

for LONDON INDEPENDENT PHOTOGRAPHY

FLIP INSIGHTS



ISSUE 4 : DEVELOPING A PHOTOGRAPHIC STYLE, PORTFOLIO REVIEWS & INSTGRAM TIPS

Welcome to fLIP INSIGHTS.

In this issue we are presenting the full unabridged text of the interview with LIP artist Mieke Douglas in which she speaks extensively about her personal journey in developing a unique photographic style and why this matters.

Mieke mentions the benefits of portfolio reviews and the skilled use of social media for communicating with wider audiences and getting ones work seen. Both are important to the development of a photographic 'voice' and getting that voice heard. Mieke and I ran a portfolio review session following all the rules and tips we knew about and the session was observed by LIP member Frankie McAllister, who provided an independent commentary on the interaction. We also discussed what photographers could do to maximise benefits from the Instagram platform.

It is a pleasure for us to present the full interview and some tips for getting the most out of portfolio reviews and Instagram.

fLIP INSIGHTS is an on-line supplement to fLIP magazine published by London Independent Photography. Here we present in-depth interviews and feature articles that, due to extra content, require more space than we have in our print magazine.

Note: The first part of the interview with Mieke Douglas appeared in fLIP 50 (Winter 2021).



Mieke Douglas

Developing a photographic style

Mieke Douglas talks to Arun Misra

Mieke Douglas is an accomplished photographer. She has a distinctive photographic style, her work is critically acclaimed and she is the recipient of several prestigious awards. Mieke, an LIP member, gave a talk to LIP's 2021 AGM on developing a personal style. We invited her to discuss her journey and delve deeper into how she developed her unique style.

AM: *When did you first become aware of your photographic style?*

MD: I started my photographic journey late in life, after careers in Law, business and raising a family. When I had some time to pursue my love of photography more seriously, one of the first things I did was attend a lecture on the importance of 'finding your unique photographic style' to becoming a successful photographer.

It made me think a lot about issues like: What kind of photographer am I? What am I trying to say? What is my style? Am I lifestyle, portrait, reportage? High Key, Low Key?

I agonised over these issues in the following months, trying to force myself into one of these categories. But fortunately, I was also just enjoying playing with this new creative outlet, taking lots of pictures and immersing myself in the world of art - and it sort of grew organically.

After a while, people started saying things to me like: 'Your images are very moody' or 'oh that photo is your style' or 'I could tell that image on Instagram was yours as soon as I saw it' - were they commenting on my 'style'.

'Really?' I thought, 'I have a style?' I honestly had not even noticed. It was only when I had a look myself at my Instagram feed, could I see it. There was something there. It had just happened. I had been shooting various themes, mostly horses, waves, flowers and a bit of street, but it had percolated its way through them all. I could see a thread. This was a bit of an epiphany for me.

AM: *Do you think having a photographic style is important?*

MD: I suppose it depends on what you want out of photography. If you hope to have any commercial success, then yes. If your work is just like everyone else's, then the only way to distinguish yourself and get the business is by lowering your price - not the best way forward.

On the other hand, getting too hung up on pursuing a distinctive style can hinder creativity and risk-taking and actually have the opposite effect. In term of creative fulfilment, I think it's a personal and constantly changing balance.

AM: *What would you say to photographers wanting to find their own style?*

MD: Well, this is only my experience, but for what it's worth...I would suggest that 1) Just keep shooting, 2) Photograph what is available to you and 3) Photograph what you love.

AM: *That quite general. Can you unpack it for me? What do you mean by just keep shooting?*

MD: For me, the first and most important step towards finding my style was to just get out there and take as many photographs as possible. We all have busy lives. If you only have 30 mins free, that's fine, go out and just shoot for 30 minutes. If you can't leave the house, shoot around the house, maybe set up some still life images. Shoot what's around you.

To begin with, the only time I had to shoot



all images: Mieke Douglas

was during my weekly morning walks to my Photography class and then an intense few months flying back and forth to Toronto, to see my dying mother. I tried to stay on UK time, so my life wouldn't be too disrupted when I got back, so would wake up 2 am Toronto time, go to the gym, find the 24 hr Starbucks and go out and shoot until the sun came up. These are some of the images I was making at this time.

I think this was a pivotal time for my photography. I was all alone, for hours at a time, in the dark. It was a bit scary; all my senses were heightened. I became intensely focused. It was a personally emotional period. It was probably also the most time I had ever spent shooting and I think this was really the start of my journey towards developing my own vision as a photographer. In hindsight, I can see a style developing or mood. Or something

AM: *So you immersed yourself and were mindful*

of a particular trajectory. Your second point is to shoot what is available and not putting things off... can you expand on what this meant for you?

