

THE ONLY WOMAN

When documentary filmmaker Immy Humes started collecting group portraits of 'only women' in a sea of men, she didn't stop until she'd gathered hundreds of photographs. Now collated in her book *The Only Woman*, Humes talks Georgia Green through a compelling gallery of women who made their way in a man's world



It started with a photo of the filmmaker Shirley Clarke in 1961, toasting her first feature, *The Connection*, about a group of heroin-addicted jazz musicians. 'I became fixated with the image,' says Immy Humes, an Oscar-nominated filmmaker herself, 'because she's literally surrounded by men.' Often described as 'the only woman filmmaker' of her time, Clarke was photographed as the sole female among 22 men – an image that reminded Humes of a famous shot from *Life* magazine of great post-war American artists including Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning: all men, except for one woman, Hedda Sterne. 'She stuck out like a sore thumb, or, as Sterne put it, a feather in the hat.'

After that moment piqued her curiosity five years ago, Humes began embarking on what she calls 'fanatic research'; collecting and collating historical photos that depict 'the only woman' across time and place: artists, doctors, athletes and astronauts in images ranging from the 1860s to the present day. 'As I worked through the decades, I was flummoxed by how easy it was to find these pictures.

I thought, "Why is it so common, then and now?" So I tried to come up with some speculative answers,' Humes says.

Among the women featured in Humes' resulting book, *The Only Woman*, there are the 'firsts', such as Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to be elected to the US Congress; Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space; Marie Curie, the first woman to receive a Nobel Prize, and Jane Campion, the first female filmmaker to receive the Palme d'Or award.

But as Humes dug deeper, other 'categories' began to emerge: a single woman included in a tokenist move to represent women everywhere, or to give the impression of inclusion – a trend seen time and again in popular culture (*The Smurfs'* Smurfette or Princess Leia in *Star Wars*, for example) – that began to prove itself through photos such as formal university class line-ups.

But there were also singular women in a crowd of men as far back as the 1920s, before all-male groups would have felt pressure to include women at all. 'I ended up naming this category "mascots",' says Humes. 'At first, it was a mystery to me why the women were there.' Then it dawned on her: it must have pleased the men.

Coming at the project as a filmmaker gave Humes a unique eye for imagery. 'I'm not a historian. Pictures that were visually arresting but that also had an interesting story to tell – that was my criteria.'

As well as trawling online archives, Humes consulted with scholars, but many photographs came from friends and third-party contacts. Five years later, amid thousands of images collected, Humes began whittling the portraits down to the 100 that appear in the book.

'The same ludicrous constellation of many men, one woman, appears over and over again, but that tension between repetition and particularity is one of the peculiar pleasures,' she says.

BETSY WADE, NEWSPAPER EDITOR, USA, 1975

'Fired from her previous job at the *New York Herald Tribune* for being pregnant, Wade became the first female editor on the newsdesk of *The New York Times* in 1956. An illustrious 45 years at the newspaper left her with a string of firsts to her name, and she was involved in numerous journalistic events of her time, including the *Pentagon Papers*.

In this image, she's right at the centre of the action. This U-shaped desk is a traditional old newspaper set-up, when paper was handed around the office – copy literally being ripped up. Everything would have had to go through her, so this set-up was clearly symbolic as much as it was practical. I love the picture for that double meaning.'

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**LUCY KOMISAR,
ACTIVIST AND
JOURNALIST,
USA, 1970**

'Up until the 1970s, sex segregation was perfectly legal in American establishments.

From The Plaza hotel to the dive bar, the majority were often closed to women, if not all the time.

That was until 10th August 1970, when sex discrimination in public places was banned. Komisar, vice-president of the National Organization for Women at the time, marked the occasion by walking into Manhattan's oldest Irish pub, McSorley's Old Ale House. She experienced, shall we say, friction, at the door, and in the moments after this picture was taken, one man threw a mug of ale at her. During my research, I visited McSorley's with my editor and one of the men from the picture was there drinking. He'd clearly spent his whole life in the bar, dining out on the story for years.'



VIRGINIA WRIGHT, STICK-UP ARTIST, USA, 1931

'Held at a New York police station with 10 men, all accused of "stick-ups" (robbing a small store), Wright is elegant in a long black Persian lamb coat and fabulous (if unbuckled) shoes. You can see she's young, but she looks tough. The newspapers called her a "gun moll", under the headline "Bad News". The term gun moll entered pop and gangster culture in the 1920s and originally had Jewish roots: gun is not from firearms but the Yiddish word for gonif, meaning thief. With moll, old slang for prostitute, it becomes "thief's whore". But intriguingly, Wright does not look like anybody's moll.'



GLORIA RICHARDSON, CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER, USA, 1963

'Richardson was a key figure in the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, although she was often held back from talking at rallies because she was a woman. In 1963, the governor of Maryland declared martial law to quell civil rights demonstrations. In this picture, Richardson was talking to the men on the street when she was rudely interrupted by a National Guardsman and his bayonet. "I wasn't afraid," Richardson later recalled. "I was upset. And if I was upset enough, I didn't have time to be afraid." Her aplomb while pushing the bayonet away is magnificent: she just didn't have time for the riot cops.'



**MARGARET NAYLOR,
DEEP-SEA DIVER, UK, 1924**

'The newspapers loved the only woman pictured here; they called her "The Girl In Iron Pyjamas" and couldn't get enough of her story. Naylor began diving during the First World War, when she went to work for the British Navy Department. According to a reporter for the *Hamilton Evening Journal*, "She did remarkable work on some of the sunken warships, and became recognised as the leading diver of Europe, male or female."

