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# No longer camera-shy...

**Grace Robertson, the photojournalist, welcomes the first festival to focus on the work of women photographers**

When the 150th anniversary of the birth of photography is celebrated next year, more women than ever before will be using cameras – and not just to photograph the new baby or record a holiday abroad. Women photographers with important things to say are on the increase and the events of life today, even the very ugly ones, are as likely to be reported by adventurous young women with cameras as by men.

This weekend, Spectrum, the first festival of women's photography, begins with exhibitions and workshops at nearly 70 venues in London and in 14 provincial cities. Last July, when I said a few words at its Press launch, the work of older women photographers gazed down from the walls of the Institute of Contemporary Arts on to a gathering of young people representing the next generation. Examining these camera-carrying young women, I detected an air of seriousness and solidarity, which I would not expect to find in a similar gathering of, say, young women writers or painters; and there is a good reason for this.

When I look back to my time as a freelance photojournalist, I vividly recall the physical strain of certain assignments, the problems of getting to places on time and of coping with the difficulties that were put in my path – and this was at a time when there were fewer photographers and less pressure. No wonder they looked so serious and determined: they didn't need me to tell them they had a tough job on their hands.

As a photojournalist in the Fifties, I was, in effect, taking part in a reconstruction of the very society with which today's young photographers are coming to grips. After six years of war and with evident signs of social change, we all needed a moment in which to take stock of our lives. When I went up into the hills around Snowdonia to photograph the farmers who lived there, I considered it was my responsibility to show town-

dwellers how such people were living, so far from the amenities others took for granted. When I photographed Miss Bluebell's dancing girls on a visit to Italy, I felt I might well be opening up the horizons for other young women who, like myself, had been unable to leave Britain during the war.

With *Picture Post's* reputation for responsible reporting backing me up, I never met anyone who objected to my camera; indeed, I was often made actively welcome. My acceptance by a group of women I joined on a Battersea pub outing (shown left) springs to mind. Nowadays, many people who are photographed fear (and often with reason) that they may be unfairly represented.

In the South of France recently, the photojournalist Sue Adler was covering a religious event that was taking place on the edge of the sea. She photographed the procession as it was winding its way, rather uncomfortably, through the breaking waves. To the right of one of her pictures, I spotted another photographer at work. It brought home to me just how complicated life has become for the professional photojournalist.

Today, both Press photographers and photojournalists use miniature cameras and a photojournalist, covering a public demonstration, for example, is quite likely to catch in her lens a colleague at work. The difference between a Press photographer and a photojournalist is that the former, working to a deadline, is after a single, self-explanatory image; the latter seeks to catch a photograph "on the wing", to capture the mood of the occasion.

What is most encouraging about the Spectrum festival is not just the diversity of photographic styles, but also the emergence of a lighter, defter touch. Women today such as Melanie Field, whose work is shown here, often use carefully constructed stylised pictures to



Grace Robertson by Thurston Hopkins

represent human relationships within the environment.

At the exhibition at the South London Gallery, which was open to any woman photographer living in London, Anya Teixeira's sensitively observed and fast-captured images ask questions rather than supply answers. A small child uncaringly turns its back on an ignored clown; a family group is framed in a tea-room behind a stuffed ape that appears to be making a dash for freedom.