MD: I have learned that it's important to shoot things I can come back to, again and again. Then I'm not afraid to experiment, take some risks and make mistakes. I can always come back and try again next time.

Probably my first photographic subjects, after my children, were horses. I love horses and I hope that comes through in my images. But a big reason they have worked for me is purely access. My daughter used to take a riding lesson early every Saturday morning, when the light was nice and low and lovely. I usually brought my camera to take pictures of her.

But when she became a teenager, she wouldn't let me point the lens anywhere near her, so I moved

on to the ponies. I started walking around and chatting and patting them and started snapping. I probably only had 10 or 15 minutes with them each week before the lesson started or my daughter began to die of embarrassment, and I would have to stop.

Sometimes a bit of time pressure is good to focus the mind.

Here I learned, by trial and error to begin with. Horses were not an easy first subject. They are fast-moving, unpredictable and these were in dark horse boxes.

My first images were underexposed and blurry. But during the week I would have thought about it and perhaps the next week I may have tried a

faster shutter speed to stop the blur, but then the images were too dark. And so on.

But slowly I learned what worked and what didn't. Which settings would create which effect? Which colour horses suited which techniques? Which horse boxes might have a stray ray of light at that time of the morning? And then it became interesting.

I learned their individual characters; who might stay still and who moved quickly and unpredictably; who might try to bite or kick.

If I couldn't get the entire horse in frame, because it was in its box, I experimented with conveying what I wanted to say, with parts of them - curving lines of the musculature and textures of the hides,



illuminated by the occasional ray of light.

This allowed me to move beyond the technical and really find my voice and create something unique to me.

These images have grown into a few ongoing bodies of work, one of which I was lucky enough to have gained some recognition for, early in my photographic career. This was great because it gave me some confidence and emboldened me to keep experimenting and exploring new things, in my own way.

AM: *I can see that mastery of a few basic parameters coupled with subjects that one is drawn to can be helpful in finding a voice. But what is that voice once you see it emerging and do you like it?*



MD: Not everyone will like your work. Most people may not like your work. Photograph what you love. Make what you love. Show what you love.

AM: *How important is mastery of technical skills to the process?*

MD: Technical skills are important. I embrace photographic technology and digital post-production wholeheartedly and have spent countless hours learning about it. But technical skill alone does not make a powerful image. In my opinion.

The great photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Julia Margaret Cameron, Robert Capa, Robert Doisneau etc... didn't spend their weekends in Photoshop or a fortune on the latest gear. They knew where to point their cameras.

For this, I think it's important to seek out visually inspiring information that enriches the mind - not just quick tips that make you better straight away - but things that help you develop a slowly expanding view of the world, so you know where to point your camera - at a more specific view.

This is where we find our individual voices. And where it gets fun!

Don McCullin, one of the best British Photojournalists once said, "Photography isn't about seeing, it's about feeling. If I don't have some kind of feeling for what I'm shooting, how can I expect the person who looks at it to feel anything?"

That really resonates with me.

AM: *Can you talk about any particularly strong or distinct styles that you are attracted to?*

MD: My work is probably more influenced by the world of art than photography. I don't purport to know that much about art - I don't. But what I have been exposed to definitely influenced my work and my ideas about what is beautiful or visually pleasing.

I grew up in Canada but used to spend my summers



visiting relatives in Europe and was lucky enough to see a lot of paintings by the Old Dutch Masters. I was constantly being dragged around galleries and museums like Rijksmuseum. I can't even remember most of them, but some of it has stuck with me, as you may see in these floral images.

I get overexcited early every Spring when the first tulips appear after a long grey winter and tend to binge shoot them for a week or two - and then I am over it, until the same happens next year.

I have tried countless different ways of lighting them, but I always come back to a similar style - I just prefer the way it looks. I suppose it's what I have seen at an impressionable early age defining what I think is beautiful.

AM: *How do you deal with emotional pressure?*

MD: I have learned to be kind to myself. I have

learned not to put myself under too much pressure. Not to go out to take an award-winning image; or to do anything in photography with a view to be taken seriously. So I would say it is important to be kind to yourself. Let it happen slowly, organically.

I remember a quote from Charles Bukowski [the German-American poet] - 'Find what you love and let it kill you'.

