

# The Photography Monthly Interview

# Julia Fullerton-Batten

Ian Farrell talks to one of Britain's most talented photographers about commercial success, personal work and her recent move towards fine-art photography



**Julia Fullerton-Batten**

"If you shoot personal work that it has to come straight from the heart. It should be something that you are very passionate about."

Laura, a model that Fullerton-Batten uses often when shooting for her personal project on female teenagers

- Julia Fullerton-Batten was born in Germany in 1970. She moved to Pennsylvania, USA when she was ten years old, before moving to the when she was 16
- Studied photography at Berkshire College of Art and Design in Reading, UK
- Worked for a number of different photographers as an assistant before going solo as a professional in 1999
- Won major awards from bodies such as the Association of Photographers and the The Schweppes Photographic Portrait Prize



Two of Fullerton-Batten's successful entries in the annual Schweppes Photographic Portrait award: (above) Playground, 2005 and (left) Shanghai Subway, 2004.

turning up and the guys were saying where's 'the photographer'. And I'd be saying 'err, hello...'

"But actually I quite like being a female photographer. I think I stand out more than a man. I don't know why photography is so male dominated. Obviously it's very technical, and I think women sometimes aren't as technically minded, but I think the situation could change. I'm certainly being approached by a lot of female assistants now and I get a lot of female photographers emailing me for advice."

At present, Fullerton-Batten's photography is going through something of a change. "I have this advertising background, but what's interesting me more and more at the moment is my personal work," she says, "and how I can use this to break into fine-art photography."

About three years ago, Fullerton-Batten started what has become her main personal project: photographing female teenagers. "That age, those teenage years when you are growing up, are very important to me," she says. "There were certain things that were happening then that really affected me,

even though I didn't realise it at the time. I didn't realise how much life affects people at that age until really very recently. I don't think people ever get over some things that happen at that time, when you are quite sensitive and feel vulnerable. So I started having this fascination with teenagers. That's where it came from, I think.

"The girls look solemn; I don't like smiling people in photographs, it makes a completely different shot. They are quite thoughtful images, that definitely relate to my own childhood. There is perhaps an element of sexuality there: they are going through a period of sexual change and I think I felt quite uncomfortable during puberty. I think girls are very self-aware at that age, about their looks and weight. You compare yourself to other girls; I'm sure it's the same with guys too."

These elements of self-portraiture were not a conscious effort to begin with, however: "It wasn't the case that I got up one day and thought 'OK, I'm going to photograph teenage girls, because it relates to experiences from my own childhood', the reasons behind the pictures only surfaced later on.

It was an amazing discovery, it gave the pictures more meaning."

Some of Fullerton-Batten's teenager pictures are shot using model villages as a location, a twist that enables her to include even more personal elements: "Lots of the model villages we've used do look quite American, and of course I grew up in the US. I've photographed the girls doing things that I would do at that age, like getting a milk bottle in off the street. It was always hot where we lived, and I would always wander around in my bathing suit - as kids we'd spray each other with hose-pipes and jump through sprinklers. I tend to photograph some of the teenagers in their swimming costumes, and I love photographing water. There's something very tranquil about it."

The more of Fullerton-Batten's work you see, the more these common themes appear. Her style is a distinctive one: colours often appear muted, except for a single shade that stands out vibrantly. Her subjects' faces are expressionless, or maybe even hidden from view. She also has a fascination for uniforms and her subjects all have a distinctly normal, non-model look about them.

"I don't go for the typical good-looking model from a model agency," she says. "If there is time I much prefer to get real people from the street. Often, someone will have something very unusual about them that will grab me - a look that says they are a real ☐

**"I don't go for the typical good-looking model from an agency. I prefer to get real people off the street. Often someone will have something really unusual that will grab me."**

person. And because they have never been photographed by a professional photographer they can look and feel slightly awkward, which I find quite charming. Sometimes, when people have been photographed a lot, they start posing in a certain way. This is one area where I struggle with model agencies. The people on their books are used to being photographed for catalogues, and I constantly end up saying 'don't pose - I need realism.'

"If I see someone interesting on the street I'll just approach them and say 'will you model for me?' That's where it does help to be a woman, actually. I've only ever had one person say no and he was an art director or something and said 'no, I'm usually on the other side of the camera'.

"Having said all that though, there is one girl, who has modelling experience, that I like a lot and use quite often - her name's Laura. She lives near London, but I pay for her to come up to where I am shooting. She has been photographed a lot before, and she used to be with a model agency, but there is something quite unique about her. I like to bring her in along with the girls who are street cast. She's my kind of saviour if something goes wrong."

