



The photographer who captured a time of change

From fashion to slums of Paris: show will celebrate work of Marilyn Stafford

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Marilyn Stafford's photographs depict a century of change, from shifting dress shapes to the impact of world conflicts. Today they are also proof of the long and varied life of a unique artist.

Stafford, 91, who lives in Sussex, was born in Ohio in 1925 and launched her career with a 1948 amateur portrait of Albert Einstein, before going on to work alongside the famed photographers Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa. A new exhibition dedicated to her work opens on Saturday in St Leonards-on-Sea near Hastings, before coming to the Art Bermondsey Project Space in London in late June.

The show at the Lucy Bell Gallery features 67-year-old images remastered from damaged originals by the renowned darkroom printer Robin Bell. Many of the photographs highlight the poverty in 1950s Paris, where Stafford was living with her first husband, a British foreign correspondent. In the poor quarters of Bastille and Boulogne-Billancourt, Stafford found street children living around the notorious slums of Cité Lesage-Bullourde, now the site of the Paris Opera Bastille.

Other photographs in the show follow the development of Stafford's photo-documentary approach to fashion shoots. She took the models out on to the boulevards and squares. "Fashion photography was a double-edged thing," she said. "On the one hand it was marvellous, all the beauty of the designs and the fabrics was delightful. But the business end of it had its dicey side."



Marilyn Stafford in borrowed mink coat during a 1950s fashion shoot in Paris. Photograph: Gene Fenn

Stafford's first front-page picture was taken for the *Observer* from North Africa in 1958, showing fleeing Algerian refugees. "I was very involved with the *Observer*. Either I was sent out on assignment and did what I had to do, or I instigated my own projects. My particular interest was to see humanitarian issues through my camera and draw attention to them. The picture I loved most is of a refugee mother holding this poor little infant. That image meant more than anything else. I wanted to do a story about the refugees. I believe that documentary work should raise social issues, and was very happy when other photographers and journalists were commissioned to go out and record the situation."

Growing up during the Depression in America, Stafford was aware, she said, not just of the poverty of hungry migrants from the Dust Bowl, but also of those fleeing Germany to safety before the second world war.

"I congratulate myself for surviving so long, but I have never put myself in positions of real danger. I was very friendly with Bob Capa, and once he suggested that I go to work with Chim, the working name of another Magnum photographer, David Seymour, as an assistant. But I knew he was a war correspondent, so I said I would not go. And, of course, both of them were killed covering conflicts."

Stafford has launched an award in her name for young female photographers. "The object is to give women a little bit of money towards building up a photo essay that addresses important issues. I am doing it in conjunction with the arts organisation FotoDocument [submissions by 26 May]," Stafford said. "Life has been good to me, so I felt I should try to give something back. When I started out it was very hard for a woman in Fleet Street, and I am sure, although it has improved, that that is still true."

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