

The Face of Suffrage

Helen Marshall Artist

Last year, I set up The [People's Picture](#), an art and design studio, where I work with a small, meticulous and caring team to tell people's stories through photo mosaic installations. We partner with a myriad of people, organisations and public spaces often outside of the gallery, or institutional art space, to realise our projects. Popular, faces are featured as the emblems of our time following in the footsteps of historic mosaics that often included famous figures from history and mythology as well as lesser-known faces as my ethos is about inclusivity.

One of our latest projects is 'The Face of Suffrage' at Birmingham New Street. It is a floor-based, 200 metre-square photo mosaic revealing the face of a suffragette who has a 'daring and brave' story to tell. It is made up of more than 3,700 crowd-sourced photos and selfies of inspirational women and girls (who identify as female or non-binary), combined with hundreds of historical images drawn from archives and libraries and focused on women's suffrage in the early 1900's. The artwork commemorates 100 years of women's right to vote and has a local and national reach from the West Midlands and beyond.

The final portrait is of Hilda Burkitt (1876-1955). She worked at the Birmingham Women's Social and Political Union in Ethel Street (near New Street station). She was convicted of wilfully damaging a railway carriage by throwing a stone and breaking a window in the last carriage of Prime Minister Herbert Asquith's train as it pulled out of Birmingham New Street station on his return from a usual men-only budget meeting in the city. She was sentenced to one month's imprisonment and became the first suffragette to be force fed—in total, a staggering 292 times whilst incarcerated. The artwork remains in place until December 14th, the date some women first voted in the UK.

One of the most important aspects of the artwork has been the 'working together' part. I want my process to be visible, not conceptually hidden. The creation of the whole is greater than the simple sum of its parts, and it is the 'social synergy' or 'love' that ultimately brings the artwork together. The 'Face of Suffrage' is no exception. It is fitting too in that it reflects the spirit of the suffrage movement full circle. You really feel this looking at the artwork close up, it is self-populating, passionate, sensual, but it is also hard to put this into words. I have been overwhelmed by the incredible care people have taken in submitting their photos and stories—there are narratives of loss and love, of honouring mothers and friends, even oneself. This is one of the most rewarding parts of my job, not only are many of the photos accompanied by stories, but we have been able to visit the descendants of many of these suffragists in their homes and have photographed and interviewed them.

Every individual photo tells a story, and just like the sweet photo of Hilda Burkitt, the Suffragette the story can be quite a surprise. Most of the photos speak for themselves and people often submit a story caption but when I receive a photo like this one of 'Amy Milanian' a self portrait with her newborn baby. There are so many photos like that, but after reading the story in that moment I am taken aback; I feel a sense of inadequacy in being able to fully conceive what this woman went through, it's similar to how I feel when I find out the lengths to which individual women went to gain suffrage 100 years ago.

I also feel thrill and delight in knowing it means a lot to that contributor to share their photo, have it featured and find it in the iconic artwork. That is what matters—I can never be in their shoes, but I can be a bridge to express their story. Being empathic feels like quite a challenge when processing thousands of individual photos alongside the sheer challenge of creating such a large scale installation but whilst the process seems diametrically opposed it is transformative and somehow it rarely fails. We use a very tight algorithm and mathematical system to ensure that everyone's photographs is included.

This artwork is a personal statement as well as a more universal one. I inserted a few women who meant a lot to me including my mother and my daughter and a friend who passed last year. Years ago, I was a young single parent compelled to make a living from making art and nothing else. I identify with many of the challenges that so many women face. We often have to be so much to be so much, to so many people.

Why did I choose Hilda Burkitt, the militant Suffragette? We are familiar with the Pankhursts but few of us know about the women, many of them working outside London, such as Hilda, who were on the front line of the movement and had to hide so much of what they did from society and their families. I researched a number of women from the West Midlands involved in women's suffrage. Whilst all these women have a daring and brave story to tell, Hilda's was uniquely connected to the station and Birmingham. The portrait is of a smiling Edwardian lady, but her story is far from what we might expect, much like the public submissions. I felt a 'chemistry' with the photo because her great great great niece, Lesley Caine, literally scanned the image while she was on the phone with me. It was personal and it wasn't sourced from a museum archive. She looks us right in the eye and we are reminded that what we take for granted today only happened, in historical eras, yesterday. I did not want to be confined to class discussions or the politics around suffrage but I did want to uncover a 'brave and daring' story that many may be afraid to tell, one that many people may never have heard of before. I wasn't commissioned for this project and I feel that it has given me greater freedom to respond intuitively and authentically. I do not think many people realise what those women went through and how desperate they were, not all of them were middle class women with placards wearing petticoats as depicted by much mainstream media.

The People's Picture – A project by award-winning artist Helen Marshall. Marshall's practice is rooted in photography and socially engaged practice. The People's Picture combines thousands of photographs to tell a story, commemorate an important occasion or bring attention to important social issues. You can find out more about her previous body of work, education and exhibitions at helenmarshall.co.uk.

Each photo mosaic is assembled from thousands of photos yet every single one tells a story. In 2006 The Big Picture broke the world record for the largest photo mosaic in the world. Clients include BBC Television, Tate Britain, Canary Wharf Group and The Photographers' Gallery. The People's Picture projects have been featured in the national news and are held in private and public collections in a diverse range of locations including cathedrals, museums, airports and on the street.

Marshall is an image maker and a storyteller. She has a track record in photography, design and collaborative practice. Her work is made for an audience at large, often outside the gallery or institutional art space. Realised in the public realm, the work has a performative relationship with photography. By engaging people as the primary producers and contributors of the work the art takes on a new identity. Popular icons and faces are featured as the emblems of our time. Commissions include queens, footballers, soldiers, and the average person on the street.

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