

# Age of innocence

**Carolyn Mendelsohn**, gold winner at the 159th Royal Photographic Society Print Exhibition, describes her portrait of a girl between childhood and adulthood

I took this portrait of Alice [right] as part of my ongoing personal project 'Being Inbetween'. I submitted four portraits from the series to the 159th Royal Photographic Society (RPS) International Print Exhibition, and to my surprise, all were shortlisted.

My studio set-up for Alice's portrait was very simple: a hand-painted grey canvas backdrop, one single light (with a beauty dish) and a second that I rarely use. I love the simplicity of using one light, and I move it around until I get the right quality of light on my subject.

When Alice arrived at the studio, I was struck instantly by her stillness, composure and intelligence. She has a timeless quality – she could almost be a child from Tudor times. She arrived in clothes she had chosen (I do not intervene in this choice), and she decided herself on how her hair should be. I spent some time with her, asking her questions and listening to her. My aim was for us to work together to create a portrait that exactly represented her at this time in her life.



I spent a long time thinking about the prints, knowing that even though I had been shortlisted, the final judging was based on the print itself rather than the digital image. I used the wonderful printers at CC Imaging Ltd in Leeds and had the work printed on Fujifilm Fine Art Photo Rag paper. I had used this paper previously for an exhibition of the series and was more than happy with the results. When I received my four prints, I spent a long time over-thinking and worrying that my work would be bypassed (the competition is vast, with, I think, around 5,500 images submitted). When I received a notification that 'Alice' had been awarded the gold medal, and that another portrait, 'Caitlin' [below left], would also be in the exhibition, I couldn't have been more shocked and delighted.

## Making the portrait

The quality of my work tends to be nostalgic, with an element of mystery. I strive to bring out the story in the image – be it simply about the subject's life or using the natural drama of the environment to create an intriguing portrait.

The focus of the 'Being Inbetween' series is the complex transition between childhood and young adulthood. It explores the ages of 10 to 12 years, where one is no longer a young child and not yet an adult. It's an age when girls are often unintentionally rendered invisible or unimportant. The work really stems from strong memories of this part of my own life. The things people said to me back then really stuck in my head – be they throwaway comments or little criticisms from teachers, parents or my peer group. Comments stick and influence us for a long time,

**Right: 'Alice', Carolyn's gold-winning portrait**

**Bottom left: 'Caitlin', which will also feature in the 159th RPS Print Exhibition at London's Royal Albert Hall from 16 November until 12 December**



Carolyn is a portrait photographer and filmmaker based in West Yorkshire. In 2013, she was awarded the Professional Photographer of the Year 2013 award in the Lifestyle category by *Professional Photographer* magazine. She offers a variety of lifestyle, fashion and bespoke portrait services. For more details, visit [www.carolynmendelsohnphoto.com](http://www.carolynmendelsohnphoto.com).

sometimes well into adulthood. I very much wanted to explore this through photography.

In order to produce the series, I did a call-out for girls between the ages of 10 and 12 years. I asked them to come in clothes of their own choice and for there not to be parental/carer intervention in this decision. It is really important to me, and essential to the success of the portrait sitting, that the subjects feel comfortable and very much themselves. At the sitting, we explore how they naturally stand and hold their hands to create a more truthful portrait. The girls are invited to look directly into the camera, the intention being that when the portraits are viewed, the effect is one of directness, power and confidence. After the photograph is taken, I interview them with the same set of questions each time and record the answers.

The work has been exhibited as a solo show in two galleries: Artlink in Hull, East Yorkshire, and Salts Mill in Saltaire, West Yorkshire. My long-term objective is for the work to tour to other galleries further afield, and I wish to eventually publish a book on the series. I'm also delighted that my portraits of Alice and Caitlin will be touring the UK for a year in the RPS International Print Exhibition. It feels as if I have been given a wonderful present, and I am extremely grateful.

## The kit for the job

I have a whole collection of cameras. My workhorse is a Nikon D800, and I always use fast prime lenses – my favourite being an AF-S Nikkor 85mm f/1.4G. I love using my Nikkor 135mm f/2.8, while my AF-S Nikkor 35mm f/1.4G is great for groups of people. I also have a collection of old film cameras, Polaroid and various plastic toy cameras that I use when I'm in the mood or when I have film. My favourite film camera is my Hasselblad 500CM, which is a joy to work with. Because I run my photography business, I don't have much time to play with my cameras, but I am hoping to change this and incorporate them into my work.

Irrespective of me working in the studio or on location, I always carry along a large reflector with me. I don't always use it, but it has proven invaluable in tricky lighting situations. I have used it as a diffuser of bright sun and to help shape and create beautiful light.

