#NWConnect: Interview with photographer, Philippa James

**Kimberly Glassman (KG):** Today we have Philippa James here to talk about her work for her exhibition *100 Women of Oxford*.

Philippa James visited one hundred women, in their homes, and listened to experiences of love and loss, politics, motherhood, climate change, dreams, disability, murder, sexuality, mental health, fear, imposter syndrome, social justice, family conflict, abuse, feminism, war, joy, death, social inclusion and many more stories of humanity. In this exhibition you will have the opportunity to meet all one hundred brave, courageous, inspirational women, who are a part of Oxford’s community. We are so happy to have you hear and thank you for taking the time to chat with us today.

**KG: I know that you have not always lived in Oxford, can you tell us how you got here?**

**Philippa James (PJ):** I was brought up in the middle of nowhere in South Wales and I moved to London after University and I absolutely loved it. I lived there for about 10 years. When I had a baby I simply could not afford to live there anymore, but I still loved city life and so Oxford was the closest city really.

**KG: In an article you mentioned that you started this project looking at many different people and then honed in on women. What drew you to them?**

**PJ:** As I said, I was brought up in South Wales and it was quite an old-fashioned household where my father was the one in charge. He is a lovely man, but he always kind of intimidated me. Not so much now, but he did when I was younger. I wasn’t encouraged to speak up or have an opinion. I think deep within me there is this passion to rebel against that and encourage women to speak, share their story, their opinion, and their beliefs. I think there is so much to learn from other women, no matter who you talk to. I am also probably still learning myself on how to speak up. I guess I am curious to see how others do it.

Obviously, these days you can listen to so many incredible podcasts and hear so many women’s stories, but I wanted to find out more about who lived on my doorstep and about the people I would pass every day on the streets. That was kind of my starting point, but looking at it on a deeper level it probably does come more, like anything, from my childhood.

**KG:** **That definitely comes across in your portraits. The women take such a strong stance that we don’t tend to see in the media and the art world. Interjecting this type of imagery really does echo your position telling women to speak up, to be heard, to be seen. I think your work is done brilliantly, but I also think that those coming to the gallery will see this in the work as they interact with these photographs.**

**Visitors to The North Wall will be meeting these women for the first time and being introduced to their stories. When you met them, you too were strangers, is that right? In your work, when you capture this essence or moment of getting to know a person: when someone unknown becomes known to you, did you face any difficulties in summarising this encounter in a line let alone an image?**

**PJ:** They are kind of two separate things really. The text was the harder thing for me, much harder than the photography. I struggle with words anyway. Some were easier perhaps, but others you could have written a whole book and still there would be more to write. I will be honest; it was almost an impossible task. In fact, at one point, the stories were so inspiring that I had a massive attack of imposter syndrome. After chatting to about ten women I just put the project to bed because it was just too overwhelming. I didn’t really know what I was expecting, but I was blown away – absolutely blown away! I just felt like, ‘how on earth could I tell this story in one or two paragraphs?’ So, I kind of put it away for four years because I didn’t know how to do it. Then, last Christmas, I decided I was going to finish the project in time for International Women’s Day 2020. It gave me three months to photograph the rest of the 90 women. In all honesty, I literally just had to get on with it. I was forced to choose a part of their story and I guess if I hadn’t, the project still wouldn’t be finished.

Every woman did not necessarily see their portrait, but they all saw the words that were going to go beneath their photograph because some women shared some really personal stuff, which that they didn’t necessarily want shared with everyone else who was going to view the works. I had to be really mindful of that. Some women were absolutely fine sharing because they knew that it could empower others, or it could encourage someone else going through a similar thing to seek help. But it was hard, it was really hard.

In terms of photography, it is interesting because it is not necessarily that I have photographed the complexities of one person. I mean, with a photograph you can capture someone a hundred different times and they could look a hundred different ways. For me, they are all photographed in a very standard pose because I was focusing more on the interviews, I guess. I mean, I hate even calling them interviews because they were deep conversations. And really the art project was me spending time and connecting with other women. The photograph was really just the evidence that it happened. Obviously, I wanted it to be lit nice and quite simple. The photographs were all lit by window light in their homes, so sometimes you can see bits of their story in the background. Ultimately, I just wanted to focus on them, do a good portrait of them, and shine a light on them, so to speak.

