

IKON

Ikon Gallery, 1 Oozells Square, Brindleyplace, Birmingham B1 2HS
0121 248 0708 / www.ikon-gallery.org
Open Tuesday-Sunday, 11am-5pm / free entry

Janet Mendelsohn

Varna Road

27 January – 3 April 2016



Janet Mendelsohn, *Kathleen* (c.1968). Black and white photographic print. Courtesy Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.

Ikon presents the largest exhibition to date of photographs by American academic and documentary filmmaker Janet Mendelsohn (b. 1943), from 27 January to 3 April 2016.

Part of a “photo-essay” Mendelsohn made as a student at the University of Birmingham during 1967-69, the photographs depict everyday life in the inner-city district of Balsall Heath, focusing in particular on a sex worker, referred to as Kathleen with whom Mendelsohn formed a close relationship. By using photography as “a tool for cultural analysis”, she provides a unique insight into a community in transformation, shaped by increasing immigration from the Caribbean and South Asia, and affected by the ongoing poverty issues of the time.

Enrolled as a student at the newly-established Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), Mendelsohn was encouraged by Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart - then deputy and director of CCCS respectively - to explore ways in which photography could be used in field research. The resulting archive of 3,000 photographs and interviews with her subjects, now held at the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham, offers a rich seam of primary source material.

Mendelsohn's photographs document a working class district in flux. This was an area that was about to undergo a relentless process of slum clearance and within two years of her photographing the area, Balsall Heath would become unrecognisable with many of its streets, such as the infamous Varna Road, ceasing to exist. Busy street scenes are interspersed with others inside pubs, cafés and living rooms whilst portraits of individuals, usually contemplative if not melancholic, are counterbalanced by a strong emphasis on family and gatherings of friends, making do and getting by.

During the late 1960s Balsall Heath was Birmingham's largest red light district, a place of work for some 200 prostitutes. Mendelsohn gives us an extraordinary insight into the lives of these women, their domestic arrangements and personal relationships as well as the nature of their profession. Her images effectively convey an understandable tendency to yield to the temptation of prostitution due to difficult circumstances. We see Kathleen sometimes in her upstairs bedroom window soliciting passers-by, but more poignantly, in one photograph, she is standing, waiting in the street. Her vulnerability is heightened by her silhouette and long sunset shadow thrown onto a pavement made shiny with rain.

Kathleen is a young woman in a dark uncomfortable place, but Mendelsohn's work does not slip into sentimentality. Other photographs make it clear that she finds Kathleen's tenacity and defiance remarkable; also the love she has for her children, her sense of responsibility as well as her sense of fun. We see her in hospital, having just given birth to her second child, with the child's father Salim, a young Asian man; at home with children in bed and at bath time, sometimes enjoying the company of other families and with children playing in a park. There is no suggestion of pity being requested, instead a kind of fatalism that equates to "live and let live".

A book will be published to accompany this exhibition. Fully illustrated it will include texts by Kieran Connell (Queen's University Belfast) and Matthew Hilton (University of Birmingham) plus interviews Janet Mendelsohn undertook with Kathleen and other residents of Balsall Heath.

This exhibition is organised in collaboration with University of Birmingham and Queen's University Belfast. Supported by the Arts & Humanities Research Council, Exterion Media, The Photography Show, Flatpack Projects, Library of Birmingham and Ort Gallery

Social Media Handles :

Instagram, Twitter and Facebook: @ikongallery #janetmendelsohn #IkonGallery

Twitter and Facebook: @CCCSMendelsohn

Note to Editors:

