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# Telling stories

The RPS's IPE 166th edition is an accessible and diverse celebration of contemporary photography from around the world. **David Clark** talks to Curator and Exhibitions Manager Billy-Jay Stoneman

The Royal Photographic Society's International Photography Exhibition, first held in 1854, is the longest-running photographic exhibition in the world. It's now in its 166th edition (having missed out a few years along the way) and remains a wide-ranging and diverse celebration of contemporary photography in all its forms.

This year's exhibition, on display for the first time at the prestigious Saatchi Gallery in London, will show 113 prints by 51 photographers from 24 countries. The images have been painstakingly selected from work submitted by over 4,000 participants worldwide.

'The IPE is always really popular as it includes such a wide selection of images,' explains the RPS's curator and exhibitions manager, Billy-Jay Stoneman. 'The themes of the show change every year and reflect what people are talking about – not just in the art world, but the world in general. This year, we're really excited to have such an amazing venue in central London to showcase the exhibition.'

## Submissions and selection process

One of the distinctive features of the IPE is its inclusivity. It is open to everyone, whether professional or amateur, working in every genre. Everyone can enter one single image for free, and those who want to can enter additional paid-for-entry images. There are discounts for students and groups who might not be able to afford entry otherwise.

The selection panel always consists of notable figures

in contemporary photography. This year, it was comprised of Yuxing Chen, a Chinese artist based in the UK and recipient of the IPE 165 award; Kalpesh Lathigra, a British Indian artist and senior lecturer at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London; Anne Nwakalor, a British Nigerian curator, writer, photo editor and founding editor of *No! Wahala* magazine; Nicola Shipley, a curator, producer and mentor as well as co-founder and director of GRAIN projects; and photography consultant and historian, Dr Michael Pritchard.

As each photographer could potentially submit several images for consideration, there were something like 10,000 images in total to be considered for inclusion. The first part of the selection process took around a month to complete. Everyone who was shortlisted at that point was invited to send in prints, which could be ordered at discounted rates from digital printing service and exhibition partner theprintspace. Those prints, together with supporting text sent with the images, were reviewed during two days of print selection by the selection panel.

With such a broad range of images being entered, what criteria did the judging panel use for selecting images? 'Because it's open and there are no



**Left: Felipe Barrera Aguirre, traditional Chinampero farmer and agroecology teacher by Mat Hay**

**Right: The Tangential by Aidan Murgatroyd**

**Bottom: Angelo with his goats, near Otranto, Salento (2022) by Murray Ballard**







**From the IPE 166  
Award series Fuge by  
Lydia Goldblatt**

**Left: Lick**

**Right: Flame**

**Middle: Bone**

**Bottom: Folds**

**Far right: Kalle by  
Peter Holiday**



## Lydia Goldblatt

Winner of the IPE 166 Award Goldblatt has been chosen to receive the IPE 166 Award for her series Fugue. She is a British photographic artist born in 1978, whose work has been exhibited at prestigious venues including the National Portrait Gallery. Her previous series, *Still Here* (2013), was about her father, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease, and the period following his death. Fugue explores her experience of motherhood at a time of major transition in her life.

### Why did you choose the title Fugue?

'I chose the word 'Fugue' as it holds two meanings; it refers to a musical composition with interweaving and repeating elements, where each layer adds to the whole to create a complex narrative. It also refers to a dissociative state or loss of self. Both meanings encompass the transformations that accompany motherhood and loss, and the personal and collective resonances of daily domestic life.'

### What inspired the work and how did you go about exploring the subject?

'I worked on Fugue over four years, building a collection of photographs, and then writing – about loss and abundance, losing a mother and becoming a mother. My first book, *Still Here*, was about the landscape of love and loss generated by my father's death. The cultural silence around these emotions, the difficulty of navigating and giving voice to them, made me want to suffuse them in my work with colour and light. But when I became a mother, I found myself unable to make pictures. Somehow it was so much that it was too much.

'After my own mother died, I began to photograph again. It felt a bit like the immersion of new motherhood, as I began to explore the experience of loss, grief and love – both the light and the dark, the negative and positive. Perhaps because it is so difficult to explain, I wanted to be honest about what I was struggling with, about the feelings of claustrophobia and alienation, as much as intimacy and love. These are

feelings so often hidden by mothers, so often silenced as unacceptable. In this way, the work became a challenge to the intergenerational repetitions, archetypes and taboos of motherhood.'

### Please talk about one image as representative of Fugue

'Fugue is rooted in the domestic space of care, and foregrounds the idea and role of "mothering". However, as the mother and the photographer, I am not often in the images – both because I am the person behind the camera, but also because a huge part of this work is about questioning who and what I am in this role of the mother, and what happens to women and their identities when they become mothers. In my picture titled Lick, that role is central. It holds both tenderness and desire (going both ways between mother and child), but also ambivalence, possession and surrender. It is a conversation between these paradoxical states.'

To see more of Lydia's work, visit [lydiagoldblatt.com](http://lydiagoldblatt.com)

categories, we ask the selectors to look at the images that capture their imagination, that inspire them and elicit an emotional response,' explains Stoneman.

'Ultimately, the aim is to have a diverse and engaging exhibition at the end of the selection. The selectors always come from varied backgrounds in the industry and they always change for each edition of the IPE, which makes each edition of the exhibition unique every year.'