Technically, Fullerton-Batten's pictures are more complex than they first seem. Despite their laid-back, unposed look, her images are carefully coordinated and very purposefully lit. At the beginning of her career she would set up pictures without using flash, because of the excessive cost of gear and assistants. But as the success and money started to come in, the lighting set-ups became more and more elaborate. "I always use flash now, even on personal shoots," she says. "I find it puts another twist on things, adds a certain something else."

Close examination of Fullerton-Batten's pictures reveal shadows going in the opposite direction to the main light source, and extra highlights in the wrong place. "I like the light in my pictures to appear that it's coming from the wrong place," she explains. "People who don't really understand photography look at the pictures and think 'there's something a bit weird about that, but I don't know what it is.'"

"My favourite approach is to use daylight for the majority of the scene and mix flash in without it being too noticeable. There was a trend for a ☐



"This model village had a kind of American feel to it, which I liked. At first I photographed the girl just lying there, but it needed something else to explain why she was lying there, which is where the eggs came in."



There aren't too many careers where the tools of your professional trade can also be rewarding in your personal life, but photography is definitely one of them. Professional photographers often cite shooting so-called personal work as a source of creative inspiration, an outlet for artistic expression or even a method of discovering more about themselves. And for Julia Fullerton-Batten, shooting images purely for herself is all of these things. And more.

Fullerton-Batten - or JFB as her name is frequently abbreviated to - has been a fully fledged commercial photographer for just six years, in which time she has picked up many awards, including prizes from the Association of Photographers, the London Photographic awards and the Schweppes Photographic Portrait Prize.

In fact, depending on which parts of the photographic press you read, Fullerton-Batten is described variously as "innovative", "refreshing" and even "potentially one of the country's foremost photographers".

When she came to England from the USA at the age of 16, Fullerton-Batten started thinking of photography as a career. She first picked up a camera a few years earlier. "I got into photography the same way everyone else did really. It's the same old story: when I was a kid, my dad gave me a camera, and he had his own darkroom, blah, blah, blah," she laughs, as if it's a story she's heard herself numerous times before.

"Mind you, before I was born, he was quite a ground-breaking photographer. He would photograph people in the

swinging sixties, shooting women in New York in their miniskirts. But he would chop off their heads and show just their bodies. He took some very unusual images that are still interesting to look at now. I'm trying to get a book published of his work.

"When we moved to England I started to ask myself what I was going to do. I knew that I was pretty passionate about photography, but my dad was saying 'You can't do photography. Why don't you do a bilingual secretarial course?' So I ended up learning German and English shorthand. After a year I just thought 'no - I have to do what I want to do'. So I went and studied for a BTEC diploma in Photography at Berkshire College of Art and Design in Reading."

After she cut her photographic teeth at college, Fullerton-Batten was ready

for the long hours and low pay that is assisting. "I had a friend one year ahead of me who was working as an assistant in London, and he asked me if I wanted to come on a shoot," she recalls. "My college didn't really prepare me for assisting. They didn't get over to me that it is really important to assist when trying to break into photography as a career. It's the only way, really. You can't just study, there's so much about the business aspects to learn. Obviously there is the technical side, but then there's also elements like production, meeting the right people, and so on."

Eventually she moved to London where the next five years were spent assisting. "That was a long time to spend in that kind of job, but I didn't really know which direction to go in," she confesses.

"Initially I wanted to be a fashion photographer, as I think almost everyone did at that age. I went on to assist everyone from car photographers to food photographers, but I still didn't know what I wanted to do.

"Later on I went on a month-long trip to Vietnam with my boyfriend, and for the first time in a long time I got the camera out for myself. The odd thing about assisting is that I was so busy I didn't have the time to shoot pictures for myself. But in Vietnam I just started photographing things that I saw. It could have been still-life observations, or a kind of portrait if there was a girl knitting with her ball of wool on the table, or something like that. I shot them all with a tripod, quite static, using Polaroids. I'd take about an hour to shoot a picture. I really found my

**This shot, produced for the London Eye, is a composite image. The background was shot from the air while the models were photographed suspended on wires in a studio. The wings were from a local taxidermist.**

element. I came back and printed up all the images and entered them into the Association of Photography's Assistants' awards. Eight made it through into the final exhibition, and one was a front cover on the accompanying book."

Success, it seemed, was on its way. "Straight away I got approached by an agent, who began to represent me in Germany while I was still assisting," she says. "This was a good arrangement, that meant I could carry on assisting and building up my portfolio while my



agent was going out with my book, on my behalf, introducing me to art directors and buyers.

