

## “In-Conversation”

January 2008

*Featuring*

**Fiona Alison**

**FBIPP FMPA FRPS**

Past President, Master Photographers' Association  
2006/2007

*Interview conducted by*

Steven Yee Pui Chung



### **ABOUT FIONA ALISON**

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Fiona's client list in children's advertising, fashion, editorial and portraiture spans all over Europe. She gained her BIPP Fellowship in 1988 and was the first woman to win the Peter Grugeon award for the best fellowship panel of that year. She went on to serve on the BIPP Distinctions and Annual Exhibition Panels. In 1992 she became an FRPS and is still a member of the Professional and Applied Distinctions Panel.

1995 saw her achieving the FMPA and she later toured the U.K. with the MPA Delphi Lecture tour. She is now shooting and selling Fine Art and also lecturing far and wide on photographing children, throughout the UK and is heavily engaged in producing work for Getty and her personal library.

#### **Questions:**

##### **1. How did you get your start in photography?**

I was given a camera for Christmas 1979 and sold work from my first roll of film; I have never actually been an amateur photographer.

##### **2. When did you join The Master Photographers' Association (MPA) as well as The British Institute of Professional Photography (BIPP) and how did you benefit from the membership?**

I have been a member of BIPP since 1980 and joined MPA in 1995. I am also a Fellow of the RPS. To be a member of either the BIPP or the MPA, one must be a professional photographer. Both these organisations will accept professional photographers from all over the world as members. Compared with the RPS which has a huge worldwide membership, the BIPP and MPA have far fewer members and do not cover as wide an area of photography.

The major benefits of belonging to an organisation are the provisions available to meet, talk with and learn from other photographers, and to attend many and varied important seminars. Interaction and networking is of vital importance to the progress of any photographer.

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**3. What is the definition of a professional photographer? Can freelance photographers join the MPA or BIPP?**

A professional photographer is one who works full time in photography and makes his/her living from it. Professional Freelance Photographers can join either or both organisations.

**4. How will the Distinction titles help freelance and professional photographers?**

I think for Social type photography Distinctions are probably successful as they appear impressive. It is more important as a 'work focus' towards improving personal standards – a way of working up a 'ladder of improvement' from Licentiateship, through Associateship to Fellowship.

**5. What would be your advice for someone who is keen to apply for the Distinction titles of MPA and BIPP?**

Technical perfection  
Excellent composition  
Superb print quality  
Professional conduct

**6. Cool. Thanks for providing some insight into MPA and BIPP. Now let's talk a bit about your photography journey. How did you turn a hobby into a profession? What was your big break in photography?**

Photography was never a hobby. I came from a family of artists and I had never owned a camera before. I fell in love with photography immediately. I knew absolutely nothing and had to learn very quickly. I soaked up all photographic knowledge like a sponge and have never stopped learning. My big break was when shots from my first ever roll of film were exhibited in a building society window in January 1980 ( a fortnight after I had exposed my first roll of film ) and I received commissions immediately from this, which actually kick-started my career.

**7. What is your favourite subject and specialization?**

I specialize in photographing children, from babies to teenage. I love to shoot young people. I have deviated a little in the last few years and have shot some Fine Art Still Life which I really enjoy. It is less exhausting and confrontational than shooting half a dozen two year olds for an advert!

**8. What is your most interesting experience during your photo shoot which you would like to share?**

Initially I worked from home, using my garage as a studio. Early in 1982 a French Art Director offered me £1,000 a day for four days to shoot six children for a major advert. I turned it down, as I did not have sufficient room to shoot the brief as I wished. At that time I had not the experience or knowledge to go to London and hire a studio, so I was devastated to turn away such an offer. I realised what I had given up, so after great thought and many anxious moments, I made an important decision and rented my own studio in London's West end.

This was a huge turning point in my career and I never looked back.

**9. How do you get inspiration for your works, especially a series or project?**

Sometimes I sit and think for ages and on other occasions the ideas just seem to be in my head already. At other times my client may have a brief which must be followed to the letter, so my only input then is the actual photography. Fortunately this does not often happen.

**10. Which is your favourite photograph? Any special reason?**

I have too many favourites to name just one.

I admire the work of Yousuf Karsh, Robert Doisneau, Michael Kenna, Irving Penn, Don Mc Cullin, Jane Bown and Susan Meiselas among many others.

**11. Which photographer inspired you most? What did you learn from him?**

I have learned from many photographers – technique from some, composition from others, lighting, a captured moment – you name it – there is always something from a shot somewhere; just a feeling or an emotion sometimes. I can buy an expensive book, just for one photograph I really like.

**12. How does photography enrich your life?**

It is my passion – I cannot think of my life without photography

**13. What would you say is the new challenge for photography as a whole?**

The new challenge, I feel, is to ensure that digital photography has the same depth of feeling, longevity and print quality as that achieved by the old processes. It is so easy to ‘snap and hope’ and not give enough thought to technique, lighting, composition and feeling or emotion in many cases.

Technically digital photography in the last three years has leapt forward in huge strides. Those of us involved must use it well to promote its vast potential to the best advantage.

It is here to stay and progress and is part of tomorrow’s world.

**14. As advice to beginners, how can they improve their path in photography?**

Look at pictures – all types - Paintings, Photographs,  
Graphics, Cartoons, etc.

Start with a strong base on which you can build

Get your technique down to a fine art

Think a lot about lighting – What, Why, When, How, Where

Work on composition

Learn about print quality

Don’t break the rules until you know what you’re doing

Enjoy your work!

## Works















