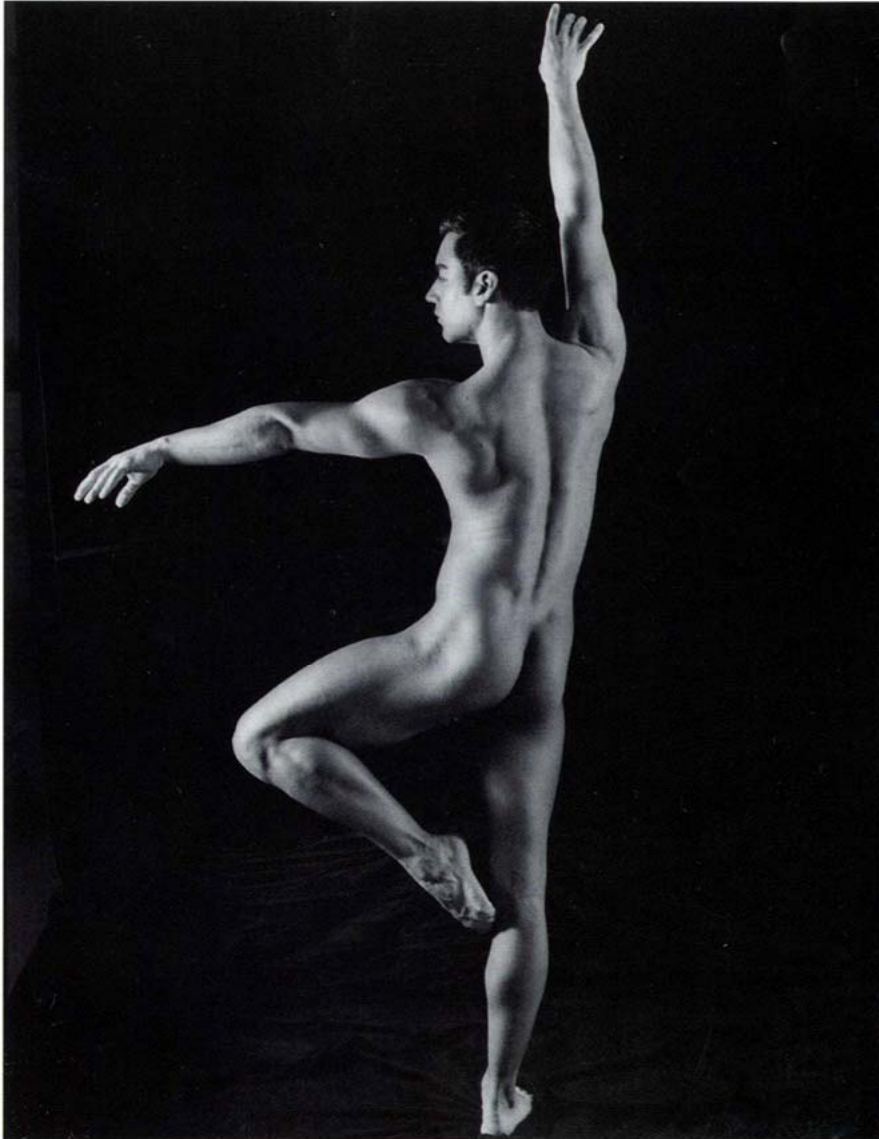


# Feminine touch

Nude photography traditionally puts women in front of the lens and men behind it but, finds **Diane Smyth**, plenty of female photographers are exploring the form

Right: © Dianora Niccolini.



From Edward Weston to Nobuyoshi Araki, the photographers best known for shooting nudes are male (and their models usually female). But, as American photographer Dianora Niccolini points out, women photographers have also explored the form over the last 150 years – it's just that their work is less well known.

Do women photograph nudes differently from men? The jury's out, although the concept of the 'male gaze' has become widely adopted since its introduction in Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay

*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Here we present the work of four women who photograph nudes, and hear how they approach the form.

## **Dianora Niccolini**

Dianora Niccolini started out as a dancer but took up photography when she met Weegee in 1963. Her first serious photographic exhibition, in 1974, was a study of the female nude, and her second, in 1975, explored the male nude. She has become well known for her male nudes, and 15 of her studies were included

in the Taschen publication *The Male Nude* by David Leddick, in 1998. Most recently, as she explains here, she has edited an anthology of male nudes taken by female photographers.