**KG: I think the uniformity of your photographs are quite striking because I feel that the emphasis is on the conversations that you had, on the meeting, and on the individuality of each instance. I almost think that if you were to photograph them all differently, then it wouldn’t have the same. There is something about seeing the series and being able to register all these different women who are seated almost in the same way, but come from so many different backgrounds, who have so many different stories, all at once that really resonates with me as a viewer.**

**PJ:** Yes, because there is 100 of them, but it might not have been the case if there were three. The style of the photography gives it a uniform. The photographs are very pleasing to look at. Then, when you read a bit of their story, quite often it is shocking. You go from one story, to the next story, to the next. They are so diverse and so many of them, that I think then the stories really do speak. The portraits of them are beautiful, I mean they are beautiful women – all of them are. I definitely wanted to capture that.

**KG: The beautiful thing about collections of artworks like yours is that aesthetically, they do entice us. We are drawn to them and to the beauty of the composition, but we are also drawn to them as people being photographed. And then we peel back the layers and start to get to know them. It is like we are having an encounter like yours. You are recreating that encounter with a person where you see them first, then dive a bit deeper and really get to know them. This is exceptionally special to create in a gallery space, especially in a time when connection is a bit difficult.**

**I know your work draws on that idea of humanity and the need to feel connected. As you have mentioned, this project, while focusing on the individual women, was also aimed at bringing out this theme. Where does this idea of connection lie for you? Do you feel connected to these women and do you remain in touch?**

**PJ:** I think to feel connected is to feel understood by another person. That is what everyone wants to feel, isn’t it? In terms of if you are the viewer of these photos, the connection lies in the photography. You read the story and then you look up again at the woman and then you re-read their story. There is that real connection that you are getting to know a couple of paragraphs that they’ve shared, and that I’ve shared.

In terms of my connection with the women, I wanted to give others the opportunity to speak, which not everyone has. I’m not a therapist at all, but I do get a lot from listening to others and their experiences. The many women who I listened to did say it felt like a real privilege to talk about themselves, to analyse and dissect concepts, to go down memory lane, and just to be listened to. I feel like they felt a connection because of that, and I felt a connection because I shone a light. Lots of them have spoken about things, but lots of them might not have as well. So, I think to help unravel something, or just be the facilitator *is* connection.

I do stay in touch with lots of them in some way or another. Especially during lockdown, I made sure to get in touch with most of them to make sure they were alright. Some of them are vulnerable, some of them are older – there are all sorts of backgrounds there. Actually, I am off after this interview to meet one for a coffee.

**KG: The subject of connection is all over your work. It is part of the process, it is part of the visuals, and it seems you have carried it on in your relationships with the women afterwards. It is beautiful and I think we are craving a message like this now more than ever. You mentioned that you were in touch during lockdown when we were all stuck inside. The desire for physical human connection was, I think, more evident in those times, to be in touch and to value those kinds of social interactions.**

**It seems perfect to have a show about human connection as our second show to return to The North Wall to bring us back. Given the current state of things, how do you think your project will be received?**

**PJ:** I think the whole world is talking about connection and how to be connected, especially because of lockdown. I definitely felt with this project as soon as lockdown happened, this real kind of sense of responsibility to connect with everyone. With the 100 women, I felt a need to help and to have a community.

**KG: You have given us a lot to think about with idea of connection in your work and I am excited for our listeners to hear about it before going to visit the gallery, and then see it for themselves.**

**I also wanted to ask you about your time dedicated to workshops with sixth form students that you have done over the course of this exhibition. Why do you think it is important to engage with the youth and teach these workshops?**

**PJ:** I am an open book really. I am always up for learning, that is how I am. So, to share my experiences, energy, and knowledge with others is great. To see them relate to it with their own work or in their lives is fantastic and I just love doing workshops for all, not just for the young. To work with the A-level students for this exhibition is fantastic, it is just so inspiring when you are sharing your knowledge of a project with others and then seeing them think about it. We set them a project where they need to go and photograph a female and interview them. We went through interview techniques and how important it is to listen. It is really inspiring to see them being inspired.

I think this also runs in other workshops I do as well. I run workshops called [*The Motherhood*](https://philippajamesphotography.com/photography-workshops-oxford/), which is for mums and has a different approach but similar level of inspiration.

**KG: It seems like your work is as much about the process as it is about the results you get, that being the photograph and the paragraph from their story. It is like we get an insight into your photographic process, which seems like the whole point. Giving them a voice is the act of meeting with these women, having a conversation, and then like you said, the photograph is the proof that it happened. I think that is exceptional, and I know the students had an amazing time!**

**What do you hope visitors will gain from coming to see your exhibition?**

**PJ:** It was up at Tap Social on International Women’s Day and then two weeks later, we had lockdown. Many people who went and saw it there got in touch and were saying how moved they were, a lot of people said they were emotional, a lot of people cried. The one thing that most people said was that they would never judge anyone again. They really felt this sense of empathy. They said if they saw someone on the streets, they would be non-judgemental and think about what their story was and what they had been through. You know, wouldn’t that be a wonderful world just to have a sense of viewing each other equally? It would be great if people could come away feeling similar feelings to that.

