

WHAT
WE
SEE



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 WOMEN PHOTOGRAPH

WHAT WE SEE

Women & nonbinary
perspectives through the lens

Curated by **Daniella Zalcman**
& **Sara Ickow**

 **WHITE LION
PUBLISHING**

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Foreword

By Kat Chow

What We See is nothing short of breathtaking. Each of these photographs evoked within me a staggering and visceral response, at times bewildering, at times heartrending. As a journalist who has spent years contextualizing our infinitely complex world, I have witnessed time after time how photographs can illuminate our lives in ways that words and audio simply cannot. *What We See* is certainly no different; I was stunned by how these images drew me into their stories, and how thrilled I was when I recalled that you, too, get to experience this work for the first time. Captured by photographers who are women or nonbinary, these images forge a crucial modern history: one where such perspectives that have historically been ignored – behind the lens and in front of it – are illuminated with care and respect.

The range of these photographs is remarkable. Perspectives from New Delhi, the Weddell Sea, Vava'u in the Kingdom of Tonga, Hong Kong, Cleveland and so many other places, sit alongside one another. They preserve moments of a young woman undergoing surgery to receive the first-ever face transplant, two cholitas in Bolivia mid-fight in a mountain-lined wrestling ring, an examination of Afro-descendants in Mexico, a young woman in Aabey, Lebanon, sitting defiantly in her car following its destruction during a protest in the uprising of 2019.

When I consider what binds the vast array of photos that comprise *What We See*, the word 'intimacy' surfaces. Intimacy, because the emotional connection to each of these photos arrives swiftly, stirring in me – and surely also in you – a deep curiosity about their subjects. Intimacy, because this collection ultimately evokes a sense of support: the stories brought to life here elicit the feeling that we are not alone. And that people are bearing witness to, and capturing, the essential stories that animate our lives.

With deep admiration for these talented photojournalists and the lives they have chronicled, I invite you to sit with, and absorb, these photographs. *What We See* is an impressive feat that will expand your worldview.

Kat Chow is a journalist and writer. She previously was a founding member of NPR's *Code Switch*, and her work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *New York Magazine*, among many other places. She is the author of *Seeing Ghosts*, a memoir about family and loss.

Introduction

By Daniella Zalcman, founder of *Women Photograph*

Photojournalists are tasked with a unique privilege: teaching others how to see.

We introduce our audiences to people and places they may never otherwise encounter, show them ecosystems, conflicts and communities from every corner of the globe. But for as long as photojournalism has existed as a discipline – built around broadening perspectives – the industry has been dominated by white Western men. That has had a profound impact on our collective visual history: what we choose to document, and why, and how.

It is easy to believe that we, as photojournalists, simply freeze the world around us frame by frame, working as unbiased observers who are fully detached from the events we cover. After all, this is the lie we have told ourselves since the advent of news photography. But, in reality, our identities and lived experiences deeply impact how we access spaces and choose to tell stories. We can only hope to produce nuanced, thorough and respectful journalism with an industry of storytellers as diverse as the communities we document.

I became a photojournalist around 2007 while I was a college student in New York. If I felt the yawning absence of women colleagues and mentors in the press corps at the time, I certainly did not understand how it was impacting my own growth as a photographer. But, by 2016, industry reports were starting to emerge that only 15 to 20 per cent of working news photographers were women and that major news outlets were hiring women photographers at even lower rates. And when interrogated about their assigning practices, editors frequently responded that they just did not know where to find women photographers.

In response, I launched *Women Photograph* in 2017, a hiring database of women and nonbinary photographers from around the world. Today, our community includes more than 1,600 independent photographers based in 110 countries. And our mission has grown alongside it. We distribute project grants, host annual skills-building workshops, run a mentorship programme that connects early career photographers with editor and photographer mentors, exhibit the work of our photographers at festivals and in galleries internationally, and collect hiring and publishing statistics on the photojournalism industry.

Our long-term objective for the organization is simple: to become obsolete. If *Women Photograph* is successful in helping the industry achieve true intersectional parity, then the advocacy work at the heart of our organization will no longer be necessary.

Our inaugural book *What We See* is a broad survey that represents the equally broad careers of our members. The goal is not to make any generalizations about the gaze of women and nonbinary photographers – such generalizations are impossible. The directions in which we can expand our traditional understanding of photojournalism are infinite. This book merely begins to hint at the possibilities.

