

# FRANKI RAFFLES



**OBSERVING  
WOMEN  
AT WORK**



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## OBSERVING WOMEN AT WORK

A local authority canteen worker is quoted in Raffles' 1988 publication, *To Let You Understand...*, as follows: "Well privatisation won't affect me. I'm due to retire soon, but it's the younger ones I feel sorry for."

Looking back over the quotations gathered for this City of Edinburgh District Council Women's Committee commission, they concentrate on high unemployment statistics for school leavers; impending privatisation (at the time the publication was written, this related to British Steel, water and electricity following the sell-off of utilities such as British Telecom and British Gas); low pay; childcare issues, particularly free nursery places; income support; inadequate NHS funding; equal opportunities; and employee protection rights. Fast-forward 29 years to 2017, following Thatcher, New Labour and into the economic uncertainty of BREXIT, Raffles' work continues to be relevant to present-day working conditions and debates. The destination of many school leavers and graduates continues to be the Job Centre; sections of the NHS are being quietly privatised; the high cost of childcare still impacts greatly on income; and zero hour contracts create often precarious working conditions. Viewing Raffles' work in black-and-white from our current decade is not in any way a nostalgic activity.

On entering the gallery to see *Observing Women at Work*, visitors encounter a similar view as the narrators do in Charlotte Gilman's novel *Herland* (1915) – a society entirely comprising women. Through the repetition of gender, each of Raffles' photographs reinforces her feminist agenda. The women are centre-stage. It is only on closer inspection that one can see men in the further recesses of the photographs – having a cigarette out of a lorry window or lingering at the end of a corridor with a co-worker. Even in a sole photograph of doctor and patient (Inside Back Cover, *Women Workers, Russia*), where the male has equal presence to the female, it is the woman who is wearing the white coat of the doctor, and the man who is the patient. Intriguingly, Raffles resists the device of the close-up, preferring the mid- or long-shot. She predominantly uses the establishing shot, which clearly shows the environment within which the worker operates, whether it is the regulated space of the open plan office, the natural dirt of the state farm or the systematic space of manufacture.

Contact sheet from *Women Workers, Russia*, 1989, Franki Raffles. StAUL: 2014-4-SW038



*Sheep Shearing, The Fank, Lewis, Spring 1981, from Lewis Women, Franki Raffles. StAUL: 2014-4-T-LE011*

Did Raffles discount the close-up for its potential objectification of women and in opposition to the ‘male gaze’ (a concept introduced by Laura Mulvey in 1975 in the essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*)? Whilst Raffles observes, her photographs do not frame their subject as ‘other’ or categorise the protagonists as ‘type’. Hers is not an ethnographical eye. Her frequent method of providing captions alongside photographs gives autonomy to the women, affording them their own voice. They provide information, they are humorous at times and they capture the ‘on the ground’ interaction between Raffles and the women she photographs. In *Potato Lifting, State Farm, Caucasus*’ of 1989, a woman in her overall, standing with her hands on the small of her back, says to Raffles, ‘Why don’t you come over and live here. I could get you a job no problem’. I said ‘I’ve got a job already’. She said ‘Yeah, taking photographs of me’.

The roles conferred by work create equality between the person behind and in front of the camera.

*Observing Women at Work* presents a selection of photographs and material from three bodies of work: *To Let You Understand...* (1988); *Women Workers, Russia* (1989); and material from *‘Prevalence’*, the first campaign of *Zero Tolerance*. The archive of Raffles’ work, housed within Photographic



*Màiri MacRae shearing, North Glendale, South Uist, c. 1934, With Angus Ruadh Campbell, Alasdair Campbell, Ronald Walker, and Angus MacCuish, and little Michael Campbell, Margaret Fay Shaw. Courtesy the National Trust for Scotland, Canna Island*

Collections at the University of St Andrews, predominantly comprises the negatives and contact sheets from these series, rather than original prints. For the wall works in this exhibition, the decision was taken to digitally reprint the photographs from scans of negatives. Some of the original artefacts that remain, which begin to hint at her hand and process, are shown in vitrines.

A final section of this exhibition offers the opportunity to begin contextualising Raffles’ work alongside that of other key photographers, broadening the conversation. This includes Margaret Fay Shaw (1903–2004), Helen Muspratt (1907–2001) and Doris Ulmann (1882–1934).

