



Viewpoint Mike Smith

Are disposable selfies equivalent to the Victorian portraits of yesteryear? Mike Smith has his doubts

Instagram purports to have, on average, 70 million photos posted daily. This highlights the obvious fact that photos are common – the democratisation of images began with the Kodak Brownie that, as Graham Clarke, author of *The Photograph*, notes, meant ‘everyone could take photographs and everyone could have their photograph taken’. Every technological step forward from that point has enabled novices to take better photos more easily and more cheaply. The smartphone is the ultimate culmination of this development – an image can be captured, processed and shared immediately.

Smartphone images have culturally come to represent the ‘power of self’, epitomised by the selfie – not only can I have my photograph taken, but I can also take it myself, present myself as I want to be seen, project my image of the

here and now, and then move on to the next moment. It is the vanity of self, the notion of transient celebrity that is a throwaway memory. Celebrity is defined as ‘who I’m with’ or ‘where I am’ – there is no attempt at depicting or defining ‘me’, of ‘recording’ the person.

From early on, photography was able to offer portraits at a fraction of the cost of paintings, allowing the Victorian middle and working classes to record their families. The picture of my grandmother (above) was taken in the late 1910s. From a working-

class family, she has her best dress on, her hair prepared and a typical off-camera gaze into the distance. She looks beautiful, and it is a portrait to cherish.

Do we value portraits today? There are clearly strong commercial and wedding sectors where people need and want to record significant individuals and events, and maybe these are stronger and more vibrant than ever.

What about the consumer and family sector? I don’t think this is the case, and while there have always been those who have felt the cost of a professional portrait is too much, the sector has changed. Images are common, which has led people to believe that anyone can take a picture or a portrait. Not only has it been a race to the bottom (there are photo booths in every digital print shop), but we now think all that’s needed is a selfie stick. And maybe with increased

longevity (compared to the Victorians), we feel a less-pressing need to formally record our families. The more insidious point is that many now don’t know what a good portrait looks like – and this is sad because, as a generation, we are losing that record of who we were.

What is the value of a portrait? It’s something to cherish for generations to come.

Mike Smith is a creative photographer. Visit www.focali.co.uk for more information



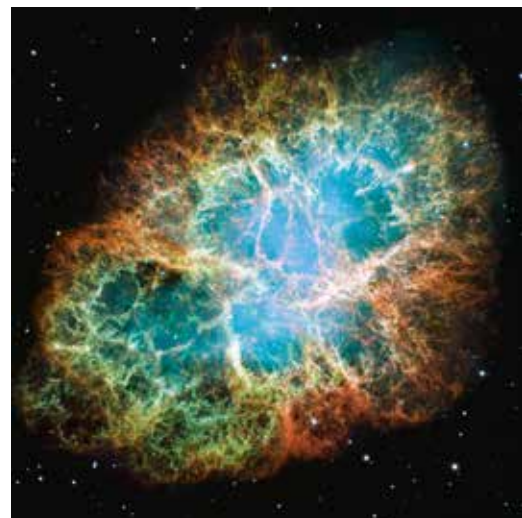
Sybil Ellen Gertrude Farthing, studio portrait, c1915

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New Books

The latest and best books from the world of photography. By Oliver Atwell



Expanding Universe: Photographs from the Hubble Space Telescope

By Charles F Bolden Jr, Owen Edwards, John Mace Grunsfeld and Zoltan Levay, Taschen, £44.99, hardback, 260 pages, ISBN 978-3-83654-922-6

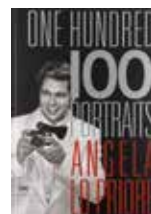


IT TAKES a special collection of images to give us some sense of place within the universe, and that’s what we find with the pictures in *Expanding Universe*. The images collected within this book all

come from the Hubble Space Telescope – a feat of engineering that has not only helped astronomers get a better picture of the building blocks of the cosmos, but has also offered us a humbling account of just how small our place within the universe is. *Expanding Universe* is a gorgeous volume. Each image is, in the original sense of the word, awesome. There are not many books that can leave you breathless, but this is certainly one of them. ★★★★★

One Hundred 100 Portraits

by Angela Lo Priore, Skira, £60, hardback, 228 pages, ISBN 978-8-85722-439-8



ITALIAN-BORN photographer Angela Lo Priore’s career has taken her into a variety of genres and commissions, from architecture to advertising. However, it’s her celebrity portraits that have garnered her the most acclaim. Where most photographers are happy to rely on

the simple act of photographing their subjects, as if the aura of their celebrity will suffice, Angela’s excellent eye manages to convey depth and character through minimalism and a nice handling of black & white imagery. This is a great study in how to achieve beautiful and engaging portraits – no matter who it is in front of your lens. ★★★★★

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