

Meet the Artist: Carolyn Mendelsohn

11 minutes

Produced by New Focus, Impressions Gallery's young peoples collective

Hi, my name's Carolyn Mendelsohn, I'm a photographer and filmmaker and I'm based in the Bradford District.

My inspirations for this project started really with my memories of being between the age of 10 to 12, I have really strong memories of that time. I remember feeling incredibly uncomfortable in my own skin and really self-conscious. All these memories of this age, and my growing awareness of how fragile girls are at this age, and how much the things that people say can affect the way girls see themselves really made me think about doing a piece of work where I was exploring that age group where I was giving girls of that age the opportunity to be who they are, and to be celebrated as they are.

When it came to the portrait sittings, before it got to that point, I would give a set of instructions. So, I would say number one, I'm going to do a portrait of you but I would like it if you wore the clothes of your choice, I don't want there to be parental intervention. I'm also going to ask you questions about your life about your hopes, fears and dreams. So they would come and I would talk them through how I would use the light, also if you look at the pictures you can see that the girls are looking at us, and that was an intentional decision. I wanted those girls to have power, so I explained to the young people I want you to look straight into the camera, but I don't want you to stare, because what I would love is when we see the picture, that you're looking at us, you're looking at the audience or the viewers.

We would also have a discussion about how they might stand because it was important to me that how they were standing was really natural to them. So some girls might want to stand with their arms folded, or sometimes they might stand slightly at the side with their face there, they might stand with their arm there. It would be really a negotiation and a joint process between myself and them. And the starting point for

that was, as a photographer you're really powerful, and I wanted to really create a mutual process where they could equally take part in the telling of their own stories.

I'd do the portrait and then we'd go into a separate space and I'd ask the same set of questions. So I'd start off with, what's your name? How old are you? What are your hobbies? What is your dream? What do you hate? What do you love? What do you want to be when you grow up? What are your hopes for the future, all kind of questions like that. All of the girls have had a big impact on me and they've all been different, they've all been singular in their dreams and their aspirations.

I have really strong memories of Olivia coming, she was 12, and this was probably in 2015. Olivia came to the studio that I was shooting portraits at, she was a very small 12 year old but with a massive amount of energy, and I was really taken with her. I remember asking her the questions then at the end of the series of questions, because they were a very defined set of questions, she stopped me and said, "*Is there anything else you'd like me to talk about?*" None of the young people had set that to me before, and I said, "*Oh right, Olivia, have you got something you'd like to tell me about that I've not asked you about?*" and she said, "*Yes, I've had 6 major heart operations throughout my life.*" and then she proceeded to tell me something so major in her life that I hadn't even touched upon, that in some ways made sense of her absolute engagement in every moment. And she taught me that, after the questions, always, always ask if there's anything else.

I remember Becca and Lottie coming and they were the last two sittings, so February 2020, the very final portraits I took. Becca is such an exceptional and humorous human being, she has cerebral palsy, her twin sister is Lottie, they do a lot of things together. Becca just charmed me with her intelligence, her humour, she wore a t-shirt that her mum was a little bit concerned about, Becca chose a t-shirt which said 'I'm only in it for the parking.' with a picture of a wheelchair. And she had all these dreams and aspirations, she has lots of hobbies and she's really concerned that people in wheelchairs are given opportunities that able bodied people have. Her wish was to walk, her wish was to go to the same places that her sister could go, to run with her sister, to walk with her sister, to climb trees with her sister and she was not afraid to talk about this but at the same time she had a massive amount of humour and wanted to make the world a better and easier place, and more accessible place to people that had physical challenges or were in wheelchairs. She was brilliant, and one thing that really touched me greatly was at the end the interview, I asked Becca and Lottie of what their experience was of being part of *Being Inbetween*.

Becca and Lottie:

Showing who we really are and letting our voices be heard, so we're not in the shadows.

The really, really interesting thing for me about doing this project particularly over six years, a long period of time, and interviewing the girls with the same set of questions was actually I saw how their responses also reflected the changes in our world and our society, politically and socially at the time. Initially there was lots of talk about self-image and the pressure to conform and look a certain way and how it was important to feel it's alright to be who you are. There were young people talking about homelessness and their concern about poverty and war and terrorism. Equality was a massive issue, people being treated well by other people, people not being mean to other people, and then as time went on I remember they started to talk about, I think just over a year ago, climate change. That was a huge thing in their lives, they were being educated on climate change within school but also amongst themselves and their peer groups, it was a major concern. And then my last shoot was in February this year, and I remember Lottie saying to me, and this is February [2020], "*I have a real fear of coronavirus,*" and I remember responding to her and saying, "*You know what Lottie, so do I.*"

I am really excited to say *Being Inbetween* has been published by Bluecoat Press, and not only that, it has an essay written by Anne McNeil, director of Impressions gallery, and a foreword by Zelda Cheatle. Not in a billion years did I imagine this was going to happen, it was a dream and now it's a reality. I really hope that you get the book, that you see the faces of the girls, that you read their words and I hope the book goes all over the world.

I think that this project, though it's based on my memories of being that age and it's about my view as a girl of that age, it's actually universal. It's about hope, it's about aspirations, it's about being at that very cusp of your future, of our future, of their futures. So I hope that people who come to see the work, invest some of themselves when they see it and give those girls the space to have their moment, and that it then maybe then alters their perception of what girls of that age are capable of and how they think and feel. I also hope that people see it as not just as about girls but also about the humanity of this time, and that it gives people a kind of hope for the future.