

# FAITH, LOVE AND LOSS

As the RPS International Photography Exhibition returns for its 166th edition, Jonathan McIntosh speaks to four image-makers whose works are among the highlights

**The lasting environmental damage** caused by the cut-flower industry, Indian bodybuilders defining femininity on their own terms, and motherhood and loss. These are just some of the far-reaching themes tackled in the 166th edition of the RPS International Photography Exhibition (IPE 166). The selectors for the latest edition of the world's longest-running photography exhibition were tasked with choosing from more than 8,000 images submitted following an open call in early 2024. The panel included Chinese artist and researcher Yuxing Chen; British Indian artist Kalpesh Lathigra; Anne Nwakalor, photo editor and founder of Africa's contemporary photography magazine *No! Wahala*; consultant

to the RPS Dr Michael Pritchard FRPS; and Nicola Shipley, co-founder and director of GRAIN Projects. On the following pages we focus on four finalists whose images captivate in different ways. Revealing the inspiration, intent and stories behind their submissions are IPE 166 Award recipient Lydia Goldblatt; Keerthana Kunnath, who achieved the Under 30s Award; John Boaz; and Tine Poppe. Discover the work of our fifth chosen finalist, Aria Shahrokhshahi, in the April *Journal Extra* e-newsletter.

**The International Photography Exhibition 166** is at Saatchi Gallery, London, from 5 August to 6 September before touring. IPE 167 is open for submissions from September 2025. [rps.org/exhibitions](https://rps.org/exhibitions)

**Opposite**  
'Bone' from the series  
*Fugue* by Lydia Goldblatt



# Lydia Goldblatt

IPE 166 Award

When London-based photographer Lydia Goldblatt had her first child, the responsibilities of motherhood left her unable to take pictures. But when her mother died a few years ago, photography became a visual language to convey and navigate her grief.

In the series *Fugue*, Goldblatt reflects on her experiences of love and loss intertwined with these transitions.

“I wanted to be honest about what I was struggling with, about the feelings of claustrophobia and rage, as much as intimacy and love,” she says. “These feelings are so often hidden by mothers and silenced as unacceptable.

“With each transition, I just carried on in my own life. I couldn’t process anything. Photographing *Fugue* became a way for me to give shape to my feelings and helped me understand some of what had happened.”



‘Lick’ from the series *Fugue* by Lydia Goldblatt



‘Windows’ from the series *Fugue* by Lydia Goldblatt



‘Eden’ from the series *Fugue* by Lydia Goldblatt

“These feelings are so often hidden by mothers and silenced as unacceptable”

Beginning in February 2020, Goldblatt created *Fugue* across four years, exploring how humanity is connected by common experiences while challenging stereotypes intrinsic to modern motherhood. ‘Eden’, an image from the series, was recognised in the Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize 2020.

“I’m interested in how love and loss in relationships are heightened in transitional stages – themes I explored in my previous project, *Still Here*, where I documented my parents growing older,” she says. “Grief and personal growth are intertwined and I’m interested in the creative catalyst of these spaces.”

Depicting the everyday rhythms and rituals of family life, *Fugue* shines a light on the disharmony between the peace of home life and Goldblatt’s navigation through these transitional periods.

“As a creator, you can process things through making,” she says. “This allows for a different kind of experiencing and comprehension.

“And while I don’t think *Fugue*’s photographs have necessarily provided me catharsis, they’ve given shape to these experiences that I’ve been thinking about, both for myself and in the wider context of care and parenting.

“I want *Fugue* to connect people with the emotions tied to these moments that we’ll all likely experience at some point in our lives. I hope it helps articulate the feelings that can be so hard to visualise or articulate during times of transition and loss.”

lydiagoldblatt.com



# Keerthana Kunnath

Under 30 Award

**Calicut-born, London-based Keerthana Kunnath is tired** of the societal, beauty and gender standards policing south Indian women’s bodies. In the series *Not What You Saw*, the fine art photographer rejects these ideals to celebrate Keralan female bodybuilders defining their own versions of femininity.

“My research into Kalari – a traditional, male-dominated martial art [believed to originate] in Kerala in the 11th century – connected me to this community of female bodybuilders. Hearing their stories, we’d all experienced society’s criticisms of ‘not being feminine enough and encroaching on male spaces’,” says Kunnath. “I was inspired by how they ignored these standards to forge their identities on their own terms.”

Conventional Indian female beauty standards of light skin, slim bodies and long hair – definitions steeped in long-standing patriarchal perceptions of how women should look and act – remain prevalent and continue to be instilled in girls from an early age. Both the creator of *Not What You Saw* and her subjects defy this male gaze by challenging these gendered expectations.

“When these women began bodybuilding, men asked why they wanted to develop ‘masculine features’. Conversely, I find their muscularity extremely graceful and feminine,” says Kunnath. “I wanted to show femininity’s multitudes while combatting the male-driven narrative that women can only exist within male-prescribed roles.”



