



Helen Sumpter meets the husband-and-wife partnership whose passion for photography made in the UK led them to launch the Centre for British Photography earlier this year. Portrait by *Alun Callender*

Meet the collectors: James and Claire Hyman

On a chilly Friday morning in February, in the heart of central London, there is a queue forming outside the Centre for British Photography in Jermyn Street, ahead of its 11am opening. It's been a similar story every day since its public gallery spaces opened in January, attracting more than 7,000 visitors in the first three weeks, here to see six opening exhibitions over three floors of expansive and impressive exhibition spaces. Those keen visitors, many young people among them, soon enter the main ground-floor gallery and engage attentively with an exhibition of contemporary women's self-portraiture. Titled 'Headstrong: Women and Empowerment', it's been curated by Fast Forward: Women in Photography, a research project based at the University for the Creative Arts, promoting photography by women and non-binary people. Featuring work by, among others, Joy Gregory, Trish Morrissey, Maryam Wahid and Rainbow Sisters – a group of LGBTQ+ women who have been or are going through the UK asylum system – it's a bold and celebratory opening show.

'That was a really important statement for us,' says James Hyman, director and co-founder of the centre with his wife, Claire, as the three of us

sit in a quieter downstairs meeting room, 'to have an outside curator for the show in our main space and for it not to be focused on the collection.' 'And I'm really excited to see young people come into the centre,' adds Claire. 'Photography is a real leveller, in a way, because everyone with a mobile phone can create their own images, so they're interested in seeing photographs on the wall. People don't feel insecure about their knowledge in the way that they might do about painting. For me, this is really exciting for photography.'

The Hyman Collection, which James and Claire began in 1996, currently comprises more than 3,000 works. For the past 15 years its focus has been on British photography – images, historic and contemporary, created in Britain, by photographers and artist-photographers of all backgrounds. Fully documented and accessible on the centre's website, the collection includes work – often entire groups or series – by some of the medium's most acclaimed names, including Sonia Boyce, Bill Brandt, Helen Chadwick, Willie Doherty, Fay Godwin, Don McCullin, Charlie Phillips and Jo Spence, as well as more up-and-coming photographers. Among the latter is British Ghanaian artist Heather Agyepong, whose



© HEATHER AGYEONG. © THE JO SPENCE MEMORIAL ARCHIVE. COURTESY RICHARD SAUDIN GALLERY, LONDON. © NATASHA CARUANA



The collection includes work – often entire groups or series – by some of photography’s most acclaimed names

Right: Natasha Caruana, *Fairytale for Sale* no 66, 2011-13; above: Jo Spence, *Photo Therapy: Daddy’s Good Little Girl*, c1943, from *‘The Minefield of Memory’*, 1985-86; facing page: Heather Agyepong, *Wish You Were Here* (6. *Le Cake-Walk: Spotlight on Rest*), 2020

series *Wish You Were Here*, commissioned for the collection in 2019, is on show in the first-floor gallery, alongside the recent acquisition of Natasha Caruana’s project *Fairytale for Sale*, images of women on their wedding day, used to advertise their now unwanted wedding dresses. With the faces in the images painted or scratched out, the eye of the viewer is drawn instead to the bride’s body language or the location of the image – and to speculate on what the nature and trajectory of that relationship might have been.

Agyepong’s images are a powerful response to postcards depicting the Cake Walk – the popular, exaggerated processional couples’ dance thought to have been developed by enslaved African Americans as a covert way of mocking the formal dances of their enslavers – in particular images of actress and performer Aida Overton Walker (1880-1914), known as ‘the Queen of the Cake Walk’. Also on the first floor, and accompanied by two publications, is ‘Jo Spence: Fairytales and Photography’. The pioneering photographer, writer and phototherapist (1934-92) used her own image and experience to explore cultural norms in relation to feminism, class and illness.

