

# AFTER NYNÉ



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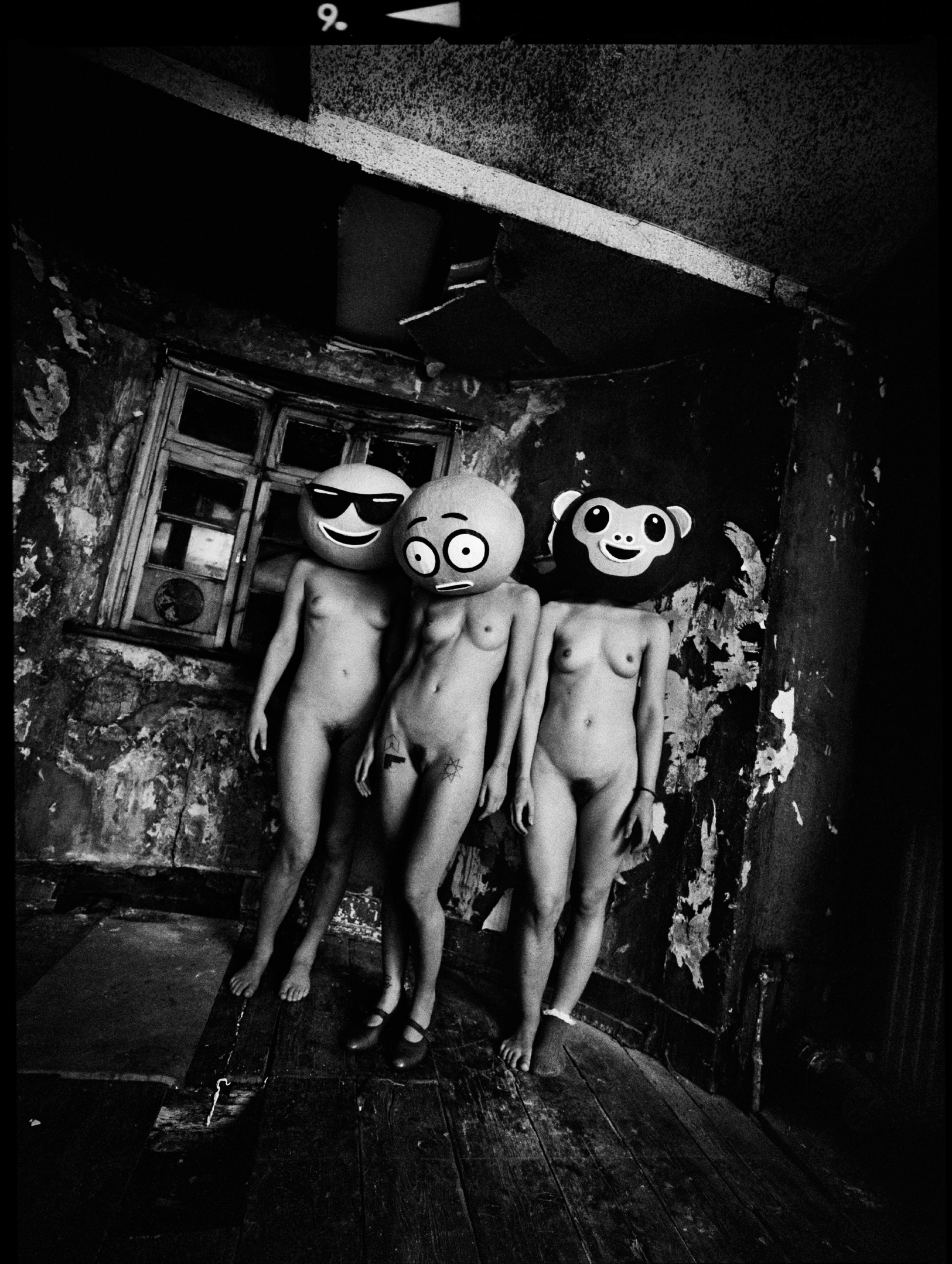
# THE EVE OF AVANT GARDE