In the 1930s, Margaret Fay Shaw, an American, lived for six years with the sisters Màiri (1883–1972) and Peigi (1874–1969) MacRae in their croft at North Glendale, South Uist. Her photography records their daily life in their



*Women Workers*, Russia, 1989, Franki Raffles. StAUL: 2014-4-SW084-3a

small community, both at work and at leisure. The women were in their fifties when Shaw photographed them. Màiri MacRae is the main subject of Shaw's photography, capturing her in different moods and roles over the six years. Màiri MacRae was a single parent, a potentially difficult path at that time for women. Yet Shaw records her and her sister having key roles at the heart of their community. The photographs communicate a non-hierarchical and secure community, with women and men represented as equals. Shaw takes the portrayal of an islander beyond one of type to a sensitive account and exploration of identity and the autonomous subject. The image selected for inclusion in the exhibition, *Màiri MacRae shearing, North Glendale, South Uist* (c. 1934), is shown alongside a work by Raffles from the series *Lewis Women* (1983). Both images position the woman as the central figure, around whom others in the group rotate. Both Shaw and Raffles were untrained in photography. It is not known if Raffles' was aware of Shaw's photography.

Whilst Shaw was living in South Uist, another American photographer, Doris Ulmann, was documenting life and craft in the Appalachian Mountains. Three reprints are included in this exhibition *Observing Women at Work*, which, unusually for the era, show close-ups of hands at work. The quilter, Ethel May



*Women in the fields*, 1936, Helen Muspratt

Stiles, has made her own thimbles to reinforce her fingers; Lucy Lakes 'corn shucks' the bottom of a chair; and students break up candy in a kitchen. These works are shown alongside Raffles' photograph from the series *Women at Work, Russia*, of three women sitting knitting on a bench outside a house. Raffles' caption with the photograph reads: 'Do you spend all day sitting here?' 'Of course we do. It's our job. We knit jumpers and sell them to the State. The money is good and we like it'.

This link between knitting and economics is not an unusual one. Shetland filmmaker Jenny Gilbertson (1902–1990) in her films *A Crofter's Life in Shetland* (1931) and *Peat: From Fireside to Home* (1932) show women walking and knitting during any spare moment while working on the land. Knitting and the subsequent sale of its products created an important income for women on Shetland.

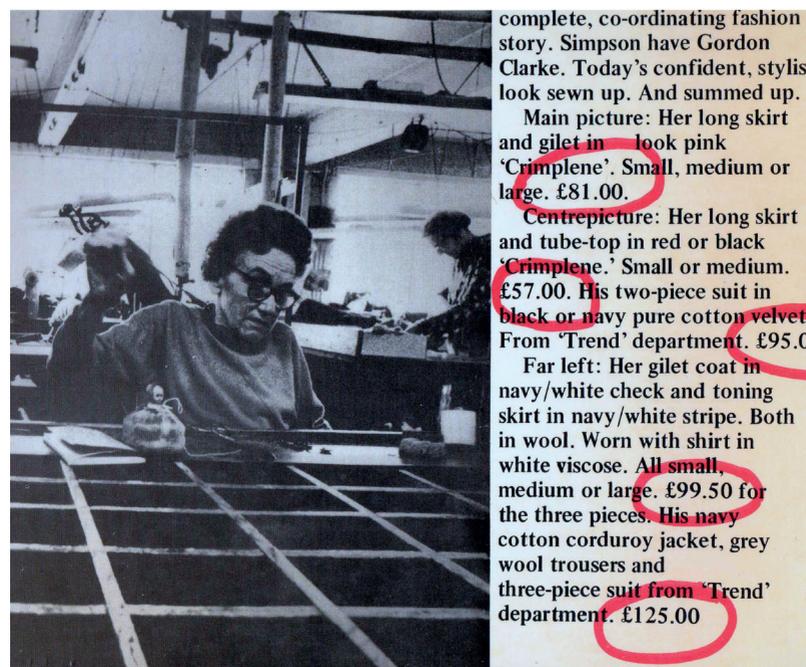


Shoe factory, *Women Workers*, Russia, 1989, Franki Raffles. StAUL: 2014-4-SW006-24

There is no doubt that Raffles' work was deeply informed by her political beliefs. She was a Marxist Leninist, sympathetically photographing an aspect of a Soviet system on the brink of collapse. The gender equality of work is represented through women plasterers, road builders, farm labourers and railway workers. One Soviet worker asks with incredulity whether 'in the UK you have women as house wives?' Evelyn Gillan records in an interview with Alistair Scott (conducted and recorded on video at Edinburgh Napier University, Merchiston Campus, Edinburgh on 20 June 2013) that:

She [Raffles] was a supporter of the Soviet system; she was a supporter of what it had done to women. She understood the shortcomings and the criticisms but what she did say was it had given women a role in the workplace that no other systems really had done. She said, why wouldn't you get an image like that in the UK, look at the strength of those women, look at the confidence of those women.

