



**SHIRLEY
BAKER:
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SHIRLEY BAKER: PERSONAL COLLECTION

THE
PHOTOGRAPHERS'
GALLERY

15 JUNE–28 JULY, 2018



Manchester 1966 © Shirley Baker

The Print Sales Gallery presents rare vintage and lifetime prints from the personal collection of pioneering British photographer Shirley Baker (1932- 2014).

Thought to be the only woman practicing street photography in Britain during the post-war era, Shirley Baker's humanist documentary work traced communities in the North West of England throughout the 1950s, 60s and into the 80s.

Baker's passion for photography is perhaps best epitomised by her depictions of the daily life of the working class terraced streets in Salford and Manchester, which despite receiving little attention at the time, still remain important and empathetic documents of the urban clearance programmes and the resilience of communities under siege.



Untitled (self portrait) © Shirley Baker



Manchester 1964 © Shirley Baker

Shirley Baker: Women, Children and Loitering Men

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The street photographer's images of Manchester's poorest districts in the 1960s and 70s exposed the pressures on both the built environment and the communities living within it

"I never posed my pictures, I shot scenes as I found them," Shirley Baker said of her photography – an approach clearly illustrated by a quasi-retrospective of her work at the Photographer's Gallery.

I say quasi, because rather than presenting an extensive cross-section of all her work, the show concentrates on the most recognised collection from her portfolio, and the one that best captures her ethos: her documentation of the working-class

communities in Salford and Manchester from 1961 to 1981. Baker, who died last year, was born in Salford in 1932 and worked as a photographer and writer for several magazines and newspapers over her lifetime. The photos she became best known for, however, were mostly taken for her own enjoyment, rather than on commission.

One of the only female street photographers in the UK at the time, Baker shed light on the relationships between the communities and the estates they lived in. Influenced by the likes of Robert Frank and Henri Cartier-Bresson, her photographs have a sense of planned spontaneity, with the setting seemingly preordained, but the human subjects within these frames acting independently and naturally. A sense of wit and humour shines through in her work, not just in the comical expressions and actions of her main characters, but also because of the supporting role played by the terraced houses and scrawled graffiti, which provide context and tone.

In one photograph, a delivery man stands outside a row of houses talking to the locals. Framing this rather mundane activity are houses that have either been abandoned, or had their owners evicted – identified by the letters “EX” sprayed by the council beside the doorframes and, more obviously, the broken windows and crumbling walls. In another, a group of laughing boys play football with a protest-graffiti covered brick wall in the background. These photographs reveal how these groups of people would have interacted with each other and their neighbourhood.

The photographs were taken at a time when the area was undergoing great redevelopment, as the Manchester councils tore down terraced houses to make room for larger “modern” low-rise flats in areas such as Salford and Hulme. These optimistic, brutalist affairs (such as the infamous Hulme Estate) were an attempt to solve the housing crisis in the Manchester area at the time. However, within 20 years, due to poor construction, high crime rates, and pest infestations, many of these buildings went the same way as their terraced forefathers. The title of Baker’s 1986 exhibition, “Here Today, Gone Yesterday”, neatly encapsulates this idea of a resilient community in the midst of extinction.

Street photography of this period can often stray down a nostalgic path. But Baker’s photography provides an honest and entertaining platform from which to reflect on a seemingly authentic version of our past.



Manchester 1968 © Shirley Baker



Last days of the slums: a portrait of Manchester by Shirley Baker

From neighbours chatting between rubble-strewn terraces to kids playing cricket on cracked pavements, Shirley Baker's photographs capture a rich street life on the brink of being bulldozed into history

For 15 years from the early 1960s, Shirley Baker photographed the demolition of the tightly packed terraces which had become Manchester's slums.

The streets belong to us: Shirley Baker's 1960s Manchester – in pictures
Built in the 19th century to house the workers who powered the looms and engines during the industrial revolution, by the time the Salford-born Baker arrived with her camera, conditions were dismal. The red bricks had turned black from soot, huge families were crammed into two bedrooms with no bathrooms and an outside lav by the air raid shelters out back. Deprived of playgrounds and parks, little girls pushed their dollies among the cracked pavements and boys set up cricket games in the rubble-strewn streets.