From the series *Not What You Saw* by Keerthana Kunnath



Kunnath’s images provide another vision of beauty rooted in feminine power. Flexed muscles and sculpted physiques contrast with traditional female outfits set against backgrounds of beaches and verdant greenery.

“The backgrounds are inspired by old Malayalam cinema and religious iconography, which typically portray women as shy and unconfident. I juxtaposed this by placing powerful women at the forefront,” says Kunnath. “Mainstream media is responsible for perpetuating this messaging, so I flipped it on its head.”

Her images radiate with the women’s joy and pride they find in forging their own path – something that’s sparked much online discussion.

“Many women have reached out to say how this work inspires them. It’s been heartening seeing women reply to men’s negative comments by asking what qualifies them to ascribe what a female body should look like,” says Kunnath. “I want to spark these conversations and continue to positively impact the communities I’m portraying.”

[keerthanakunnath.info](http://keerthanakunnath.info)

**“Mainstream media is responsible for perpetuating this messaging, so I flipped it on its head”**



From the series Not What You Saw by Keerthana Kunnath



From the series Not What You Saw by Keerthana Kunnath



# Tine Poppe

From yellow marigolds guiding the departed to their ancestral homes on Día de los Muertos to romancing a Valentine with a dozen red roses, flowers are powerful symbols that decorate exceptional and everyday moments.

In *Gilded Lilies: Portraits of Cut Flowers*, the floral depictions of Tine Poppe play a different purpose, highlighting the damaging environmental impact of an industry.

“After being diagnosed with cancer seven years ago, I focused on nature to heal,” explains Poppe, who is based in Oslo, Norway. “Nature’s infinite beauty and rising manmade environmental threats have made me continue my focus on this subject now that I’m no longer ill.”



‘Echinacea’ from the series *Gilded Lilies: Portraits of Cut Flowers* by Tine Poppe



‘Anthurium andraeanum’ from the series *Gilded Lilies: Portraits of Cut Flowers* by Tine Poppe



*Gilded Lilies* was born a few years ago after Poppe read a TED Talk examining the horticultural industry's damaging environmental impact.

"I assumed my beloved cut flowers were grown locally, but learned the true environmental cost of their journeys from industrial-scale greenhouses around the world," she says. "I was shocked by the damage these blossoms we buy to briefly brighten our surroundings left behind long after wilting."

A 2018 Lancaster University study discovered imported flowers' carbon footprint can be 10 times that of homegrown blooms. To emphasise this, Poppe contrasts her images of local cut flowers with photographs she has taken in landscapes affected by climate change – resulting in floral portraits that are equally striking and disconcerting.

By juxtaposing flowers with climate change's devastating consequences, *Gilded Lilies* forces the viewer to confront the role they play in the planet's destruction by pursuing and consuming the fleeting beauty of cut flowers. Poppe wants audiences to be entranced and sobered by this eco-conscious clarion call.

"*Gilded Lilies* is a reminder of the natural beauty we risk losing," she says. "I hope these images educate audiences on the unnatural surroundings these flowers are bred in and the cost to the climate."

tinepoppe.no

**"I hope these images educate  
on the unnatural surroundings  
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the cost to the climate"**



'Red Lilium II' from the series *Gilded Lilies: Portraits of Cut Flowers* by Tine Poppe



## John Boaz

**The Oxford English Dictionary lists 14 meanings for the noun ‘religion’, suggesting the concept is rather difficult to pin down.**

When John Boaz decided to use photography to explore religion, the idea was to celebrate it in all its complexity and variety.

