



AT FRANK CRITCHLOW'S FUNERAL 2010 CHARLIE PHILLIPS

The Centre for British Photography showcases the diversity and variety of photography in the UK. Director James Hyman tells us more

WORDS JONATHAN WHILEY

NATION WIDE

From social traditions surrounding death in London's African-Caribbean community to modern portraits inspired by 19th-century Chinese studios, the Centre for British Photography is determined to champion British photography in all its diversity.

Founded as a charity by its director, James Hyman, in 2020, it opened on Jermyn Street (in a space formerly occupied by Italian clothing brand Boggi Milano) in January this year. "I've had galleries in Mayfair and St James's since 2001 and I've got somebody very good who finds me spaces," says James, a leading authority on British photography and 20th-century British art. "This place was available and it's an amazing location."

The centre has six exhibition spaces, a photography sales gallery and a programme of public events. It also administers and provides access to the Hyman Collection, the renowned private collection of artworks owned by James and his wife, Claire, a specialist oral surgeon and clinical lecturer who is the charity's chair of trustees.

The couple began collecting in 1996 and have amassed more than 4,000 pieces, from historic photographs to contemporary works, bound by a commitment to champion diversity and support women in photography. In 2015, they launched a website (hymancollection.org) based on the British photography in their collection to be used as an educational resource and thereafter, donated



photographs to institutions such as the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

"We were becoming much more public in terms of spreading the word about British photography and also exhibiting work from the collection," says James. "In a way opening this space seemed like a natural development and alongside that we set up the charity. There isn't a charity that is specifically dedicated to supporting British photography in all its diversity and we just felt there was a gap when you look at what other institutions are doing."

Why does James think there is such a void? "I think historically some of our institutions have felt more naturally comfortable with painting or sculpture or drawing. I think if you are looking at British culture you should be looking at every medium and photography



ought to be part of that, but it's always been a rather uncomfortable fit.

"There hasn't been a history of engagement, so to set something up that is specifically about supporting photography in Britain is quite a big statement. The Centre for British Photography is not a nationalistic statement, it's a statement about trying to support what's happening in this country. It's not about nationality as such, it's about people who are here. If we have a mission, one

of the missions is to celebrate the

way that cultures are enriched by people from different backgrounds, heritages and histories."

The centre's current exhibitions – which run over three floors – are on show until December 17. They include Arpita Shah's *Modern Muse* (drawing from

TOP: NEIL WITH HIS HEAD IN AN ELEPHANT'S MOUTH, CIRCUS HOFFMAN, WEYMOUTH, DORSET, JULY 1974. DANIEL MEADOWS
LEFT: CHAPEL MARKET, ISLINGTON WOMAN WITH DOLL, DOROTHY BOHN



GRACE LAU

and subverting the conventions of Mughal and Indian miniature paintings), Dorothy Bohm's London Street Markets, Charlie Phillips' How Great Thou Art (capturing 50 years of African-Caribbean funerals in the capital) and Daniel Meadows' 50th anniversary show featuring photographs he took during a 14-month journey across England in 1973 on a double-decker bus he had repurposed as a gallery and darkroom.

"These are all people that are part of Britain and our communities and what we want to do is not only celebrate those communities, but speak to those audiences and find new audiences," says James.

Grace Lau's Portraits in a Chinese Studio is another example of the community thread that runs through the current crop of shows. It's an echo of the photographic portrait studios set up in China in the mid-19th-century by western travellers, where photos of "exotic" subjects such as beggars, opium smokers and courtesans were reproduced as postcards to amuse European audiences.

"She likes the idea of reversing that," says James. "You can go with friends, family, dress up, bring props. She will photograph you and send you the digital files and then alongside that, you can have a professionally printed one if you want. She is very keen that each place it goes it reflects the community she is in."

Accessibility – be it location or reaching a wider public – has been an important consideration. "Setting

up a charity was because we wanted to support artists; whether through grants, commissions or mentoring," says James. "We are trying to reach a wider public. Our exhibitions are free and that is a big statement. We are committed to having a diverse audience of all ages and backgrounds and we don't want it to be intimidating or for the cost to be a barrier."

James feels the medium of photography is also one of the most accessible forms of art. "The audience for photography is very international, it's very diverse, often very young. Why is that? One of the reasons is that we have this western convention that oil on canvas is the supreme medium. But why should oil on canvas be more important than anything else? If you go across south-east Asia or Africa, there is no history of oil on canvas. It's peculiar in a global context.

"Photography is a universal medium; everybody can relate to a photograph. The idea that the camera never lies is one of the stupidest things anyone ever said. The camera can lie all the time, but nevertheless it's a language that we all think we can read and I think that is its strength and its weakness.

"I would argue that to be an artist working in photography is one of the most challenging things you can do. It's the very easiness of it technically that makes it so difficult artistically."

49 Jermyn Street, britishphotography.org