

# Dana Lixenberg







In March 1993 the photographer Dana Lixenberg placed herself in the aftermath of the Rodney King riots at a housing project called Imperial Courts in South Central LA. The work she made there is a complex and evocative record of an underserved community, a microcosm for poverty and racial tension around the world. At that time, she had no idea that these photographs would be the catalyst for her career and the genesis of a project that would continue to resonate with audiences decades later.

Words by Gem Fletcher, Photography by Lotte van Raalte

Dana Lixenberg is a master of observation. She confidently embraces the messy truths of life. Unassuming and surprisingly unfiltered, Dana is open about her own emotions and inner conflicts. She hates logistics, describes herself as indecisive and believes it's a privilege to be flawed. She defines the most challenging aspect of her work as her own doubt. Her career is the culmination of years of diligent work or, as she describes it, "showing up". This acute self-awareness permeates everything she does, and her approach is inherently human. Unlike other photographers, she never treats the subject as "the other". She connects through sameness, not difference. Fiercely defiant toward cultural stereotypes, her work celebrates the diverse beauty of people.

Dana spent the last three decades living and working in America. She built a career divided between editorial assignments for titles including *The New York Times Magazine*, *Vibe*, *The New Yorker* and *Rolling Stone* and personal work that focuses on individuals and communities on the margins of society. I first met Dana earlier this year at The Photographers Gallery in London, where she was exhibiting images from her seminal work 'Imperial Courts'. The project was recently shortlisted for the prestigious Deutsche Börse Photography Prize, an annual award given to a living photographer who has made the most significant contribution to photography in Europe.

It's been a long journey to this point. Originally from Amsterdam, Dana's fascination with America

began after high school when she took a job as an au pair in New York. The city became an endless source of inspiration. "I've always been fascinated by the way people carry themselves, how they connect to each other and how families behave." While living there, she also discovered her love of photography after attending night school at Parsons School of Design. She returned to Europe to study at the London College of Printing and the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam, before returning to Manhattan to begin her career in photography.

In 1992 she was sent on assignment by a Dutch magazine for a story about the rebuilding of South Central Los Angeles after the Rodney King riots. The area had a history of rebellion and race rioting dating back to 1965 due to rising anger at social injustice. Riots broke out again in 1992 after four LAPD police officers were acquitted of the brutal beating of Rodney King, an African American taxi driver. When the National Guard restored the peace, over 50 people were dead and more than 2,000 were injured. News channels disseminated images across the globe portraying it as a hotbed of crime and violence, forever casting a shadow over the community. Driven by a desire to create an antidote to the media stereotypes, Dana returned to the area a year later of her own accord.

During her time there, she had a chance encounter with Tony Bogard. Tony, a gang member turned peacemaker, ran Hands Across Watts, a nonprofit organisation formed to encourage gang truce. He was the unofficial godfather of Imperial Courts, one of the largest public housing projects in South Central. Dana was at first regarded with suspicion—the community were fed up of the media attention and negative stereotypes that came with it. "Tony was really sceptical about me photographing his community. I think he was concerned about exploitation. He wanted to know 'What do we get out of it?'" Dana had no clear answer, and could only demonstrate how she would work. She was persistent, and eventually granted permission to shoot. This was the first of many fortuitous moments that Dana fearlessly leaned into.

Alone with her 4×5 film camera, Dana spent four weeks shooting portraits in Imperial Courts. She invested time getting to know people and a word-of-mouth approval circulated amongst the community. "Being physically present there moved me deeply. The reality of any explosive situation is always more complex

than the mainstream media can convey. I was confronted by people's individual and collective experience of a long history of violent events. I became interested in exploring life in the projects through a de-sensationalised approach."

For Dana, each encounter is intuitive. She has a skilled eye for telling details, creating precise and poetic moments. "I'm sort of waiting for the pictures; it's not only about form and how the subjects are positioned in the frame, I feel it in my gut when the picture feels right. My work is more about silence. The action is made of very small gestures and texture. It could be a minute change which makes the image."

These determinedly low-key black and white photographs are a testament to the power of understatement. Tyrone, Miyong, DJ, Wilteysa, J 50 and many others are intentionally photographed against neutral backgrounds, rather than locations loaded with meaning. Dana kept the references to gang culture and ghetto stereotypes out of her images. Her tranquil, intimate portraits imbue the men, women and children she encountered with a quiet confidence and sense of self. These ordinary moments illuminate the tension and issues that lie just beneath the surface. With the series she found her language as a photographer. "The camera gives me a licence to examine the world. It's a combination of stepping back and really deciphering what I see, but also intensely engaging with the subject. Once I'm present in a place, I start to see what was previously inaccessible."