AM: *What else did you decide to do?*

MD: I just decided to immerse myself and see what happened. I bought photography books and embarked on loads of online learning. I joined every group going; attended lectures and workshops and courses. I went to as many exhibitions and private views as I could.

I also read art and photography books and find that I love nothing better than to look at beautiful



art and photography books. They are such a great source of inspiration. I like to look at the images and think about: What makes me linger on a particular one? What is it that speaks to me and why? How has it been created?

Looking at the work of iconic photographers is really inspiring. Sometimes I go back through images of iconic photographers and see who resonates with me at the moment and think about why. For me this has also evolved over time. So my top tip here would be to save images that resonate.

AM: *What do you do with these resonating images?*

MD: I keep folders on my desktop of images I like, for inspiration. Whenever I see something I particularly like, I will screenshot it and put it in one of my folders. Sometimes when I need a bit of inspiration, I will go through them, and something always sets me off in a new direction.

AM: *Personal styles can change as an artist*

progresses through life. What causes change? Are there notable examples you can think of?

MD: As another famous Photojournalist Ernst Haas said, 'Style has no formula, but it has a secret key. It is the extension of your personality'.

I think you need a bit of life experience to know what your voice is. What you like and don't like. My life experience determines what speaks to me and has shaped my visual voice. I couldn't have made this work at 18.

Sure, most of the population now has a smartphone or a camera taking pictures, but we are all unique. Our life experiences and therefore our visual voices are unique.

They are shaped by so many things, like: family and friends; education; work experience; movies we have watched; art we have been exposed to; books we have read.

Like life, photographic style is always evolving.

Finding one's voice is a constant process of inquiry and reassessment. I think it's important to pay attention to what is working. Let your style come to the surface. Embrace it and let it percolate into whatever you shoot, regardless of the subject matter.

Similarly, it's important to pay attention to what doesn't work - maybe it means you have to try harder, or maybe it's your voice saying try another way.

For example, I have never really been able to crack portraiture.

During lockdown, I had a bit more time on my hands to think about it. I wasn't sure exactly what I had in mind, just to approach it from another angle that resonated with me. Focus on what works for

me. Not someone else. So, I did a mood board of images. Just a vague set of ideas of things I like. Colours, curved lines, textures, poses..

In between the first and second lockdowns, I called in the help of a close friend, who is a brilliant makeup artist, and a friend's daughter volunteered to sit. I bought two continuous lights and a black backdrop and set them up in my garden shed.

Not dissimilar to the horse box really. This wasn't entirely conscious, but in hindsight it's pretty obvious!

And for once, I am pleased with the results!

I suppose I just needed to try another way and start thinking about what speaks to ME not follow what works for someone else.



AM: *Can portfolio reviews help in developing a personal style? How should photographers approach this?*

MD: Well, this is something you have probably had more success with than me, but in my opinion, yes they can be extremely helpful, if approached correctly.

Firstly, it's important to identify exactly what it is you seek to achieve from the review.

Do your research. Have a very good look at the reviewers. Invest the time to find out about them and determine whose opinions you respect and who might be in the best position to help you achieve your goals.

Bring a strong edit of images, beautifully printed or in whatever format you intend to use them, with some backups just in case.

Be able to explain to your reviewer what your work is about and what you hope to achieve.

Take notes or record the reviews. You may feel completely confused at the end of a day following several reviews. But when you review your notes or listen to the recordings you will almost certainly find recurring themes. These are probably the things you should pay attention to.

AM: *Is it important to have a website?*

MD: Yes, I think starting a new website or reworking an existing one is extremely good for focusing the mind. It's unlikely to bring in any business or attention, but it's a good place to direct someone who has already expressed an interest in your work, sort of like an online portfolio.

I started to set up a website a few years ago. It took absolutely ages, because I was stuck, trying to put my work in to various arbitrary categories: Portrait, Landscapes, Travel etc and it just wasn't working, so it languished unpublished for a long time.

However, once I had produced a few photographic projects and had more clarity about my voice,



I took down my languishing website, which was organised by category and started again, organising by project or series of images, and it all came together very easily. It seemed to flow. Some kind of thread or mood runs through it and holds it all together. I hope it gives a viewer a good sense of my work.

AM: *Do you use social media to promote your work?*

MD: Yes, social media is integral to my practice.

I am more comfortable expressing myself with images than words so I mostly use Instagram. It has been a constant source of nourishment for me and has been instrumental in my growth as a photographer. It's not only where I first noticed



my photographic style, it's my main source of photography news. I have made friends, discovered new artists and events, gone on collaborative shoots and sold prints through Instagram.