Downstairs, ‘The English at Home: 20th Century Domestic Photographs from the Hyman Collection’ comprises a selection of more than 100 photographs that take the viewer from the street to inside the British home, through the work of photographers including Shirley Baker, Richard Billingham, Anna Fox, Martin Parr and Edith Tudor-Hart. The sixth show, installed in the street-facing windows is a collaborative commission by Andrew Bruce and Anna Fox, who have arranged and photographed some of the now less-than-pristine puppets (owned by James) from the original series (1984-96) of the TV satire *Spitting Image*, including of former PM Margaret Thatcher. Shot against brightly coloured backgrounds, the resulting images are a very contemporary response to figures who now seem very much out of time. Viewed together, the exhibitions present a carefully chosen showcase of the diversity, vibrancy

and quality of British photography. Born in Surrey, Claire has worked in the National Health Service for more than 25 years as a specialist in oral surgery and at the start of the pandemic was redeployed to work in intensive care. Since then she has combined NHS clinics with teaching surgery to undergraduate and postgraduate students. Right now every spare hour is spent on the centre, where as chair of trustees she is steering it towards its next phase and is actively involved in establishing a soon to be announced grants programme.

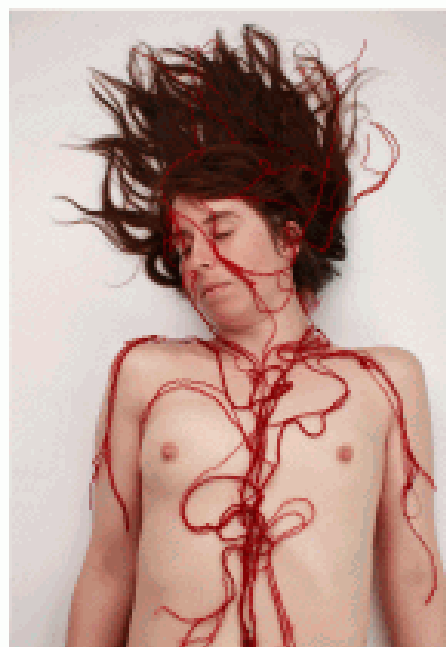
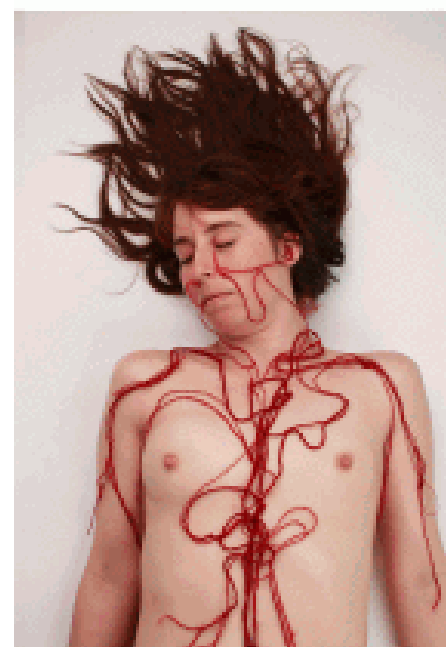
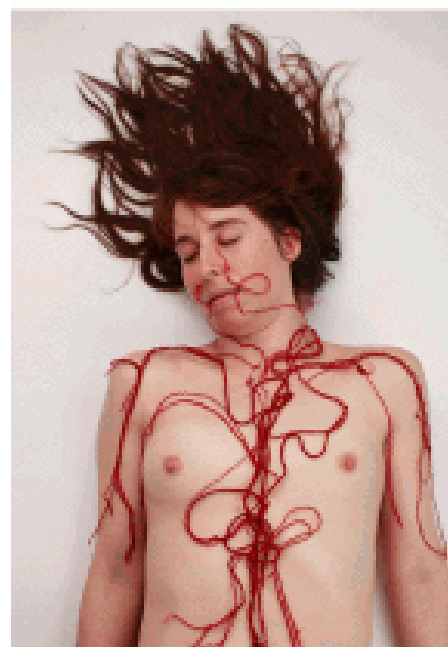
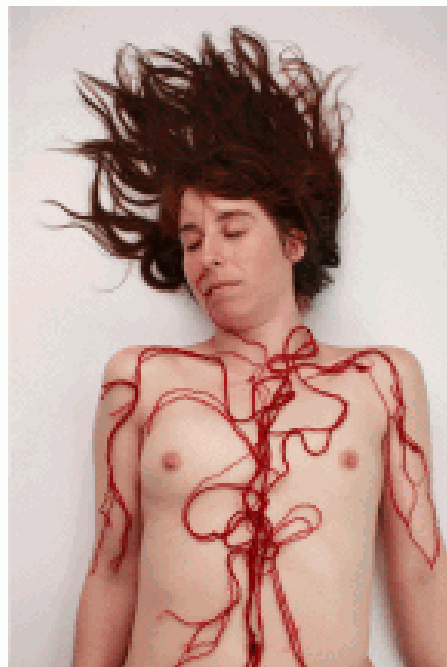
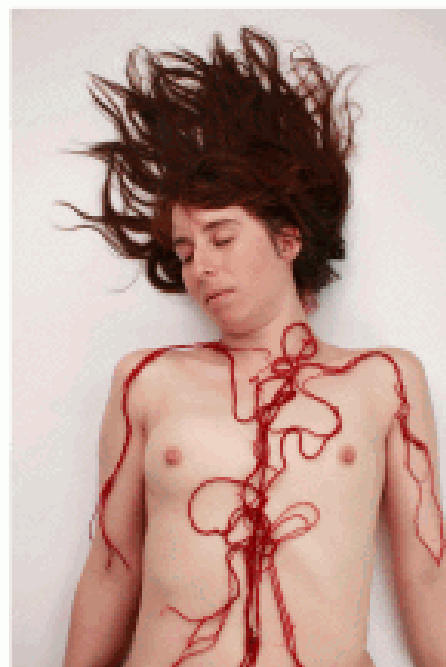
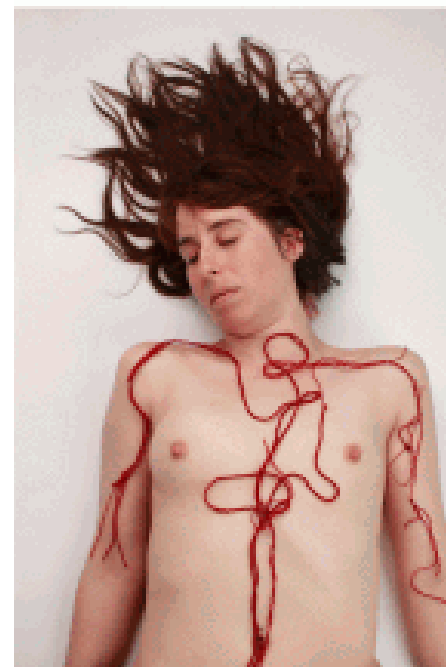
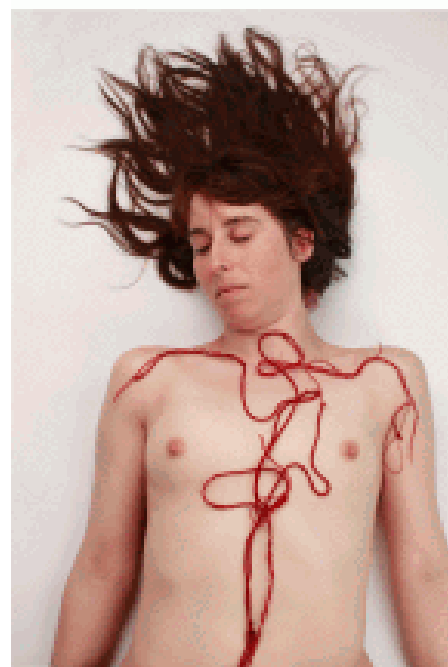
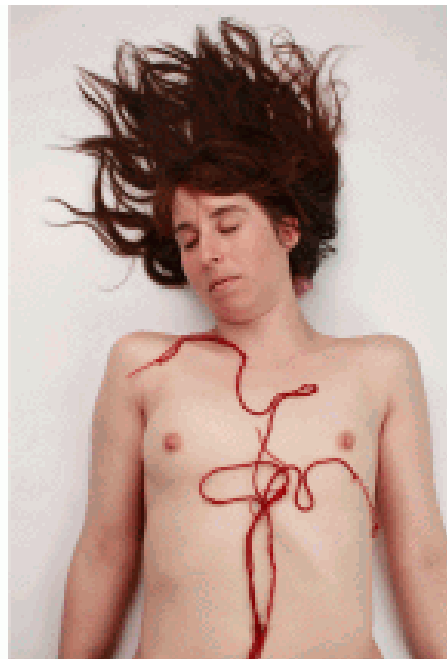
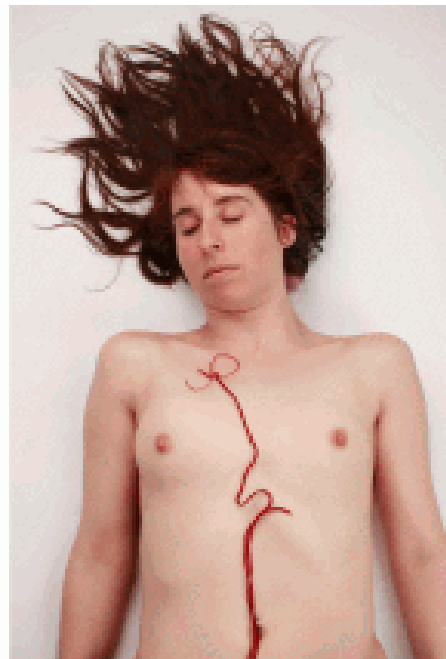
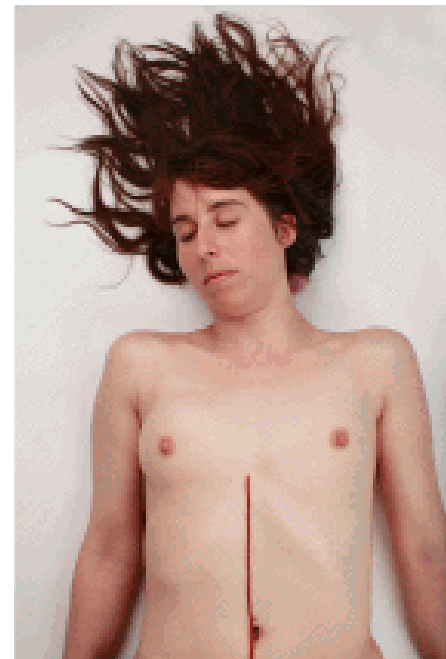
James, meanwhile, was born in northwest London, where the family still resides. James’ love of photography was ignited as a 14-year-old schoolboy, when he borrowed his father’s camera, shot a roll of black-and-white film in central London and developed it in an older cousin’s attic darkroom. He submitted an image of a newspaper seller to the annual photographic competition run by the Greater London Council (the equivalent of the GLA) and won first prize. Despite this early success behind the camera, and a developing passion for the medium – for street photography and the work of 20th-century greats including André Kertész and Henri Cartier-Bresson in particular – the prevailing view that neither photography nor fine art were suitable disciplines for anyone showing academic aptitude led James instead to study art history, first at Manchester and then at the Courtauld in London. He left in 1995 with a PhD focused on postwar British figurative painters, many of whom – including Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud – were at that time approachable, and whom he met. He taught, which he enjoyed (and still does), and wrote, and despite initially having no interest in the commercial art world, in 1997, when a student of his with the means, Helly Nahmad, asked him if he would help him set up a gallery in Cork Street, he was curious enough that he took him up on the offer.

