



In Conversation with the French photographer, and recent Oskar Barnack Award Winner, Clémentine Schneidermann

by Philip Gray

Two professional photographers are chosen each year by the international jury of the Leica Oskar Barnack Award. Winner of the Newcomer Award for 2016 is Clémentine Schneidermann for her series *The Unbearable, the Sadness and the Rest*, which she photographed in Blaenau Gwent, South Wales.

- **Firstly, congratulations from The Leica Society on your well-deserved success. Before moving to South Wales you lived in the very photogenic city of Paris and then in Switzerland. What made you move to the valleys of South Wales?**

After studying photography in Switzerland, I knew I wanted to continue my photography degree studies. I chose the MA degree course in documentary photography at the University of South Wales, Newport, which is why I moved to Wales. It was during that course I received a commission to undertake the Heads of the Valleys photographic project: I stayed here and am enjoying living and working in this community.

- **Your work has already been shown in numerous exhibitions throughout Europe. and I think it has featured in recent recent Paris Photo exhibitions at the Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées. Do exhibitions ever allow you the chance to discuss your work with the visitors?**

Yes, I won a prize in 2014 and had my work shown in Paris Photo that year, then my Oskar Barnack portfolio was included in Paris Photo 2016. With so many exhibitors and visitors moving quickly around these large events

talking to people about my work is not so easy: it is quite unusual to see people who stop to really study one or two pictures.

In smaller events, such as my current exhibition in an Abertillery gallery, the atmosphere is very different. There it is the local people who really look closely at photographs of their own area,

although my work may not be like the images they are more used to seeing. I often visit the exhibition and frequently have a chance to discuss my work with the visitors.

Another way in which I shared my work within the local community was through a free supplement, published in a widely-distributed local newspaper.





estates we worked together with a group of children from a local youth club and community centre. This proved to be quite a revelation because it gave me so many new opportunities to create the images.

● **How did the Heads of the Valleys project come about?**

In September 2015 I was commissioned by the Arts+Minds project, a community programme involving various groups and supported by the Arts Council of Wales. During the ambitious three-month project I had to create a body of photographic work about Blaenau Gwent. Community engagement was central to the project but I was given carte blanche as to how I should approach it. Living in the community has been a tremendous benefit, as has the support I received through working with the youth club and other community organisations.

● **Your Heads of the Valleys portfolio includes so many memorable photographs. They seem to mix the sadness of the landscapes with the brightness of the young people. Are children an important element of your work on this project?**

They are an important part of trying to represent the area in an optimistic way. So many journalists visit this area of Blaenau Gwent to write exclusively about the economic and social deprivation, using photographs that only seem to seem to emphasise the difficulties. Rather than setting out to photograph such bleakness, I try to see the beauty of the surroundings and the strength of the communities. I see my work as a mixture of melancholy and tenderness, plus a little humour.

● **Fashion and portraiture seem to be important elements of your documentary style. How did you set about working with the children and arranging all their bright clothing?**

I was introduced to a locally-based stylist called Charlotte James and

she agreed to work with me on the project. This is the first time I have ever collaborated with anyone in this way. Focusing on two local

● **How did you first find out about the Leica Oskar Barnack Award?**

This is widely known as one of the leading awards in the field of social



and documentary photography, and has been in place for many years. I first applied in the newcomer category, for photographers under twenty five, early in 2015 and was chosen as one of the finalists. I decided to apply again for the 2016 competition with the Heads of the Valleys project work: I didn't think I stood much of a chance as I hadn't completed the project at that stage, and had only shown my work to a few close colleagues. Suddenly my work appeared online everywhere and I found out I had been selected.

● **I believe one of the benefits of winning the award is that you have joined the list of famous photographers to be presented with a Leica camera - including another famous French photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson!**

Yes. Now I am the owner of the latest digital M camera, and lens, and am enjoying using it a great deal - although I shot the winning project on film. Being used to working with a fairly light, hand-held, medium format camera, I find working with the new Leica surprisingly similar, particularly with the same type of focusing. When I shoot with the M I feel it is almost like shooting analogue.

● **Does completing the MA in documentary photography mean you classify yourself as a social documentary photographer?**

I am the owner of the latest digital M camera, and lens, and am enjoying using it a great deal - That is certainly how I explain my style of work, and I like to think this is how my career will evolve. I am also continuing my studies by working towards a PhD in the same field at the University of South Wales, Cardiff. In addition, I also plan to continue working on the same project theme.



More information:

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Leica OB website: www.leica-oskar-barnack-award.com/en

Recent article: British Journal of Photography, January 2017

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