'The reason why it appears that there are so few male nudes is because mainstream publishers don't publish male nudes in their magazines or books. I think it has to do with homophobia.

'There are magazines and book publishers that publish male nudes, but they are targeted at the gay community and mostly shot by men. This has given the

impression that this subject is of no interest to women. But quite the opposite is the case. Most women love to look at men, especially unclothed.

'I have put together an anthology of male nudes taken by female photographers, including work by more than 50 living artists. I have discovered such a wide diversity of expression that I find it difficult to declare that there is a female point of view. I think that the motivation varies for different women. Some are sexually motivated while others are emotionally, psychologically and aesthetically driven.

'The Throckmorton Fine Art Gallery and Aperture are working together on the project to launch it as an exhibition in a museum. But every publisher I have approached has rejected it. Why is this?

'Many women photographers have shot male nudes throughout the years. Although there is little evidence, I am sure that women have been photographing their husbands and lovers since the inception of photography, albeit in a very clandestine way.

'We know that men in the 19th Century photographed other men in the nude. Isn't it also possible that some women did? It would have been scandalous for them to have been caught doing so, however, so it would have been done in secret. Imogen Cunningham, for example, faced dire consequences when she dared to publish nude photographs of her husband.

'This is why male nude photography largely became the official domain of gay men – and homophobia ensured that the mainstream press avoided any association until the mid 1970s. Now male nudes are often seen on gallery walls and in ads and fashion magazines, although they are still associated with specifically homoerotic impulses.

'Somehow I have been lucky, and my work has been accepted. My approach to photographing nudes is aesthetically driven. I want to capture beauty. I am not sexually driven, as are some of my male counterparts, and thus

my work may appear less erotic than theirs.

'I'd love to publish the anthology: it's an attempt to clarify and establish the role of women who have photographed naked men. I'd like to help the general population, both men and women, accept that although the male nude in photography may sometimes be homoerotic, it can also be great art.'

### Cecilia Magill

Cecilia Magill has set up a successful business photographing pregnant women nude, but her interest in nudes extends beyond the purely financial. In fact her images of pregnancy started out as a personal project, and she's currently planning a trip to Japan to photograph the prenatal experience there. And her portfolio also extends beyond pregnancy, including male nudes as well as female.

'I have shot both male and female models, including pregnant women, nude. They have suggested that being photographed by a woman was more relaxing, but they have also described it as a liberating experience. One model I photographed is a creative writer and wrote a piece on how it felt to be photographed nude. It was interesting to hear her thoughts and beautiful for her to share the experience. I think it takes inner confidence to allow a stranger to

photograph you nude.

'I don't have a preference on whether I shoot male or female nudes, I think the human body is beautiful. But I tend to photograph more women due to the nature of my work [photographing pregnancy] and in terms of photographing from a woman's point of view, it is perhaps easier to photograph a woman.

'I do think women do photograph nudes differently to men, depending on their subject, as there is often a male gaze on images of the female nude. But this is not typical of all male photographers photographing female nudes – think of Gregory Crewdson or Robert Farber. Equally Nan Goldin's photographs of nudes are very different to the work of Mona Kuhn. Perhaps it's better to say that people photograph men and women, and it is down to the photographer's personality as to how the subject is viewed, or how they want their subject to be viewed.

'There don't have to be sexual connotations attached to nude images, but there is a history of this due to pornography. Nudes are sexualised in some areas of our culture. Take *FHM* or *Nuts* magazine, for example. Men will buy magazines to see naked women because they want to see nudity. There is a demand for it and it is supplied.

'However, nudes are also seen in our culture in different arenas,

such as art house films, contemporary photography magazines and exhibitions and paintings or sculptures in museums and galleries. With the popularity of contemporary art, people are more aware of seeing a nude and it is more acceptable to be seen. Nudes have been made popular in our culture. People are more open about nudity now, and are perhaps more comfortable about having a nude image on display in their home.

'There is already a movement beyond the sexualised kind of imagery. Photographers such as Mona Kuhn show nudity through exceptionally beautiful photographs. She shows the inner strength of people, so that even though they are disrobed they are still clothed in their confidence and personality.'