1. Ikon exhibition opening: Wednesday 27 January, 6-8pm. The exhibition will be accompanied by a programme of public events, for full details visit www.ikon-gallery.org
2. A symposium organised in collaboration with the University of Birmingham, focusing on the significance of Mendelsohn's work and how we can understand its connections with other photographic documentation of the inner city takes place on Saturday 30 January 2016 at the Library of Birmingham.
3. This exhibition is curated by Jonathan Watkins, Ikon Director and Dr Kieran Connell, Lecturer in Contemporary British History, School of History and Anthropology, Queen's University Belfast.
4. The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was established in 1964 - using innovative teaching and research methods and often adopting a politicised engagement with subjects, the Centre was one of the first academic bodies to take 'mass' culture (pop music, television programmes, fashions) seriously. It closed in 2002 however the archive, housed at the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham, is continually expanding. www.birmingham.ac.uk/cccs
5. Ikon is an internationally acclaimed contemporary art venue situated in central Birmingham. Established in 1964 by a group of artists, Ikon is an educational charity and works to encourage public engagement with contemporary art through exhibiting new work in a context of debate and participation. The gallery programme features artists from around the world and a variety of media is represented, including sound, film, mixed media, photography, painting, sculpture and installation. Ikon's off-site programme develops dynamic relationships between art, artists and audiences outside the gallery. Projects vary enormously in scale, duration and location, challenging expectations of where art can be seen and by whom. Education is at the heart of Ikon's activities, stimulating public interest in and understanding of contemporary visual art. Through a variety of talks, tours, workshops and seminars, Ikon's Learning Team aims to build dynamic relationships with audiences, enabling visitors to engage with, discuss and reflect on contemporary art.
6. Ikon is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am - 5pm. Admission is free.
7. For the latest news and events follow @ikongallery on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/ikongallery), [Facebook](https://facebook.com/ikongallery) and [Instagram](https://instagram.com/ikongallery).
8. Ikon Gallery is supported using public funding from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council.
9. For more information and high-res images please contact Rebecca Small or Emily Luxford at Ikon on 0121 248 0708 or email r.small@ikon-gallery.org or e.luxford@ikon-gallery.org

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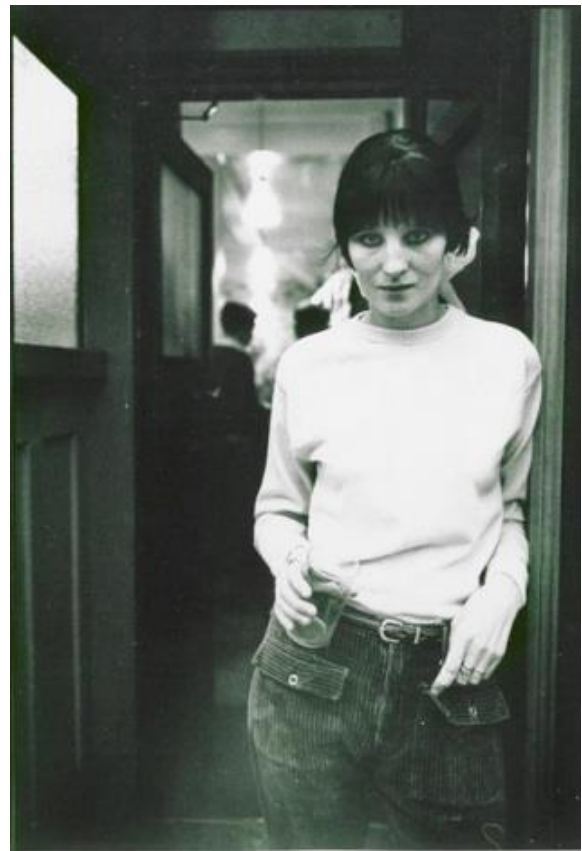
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Janet Mendelsohn, *The street* (c.1968). Black and white photographic print. Courtesy Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.



(Left) Janet Mendelsohn, *The street* (c.1968). Black and white photographic print. Courtesy Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.



(Right) Janet Mendelsohn, *Kathleen outside the bar* (c.1968). Black and white photographic print. Courtesy Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.



Janet Mendelsohn, *Kathleen hanging out* (c.1968). Black and white photographic print. Courtesy Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.



Janet Mendelsohn, *Kathleen and her newborn son L* (c.1968). Black and white photographic print. Courtesy Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.



(Left) Janet Mendelsohn, *Untitled* (c.1968). Black and white photographic print. Courtesy Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.

(Right) Janet Mendelsohn, *Kathleen* (c.1968). Black and white photographic print. Courtesy Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.



(Left) Janet Mendelsohn, *Kathleen and Salim at home* (c.1968). Black and white photographic print. Courtesy Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.

(Right) Janet Mendelsohn, *Pimps and a cop on the street* (c.1968). Black and white photographic print. Courtesy Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.