Alongside classic documentary-style images from some of our most acclaimed trailblazers such as Carol Guzy, Susan Meiselas and Lynsey Addario, there is work that defies traditional photojournalistic practice, as in the collaborative images from Koyoltzintli and Charlotte Schmitz, the composite self-portraiture of Haruka Sakaguchi and the constructed images of Sim Chi Yin and Maha Alasaker.

If there is one common thread – and a striking one at that – it is that much of the work in this book feels quiet, even if it was not made in quiet contexts. Anastasia Taylor-Lind's frame of a man in uniform doubled over, next to a bloody stretcher, is a gesture of exhaustion or possibly mourning in the middle of armed conflict. Gulshan Khan's photo of a young woman serenely donning a scarf comes moments before she attends a protest in the wake of Israeli forces' killing 59 Palestinians. Verónica G. Cárdenas' image of a Honduran woman being tenderly resuscitated occurs in the relative calm that follows her near-drowning in the Rio Grande. They are all moments wrapped in grief that still allow for other emotions to seep into our understanding of each picture. There is more than just loss.

This comes in stark contrast to the overwhelming number of noteworthy works in photojournalism that centre violence. We build our history textbooks around war and famine and natural disasters, more or less creating a chronology of the traumas inflicted on and by humans throughout our existence. Journalists are similarly drawn to the worst human experiences – partially because our work often serves as evidence, and partially because many of us do this work to live up to the words of Joseph Pulitzer III, 'We will illuminate dark places and, with a deep sense of responsibility, interpret these troubled times'.

The assembled images in this book do not shy away from those stories. They span war and revolution, terrorism and mass shootings. But the photos themselves often come from the periphery of injustice, or focus on women as the actors in spaces that are so often seen as predominantly male. They remind us of what we miss when visual news media is constructed from a singular perspective.

But the traditional perspective does not only omit narratives, it also imposes them. Historically, the photographer's role has been to record stories as an outsider, often dictating the narrative. As such, photographs are frequently taken without consultation with, or feedback from, those featured. So, there is something revolutionary about photographers like Lola Flash, Golden, Jess T. Dugan and Laurence Philomène turning the camera on themselves to document LGBTQ+ identity, or Tailyr Irvine and Citlali Fabián's portraits of their own relatives in work on modern Indigenous identity.

And while journalism rarely makes proportionate space for the joyful and the ordinary, we wanted to make sure that those photos were included as well: Tanya Habjouqa's photo of a family picnicking on the beach in Gaza or Kendrick Brinson's photo of a synchronized swimming team of retirees.

Whether on the front pages of newspapers or magazines, in school textbooks or tucked away in museum archives, the photography that we have used historically to define and memorialize human history rarely reflects how we collectively see. With this collection of work, we hope to rectify that, sharing a broadened perspective on the stories that define us.

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In this selection, photographers honour identity — sometimes by developing a deep bond with a new acquaintance, sometimes, most intimately, by turning the camera on themselves or by sharing their personal visions of the communities to which they belong. Identity can be reflected in our relationships to our own bodies, in our family connections or in the ways in which we exist together and in isolation. Some photos destigmatize an identity, others call attention to what we might otherwise consider mundane. All of them are meant to be declarative: here we are, this is who we are and this is how we want to be seen.

Identity



Citlali Fabián

Mexican

My cousins Yessi and Kristel

Oaxaca City, Mexico; 2018

My cousins Yessi and Kristel, daughters of aunt María, granddaughters of uncle Nemo, cousin of my grandma Chenchá. That's the thread that connects us as the big family that we are. This image is part of my series *Ben'n Yalhalhj* (I am from Yalalag), a project I started as a family album by photographing the members of my community who had migrated across Mexico and to Los Angeles, USA. Like many Indigenous youth, I grew up exposed to the exoticization of my reality and at the same time to the lack of authentic representation of our voices. Documenting my community, my Yalalteca diaspora, is a driving force for me as an artist to heal and embrace my identity, and I hope to encourage others to do the same. This project is a family reunion, to bring us together over time and territories, to learn about our experiences, to interconnect us through music and traditions, our migration movements, and to reinforce our bonds and ties to the community. This is my way to honour my ancestors and to see our culture stay alive and withstand colonization processes.