But most importantly it's a great source of inspiration. People say Instagram is shallow or a waste of time. Only if you make it that way. It's your choice

I love spending time on my Instagram feed, because I have chosen to follow photographers and artists I find really inspiring and that challenge the way I think about or make images. And this has been a springboard to so many other things.

AM: *Are you a networker?*

MD: No, I hate the idea of 'networking'. It brings back hideous memories of the worst parts of my time in Law and business! However, I do think it is important to make an effort to find your tribe in art or photography.

When Dr Lucy Soutter was curating the last Photofusion Salon before lockdown she was asked to give some advice to emerging photographers, and said:

'Networking doesn't have to be some ghastly chore - it starts with seeking out people whose work and conversation inspires you and meeting with them as regularly as you can. The photographic scene is so eclectic now that finding or building your own subculture within it is crucial.'

I couldn't agree more!

And that's precisely how supportive, knowledgeable and diverse groups such as LIP have been crucial in helping me find my voice and my crowd or subculture in the artistic community.

AM: *Mieke I would like to thank you for talking to us about your personal journey in finding a style that is uniquely yours. I was a real pleasure.*

Top tips for getting the most out of portfolio reviews

Arun Misra

Portfolio reviews can be hugely beneficial for photographers who are ready to talk about their bodies of work and who are seeking critical feedback, guidance and inspiration for taking their art forward. Generally it is not that useful for talking about collections of unrelated images without underlying themes or narratives. Preparation is the key to getting the most from review sessions.

Preparation

1. Select your reviewer carefully. Research their interests and background and read their CV. Create a 'Reviewers profile' with short notes on what may interest them about your work and jot down some questions to ask them.

2. Treat the review as a relaxed two way conversation. Be prepared to talk about your work simply, compellingly and without jargon or fluff. Make sure you can answer questions such as: What is your work about? Why you make it? What challenges you faced? and Where did the inspiration or drive come from?

3. Unpick your creative process and methods. Be ready to talk about your thought processes and technical and artistic experiments because being open about this will help your reviewer to understand your work and engage with you at a deeper level. Write a short note on your working methods.

4. Prepare images in the format suited for the review. If it's online follow the technical guidance on file sizes, types and labelling. If it is face to face choose a suitable print sizes and be consistent. Organise the prints in a portfolio review hinged box in the order you would like to show them. A good print size is A3. A4 is a bit small and A2 can be a little unwieldy and expensive.

5. Print your images to the best quality possible. Include some work in progress images and some installation or gallery shots if you have exhibited.



6. Show at least two bodies of work and if possible one that is in progress. Tailor your works and images from them for your reviewer's background and interests. Try to get into your reviewer's mindset so you can connect from the very beginning as time will be very precious. Reviewers like to talk about works in progress because they can see there is scope for changes which could be beneficial to its future direction.



previous page & this image: © Meike Douglas

7. Some reviewers represent publishers and galleries and are also curators. As curators they may want to get a deeper insight into your thinking and trajectory. They may want to explore themes and strands across your works as this can help them to see how your work has developed and progressed in the past and how it may develop in the future. This may relate to their wider interests and trigger opportunities. So it is worth considering beforehand the main themes you have worked on, and ideas and patterns that connect them and how this relates to you as an artist.

8. Your reviewer should ask you to say what you would like to get from the review. Have some specific questions ready and if you are not asked, then say at the outset what you are hoping to get from the review. Reviews typically last between 20 to 40 minutes and time will fly by very quickly. You should have a feeling of control over the conversation and should expect to get some valuable input from the review.

During and after the Review

9. Be on time for the session. Treat it professionally. Be relaxed and ready for an open and friendly conversation. Reviewers are not always ready and prepared and may not have looked at any of your material beforehand. This can particularly be the case with on-line reviews and be

off putting. So be ready to start off the conversation by saying who you are, what your works are about, the works you will be presenting and importantly, what you are hoping to get from the session. Keep this succinct. Rehearse beforehand if it helps.

10. Present your images and talk about your thought process and working methods. Make sure you show images of work in progress and gallery installations. Engage your reviewer and be open to feedback and suggestions.

11. Keep an eye on who is doing the talking. It should be an even balance.

12. Be ready to talk about how your work was developed and ask for feedback as you go along. Talk about what inspired it; the aesthetic choices you made; what the work is trying to say; narrative devices you are using such as sequencing, metaphors and allusions if appropriate. This has the potential of being very engaging and open up the conversation.

