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IN DEPTH: LOTTIE DAVIES

Let us tell you a story...about a lively young red-haired girl who didn't have a television but spent her time reading and making things and who grew up to win the Taylor Wessing prize. Image meets the "brilliantly imaginative" Lottie Davies.

All images © Lottie Davies

From a 2007 trip to Aleppo, northern Syria, an area known for religious diversity and which has opened up in recent years thanks mainly to satellite television.



Lottie Davies likes to describe her Surrey childhood as conventional although in truth a household without a TV in those days was anything but. "We didn't have one until I was 12 so I used to get through six or seven books a week," says Lottie, who shared her home with two brothers, a picture researcher mother and a lawyer father. "It was a happy and creative atmosphere," she continues, "I was making clothes from the age of four using my grandmother's sewing machine. I made lots of things and used to like to put them at the

end of my bed so they'd be the first thing I saw when I woke up."

Lottie's early interest in things photographic was sparked when her father bought a darkroom kit for her brother and her naturally competitive nature made her determined to master it.

She was 14 but, before she got anywhere close to considering photography as a career, her successful academic progress took her to The University of St Andrews

in Scotland and a four-year philosophy degree. "Alongside the degree I was doing a lot of theatre work... I was a combination of stage manager, director and, as the only one with dark room experience, I did all the posters and publicity too." Nothing was undertaken in small measure... one play, *Dirty Hands*, was a three-hour long Sartre with seven scene changes using furniture and props from her flat and oh yes... she also translated it. Deciding to make photography her future was a Damascene moment. "I woke up one morning, saw a large box of

photographic paper that I'd been using and just knew," she states simply.

And there started a trajectory that has taken her from modest beginnings to working in six continents as a photojournalist in such diverse locations as the Namib Desert, the Julian Alps, the Arctic Circle and the Kalahari, challenging locations where her main aim was to illuminate overlooked lives.

More recently her fine art work has centred on personal histories, memories,

beliefs and life stories with inspiration taken from modern and classical painting, cinema, theatre and literature. It is her ongoing project in this area, *Memories and Nightmares*, that spawned the Taylor Wessing-winning image *Quints* and a description of her work by the National Portrait Gallery's director, Sandy Nairne as "brilliantly imaginative".

Progress in this new photographic phase of her life was not as straightforward as in her younger days as Lottie explains; "I really

didn't know how difficult it was going to be but I did whatever I could to get into the photographic scene in London. One job I remember well was driving Avis cars for £2.75 an hour but more productively I also temped in ad agencies and assisted where I could. Money wasn't the aim for me... it was the buzz, the contacts and, above all, the chance to learn."

She assisted Keith Henderson, Matt Harris and Tim McPherson and is enthusiastically positive about her experiences with each

The Day My Brother Was Born from the series *Memories and Nightmares*.





Vide to Time from
Memories and Nightmares



Quinn from the series
Memories and Nightmares



Katherine in a swimming pool

of them and cites them as her creative inspiration along with others including Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld, Sally Mann and Eve Arnold. "Apart from the creative work I learned loads about kit, lighting and client management. It was important grounding and I ended up knowing more about the business of photography than many assistants," says Lottie.

During this phase she had been doing some personal work too... working on a worldwide campaign for Monsoon for example, which comprised floral abstracts. She was also commissioned to do editorial work, chiefly food and interiors, by *The Telegraph* (an editor saw her work on a marketing postcard

in the gym) and ended up working for the paper weekly for over six years. "With that and the other editorial and book work I felt myself becoming pigeonholed as a food photographer but I knew it wasn't what I wanted 'to be'... I wasn't finding it satisfying and I had this strong feeling it wasn't what I was supposed to be doing. What I did want to do was to make some art.

"So, in January 2008, I decided 'I'm going to play' and it rapidly became about stories... it's always stories... and the *Memories and Nightmares* project was born." *Memories and Nightmares* comprises a series of portraits conceived out of a retelling of individual early

childhood memories or nightmares. Lottie takes others' recollections and uses them as inspiration for a series of stunning images. She explains; "We all have our own tales and myths which we use to describe our lives and in many ways memories are an essentially human experience which over the years can often change. In recounting nightmares some people remember a clear narrative, others only a feeling or location. The surreal or impossible elements of the dream are often the most fascinating. In these images I aim to celebrate these fantastic, crazy and brilliant stories and encourage them to tell us more about ourselves."



Dressing Street Christmas Card

The 2011 official Christmas card, sent out by Queen and Prince Philip, used an image commissioned from Lottie. "I'm not saying I've thought I did up doing but Sarah Brown started enquiring about photographers around the time of the Taylor Wessing prize and I ended up as *Dressing Street* in October with fake snow and a large wreath on the door of number 10 – great fun."



Boys at the Market, 2006
In 2006 Lottie shared the features of the central *Kalibari* in *Bhawanee* with the charity *Survival International* which supports tribal peoples in their struggle to hold onto their ancestral way of life.

The resulting images are sumptuous, packed with content and meaning and some are joyful, others sinister. They have one common element, however, all the protagonists have red hair. "Not everyone notices and it's something of an aside anyway but it's my way of taking ownership of the way I've retold the story in each image," explains their Titian-tressed creator.

The Taylor Wessing accolade, won in 2008 for the image from the series called *Quints*, came as a delightful surprise according to Lottie. "Actually I was shocked. I'd entered the awards because it's what photographers do and obviously I knew I was shortlisted, but I honestly was not expecting to win. I had a fantastic time on the night and I've had a great reaction from everyone since... and it's wonderful to think there's at least one image that will live beyond me!"

The series isn't quite finished yet. For the last shoot Lottie is waiting for a particular meadow to be in ideal shape in the late summer. After that she plans to continue with a mixed portfolio of work; "Ideally my future is 50 per cent fine art projects and then a combination of commercial and journalistic projects... I'd certainly like part of it to be something that 'gives back' in some way."

So, that's the story so far, but there'll be fascinating chapters yet to unfold... Lottie's work triggers many emotions, touches many lives and the connections continue.

www.lottiedavies.com