Tasneem Alsultan

Saudi Arabian

Leap of Faith

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; 2016

I wanted to answer a question that many have shared: Do we need marriage to signify that we have love? Do you need a husband to have a significant life? I started this project thinking I only had my personal story to share. I was married at the age of 17 and lived separately as a single parent for the last six years of an unhappy 10-year marriage. Many family members commented that I was foolish to ask for a divorce. Only later, I realized that many Saudi women had similar experiences. I followed the stories of widows, women happily married and divorced women. A common realization among women I photographed was that they all managed to overcome the many hurdles imposed by society or their state. 'Society constrains the definition of a divorcee. What you can or cannot do remains under the control of others. As an independent single mother, I have made peace with the sacrifices I have had to make, but also managed to find happiness on my own.' These are the words of Nassiba, whom I photographed after her first divorce, while she was a single mother to Bilal. Now in her second and happy marriage, and a mother of two sons, I am happy to have been able to document this transition in her life.





Raphaëla Rosella

Australian

Tricia and Ty-Leta

Moree, Australia; 2016

My socially engaged art practice has emerged over 15 years with contributions from several women in my life, with the goal of resisting bureaucratic representations of our lived experiences such as case files and criminal records. These women are my friends, family members and extended kin, whom I now identify as co-creators in my practice. This has resulted in a co-created archive of photographic works, video works, sound recordings, state-issued documents, criminal indexes and ephemera. Using a static television channel as a light source for her bedroom, my friend Tricia breastfeeds her baby daughter Ty-Leta. Tricia's partner Troy was in and out of prison during her pregnancy and was again serving time when this portrait was made. Together we breastfed our babies while we talked about the state's relentless imprisonment of Troy. It is vital to understand prisons, policing and the criminal punishment system in so-called Australia as a continuum of settler colonialism. During this time, Troy had only spent three birthdays outside of prison since the age of nine – he was soon to turn 30. In turn, this image amplifies feelings of intimacy, frustration, kinship and connectedness that circulate between imprisoned people and their loved ones structured through carceral regimes.

Xyza Cruz Bacani

Filipina

Family Bonding

Philippines; 2017

My father, Villamor, hugs my mother, Georgia, as she spends time with my nieces and sister, Sharila. My mother has been a domestic worker in Hong Kong for more than two decades and only comes home once a year for two weeks. Those two weeks are the happiest I have seen our family. When I took this photo, my family was oblivious to the camera as they were in the moment, enjoying each other. Migration is a big part of our lives, and subconsciously we know that these moments are fleeting. This image is part of *We Are Like Air*, a body of work focusing on the nuances of migration. My family story is the book's anchor, and photographing my close relatives is one of the most challenging experiences I have had as a documentary photographer. The story is too close, and it opened up many unhealed wounds in our family. Traumas of the separation caused by migration leaked, and forgiveness was a journey we all took together as a family. The process of documenting my own family was cathartic, and it taught me that vulnerability is a gift. The circumstances of our lives made me a survivor but being vulnerable made me a better photographer.



Golden

American

I'm just grateful for niggas in the immediate

Roslindale, Massachusetts, USA; 2022

I'm just grateful for niggas in the immediate is a collaborative portrait of my twin brother, Morgan (he/they), and me (they/them) sitting together in my studio in Roslindale, MA, around New Year's. Like many of the portraits featuring Twin and me in my self-portraiture series *On Learning How to Live*, which documents Black trans life at the intersection of surviving and living in the United States, this photo presents a still moment amid the chaos of living. Just a few days after Twin recovered from COVID, after learning most of our immediate family members had caught COVID too and our Pop Pop wasn't doing too well. Just a few days after a long drive home, back from our hometown (Hampton, VA), where I stopped to see my older brother in Dover, DE, and picked up Twin in New York City. After hours of playing in closets, deciding what colors match our mood, which make-up marvels our mugs, which poses perfect our frame, we arrive here – hand in hand, legs in limbs again, like once in the womb. Just grateful to have someone to witness the weather with, to say *We are not alone*.





Gillian Laub

American

Grandma's Kitchen

Mamaroneck, New York, USA; 2010

Grandma's Kitchen is an image from *Family Matters*, a more than two-decade-long project confronting issues of privilege, class and other fissures in the American dream. In 2016, when my parents and I found ourselves on opposing sides of the most contentious issues in recent US history, what I was experiencing with my family felt like a microcosm of a larger fractured America. In this image, my grandmother is pictured with her full-time caregiver, Dorothy, in her kitchen; they would argue every day until she finished her lunch. As I watched them over the years, I became more conflicted about the role that caregivers played in our collective family life. On the one hand, I felt deeply grateful to them personally, for quite literally enabling us to be healthy and happy and connected to each other. On the other, I could not avoid the social and political context that set up these dynamics – insidious issues of race and class that created worlds of pain and unfairness. I felt increasingly guilty about it all, especially as I started wondering if I would repeat this very dynamic if I was going to have children of my own.