13. Be ready for unexpected questions such as: I don't get your work, can you explain? The aesthetic you have chosen doesn't seem to work for me – do you think a different approach could work better? How would you display your images on a gallery wall – what colour background would you use? Would you caption your images? How would your prints be hung and lit? Etc.

14. Also questions such as these may come up: How could we help you? Would you be interested in collaborating with XYZ? Think about the consequences before you answer.

15. At the end summarise any follow up action suggested by your reviewer. And depending on the rapport you have developed, ask if you could keep in touch. Say your thank you and if it's a face to face meeting leave a card for them to remember you by.

16. After the end, make notes on the salient points, how you benefited and follow up points.

Good luck.

Portfolio review session observation

Frankie McAllister

Portfolio Review: Mieke Douglas reviewed Arun Misra's work, observed by Frankie McAllister

As an observer, I watched MD review the work of AM, a live review looking at two bodies of work, one portfolio of 26 images and one book.

I sat in to observe the process at close hand, making no comment until afterwards; I found it raised a number of questions outside of the particular body of work under review...

Q Reviewer: what do you want to get out of the review?

A. Reviewer: critical feedback

Q Reviewer: What is the purpose of the work and what is the goal for the work.

Observer question 1: what is the purpose of review?

Observer question 2: how does a portfolio review differ from a mentor review?

Observations: work is usually reviewed by a reviewer who has little or no previous knowledge of the photographer or their work. The reviewer may want the work to be presented in a particular order or format, but the photographer may (will) wish to follow their own specific criteria which can sometimes (usually) be specific to the work and particular to what they want to show. In this case MD knew the photographer and had a little knowledge of his work.

In discussion, the photographer explained his usual way of working (in "clusters of thought"), leading to the development of a subject or theme. He explained the themes in this particular project, considering life, language, love, fate, the journey; as he presented the images in a grid panel following the order they would be in a book. The images at first appeared quite varied, with closer consideration revealing connecting threads exploring the different sub-concepts.

This raises the question: How do we convey our intention to the reviewer and, by extension, to future viewers?

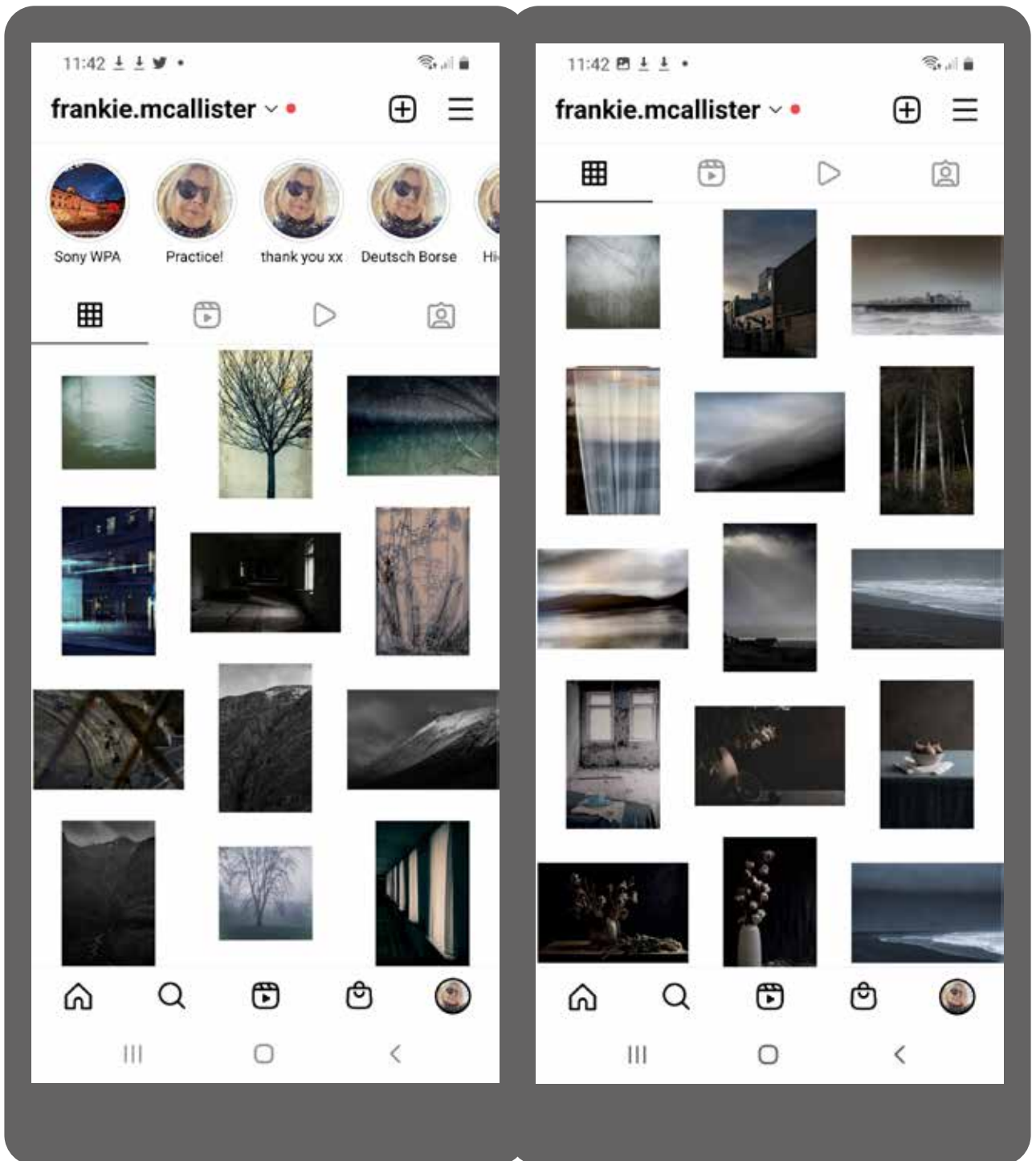
We rely on the reviewer's ability to 'see' the concept, but what is the reviewer actually commenting on; is it the aesthetics of the work, their personal preferences, the idea or concept, or the level of success of the photographer in making the work convey the concept? The photographer may wish to clarify this.