Central Bank Governors Meeting



**CHRISTINE LAGARDE,
INTERNATIONAL BANKER, JAPAN, 2019**

'As one of very few women at the top of her field of monetary policy and international finance, Lagarde was the first woman to run the European Central Bank, the first woman to run the International Monetary Fund and the first female chair of a major international law firm. She's been listed among *Forbes* magazine's 10 most powerful women in the world every year since 2011. You really get a sense of her revelling in being a woman here. While the men look a bit stuffy, she's showboating.'

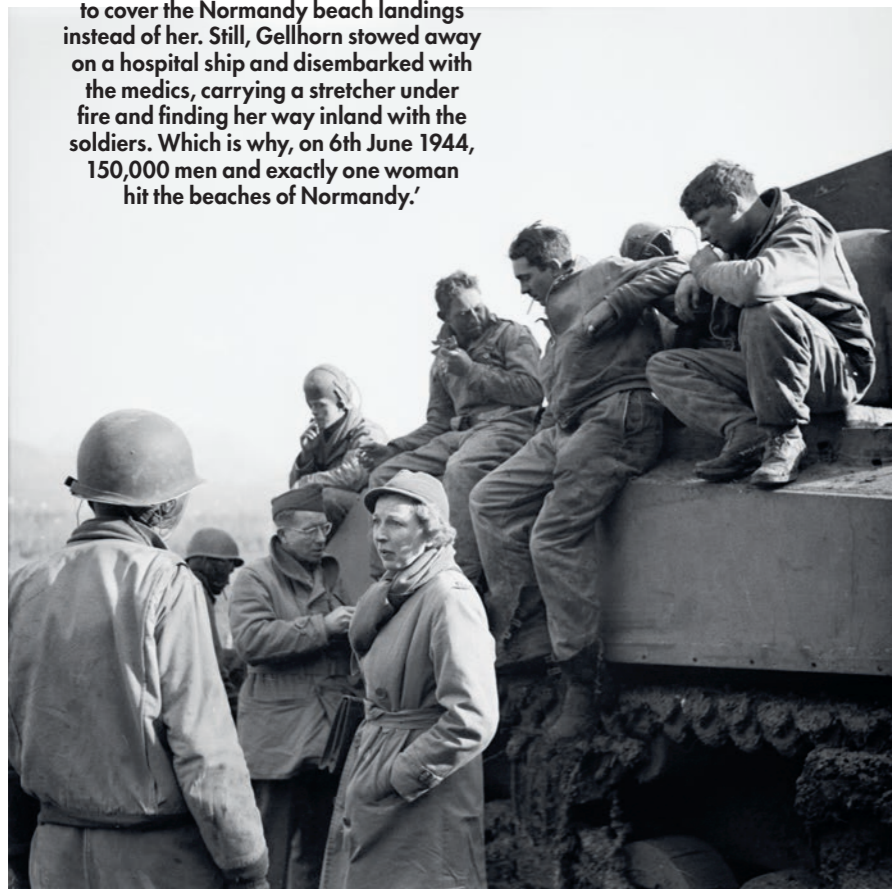
LIL HARDIN, MUSICIAN AND SONGWRITER, USA, 1923

'I'd never heard of Lil Hardin, yet she was a genius pioneer. In the early years of jazz, the few women performers were almost all singers; instrumentalists were rare. Hardin was both. At 20, she was the hottest pianist in Chicago. The band pictured here includes a player on trombone newly arrived from New Orleans – a young Louis Armstrong. He and Hardin married in 1924 and she pushed him to launch his career, resulting in the first-ever jazz recordings.'



MARTHA GELLHORN, WAR CORRESPONDENT, ITALY, 1944

'American journalist Gellhorn covered every conflict in her lifetime, from the Spanish Civil War onward, including the Second World War and the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp, the US war in Vietnam and, in her 80s, the US invasion of Panama. Days before D-Day in 1944, when this photo was taken, Gellhorn's then husband Ernest Hemingway convinced her magazine to send him to cover the Normandy beach landings instead of her. Still, Gellhorn stowed away on a hospital ship and disembarked with the medics, carrying a stretcher under fire and finding her way inland with the soldiers. Which is why, on 6th June 1944, 150,000 men and exactly one woman hit the beaches of Normandy.'



KATHRINE SWITZER, ATHLETE, USA, 1967

'When Switzer entered the Boston Marathon, signing her name just KV Switzer, she became the only woman among the 741 runners on the day – and the first to ever run it, since women were banned from entering. Around mile four, a race official got wise. "Before I could react, he grabbed my shoulder and flung me back, screaming, 'Get the hell out of my race and give me those numbers!'" Switzer recalled. Her boyfriend managed to intervene and she finished the race. Now a legend in women's sports, Switzer has devoted her career to working for equal opportunities for female runners.'

PHOTOGRAPHY: NEW YORK TIMES/EVIEVINE, GETTY, AP/SHUTTERSTOCK, IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM, ALAMY



ELLEN WILKINSON, POLITICIAN, UK, 1936

'"Red Ellen", as she was called for both her hair colour and her politics, was a cabinet minister when women were banned from Parliament members' bars. On trying to enter the smoking room, she was stopped by a policeman, who warned her ladies were not allowed. She replied, "I am not a lady – I am a member of Parliament," and sailed ahead.'



The Only Woman (Phaidon) by Immy Humes is out now

JANE CAMPION, FILMMAKER, FRANCE, 2007

'New Zealand filmmaker Campion won the Cannes Film Festival's highest honour, the Palme d'Or, in 1993 for her film *The Piano*, making her the first woman to do so. This photo was taken in 2007 and, as you can see, not a lot had changed. Campion is the only woman among 32 filmmakers from around the world invited to celebrate the festival's 60th anniversary. As a filmmaker, I have a special rage for how long it's taken for women to make a dent in the world of film. It took until 2021, 28 years later, for another woman, Julia Ducournau, to win the Palme d'Or.'