**KG: I think it would be wonderful to have people come to the gallery and take a minute to think about the people that pass us everyday who maybe we don’t think twice about.**

**PJ:** Or rather, because our heads are filled with so much already, it might not be to think twice but actually to not think negativelyor judgmentally. One lady who I am meeting this afternoon used to be homeless. She says to me all the time, homelessness can happen to anyone. And it is SO true, it can happen to anyone. And this is true with so many of these stories.

**KG: It also gives us perspective, this idea that it can happen to anyone. With these stories, we feel humbled.**

**Following up on this project, which I know has taken up much of your time recently, what do you have planned next?**

**PJ:** Well, I have just finished another project. It was a very quick one. I don’t know if you know [Waste2Taste Café in the Ark-T Centre](http://www.ark-t.org/waste2taste-cafe/) in Cowley. They reopened a couple of weeks ago. The two women who run it are actually in the 100 Women Project. They asked if they could have some of the 100 Women Project there, but there was obviously a clash since it is going up in the North Wall. So, it was a quick turnaround. The café is open to all. They make food from the food bank, they are a social enterprise, and they also help homeless and vulnerable people. I wanted to create an exhibition there that was accessible to all, so the conversation would be accessible to all.

So, I did this exhibition called *Rising Rituals.* It is about people’s morning routines and rituals. The idea was, if you get up in the morning, you can contribute to this conversation. I followed many women again and just hung out first thing in the morning and documented what they did. Some of the women in that are from the 100 Women Project, and some others aren’t. It was just a fun little project to do. I am always trying to better my morning routine, so it was quite fascinating to see what others got up to. Some of them woke up without an alarm and drew their curtains. One lady said: ‘depending on what the whether is, that is my mood for the day.’ Someone else wakes up at 5 o’clock to go running and for a swim, running home before their baby wakes up. Again, there is a range of different stories to tell.

**KG: Beginning with the 100 Women Project, you carry on these ideas of storytelling, connection, and getting to know other humans that you see every day. This seems to continuously encompass your work.**

**PJ:** You know, the 100 Women Project was my first project.

**KG: And what a breakout first project! I think people really took to it, myself included, for a reason. Hearing women’s voices and seeing their faces… There is a reason that everyone is going back to it. So many people were disappointed it was taken down from Tap Social for lockdown. We have had people already come into the gallery asking if Philippa James’ work is up yet and I have had to tell them to come back.**

**It really did start something and I think it being part of this local community really affected people because sometimes movements are very large and so you feel like you want to contribute but you don’t know how to engage with it because it is on such a large scale. I think local people of Oxford coming to an exhibition about women of Oxford is so accessible. You feel like you are getting to know a part of your community.**

**PJ:** I do think Oxford is a weird place in many ways. I mean, what did you feel about it before you came here anyways? This city known for its dreaming spires and then it’s got this whole underbelly, which is totally different from the whole town and gown, students and people who live here, and tourists - thing. Some people love it, other people are not sure, others live here but work in London. It takes a while to get to know it, it’s definitely taken me a while to get to know it. And I have totally fallen in love with the city.

**KG: It is almost like when we think of Oxford, the image that comes to mind is the University and the iconic buildings with the spires. But just like with your photographs, the image is not the whole picture. You *must* read the stories. Your photographs feel so much like Oxford; the women of Oxford being more than just their photos, just like the city itself.**

**100 Women of Oxford will be on view at The North Wall Arts Centre from 14 October -24 October.**

**Join us on 16 October from 4.30pm – 8pm for a glass of wine and a chance to chat to photographer Philippa James.**

**Limited number of 20 minute viewing slots available. 1-6 tickets available to book per household. Advance booking essential.**

[**Book your tickets here**](https://thenorthwall.ticketsolve.com/shows/873621655)

This exhibition is part of Photo Oxford 2020, which takes place from 16 October – 16 November 2020.

This, the third festival, is a celebration of women as photographers, photographic subjects, curators, collectors, researchers and more. The festival brings a curated programme of international and local photography to a range of spaces in Oxford, supported by events and opportunities to enjoy, learn and participate.