

LONDON CALLING

Cammie Toloui meets Simon Frost on the eve of her return to San Francisco, at the end of a yearlong hunt for unusual moments on the streets of London. It's an encounter that crosses cultures but one that allows for new perspectives.

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From documenting Soviet punks in the USSR and the clientele of San Francisco's sex industry to the straight-edge punk scene in Berkeley, Cammie Toloui had always gravitated towards the fringes of society. But her edgy documentary work took a back seat for some years as she brought up her son, when she began to shoot portraits, taught photojournalism and worked as a photo editor for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. 'When my son went off to university a year ago, I thought it was my chance to find out who I am now as an artist, because I'd spent 18 years shooting for money,' she explains.

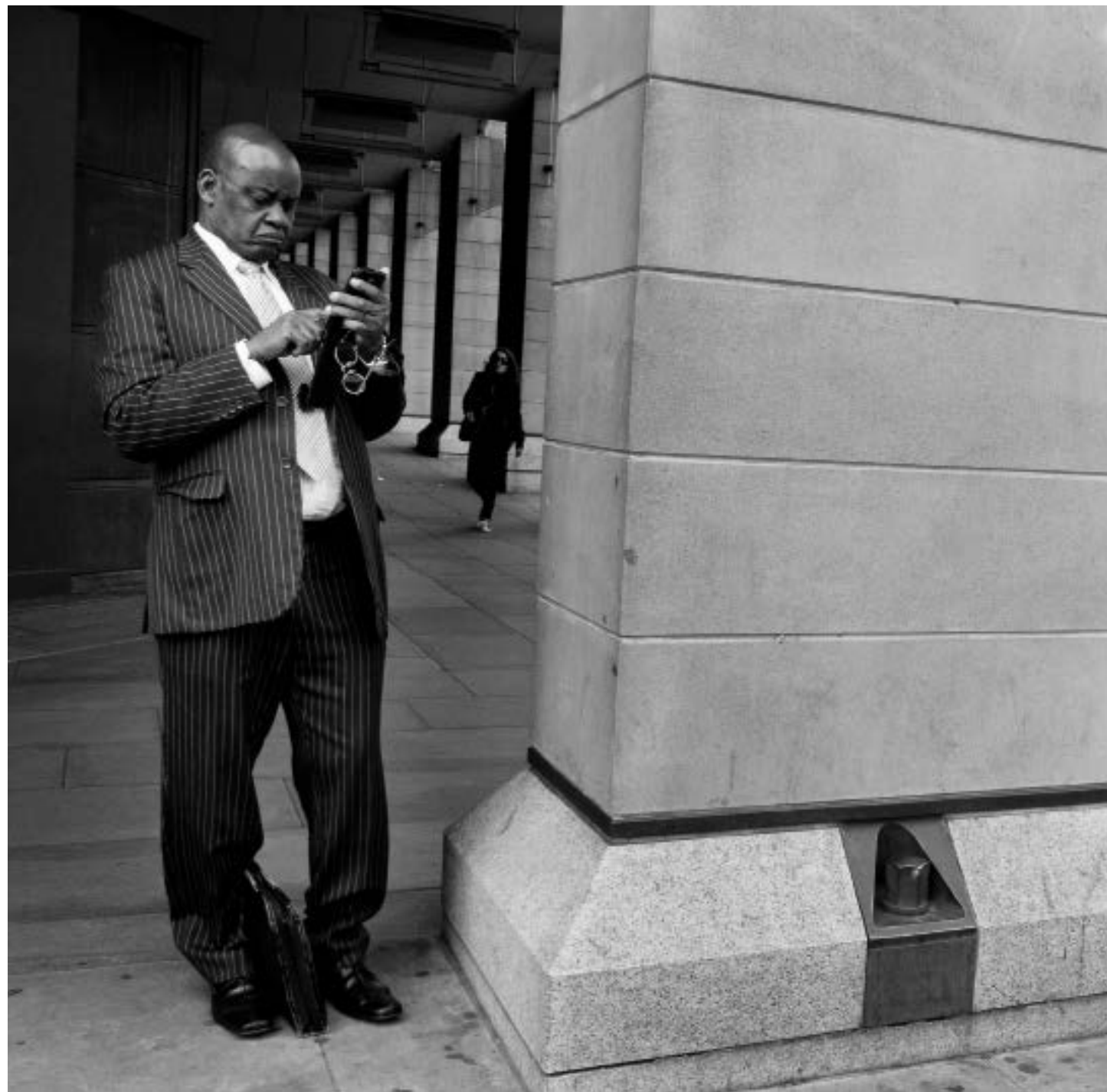
Cammie was drawn to London after a short stay in 2010, when she had photographs in an exhibition at Tate Modern. 'While I was here I was wandering the streets, taking a few pictures, and I realised what a goldmine London is for street photography. There are so many interesting people and so much happening on the street.' Through a campaign on the crowd-funding website Indiegogo, Cammie raised the funds to spend a year in the UK, inconspicuously exploring the streets of London in search of candid human moments and offbeat characters.

We meet at her fiancé's home in Lewes, where Cammie starts a slideshow of her

latest photographs as we talk. She tells me that though she has been shooting street photography for a long time, she still hasn't conquered her fear of approaching people. 'I like to think that they don't see me. I use a small camera with a wideangle lens, a Lumix that shoots Raw, and I don't look through the viewfinder. I've gotten pretty good at knowing what I'm getting. If they suspect I'm shooting, I'm gone.'

At that moment, an exception to her rule pops up on screen. 'I had to approach this guy; he was just too good to let pass by. He was pretty >







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◀ drunk and a real dandy, full of himself, he had this cane he was swirling around and a scarf thrown over his shoulder, he was just like a peacock. I went up to him and he started shouting at me in a German accent, being quite intimidating, but I just had good humour about it. I’ve dealt with people like him my whole life in San Francisco so I wasn’t scared – and by letting him know that, I was able to get pictures of him for about 10 minutes while a crowd gathered around. It was really exciting. In this shot he was just about to hit me with his fan. I’d like to approach and engage with people more, but I don’t get into many situations like that. Maybe I’m going to the wrong neighbourhoods!’
Cammie’s interest has always been people.

Thinking that she should undertake an academic subject, she originally enrolled to study anthropology at university, but soon realised that she was better suited to exercising her inquisitive eye through the camera lens and shifted to a photojournalism course, where she discovered her prevailing influence, Diane Arbus. ‘She was my hero and I don’t think I’ve ever completely departed from that. But lately, I’ve been influenced by looking at people’s Flickr feeds – street photography specifically. You really get a sense of what people are shooting in the moment and what the current style is; it’s nice to evolve and see the world in new ways, especially because I was feeling a bit self-conscious about being so Diane Arbus-y.’

Travelling to England gave Cammie the fresh perspective she craved; she tells me that San Francisco is full of ‘strange and wonderful people’, but tied up with the feelings of familiarity that a person has with the place they grew up. ‘When I walk down the street I’m sort of blind to it all because it’s my home. When you go somewhere with a different culture and environment it’s inspiring – you see things. I’m sure I could go to New York and go crazy taking pictures, but there’s something about going to a new country that’s exciting and inspiring – and for people watching, you just can’t beat London.’

▶ To see more of Cammie Toloui’s work visit cammiet.com

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