### Final selection

The predominant themes in the images chosen for this year's exhibition reflect society's current concerns and preoccupations. 'Stories of identity, the environment and the movement of people are really strong themes and matters of concern that are around us all the time,' Stoneman comments. 'They are obviously subjects that the photographers feel really passionate about.

'In the two days where we have the final print selection in person, there are lots of discussions and careful consideration about what work should be included in the exhibition. By the end of the two



days, the selectors have worked together and listened to each other's views and they decide which images work really nicely together or whether certain subjects need more representation. Some years the selection is dominated by portraiture, while others focus more on environmental themes. This year there is a particularly balanced and diverse range of themes.'

She continues, 'The standard of entries was incredibly high, and I know the selectors faced a real challenge in choosing the final images. What continues to inspire me every year is the unwavering enthusiasm of the selectors. They approach the process with such care and passion and are really involved and engaged in uncovering the stories behind each print and selecting an inspiring exhibition.'

The selection in IPE 166 ranges from black & white contemporary portraiture to colourful botanical studies and still-life abstracts to wildlife images, shot on equipment from cutting-edge digital technology to large-format glass-plate analogue kit.

Projects by two photographers have been chosen for special commendation: the winner of the IPE 166 Award, Lydia Goldblatt, and the Under-30s IPE Award winner, Keerthana Kunnath (see separate

**Above: Family Portrait by Ville Niiranen**

**Right: Our Lady of Fatima by Ana Paganini**







**Above: Men playing cards, Muro Leccese, Salento (2022) by Murray Ballard**

**Right: About to leave by Timon Benson**





From the under-30s  
IPE 166 Award series  
Not What You Saw by  
Keerthana Kunnath

Left: Boomika 2

Right: Sandra

Bottom: Aishu



**Keerthana Kunnath**  
Winner of the under-30s  
IPE 166 Award

London-based photographer Keerthana Kunnath has been awarded the under-30 IPE award in recognition of her series Not What You Saw. Born in Calicut, Kerala, South India and based in London, she holds an MA from the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London.

**What inspired your series, Not What You Saw?**

'The idea for Not What You Saw began when I came across one of the bodybuilders by chance on social media. She immediately stood out, she was nothing like what I had seen or expected. The title is a kind of literal translation of the thought I had at that moment. These women were challenging everything that I'd been conditioned to believe about how women should look, speak, or behave.

'Growing up in the region I'm from, there was always a clear, often rigid idea of what femininity should look like. These women were unapologetically breaking those norms, and that disruption really moved me. It inspired me to explore their world more

deeply and ultimately led to the creation of this body of work.'

**What did you aim to achieve with the work?**

'My goal with this work was to create awareness and foster appreciation, both locally and globally for women in sports. While the series specifically focuses on female bodybuilders, it also opens up broader conversations about femininity and the societal expectations placed on women, especially in India.

'Female athletes here often face not only financial struggles but also deeply rooted social stigmas. In many communities, women pursuing sports, particularly those that demand physical strength, are judged for defying traditional gender norms. They're often discouraged by their families or pressured to prioritise marriage and domestic roles over their athletic dreams.

'Through this work, I wanted to challenge those perceptions and to advocate for systemic change, including increased financial support, corporate sponsorships, grassroots development, and most importantly, a shift in how society views women in sport. Only then can talented female athletes in India truly thrive and compete on an equal footing.'

**How many female bodybuilders did you photograph and how did you meet and choose your subjects?**

'I photographed around ten female bodybuilders for the series. I initially connected with a few of them through Instagram, and from there, I met more women during regional and national bodybuilding competitions. It was a gradual process of building trust and finding individuals whose stories and presence resonated with the vision of the project.'

**Please choose one image as representative of Not What You Saw**

'My photograph "Boomika 2" shows female bodybuilder Bhumika against a quintessential Kerala backdrop. To me, this image encapsulates the core message, that being muscular doesn't diminish femininity.

'It challenges the rigid binaries we've been taught: that strength and softness, power and grace, cannot coexist in the same body. This photograph calls on us to rethink and reshape cultural constructs of gender and beauty. Bhumika, like the other women in the series, embodies the idea that womanhood is expansive and that strength, elegance, and muscularity are not mutually exclusive.'



To see more of Keerthana's work, visit [keerthanakunnath.info](http://keerthanakunnath.info)



**Above: Fabian, Equestrian Eventer by John Boaz**

sections on these pages).

What does Stoneman ultimately hope that IPE 166 visitors will take away with them after seeing the exhibition? She says, 'I hope visitors are struck by how diverse the exhibition is and how expansive and expressive photography itself can be, especially in the contemporary photography world.

'It's a great opportunity to view such a wide range of styles and approaches of photography. Each image and series of images is an artist using photography to express their passions, their voice and their stories and what is important to them. Ultimately, at its heart, it's about storytelling.

'I also hope it will inspire photographers, whatever the stage of their career, to enter next year's IPE, because of how accessible it is. Many of the photographers who submitted and are included in the exhibition have never had their work shown in such a prestigious exhibition before. The RPS IPE is a great platform to launch a photographer's career.'



The RPS International Photography Exhibition 166 will be on show at Saatchi Gallery, Duke of York's HQ, King's Road, London SW3 4RY, from 5 August until 20 September. Open 10am-6pm. Entry free. Call for entries for the RPS International Photography Exhibition 167 opens on 2 September 2025. See [rps.org/ipe167](http://rps.org/ipe167)