### Michelle Sank

Michelle Sank is a documentary photographer, whose projects have included images of teenage parents and young carers. Her most recent project, *The Water's Edge*, involved photographing women aged 16 to 90 who had worked on the Liverpool Waterfront, and will be published and exhibited later in the year. For the past two years, Sank has also worked on a project called *Wondrous*, exploring older women's sexuality.

'I'm interested in the history that goes with an older body. We

Above: © Michelle Sank.

Left: © Cecilia Magill.

'I think it takes inner confidence to allow a stranger to photograph you nude.'

Above: © Joan Sinclair.

'It would have been patronising to go in feeling sorry for the women or assuming they were being used. And if I had gone in with that attitude, they would have sensed it.'

see photographs of younger people everywhere, and our idea of beauty is informed by looking at them. We are surrounded by so many things trying to encourage us to banish the effects of age. There is no appreciation that a body can be sexual and feminine even when it's older.

'But actually there is something quite beautiful about older skin, and I wanted to celebrate that. It's almost as though older people are marked by their experiences and show the lines of their life. It's a different beauty and it's nice to appreciate it. When you talk to older women and think about what they've been through – especially women of that generation – it's really amazing.

'The women I have photographed were not at all shy. The woman at the window I didn't know at all, I'd never met her before I went to her house. I started to photograph her in her nightclothes, then she suddenly said 'Did you know I've had breast cancer?' and just took her top off. I've also photographed my mother in her underwear.

'Both women were very relaxed and free and there was something very bold in their confidence that I really liked. My mother is in her early 80s, and I think perhaps when you get to be that age

you just don't care any more. Perhaps there's also something different in the fact that I'm a woman photographing other women. There can be certain connotations that go with men photographing nude women.

'There are so many adverts with sexualised nudes that you almost become immune. But there are photographers who do something else with it. I want to photograph the person, not an image. It's not for the body's sake, it's for what goes with it. So I'm not sure I'd like to do full frontal nudity – I'd rather do something more obscure.'

### Joan Sinclair

Joan Sinclair was 22 and teaching English in Tokyo when a friend took her to the city's notorious Kabukicho district. The area houses some 5000 sex shops, but what really caught her eye were the Image Clubs, fetish emporiums that cater for every conceivable sexual fantasy. The project was published as a book, *Pink Box*, by Abrams last autumn – pink is the euphemism for commercial sex in Japan, just as red, or red light, describes it in the West.

'I worked in Japan for two years, and got to hear about the so-called Image Clubs because I learnt some colloquial Japanese.

Foreigners are not welcome in these clubs but they are a massive part of Japanese society, so of course I was fascinated. I had to dedicate an entire year just to get access to them.

'The 'image' refers to the fact that they provide fantasy role play. The women who work there wear costumes, including cartoon animal costumes. They work in private rooms that are made up to match the fantasy. For example, you can see in the background of one of my images that a room I found was made up to look like a schoolroom. They are fantastically photographic places.

'Because I was working in a documentary way, I tried to record the rooms exactly as they were. You can see boxes of tissues and lubricants in the background. The lighting was sometimes hard to deal with – some of the rooms are fluorescent, lit with black lights. But I wanted to photograph them as if I was a customer.

'My Japanese is very esoteric – I know some ridiculously rude words because I worked on this project – so in some of the photographs the girls are laughing at what I'm saying. It helped to break the ice very quickly. Some of the other images are harder to look at. I wanted to include those

pictures too though, I didn't want to candy coat what the women do with the customers.

'The book is very bright and cheerful because that is what these places are like. They are also scrupulously clean. I wanted to go in with a very objective point of view and be very non judgemental. It would have been patronising to go in feeling sorry for the women or assuming they were being used. And if I had gone in with that attitude, they would have sensed it.

'My work is documentary, and I get annoyed when people call it erotica. But I know that my book will sometimes be stocked with erotica, especially in the US. You just have to be brave about what you are doing and believe in it.

'People have said to me "Why photograph these girls, they are already being used", but I felt it was really important to show them. Image Clubs are Japan's second largest industry, but most outsiders have never heard of them. For better or worse, they are there.' **BJP**

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