*

MS: Both series of these pictures weren't intentional, it was part of going out and just taking pictures to take pictures – I was self-taught with the encouragement of film people at first, and later Cartier-Bresson. When I first went to Paris I hadn't thought I'd stay there and I did! I thought it was so wonderful and different from the United States. I suppose the discovery of something totally different is an inspiration and it opens your eyes to new worlds, new thinking, and new vision.

I had an old Rolleiflex camera and I would take a bus to the end of the line. That is how I found myself at Bastille and at Boulogne-Billancourt. Boulogne-Billancourt was interesting because it was, on one side, the home of film studios and many wealthy French film people lived in that area – on the other end was the Renault car factory where there were poor and working class people. It was a very strange place and while I found the slum areas by chance, my intention has always been to tell a story which is relevant to a social concern.

HT: *That desire to produce very socially committed photography and bring attention to marginalised or under-represented people, comes across through so many strands of your archive – your work in Tunisia, Lebanon and India for example.*

MS: Yes – you see I was brought up during the Depression, and of course there was the wonderful work of Dorothea Lange who showed the terrible effect of the Dust Bowl displaced people in the Mid West, and those pictures were very prominent in Life magazine and the newsreels. So there was that knowledge even without it being spelt out that a picture could raise an emotion that could make people aware of situations. I was brought up to believe that my ultimate future was to get married, and be a stay at home mom, so women photographers like Dorothea Lange and Margaret Bourke White showed me a different path was possible.

The interesting thing was at that time there was the election in the US and President Roosevelt made social changes which helped people come out of that terrible Depression. It became clear to me that I wanted to bring attention to terrible situations but at the same time show that there were positive solutions. This is why I'm so excited by what photographer Nina Emmett is doing with FotoDocument and why, in association with FotoDocument, I established The Marilyn Stafford FotoReportage Award for Women Photographers for solution focused documentary photographic projects.

When I went to India in 1971 to photograph Indira Gandhi, she was a great heroine when I arrived there. The short war against Pakistan took place while I was there. Before the war the Pakistan army had a policy of kidnapping and violating young women in what was then East Pakistan and later became the new country Bangladesh. I wanted to do a story about these girls which was a very difficult subject because of religious sensibilities. Indira Gandhi was very supportive of me completing that story. It took some time to make connections to do the story in Bangladesh. When I returned to England I was able to get the story published in the Guardian and I raised £5,000 to send to Bangladesh to help the raped women through the International Planned Parenthood Association. So really with the India work, I feel I didn't do things so much photographically but did make a humanitarian contribution.

HT: *What have your experiences been revisiting your archive in preparing for your exhibitions with Lucy Bell Gallery and Art Bermondsey Project Space?*

MS: My sincerest thanks go to Lucy Bell and Art Bermondsey Project Space for these exhibitions and for rekindling all those memories. In my travels many negatives have been lost and my very special thanks go to Robin Bell for having new negatives made by the miracles of new technologies and for the beautiful silver gelatin prints he has produced

for both exhibitions. He has hand printed photographs that I have never seen enlarged before and this has been a most wonderful experience.

– interviewed by [Helen Trompeteler](#)

For further viewing:

www.marilynstaffordphotography.com

<http://fotodocument.org/fotoreportage-award/>

<https://www.lucy-bell.com/exhibition/marilyn-stafford-stories-in-pictures-1950-60>