Talking to the Guardian in 2012, Baker recalled the turmoil of the clearances: "There

was so much destruction: a street would be half pulled down and the remnants set on fire while people were still living in the area. As soon as any houses were cleared, children would move in and break all the windows, starting the demolition process themselves. There was no health and safety in those days; they could do as they liked. I never posed my pictures. I shot scenes as I found them. ”

The Hulme slums captured by Baker in their dying days were replaced with low rise flats laid out in multi-storey crescents. The upper floors had wide walkways which were envisaged as sophisticated streets in the sky but which ended up providing handy escape routes for drug dealers and other ne'er-do-wells who could make a quick getaway by bike.

Fast forward 50 years and the Hulme seen through Baker's lens no longer exists. Nor the ill-conceived crescents. In the 1990s, an enormous regeneration project razed the lot, replacing them with a gargantuan Asda and street after street of flats and community gardens. Despite being just a mile from Manchester city centre, prices remain relatively cheap. Around £160,000 will buy a smart new-build terrace: £100,000 for a two-bed flat. No longer a slum, but far from one of Manchester's most exclusive neighbourhoods.



Manchester 1962 © Shirley Baker



Manchester, 1967 © Shirley Baker

Shirley Baker: Women, Children and Loitering Men

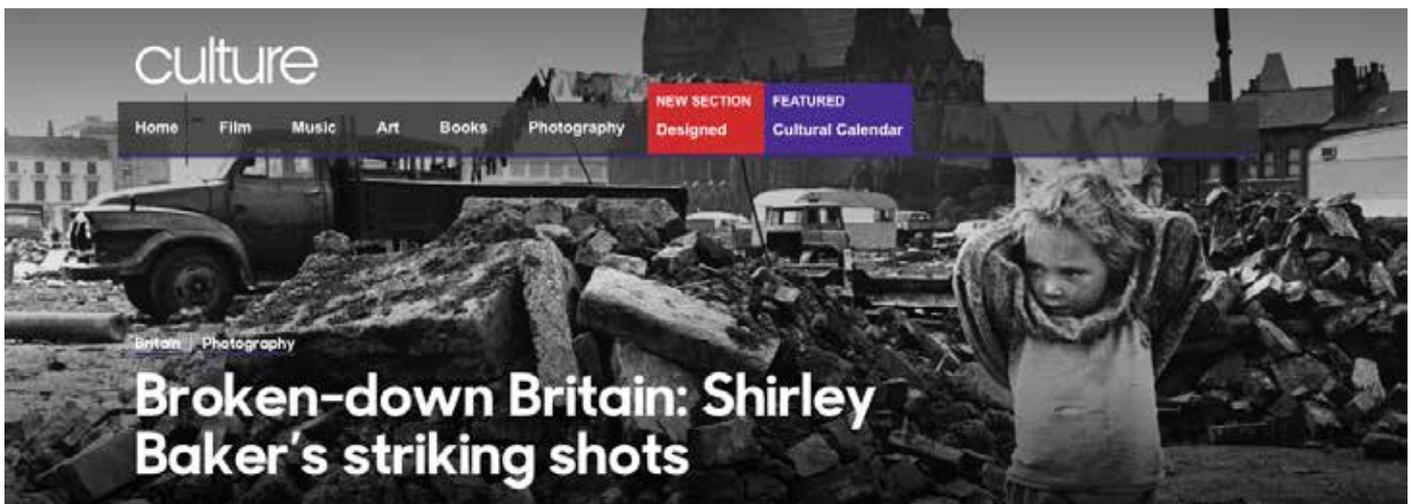
Thought to be the only woman practicing street photography in Britain during the post-war era, Shirley Baker's humanist documentary work particularly focused on working-class life in Manchester and Salford. Though she also worked in London and the South of France, she notably captured a time of inner-city urban clearances from the 1960s to the 1980s, which she saw as a needless attack on communities.