The transition from assistant to full-time professional photographer is, traditionally, not an easy one and Fullerton-Batten is fully aware that good fortune played some part in her success at this time: "I was quite lucky that I shot some images that people liked at the time. I was able to find an agent quite quickly, but there are a lot of photographers around, and not many photographers' agents. My agent is always getting approached by new photographers and she has to turn people away all the time as she doesn't want any more than the six names she already represents. It is quite hard."

In the world of commercial advertising photography, an agent is essential. And maybe it's another sign of how far Fullerton-Batten has come in the six years since she stopped assisting that she now has not one agent, but five, representing her in the UK, Germany, Italy, France and the USA.

It doesn't take a doctorate in social science to realise that, for whatever reason, photography is still a male-dominated profession. Has this made Fullerton-Batten's rise to the top any harder, does she think?

"Being a female assistant was difficult," she says. "I really had to prove myself. People would say 'oh - you can't carry things' and it seemed like they didn't want to employ me as much as men. In the end I carried equipment that was heavier than the guys were carrying to prove a point. I'm actually quite strong. But as time went on I had regular photographers who knew me and enjoyed working with me, which was fine.

"Being a female photographer is different, though. Even now a lot of female advertising photographers limit themselves to children or food. I was very aware that what I was trying to get into was more male-oriented. For example while shooting a campaign for Volkswagen shooting cars, I used a location whose staff are very used to male photographers. I remember ☐

**Part of Fullerton-Batten's project on female teenagers. "I had the girls move though the field with butterfly nets, the butterflies themselves were put in digitally afterwards. I wanted something a bit surreal."**



while where fashion photographers doing this would make the background quite dark, but make the flash-lit foreground really vibrant and colourful. I try to stay away from all that and have a different approach.

"Mixing daylight and flash is a new thing that I've been developing over the last two years. I start with one light, then add another, and another, and another and keep going until I've got the shot. I did a shoot in Paris recently where we used 12 flash heads! When I was shooting there would be this massive flash! It was amazing! I had to have someone keeping an eye on whether all the flashes were firing or not. If a bulb or battery went in one light, I'd never know until it was too late."

Until now, Fullerton-Batten's journey away from advertising photography into personal work has been just that: personal. But in the future she hopes to make it more available through the complex world of fine-art.

"I'd like to get a book published, and be represented by galleries," she says. "I'm going to have an exhibition in 2006, and I would like to show more of my personal work in that way. I'd like to carry on with the teenagers series, amongst other things as well. People do actually email me out of the blue and say 'can I buy one of your books?', and I have to say 'I haven't got a book', so that would be a cool thing to get done."

Currently, Fullerton Batten is represented by fine-art dealer Eric Franck, the brother of Martine Franck, who was married to Henri Cartier-Bresson. "He's a good guy to be with. He doesn't have his own gallery space, but rather has good relationships with people that do."

But will moving into fine-art, with all of the publishing, exhibiting and print sales opportunities that this brings,

**Fullerton-Batten often shoots her subjects with expressionless faces, or even with their faces obscured. She also has a fascination with uniforms, both formal and informal.**

spoil the individual nature of Fullerton-Batten's personal photography? How will the commercialisation of her private work affect her images?

"I don't think it will. I'm not trying to get into fine-art photography to make a living," she explains. "I know for a fact you can't make a living from publishing books, so I will still do advertising. And that's fine, I enjoy working in a big team on advertising shoots. Otherwise, I'd be working too much on my own. It'll be nice to have a combination of these different ways of working."

"Before I really gave fine-art photography much thought, I used to think that unless I could put an image in my portfolio to show to a potential client, there was no point in taking it. After all no-one was going to see it. Now it's different: getting a commission isn't my only motivation, so I can be more experimental. Advertising agencies always like to see happy, smiling faces, but I don't have to produce images like that, I can shoot whatever I want."

The more Fullerton-Batten talks about her personal work, the more she sounds like someone experiencing the thrill of photography for the first time. The passion she felt when her father taught her to use a camera as a child obviously hasn't changed at all. She is taking pictures purely because she loves to take pictures.

"I'm obsessed, really obsessed," she admits. "If I'm not taking pictures then I'm at home reading about photography. I really should calm down a bit, but if I am going to shoot personal work then it has to come straight from the heart. It must be something I am very passionate about. To take pictures you are not passionate about is a bit like being dead. That might sound a bit extreme, but if you shoot your own private work, and you are very passionate about it, then it's like you are living life, not doing a job. You put everything into it, and to get that film back and feel excited by it is just so different than shooting something you don't believe in. It's fulfilling, so much more fulfilling." **PM**