Helen Muspratt is the third photographer alongside whose work Raffles' is shown. More than fifty years before Raffles' visit, in 1936, Muspratt had



complete, co-ordinating fashion story. Simpson have Gordon Clarke. Today's confident, stylish look sewn up. And summed up.  
 Main picture: Her long skirt and gilet in look pink 'Crimplene'. Small, medium or large. £81.00.  
 Centrepicture: Her long skirt and tube-top in red or black 'Crimplene.' Small or medium. £57.00. His two-piece suit in black or navy pure cotton velvet. From 'Trend' department. £95.00.  
 Far left: Her gilet coat in navy/white check and toning skirt in navy/white stripe. Both in wool. Worn with shirt in white viscose. All small, medium or large. £99.50 for the three pieces. His navy cotton corduroy jacket, grey wool trousers and three-piece suit from 'Trend' department. £125.00

Panel from exhibition *Women and Work*, London, 1975, copyright Hackney Flashers Collective

embarked upon a six-week trip to the Soviet Union, in order to see socialism in action. Like Raffles, she had photographed women working in the fields and in the city. Material on loan from her daughter, Jessica Sutcliffe, illustrates how Muspratt used the images on her return to the UK. A poster for the subsequent exhibition at the shared Ramsey & Muspratt photography studio is captioned 'Intimate Pictures of Home, Farm and Factory Life of our Russian Allies'. A few years later, *Women in the Fields* (1936) is the main publicity image for the Mayor of Oxford's programme for 'Help for Russia Week' (1941). Whilst many of the women photographers and filmmakers of that era were discounted for not being political enough, by focusing on the domestic or rural – consistent with the later feminist maxim, the personal is the political – Scottish photographer Christina Broom (1862–1939) recorded the Suffragette marches in London, and Scottish filmmaker Helen Biggar (1909–1953) made the anti-establishment film *Challenge to Fascism – Glasgow's May Day* (1939), recording a people's march on International Workers Day in protest against the British government aligning with Franco's Spanish Right-wing regime.

## Franki Raffles

In a bid to explore whether Raffles' work on women and labour could begin to be aligned with a wider wave of UK feminist artists and filmmakers demanding equal rights for women, the exhibition also includes a reprinted work by the Hackney Flashers Collective from their *Women and Work* series, commissioned by Hackney Trades Council in 1975. This feminist and socialist collective was set up in 1974 and included members Sally Greenhill, Elizabeth Heron, Michael Ann Mullen, Maggie Murray, Christine Roche, Julia Vellacott, Jo Spence and Ann Dekker. Their work focused on the social and economic issues faced by women at work and home in the '70s. A black-and-white reprint, shown alongside Raffles' photograph of women working in a shoe factory, is a montage panel from the Hackney Flashers Collective's exhibition *Women and Work*. The image of the factory worker is montaged with text from an advertisement for Simpson – an upmarket London clothing manufacturer and retailer, who had a factory in Hackney at the time. The retail price of the clothes has been marked with a red circle, to show that it exceeds the cost of the labour taken to make similar garments. This version was used in various publications, including on the cover of *Photography/Politics: One*, published by Photography Workshop in 1979. During this second wave of feminism, a number of collectives were focusing on equal rights for women, including The London Women's Film Group with their work, *The Amazing Equal Pay Show* (1974), a film looking at the place of working-class women in capitalist society. The London Women's Film Group worked with the Women's Street Theatre Group, to lampoon issues of inequality, using the language of carnival, street theatre and pantomime. Another example is *Nightcleaners Part 1* (1972–75) by Berwick Film Collective, which documented the poor working conditions of women cleaners and the complexities of a parallel unionisation campaign when it was not the cleaners themselves agitating for unionisation.

Against this backdrop, Raffles' work *To Let You Understand...* a decade later – which includes documentation of cleaners at the George Hotel and in the grand halls of Edinburgh District Council – begins to reveal her importance as a photographer. Raffles continued recording the contribution of women to the workplace and to society, believing, according to Evelyn Gillan, in an interview with Alistair Scott, 'What you require for women's equality [is] economic independence... if you don't have that, you have nothing'.

JENNY BROWNRIGG

Contact sheet from *Women Workers*, Russia, 1989, Franki Raffles. STRAUL: 2014-4-SW061