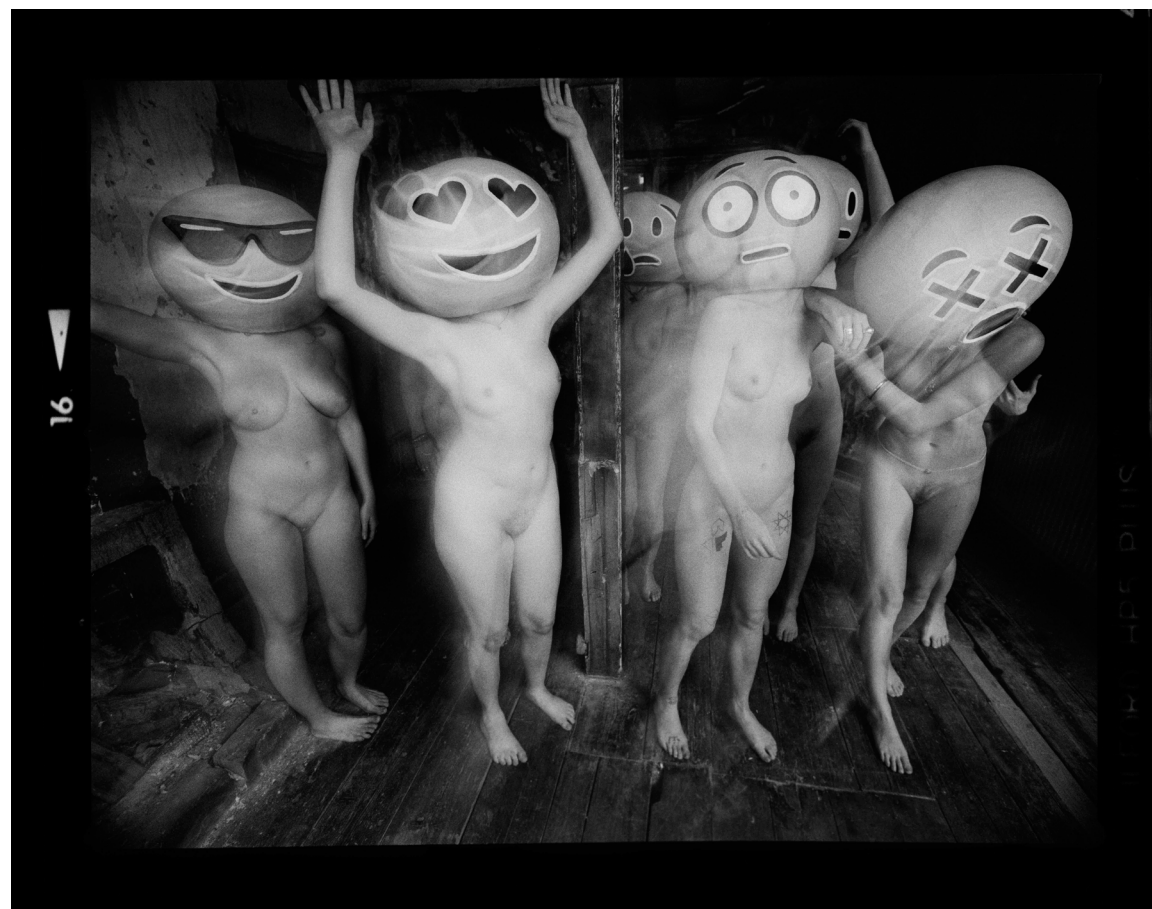
# Not-So-Ordinary Madness

How Charlotte Colbert's  
Surrealist Photo Prisms Divide  
the Vulnerabilities of the Mind

INTERVIEW · OLIVIA TOPLEY







— ‘If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn’t need to lug around a camera’ - photographer Lewis Hine once quipped. Language, spoken or signed, is used to convey a message - and where the humble English word fails, imagery finds its strength. In 2015, the Oxford Dictionaries, a global leader in matters of language, selected an emoji as its word of the year - a further testament to the ever complex nature and status of language in our 21st century. This occurrence also surely raised some intriguing questions: is the emoji becoming a substitute for and an invasion of personal expression? Or are we in the midsts of a digital revolution that transcends lingual limitations and cultural differences? Ordinary Madness examines this familiar query - through a series of black and white photographs, Charlotte Colbert’s naked female subjects find their own human countenances replaced with a digital emoticon, playing on the peril of miscommunication.

The genesis of the idea for the show started when the child of one of her friends saw a butterfly on a window and tried to zoom into the creature to try and make it bigger. Herself a new mother to a baby girl, she thought about how technology relates to us on a human level and how it has become as perfunctory as eating and drinking. Colbert explains that she started thinking of civilisation in the developed world as parodies of emoji families, she says, “There’s something wonderful about technology but something very dark. We’re coming back to a symbolic way of writing but it’s someone else’s interpretation.”

Using props, distorting mirrors, costumes as well as long and double exposures, Colbert creates a surreal parody of daily life as seen through twenty-first century language. Nude figures unable to connect, couples frozen in a forced state of feeling, a surreal army of circuit board women, an emoji wasteland where madness, fantasy, comedy and chaos coexist.



**What are the advantages to using film as an artistic tool? Why do you choose film rather than other mediums?**

I love stories and explore them through both narrative films and photography. I am passionate about both. They feed into each other, one inspiring the other or starting a questioning which can be further investigated in either medium. As a film director, the seeing and taking of photographs has influenced my aesthetic – one being the continuation of the other, both existing within my same world.

**What is the effect of using black and white imagery throughout your films? What does the lack of colour reveal about you as an artist?**

It is said that babies when they are just born see the world in black and white. Perhaps unconsciously I am striving towards that kind of immediacy with the world? It also probably allows for me to have a distance with the work, where I feel I can see it more clearly because through its color it is somehow separate from me.