The next pivotal moment came when she crossed paths with George Pitts. George was the photo editor for *Vibe* magazine and he was the first to understand the importance of her photography. "My work fell into the right lap—he gave me a platform and really respected my approach." George credited Dana with assisting *Vibe* in establishing its visual tone and photographic vocabulary. Her tough non-pandering aesthetic perfectly complemented and contradicted the slicker celebrity and fashion photography of the time.

*Vibe* went on to give Dana countless commissions, and her first big story was photographing Tupac Shakur. When I ask what she remembers most from this encounter she says "his charisma", closely followed by the fact that "he was a bit high." The portraits of Tupac encapsulate his vulnerability. They strip back the bravado and glamour of rap and put the person, rather than the star, at the centre of the picture plane.





Dana's disruptive approach to photographing cultural icons created a new narrative around the concept of celebrity. She presented them dressed-down, viewing them as people rather than stars. "I've never taken a different approach to photographing celebrities and unknown individuals. The conditions are certainly different, but the way I look at a person is the same across the spectrum. The fragility of life is experienced by us all."

Dana sustained her diligent practice, making a name for herself with pared-down portraits of celebrities including Sean Penn, Jay Z and Prince. Art projects continued to be born out of her editorial assignments. A commission by *Jane* magazine led to 'Jeffersonville, Indiana', a project that documented residents of a homeless shelter. The series focuses on the individuals, successfully extracting the stereotypes of homelessness affording the subjects dignity in the face of adversity. "I am very interested in social justice; it often informs my choice in subject matter. While I have no expectation that I can influence social change or that my photographs can have a concrete impact on the issues at stake, I do feel it's kind of empowering to give the people you photograph a timeless presence

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in the world." Dana revisited the shelter once a year for seven years. She photographed families that fell through the cracks, building a powerful record of the shifting demographics of homelessness.

Over time, Dana began to feel the pull of Imperial Courts due to increased pressure from the residents. When she returned, 15 years had passed and those early photographs had become a record of personal histories and family connections over time. She began to photograph many of the original residents, as well as their children. Gradually the scope of the project grew as her connection with the community became more personal. Dana revisited every year for eight years creating photographs, film and sound pieces. "I felt both apprehension and excitement every time I returned. I always wondered what had happened while I had been away, was everyone OK? There was usually some heartbreak."

By 2015 the third generation had been born in Imperial Courts since she began the project. The passage of time was represented in the shredding of youthful personas. "In my life, friends had started families, people close to me had passed away, including

my parents. In the community, people went missing, died or were spending time in jail. Imperial Courts is the only project I have done that's raised my awareness of the passage of my own life. I photographed people in the ongoing context of their lives. Like a mirror, they've seen me age and I've seen them age."

Imperial Courts is a multi-generational narrative that has broadened the discussion of race and poverty in America. Over time the individual images have evolved. Through shifting politics and social changes, they have accumulated meaning, relevance and urgency. The universal value of the work provides a human perspective on the issues society often likes to keep at a distance. Quietly illuminating them beyond an example of injustice.

"Tony's question, 'But what do we get out of it?', still stays with me. I don't know if I will ever answer it. I can't speak for the community," she says, "I can only hope that over the years, the existence of these images will continue to be of value to the people who live there. I'm not an activist, that's not what I have to offer, but I hope that people will get to see the work and connect with it, finding some meaning in it. Through my work I continue to learn about the human

condition. It's difficult to understand who you are as a person and also coming to terms with the fact that everyone is seeing the world differently. But the commonality of emotions, our vulnerability, is what binds us together."

The extraordinary thing about Dana is her discipline and dedication to her craft. She never rushed for approval, she focused on the daily practice of making the work happen and making it good—a pathway that feels so alien in a climate where we are obsessed by newness and overnight success. Dana's grit transformed fortuitous moments into powerful bodies of work that still resonate today. Her genuine connection and care for her subjects is demonstrated in her years of devotion. The work she has created speaks to our vulnerability and resilience as human beings, the messy truths that unite us all. ♦

The book *Imperial Courts 1993-2015* by Dana Lixenberg, published by Roma Publications, Amsterdam is out now.

Top: Miyong with her son Anthony, 1993. Bottom: Fresh, Real, Flave and 4Doe, 2008.



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Left: Wilteysa, 1993. Right: J 50, 2008.







Left: Solé, 2013. Right top: Tyrone with his son De'Anthony, 2013.