‘We did some amazing shows – including on Picasso and Miró.’ After two years he decided to get his PhD published, and to set up his own





'Photography is a real leveller, because anyone with a mobile phone can create their own images'
Claire Hyman



Right: Paloma Rendero, *Veins*, 2013-18; above, left: Haley Morris-Cafiero, *Speedo Man*, 2018



© MITRA TABRIZIAN AND ALAN HARRIS. © ROSHINI KEMPADOO

‘We want this to be bigger than us – there are lots of possibilities, and we are open to them all’
James Hyman

Left: Mitra Tabrizian with Alan Harris, *The Silence of Numbers, 2020-21*; right: Roshini Kempadoo, from the series *Like Gold Dust, 2019*



commercial space, the James Hyman Gallery, in Mayfair. ‘It was again about the art I loved,’ James says, ‘the School of London and the Kitchen Sink painters and often the less-appreciated artists at that time, such as Robert Medley. We became specialists in that area, and it was always driven more by wanting to revive neglected figures than purely commercial concerns.’

Nevertheless, the gallery was commercially successful, and having met and married in the mid-1990s, James and Claire started collecting shortly after, which is where the photography came back in. They started to go to auctions and to collect photographs. Focusing their own collection on photography not only allowed James to return to his first interest but also avoided any conflict with the paintings exhibited and sold by the gallery. Beginning with work by the American greats, including Edward Weston and Paul Strand, the shift came in 2010 when James and Claire became more interested in contemporary photographers such as Zanele Muholi in South Africa, who were engaging with issues of race and gender. ‘Nobody had really heard of Muholi, but we were really interested in these debates around sexuality, gender and violence, and it’s really powerful work,’ Claire explains. From there grew the increasing awareness that photography in this country wasn’t being properly collected or supported, and the desire not only to better support photographers making work in the UK now but to do something about the underappreciation in this country of historical photographers.

Having grown their collection over 25 years, and believing in the public realm and public collections, the next step was to put the work online as an educational resource, which they did in 2015. In addition to loaning works for exhibitions of the collection, including at the Arnolfini in Bristol and the Hepworth Wakefield, they have also donated 100 photographs to the Bodleian Library in Oxford and 125 to the Yale Center for British Art in the US. ‘Donating to Yale was important to make a statement about the international importance of British photography, validating it internationally,’ James says, ‘and also to embed photography within a collection that was primarily painting.’ Out of that grew the idea of setting up as a charity. The Centre for British

Photography came into being in 2020, at the height of the pandemic. James explains: ‘During this time, when Claire was on the front line, I felt very helpless. Organising charity sales of works donated from our collection for the NHS and Trussell Trust was a way of trying to help. The lockdowns also gave us time to work on the new photography charity and make plans for the centre.’ Collaboration and a generous openness are key to everything they do, including the promotion of other organisations on the centre’s website. ‘It’s very much part of our principle that, for photography to succeed, you all have to work together,’ says Claire. ‘There is no space for egos – you need to work collaboratively and share knowledge. I feel very strongly about that.’

Having funded and launched the centre themselves, the next phase for James and Claire and the evolution of the project is to find the right people to take it forward, initially with them, but potentially in the future without them. ‘We have provided the start, we’ve provided the funding, we’ve provided the platform and the access to the collection,’ says James, ‘but we want this to be bigger than us. We want to set up something that can become independent, that has its own director and trustees and funding. We could be one of the funders but not the sole one. There are lots of possibilities, and we are open to them all. We really welcome other people joining us.’

James and Claire are aware that, in this regard, the centre’s early success – in terms of visitors, favourable reviews of its exhibitions, ambitious educational initiatives and partnerships, not to mention the perception of the building itself – all add up to something of double-edged sword. Having more than demonstrated ‘proof of concept’, it would be more than understandable to assume that the centre isn’t in need of either additional funding or any other help. ‘People tell me how impressed they are,’ says James, ‘but the message I now want to get across is: “Yes, we are really pleased with the start we have made, but as with any public space, the centre will only survive into the future with the support of others.”’

● The Centre for British Photography, London. britishphotography.org, free to all. The new series of exhibitions, focused on landscape and the environment, opens 8 June