Portfolio reviews are usually short (this initial review was about 25 minutes, although discussion continued afterwards). The short timescale means the reviewer has to form an opinion very quickly. In order for them to absorb the work enough to then offer worthwhile feedback, the reviewee needs to make sure their work (or their edit of their work) is well prepared, not excessive in volume, and that they are clear what they are trying to say and what their questions are. The reviewer offers a (theoretically) neutral opinion on whether the work meets the stated goals as well as providing advice for moving on to the next stage of the project process.

With a mentorship review, you would expect more time and pre-knowledge from the reviewer (i.e. looking at websites, or a selection of work prior to the review). In addition to neutral critical feedback, the photographer would expect some input to help guide towards their wider objective and, possibly, to help refine or develop their direction. This would not particularly be the case in a portfolio review.

Tips for running (and growing) your instagram page (for insta novices) Frankie McAllister

1. Save lists of hashtags somewhere handy for copying and pasting and save them under category, e.g. landscapes, contemporary, black and white, floral etc. Try to use a mixture of 'small' specific hashtags as well as more general ones.
2. Decide your audience and/or what you principally use your insta account for: are you mainly showcasing your work or are you wanting to sell work. Are you principally just trying to attract followers? These different aims have an effect on the tone of your account, the latter two probably wanting lots of stories, reels and frequent current content and the former wanting more considered less frequent but regular curated gallery posts with thought out text.
3. Curate your posts to keep your gallery looking consistent and consider the overall aesthetic and style.
4. Research your hashtags (Google best hashtags for.... Or check what hashtags other people with similar work or work you admire, use) and try to use them selectively and appropriately to what you're posting and the audience you want to attract.
5. Seek out work you like or accounts you think may be useful, e.g. galleries, printers, Artists, magazines etc. and follow them. Try to interact with them and check who follows them.
6. Have an occasional clean-up up of the accounts you follow – we all follow people back or follow people we know, but every now and again you may need to cull the least interacted with accounts so as to avoid cluttering yourself up with irrelevant incoming posts.
7. Maybe consider a scheduler – there are basic free plans available with Aps like Planoly or Later, which allow you to upload media to phone or computer when it's convenient, and to easily add text and tags. You can then schedule the post to go whenever you want.
8. Work out when your audience is most active, mornings, evenings etc. and look at your analytics from time to time. You can see these either on Facebook (if you link your accounts) or in Insta for business.
9. Don't over-post. It's annoying to receive a deluge of posts from the same person on one day, so best not to send them that way either.
10. Keep consistent in posting, whether it's once, twice or however many times a week or month. You can add stories separately.
11. To avoid messing up the aesthetic of your gallery, do additional posts on 'stories'. 'Stories' is where you post 'news', the things you are doing, exhibitions you've gone to, work in progress, anything and everything that happens day to day to help to keep interest up. You can also post reels or share video clips here.
12. Add stories to Highlights to keep them live. Otherwise, 'Stories' disappear after 24 hours.
13. Tag people whose work you like, or who you would like to get to know.
14. Comment on other people's posts. Interact.