Born in Salford in 1932, Baker's pioneering 65-year career behind the lens received relatively little attention during her lifetime, something this first major London exhibition of her work hopes to rectify, presenting previously unseen colour photographs alongside her black and white images, as well as magazine spreads and sketches. Curated by Anna Douglas at The Photographers' Gallery, London, it will be accompanied by the first book of Baker's photographs since 2000, featuring

a specially commissioned short story from author Jackie Kay. The exhibition aims to highlight Baker's appreciation of alternative values and life experiences found in the communities she documented, while conveying her compassionate affection, empathy and indignation for her subjects. Her photographs testify to both the poverty and the resilience of a way of life under siege.

Douglas's exhibition presents the images as linked by narrative and theme, rather than in chronological sequence, with people and places from different times co-existing. Photographs are arranged in groupings starting with mothers and children and continuing with gangs of children playing in the street, single figures and couples engaged in everyday life. Men, mainly elderly or unemployed, make rarer appearances in her compositions. Their idle, sidelined presence conveys a sense of the passing of time and of loss. The final set of images presents broken urban landscapes, rubble, junk and abandoned shops and houses. These stark vistas warn of social destruction and a feeling of vulnerability which stands in sharp contrast to the lively scenes of the early 1960s. Also accompanying the exhibition is a specially-commissioned sound piece composed by Derek Nisbet.

Baker claimed never to have posed her pictures, something inimical to her documentarist ideals, however her multi-layered images and exacting compositions imply dwelling on a scene till each element falls into place. Her visual puns, often the result of juxtaposing chance elements in her field of vision, result in humour and everyday surrealism. Objects and scenes take on significance beyond their literal appearance. Half-demolished walls and peeling wallpaper are filled with echoes of the lives once lived. Her meticulous focus on graffiti brings plain brickwork to life and generates backdrops for scenarios in which ordinary subjects, in functional environments, become momentarily extraordinary.



Manchester, 1968 © Shirley Baker

Shirley Baker's startling, sensitive pictures could be of a war zone – but Britain's first female street photographer, who passed away last year, wasn't capturing a conflict.

At first glance, Shirley Baker's pictures could be of a war zone – perhaps Britain during the Blitz, or some ghostly dystopia. They seem to show normal people carrying on as the place they call home is violently destroyed.

But Baker – who is posthumously remembered as Britain's first female street photographer – wasn't capturing a conflict. Instead, she was shooting the streets of Salford in what is now Greater Manchester, which she focused on from 1961 to 1981. Her images show children at play, mothers chatting as they hang the washing, elderly men feeding pigeons – all surrounded by houses that are being razed, the result of post-war slum clearances by the British government.

Many of her images are currently on at the Photographers' Gallery in London, which is celebrating her 65-year career with the exhibition Shirley Baker: Women, Children and Loitering Men.

“Whole streets were disappearing,” Baker said in an interview. “And I hoped to capture some trace of the everyday life of the people who lived there. I wanted to photograph the mundane, even trivial aspects of life not being recorded by anyone else. My sympathies lay with the people who were forced to exist miserably, often on end, sometimes years, whilst demolition went on all around them.”

Built to house the families who moved to Manchester during the Industrial Revolution, the tightly-packed terraced streets were classed as slums when Baker arrived with her camera in 1961. The government began to clear slums in the 1930s, resuming again soon after the World War Two. Between 1955 and 1975, around 1.3 million homes were demolished.

“A street would be half pulled down and the remnants set on fire while people were still living in the area,” Baker said in an interview shortly before her death at the age of 82 in September 2014. And many of Baker’s subjects didn’t know they were entitled to benefits. “Some squatted in old buildings, trying to hang on to the life they knew. They didn’t have much. Things were decided for them,” she said.

Baker’s photographs are not rallying cries of social injustice, but small celebrations of youth and innocence, shared community and the enduring ability of people to get by – regardless of their environment.