**Do you believe anybody can be a filmmaker?**

I believe anybody can do anything.

**Does being a female filmmaker influence your work? Does it give you a niche when promoting your work?**

Being a female is one of the elements that makes up my identity and as such I am sure it influences how I perceive the world but it seems to me that what we tend to identify as feminine and masculine qualities can be found in either sex. For example Kathryn Bigelow's films feel perhaps more "masculine" than Krzysztof Kieslowski's.

**Who do you turn to for inspiration? Do you unconsciously emulate their work?**

Being a writer, a filmmaker or artist sometimes feels to me like being a squirrel. Collecting lots of emotions, images, stories from a night out, a visit to a museum, a train ride, a misfortune, an encounter, an eavesdropped conversation – letting it brew for sometimes years and then the strangest formations come out. Digested snippets of one's experience.

**Why does your work have strong surrealist themes? How do you think it makes your viewer feel?**

I love random things in places where you don't expect them. It surprises me, makes me laugh and makes me question. Absurdity captures a sense of irreverence and provocation at the way things are. Surrealism as a movement poked fun at the boundaries of "normality" and the accepted state of being while at the same time connecting itself to the tradition of psychoanalysis. Dreams, the mind, emotions sending us coded messages. Bottles at sea from the world beyond perception.

**Is disturbing your viewer your main aim when creating a film? Does it give you a sense of power to influence/alter perceptions of art?**

In making a film my aim is to tell a story and from that generating some kind of response, an emotion, a peek into a world... I don't really think of what response my work will generate. I just tend to do it and then bite my nails.

**Do you recognise yourself as a storyteller? How do you define this term?**

I think humans as a species are storytellers. It's the only way we know how to live, make sense of the world around us, our identities, our family – every link we have with the world is only always a fiction, a narrative we tell ourselves.

**What are some of your central characters in your work and what do they represent?**

I'm not sure... There are probably some recurring themes and figures... I feel very in the middle of them to be able to really articulate who they are... perhaps they are often lost and disconnected figures...

**Do you feel threatened by the smartphone generation where anyone can create a film? Does this detract from the art of creating a story?**

It's great that everyone tells stories. That seems to me to be one of the really positive aspects of Smartphones. Am more worried in Smartphones making us feel increasing lost, confused and exhausted by keeping us in a constant state of co-presence between the 3D, physical, world and the



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They are fascinating. So intimate.

— CHARLOTTE COLBERT



**How do you come up with ideas for your films? Do you believe an idea can ever be original? How does this influence you as an artist?**

It is said there are only 7 basic plots and all stories are always ever a re-telling of these original archetypal stories. There is something beautifully connecting about that. That all creeds, times and places share the same fears, desires, hopes, loves that are simply essentially human.

**Which is better organic art or constructed art?**

I don’t know if there is such a difference. Art seems in part constructed and in part organic.

**How do you feel when you receive such positive feedback from your work? Does this put pressure on you to create similar films?**

I still have a long way to go to be under that kind of pressure!

**Can artistic films ever be wholly personal or will they always be for viewers and spectators?**

Some films –even if you look on YouTube or Reddit – are so unbelievably personal - it’s amazing they even exist. They are fascinating. So intimate. So voyeuristic. Cinema has always been that secret peephole where the viewer can see into someone else’s personal space. They exist for each other.

**How long do you spend planning for a film? Which portion of the film making process is most important to you? (e.g. planning, production, post)**

With narrative film or photography it seems there is never enough time to shoot. So careful planning is the only way I can get what I want or at least some of what I want in the can.

**How do your films explore philosophical themes? Can film ever answer questions about meaning?**

They don’t explicitly strive to do so but I guess some universal themes creep into every specific story.

**Can surrealism ever be delicate? How do these seemingly contradictory concepts exist side by side effectively?**

I’d never thought of surrealism as un-delicate. I suppose if one thinks of surrealism as a hippo in a tutu it could be considered un-delicate but even then, thinking of Fantasia, I don’t know if I’d agree. Surrealism is the essence of dreams and what could be more delicate than that.

**What three words would you use to describe your work?**

Surreal, dark, absurd.

**What are your views on surrealism being easier to create compared to naturalism?**

They are equally tricky. Fiction is an artifice so whether one wants to make it look “natural” or “artificial” it always requires more work than one would anticipate.

**What does the future hold for you as an artist? What is your ambition for your filmmaking career?**

Hopefully to make lots more films!

**What is more important; the story or the equipment used to create the story? Can a good story be made on a shoestring budget?**

The story. Of course. Homer could be told with toilet rolls.

**What advice would you give to budding filmmakers?**

Make films.

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**Ordinary Madness opens July 1st at the Gazelli Art House, London. Charlotte Colbert’s work will also feature as part of the multi-disciplinary group-show ‘Daydreaming with Stanley Kubrick’ from June 30th at Somerset House.**