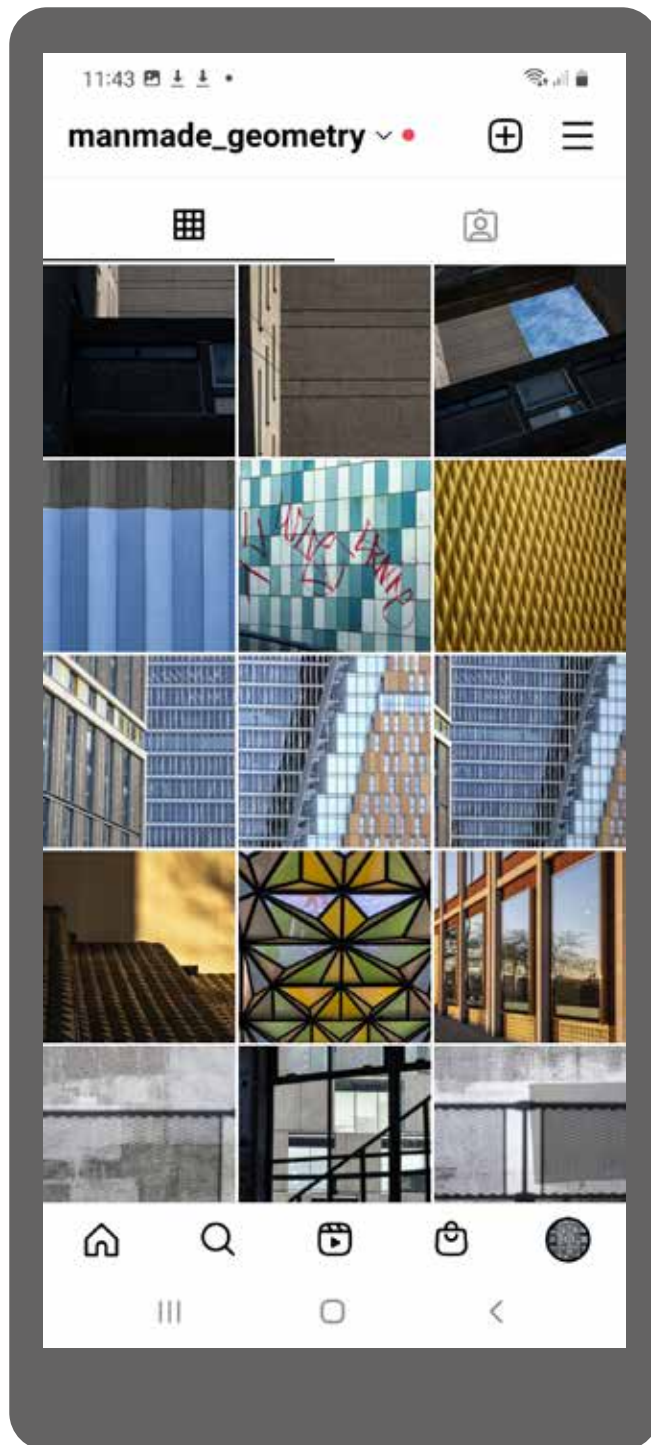
@Frankie.mcallister

This is my main 'gallery' website, so the aim is to make it reflective of what I do and to serve as a portfolio/gallery with an overriding aesthetic. However, it still has to absorb different types of work in different formats. Therefore I've chosen to mount the images on a white background to get round instagram's format constraints and to alternate portrait and landscape formats to keep an overall look. The 'Story Highlights' generally include a 'cover' to help make the story more recognisable and consistent. And – if I have events or stories to share, they will always be in 'Stories' and not in the main feed.



