

Jillian Edelstein interview

SB: Why did you emigrate from South Africa to London in 1985?

JE: I emigrated in 1985 because I had a bee in my bonnet about studying, I'd been working as a press photographer in South Africa and felt that I'd had enough of an initiation period because that's what it sort of felt like in terms of press photography, and wanted to push boundaries and explore horizons so I came here and applied to the London College of Printing, for the first year of the photo-journalism course at the college and that was how come I came to be here.

SB: How do you prepare for a shoot with somebody, is it different every time or do you have a system?

JE: I don't have a system and I don't have what I call formula, I'm much more a spontaneous photographer, I like to feel out the person, sense the location, feel what would suit them in terms of lighting and I've often castigated myself for not being a formula photographer because it would probably make my life much easier but then I would be a different photographer to the one that I am now.

SB: Do you research your sitter?

JE: Yes I do, if I have the time and I always try to. I don't think it helps that much but it certainly helps in terms of I'm not a very great chatter-box when I come to photographing somebody so generally if I can kind of establish that I have an interest in them and that I'm an interesting personality myself by the fact that I've taken an interest it's going to set us off on a better footing right at the start.

SB: Is there any particular shoot that you can remember more than others amongst the photographs that the NPG owns?

JE: Just off the top of my head I'm remembering the Linford Christie/Colin Jackson photograph that they have and that was unusual because it was at Heathrow airport in a VIP lounge as they were about to go and train for the Olympics in Australia and there was a make-shift studio, *continues..*

SB: Any others?

JE: The Darcey Bussell and Jonathan Cope photograph is interesting in that I think it was round about that time that I realised the importance of really working with people, I mean letting them know you had an interest in terms of them being portrayed in an accurate and fascinating way and I remember asking her to work out some sort of pose next to Jonathon Cope and she went into this very interesting pose where she had her arms around his waist and just a very powerful photograph that emerged.

SB: With your series of 'affinities' and 'soul-mates' for Managing Partners for the NPG what particularly attracts you to the double portrait?

JE: I'm not sure I'm particularly attracted to it because mostly it terrifies me. Certainly my project which went on over four or five years I was staggered to learn I had photographed over 105 couples and the thing, when I say terrified, is that three is always an odd combination and photographing a creative duo means that the third party is always going to be the voyeur or outsider in some way and it's interesting that I chose that project at a time in my life when I was probably really lonely and that's no small coincidence, **continues..**

SB: The Jay Jopling/Sam Taylor-Wood portrait, can you talk a bit about that?

JE: Well, that's a good example because I arrived at their home near Harley Street in London and I was ushered in and told that there was only one room that I could photograph, this was the place, that was the angle, and that was going to be it and that I would have ten minutes. I suppose I found it a little bit, mmm, I'm going to be polite here, peculiar, because I was dealing with a so-called artist and to then tell another artist and to command a restrained situation was really a bit rich I suppose. But that's what actually helped me in the end because Sam Taylor-Wood was apologetic about it and then actually phenomenally co-operative and helpful, **continues..**

Interview by Susan Bright