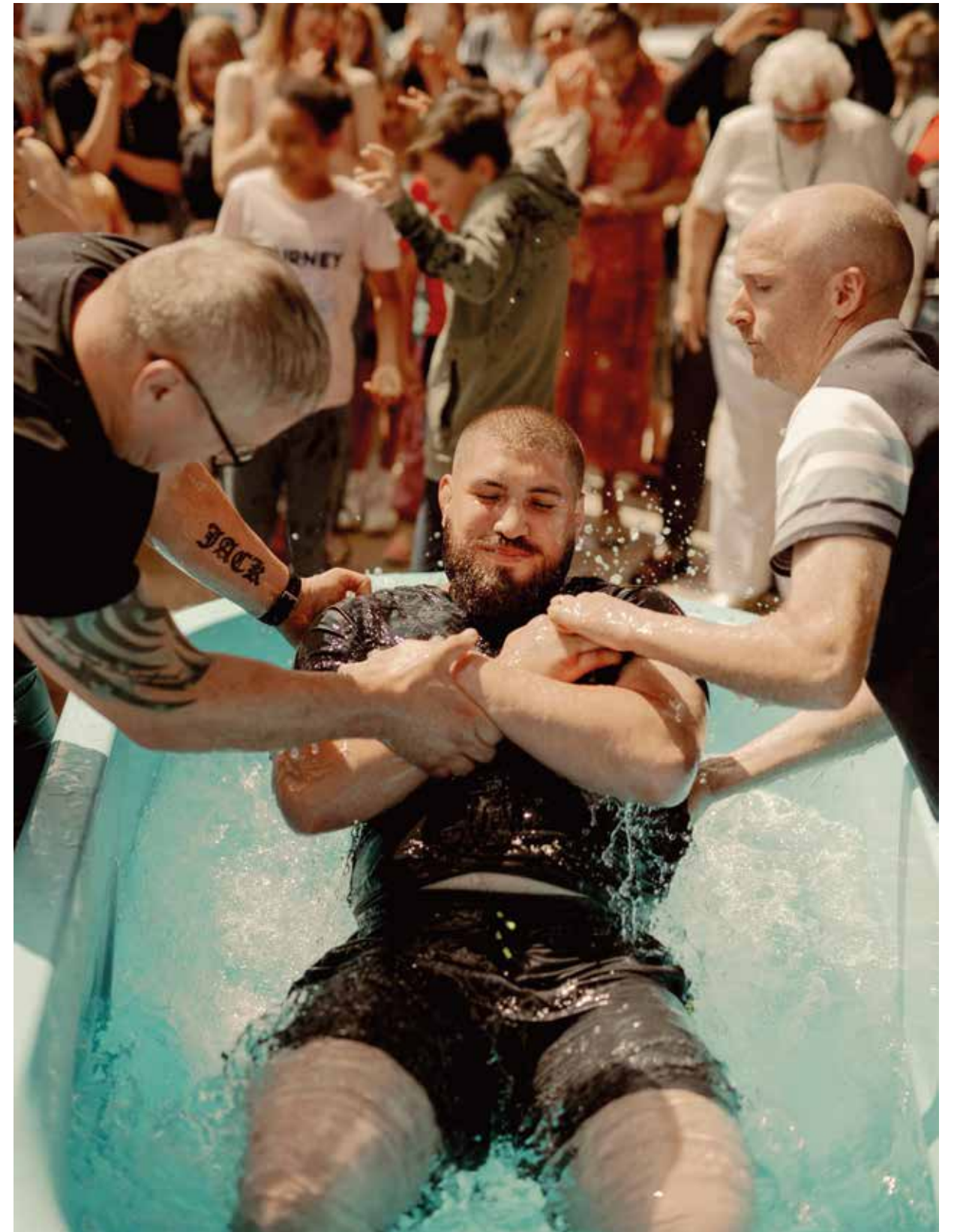
In his series *Rivers of Living Water*, the Northamptonshire-based photographer examines Christianity within modern-day Britain to spotlight the diversity of people who follow this faith.

“Through this project, I look at different traditions, cultures, nationalities and beliefs of individuals who adhere to Christianity,” explains Boaz, who graduated from Birmingham City University in 2019 with a degree in Visual Communication (Photography). “Each portrait is taken from a place of deep respect, sensitivity and reverence of their connections to religion,” he adds.

Boaz was brought up in a Christian community and his faith remains strong. *Rivers of Living Water* includes work from his other projects – including *Mathētēs* (μαθητής), *Our Father* and *Hope In New Beginnings* – that explore humanity’s relationships with God.

The photographer, who credits Alec Soth’s *Sleeping by the Mississippi* and Laura Pannack’s *Youth Without Age and Life*

**“Each portrait is taken from a place of deep respect, sensitivity and reverence of their connections to religion”**



From the series *Rivers of Living Water* by John Boaz





From the series *Rivers of Living Water* by John Boaz

*Without Death* as inspirations, hopes to publish his latest series as a photobook.

“I like to explore themes of faith, community, love and hope through my photography,” says Boaz. “*Rivers of Living Water* is taken from a celebratory perspective of Christianity rather than being investigative.”

His images also reveal the diversity of traditions and relationships linked to Christianity. “Take my portrait of east London’s Fabian Williams, ‘The Blessed Equestrian’, whose goal is to be the first Black eventing five times Olympic gold medallist,” says Boaz. “He’s a brilliant person and I was drawn to everything he stands for.”

“Ruvimbo Makumbe’s story is also incredible. Born in Zimbabwe, the environmental activist and businesswoman came to the UK when she was 12 and reunited with her mother,” he adds.

“*Rivers of Living Water* illuminates how Christian spirituality is unique to each and every person I meet.”

[johnboaz.co.uk](http://johnboaz.co.uk)

**“*Rivers of Living Water* illuminates how Christian spirituality is unique to each and every person I meet”**



From the series *Rivers of Living Water* by John Boaz