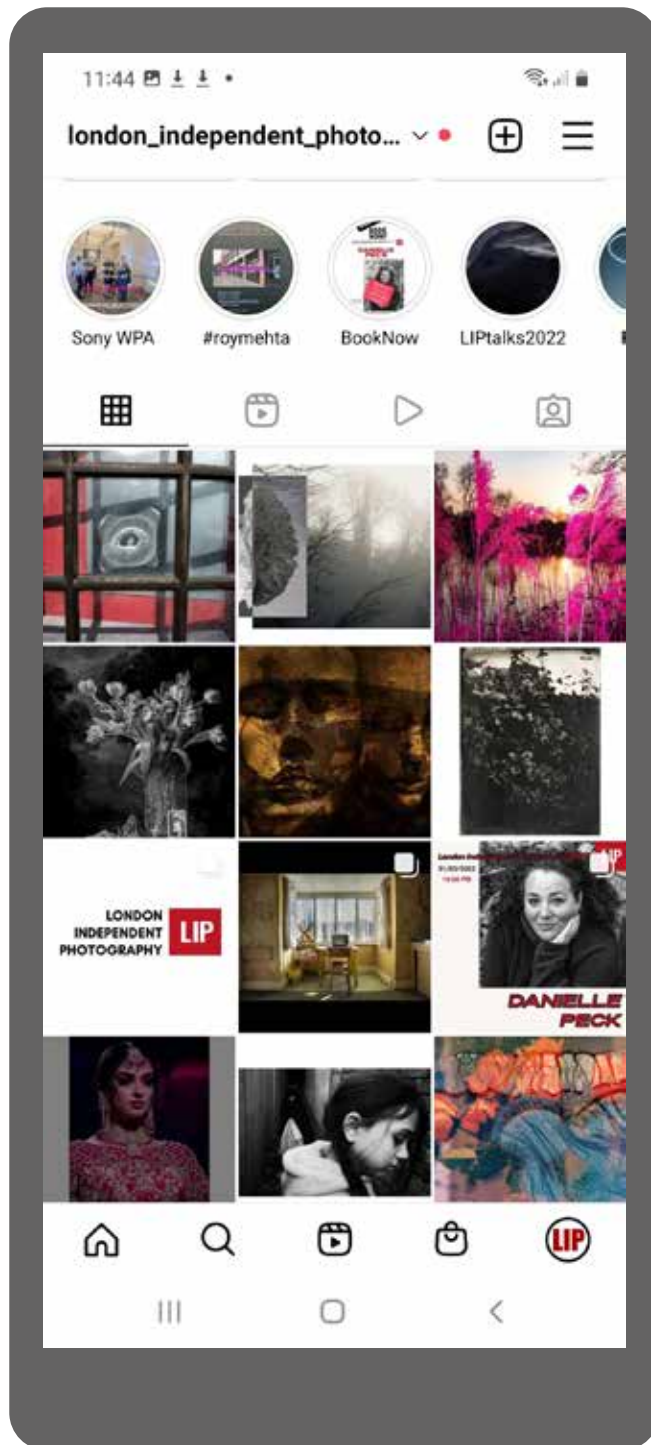
@Permitted Exercise

This is a photo diary feed (started during lockdown) where the main point was to record events and experiences – the purpose wasn't particularly to grow the site so the Highlights aren't branded and I have paid less attention to consistency in posting, although there is still some attention to aesthetic. Again, the feed is kept for the images and anything else goes in Stories.



@manmadegeometry

A fairly new insta feed concentrating on one main subject. I wanted to keep the layout in keeping with the subject, sharp and angular with high contrast, so I post in rows of 3 similar or related images, to ensure the gallery always conforms to a look that relates to the name.



@london_independent_photography

Because this is a semi public feed, serving primarily as a Members Gallery but also as a form of publicity for the organisation, there are slightly different criteria and it makes for a messier look, but that is secondary to the main aims. In addition to member images in the feed, there will also be ads and promotions for LIP events. These will also go in the feed, but it's much more of a mixture across the two.

Mieke Douglas

Mieke Douglas is a Dutch and Canadian Fine Art Photographer, living in London. She is known for her atmospheric lighting and surreal perspectives. Her work is described as moody with an underlying sense of unease.

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Frankie McAllister

is a London based photographer from Northern Ireland. Her practice sits on the fringes between fine art landscape and documentary photography, with a particular interest in altered landscapes and the influence of man on nature, most recently including constructed landscapes and abstracted realities.

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Arun Misra

Arun Misra is a London based photographer. His works explore the magnitude of human experiences and ideas, inspired by time, space and the abstract and conceptual arts. He graduated from the University of Westminster's MA in Photography Arts program in 2018. Arun is the Editor, fLIP and fLIP INSIGHTS and the recipient of Daylight FORMAT portfolio award 2021.

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