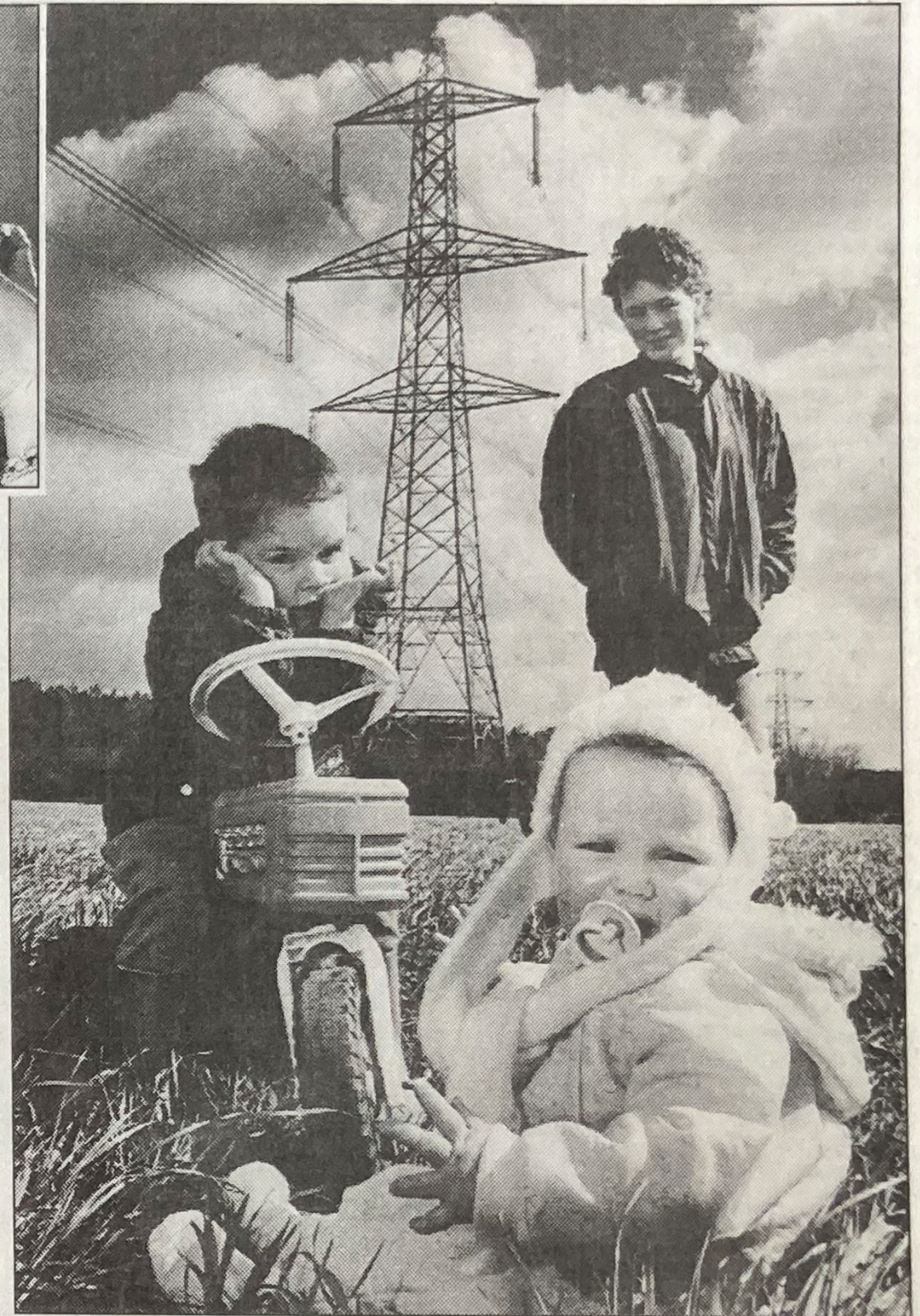
Lisa Pattenden, the victim of a knife-wielding rapist, has daringly used photography to come to terms with her remembered feelings of terror and helplessness. Three pictures present, in icon-like form, the objects that relate most vividly to that experience.

Work like this was unthinkable in the Fifties; even as down-to-earth a story as my *Birth of a Baby*, which dramatically highlighted a woman in labour, was "killed" by *Picture Post's* all-male editorial staff, who feared that women readers would be offended by such material! We have come a long way since then.

*The author was the only woman photojournalist to have been offered a staff job on both Picture Post and Life magazine. She refused the former because her father, the late Fyfe Robertson, was on the staff, and walked away from the latter because it would have meant living in America for three years at a time when she had recently married the photographer, Thurston Hopkins.*



Mother's Day pub outing: Grace Robertson, 1954



Mother's Pride: Melanie Friend, 1988