

## ***A Certain Age***

*Kay Goodridge*

There is always a starting point for a piece of work. For me it was a photograph of myself taken on holiday in Greece about six years ago, when I noticed that there was a slight curve in my spine which I had not noticed before. I also noticed that there was more flesh on my waist. I just noticed it, put the photograph away and did not put it into my photo album.

At the time, my daughter was thirteen. We had been very close when she was young and I was sure that through the teenage years things would continue to be the same. I did not believe that she (or I) could change and that our relationship would be thrown into uncomfortable disarray. I liked it as it was and the ups and downs were usually familiar ones.

Her regular periods and my irregular ones started simultaneously. She became very grumpy and according to her I had uncontrollable mood swings. I remember this time as one which I had to get through and at times things looked very bleak. I had started an early menopause, and being only forty-one at the time I was not sure how to deal with this. Having said this, the menopause has not been the physical nightmare that I had somehow expected, thanks to acupuncture and homeopathy. I did not tell many people that I was menopausal, in particular my female boss at the time, because I realised that there is still the tendency to associate irrationality with the menopause, and I knew that if I became over-stroppy (which was very likely as I was justifiably very dissatisfied with my working situation at the time) the menopause could have been used as a reason for this. In fact, it is possible that I had reached an age where I could no longer put up with situations in which I felt disempowered and that my so-called irrational mood-swings were actually a reaction to this. A famous Kay quote at the time was "I'm forty f...ing four and I've had a f...ing nuff!"

When Rosy and I started working on *Outrageous Agers* in 1998, I had already started a piece of work entitled *Still In Process* in which I was using my family album photographs and my own body to explore the decisions I had made during my life. It felt like a time of change and exploration essential in order to move forward in life. During this time, I had a very powerful dream in which I was running hand in hand with another woman toward a cliff-top. I came to the edge. We both hesitated, then I reassured her that if we jumped off the cliff-edge that we would survive. We jumped and flew. The other woman was me. I also dreamt of wading out into a turbulent grey sea with trepidation before the sea transformed into a place of calm.

Rosy and I talked a lot about how we felt as middle aged women, and in particular, how middle aged and elderly women are seen in our culture. We tended to project forward to being much older than we were at the time, looking at stereotypes of older women and thinking about our own role-models - particularly our mothers and grandmothers. The work began to move in a more dynamic way when we started to look at where we were at the time, rather than looking into an uncertain future.

Few photographers or artists have turned the camera on their own ageing bodies, and it felt as if we were making groundbreaking work by deciding to do this. As younger women, we are encouraged to have the 'perfect' body, which exists usually around the age of fourteen. Looking back at this age I realised that when our bodies were more pert, more toned, more attractive in conventional terms, we did not appreciate it as we were constantly critical. Looking at younger women now I want to tell them to love what they have, not to take on the messages from the media. But this is taken from a position of experience.

The Top Shop photographs were partly an exploration of this theme. We squeezed into clothes which were 'too young' for us. I felt very silly doing it and the thoughts 'mutton dressed as lamb' and 'old slapper' crossed my mind. I also felt very self-conscious as I knew that going out dressed 'inappropriately' for my age (!) would make me visible, open to derision and consequently vulnerable. When we decide what to wear for each particular occasion, we are putting on an identity, which hides or celebrates different parts of our personality or body. Youth culture belongs to the young, which immediately puts up barriers to the middle-aged wearing **their** clothing or listening to **their** music, or going to their clubs. Seeing a middle aged woman dancing at a club reminds young women that they will be like this one day. In our culture of 'new' being attractive and desirable, 'old' becomes its opposite. Our bodies become synonymous with/inextricably linked to consumer items.

But Rosy and I were doing it, and taking photographs of each other which became an integral part of the work, huge lightboxes which are impossible to ignore.

Outrageous Agers for me is a way of exploring my feelings about being a woman of a 'certain age'. The very expression says that women (still) should not divulge their age. Working with the Freudian Slips, a women's theatre group who write and perform their own material, was especially challenging. Rosy and I planned workshops which explored the fears and joys of ageing, what it means to be a powerful middle aged woman, introductions using a found object. Over the weeks we built up safety and using our photography and workshop skills in conjunction with the theatrical and improvisational skills of the theatre group. Eventually each of us brought in a sketch or monologue which addressed some of our own issues around ageing. These sketches were then discussed, reworked and finally performed and filmed on video and used as part of the Outrageous Agers exhibition at Focal Point Gallery.

I especially learnt from the Powerful Middle Aged Woman exercise in which each of us stood on a make-shift plinth. What was exciting was the range of experiences which were explored during this time - looking at our bodies, lifestyles, life experiences, how we see ourselves, how others see us, and especially what are our passions in life. For it is the passion in life which makes life worth living. I realised that for me, being a photographer, both professionally and as an artist, was the beginning of a self-defined identity which I had not had previously. I felt that working as an artist enabled me to have the kind of control over my life that I needed and being able to earn a living and be seen as a professional woman was an essential part of who I am. Being able to articulate this pride in myself enabled me to appreciate the depth and value of other women and to get in touch with my anger at how women, especially middle-aged and elderly women are oppressed in our society.

This piece of work was possibly the catalyst to working on how I feel I have been silenced, by identifying as working class, by being brought up in Scotland (as an English young person), by being the youngest of four girls and so on. I had written some text for an exhibition I had in 1997, called Our Silence is Your Comfort, but I had decided not to use it. In this exhibition I used a school photograph to explore child abuse between two pupils in school. In the workshops, I performed the text, sitting in darkness holding a red mouth-piece made out of small red lights, and throwing away the sheets of paper as I performed them. The act of giving voice to unspoken words enabled me to re-write the text in a more powerful way and to perform it for video. (see stills and text on the web-site).

There is so much to say about Outrageous Agers, working in close contact and collaboration with another artist, remembering to remember that we are doing what we want to do and that we are using our skills and experience to produce work which

resonates for ourselves and for other women. The reaction to *Outrageous* has been varied - not always positive of course - but we are exploring an issue that will not go away either on a personal or a more theoretical level.