There are no playgrounds in Baker’s photographs, for example. Instead, Baker shows girls pushing prams past piles of rubble or turning a lamppost into a swing, and young boys playing cricket on cracked pavements or gleefully helping to demolish the homes of their community.

Shirley Baker was born in Salford in 1932. The daughter of a successful furniture maker and his wife, she enjoyed a relatively privileged upbringing. She and her identical twin sister Barbara were educated as boarders in Wales before they



were evacuated to Chatsworth House in Derbyshire during WWII.

Baker started to take pictures when she was given a camera by an uncle at the age of eight. She began photographing the people that worked for her father’s business, and in the surrounding streets of Salford.

After finishing school, she decided to pursue an artistic profession. But Baker never promoted her own work. Indeed, for much of her career, she worked almost in secret, actively keeping her photography to herself: she never even displayed any of her photographs in her own home.

Her first solo exhibition marked the opening of the Lowry Gallery in Manchester as part of the millennium celebrations in 2000; the Queen was among the attendees. Baker’s current exhibition at the Photographers’ Gallery

is her first solo show in London. “These are my pictures,” Baker once said to Berger. “They are the observations of one person. And they tell only a fraction of the story.”



Manchester 1964 © Shirley Baker

Culture › Photography

How photographer Shirley Baker chronicled Manchester's working-class families in the 1960s

The streets of Manchester and Salford have long been mythologised in art, literature, film and TV. And, from Elizabeth Gaskell's late 19th-century novel *Mary Barton* to modern-day *Coronation Street*, underlying that portrayal has been the slow decline and social neglect of those former hubs of the Industrial Revolution.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many photographers sought to record the further, postwar slump of this particular corner of northern Britain, among them Shirley Baker. Baker was rare, in that she was one of only a few women capturing such scenes. And she did so over a considerable period, returning to the same spots for 30 years. Now, the extraordinary work of the photographer, who died last September aged 82, is the subject of a new exhibition, *Women, Children and Loitering Men*, at the Photographers' Gallery in London.

Although Baker was documenting what she considered the needless destruction of working-class communities, it's not all broken landscapes and boredom; there's also playfulness and affection, humour and absurdity.

Born into a middle-class family in Salford, Baker has the eye of an outsider looking in. But her camera never passes judgement. "She had this incredible sensitivity in trying to capture these people," says Anna Douglas, who has curated the exhibition. "There's a noble quality and camaraderie to their lives that she was attracted to. The children, for instance, are poor, yes, and some of them neglected. But that's not what Baker was trying to make a big deal about. They have a kind of liberty to take command of the streets, to make the streets work for them."

The title of the exhibition points to Baker's preoccupation: Douglas says that around 90 per cent of the images feature women and children; the men are mostly sidelined. While the photographer had a genuine interest in the former, there is also a practical reason: the men were mostly at work when she would shoot on weekdays. "The men you tend to see are those at the end of their lives, sitting around, watching time drift," says Douglas. "And a few others who couldn't get work, who you might call feckless."

Baker's work never received the recognition it deserved during her lifetime, which Douglas partly attributes to her gender. At the time, photography was not considered a career option for women: Baker was one of only two female students when she studied the subject at Manchester College of Technology. After graduating, she tried to work as an in-house photographer for industrial companies, but felt it stifled her creativity. She attempted to gain employment at The Guardian, at the time based in Manchester, but as a woman she encountered difficulties getting a press card, so was unable to pursue photo-journalism seriously. (Although she did later contribute to the newspaper, it was usually on subjects deemed unsuitable for men.)

Marrying a doctor in 1957, however, allowed her to focus on her passion without worrying about financial reward. So, influenced by Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank, she took to the streets, day in, day out. The sheer amount of time she spent there, argues Douglas, allowed Baker to capture moments that other, more famous contemporaries, such as John Bulmer, simply couldn't in their brief visits.

Her technique was to observe quietly, camera set up, waiting for something to enter the frame and fill it with life. She was a storyteller through and through, using gritty realism to deliver her view of the condition of humanity. "When she watched and waited," says Douglas, "extraordinary things would happen."