

design WEEK

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Brush with reality
Nancy Honey's intimate shots

For many of her photo commissions, **Nancy Honey** documents the carefree years of youth, but she also works on personal projects which offer deeper, complex results. Trish Lorenz finds out more



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Photographer Nancy Honey has lived in England for almost 30 years but still manages to evoke the spirit of her time as an art student in San Francisco during the hedonistic late 1960s and early 1970s. Her voice retains a gentle American drawl and – together with her mane of curly hair and the purple trousers she is wearing when we meet – it immediately suggests the warmth and openness of the US West Coast.

Honey left San Francisco in 1972 when, halfway through her degree, she fell in love with an Englishman. She moved to Bath and spent the next ten years raising a family and twitching with an urgency to get back into a creative role. In her early thirties, she was offered a place at Bath Academy of Art, where she completed a design degree majoring in visual communication. For the past 20 years she's been a photographer and, since 1997, has worked primarily in the commercial world.

Much of her work focuses on young people. Her clients include fashion magazines like *Tank* and *Madame Figaro*, along with corporate clients such as *Birds Eye*, *Sainsbury's*, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the Teacher Training Agency, for which she shot a 'huge campaign' in schools.

'I have photographed teenagers for a long time, especially girls,' says Honey. 'I enjoy their company and find them inspiring; they're so enthusiastic and I love their ideas. I think it's a symbiotic relationship too: they love having their image taken – it glamourises that person.'

Her work with teenagers began during her 12 months as a Fellow of Photography at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in the early 1990s. The outcome was a book, *Entering the Masquerade*, a study of 11- to 14-year-old girls across four different schools. 'It was quite autobiographical as my own daughter was 11 years old at the time,' says Honey.

Her daughter Daisy, now in her late 20s, has always been Honey's 'muse and inspiration'. 'I've photographed her all her life,' she says. 'And as she was growing up it inspired me to look at different age groups.'

Some of her biggest commercial projects have been commissioned on the basis of this personal work and as you flip through her portfolio it's evident that the techniques Honey employs are consistent, whether the work is labelled as art or advertising. There's a focus on close, intimate portraits that seem to be snatched at random and the work has an almost documentary feel to it. It's difficult to separate the images created for advertising commissions from her personal pieces and Honey dislikes making the distinction.

'I hate it when people pigeonhole you,' she says. 'There's so little difference in approach between my personal and commercial work. The main difference is time – I have more time when I'm doing personal work – and in the commercial world images need to be more direct and easy to read, whereas in my personal work I like more ambivalent pictures.'

Honey says art directors always worry that she will struggle to replicate the sense of freedom and intimacy inherent in her work, but says she has perfected 'the lucky break shot' with a technique that conversely, involves a lot of planning. 'I love casting and I always choose the school I want to use as a backdrop.'

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On top of that I bring in a drama coach to play games with the children and encourage them to interact with each other, tell each other jokes and stuff, while I shoot,' Honey says.

From a creative perspective, she says she's found the commercial world to be very supportive. 'I find commercial work very creatively rewarding; 95 per cent of the time I have the creative freedom to do the work I want,' she says.

Her time at the Bath Academy of Art has left its mark, both on her work and on her creative ethos. She cites Alan Fletcher as one of her heroes. 'He's a very original person and spent his life breaking down classifications [between art and design],' she says.

It's a process she's also working on. Her personal pieces have an element of joy and accessibility (elements sometimes derided in the art world) and she brings an inventive perspective to her commercial projects.

'I feel most comfortable in the design world, rather than advertising or fine art,' she says. 'Design crosses over between the two and is much less pretentious. It's very important to me that my work is accessible.'

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- 3 Cordelia's Birthday
- 4 Daisy in Italy
- 5 Nancy Honey
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- 7 Poodle Parlour

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