

Profiles

Sheila Rock

UK

Tel: +44 207 581 5844

Web site: www.terrimanduca.co.uk

Film type: Type 55 Positive/Negative



Advertising, editorial and gallery work; Sheila Rock has excelled in all these areas of photography since she started out on The Face magazine in the early 80s. Whatever the subject or assignment, Sheila seems to be able to instil a sense of beauty to her images. This was never more evident than in her recent series on Buddhist monks, which includes many superb portraits shot on Polapan Type 55 Positive/Negative film. Interview By Peter Lester

Sheila was born in the USA but moved to London in 1970. By the end of the decade she had embarked on what was to become a highly successful career photographing the key personalities of the vibrant music scene of the 80s, mainly for The Face, at the time, the UK's coolest style and music magazine.

The music scene has remained one of Sheila's favourite topics, however she has broadened her scope now, to include internationally famous artists such as Placido Domingo, and those of the Royal Opera and ballet companies in the UK. Sheila's portfolio has also diversified into advertising and editorial work in the fields of portraiture and fashion, with clients all over Europe and in the USA. With this type of successful commercial profile in mind, I asked Sheila, what motivated her to spend weeks in India, photographing Tibetan Buddhist monks? 'This became for me a very personal heartfelt project', Sheila explained, 'although it began almost by accident.'

'In 1998 I was going out to Sri Lanka and South India for a holiday. I'd been asked by a neighbour to do her a favour while I was out there, which was to deliver for her some small gifts to a boy she was sponsoring who was studying to be a monk at a monastery near Mysore. I agreed and while I was in that part of the country I arranged to call in to the Sera Monastery and pass on the gifts. I was deeply impressed by the place and especially by the people. The tranquillity, the calm pace of existence was such a stark contrast to the noise and frantic energy of the outside world,

I couldn't help being affected.'

Sheila decided to stay for a week near the monastery to photograph what she could of the place, promising herself that she would return one day to spend more time in capturing the sense of place on film. 'This happened at the right time for me,' she told me. 'Commercial photography is very demanding and rewarding but it can become a formula - same lights, same brief, it can become the kiss of death for creativity. There are always times when you are not shooting, so I made my mind up to use those times more effectively, and to do something I'm in control over. I had already had a taste of this type of work with a series I did on horses. I think what I learned from that experience, and the confidence I gained in my own work, really motivated me to see this project through.'

Even though from the beginning, people who saw the work encouraged her to work towards making a book, she found it hard to find a publisher. People associate this subject with colour and Sheila's contemplative black and white images were initially thought to be uncommercial. However, she persevered and, thanks in part to an endorsement by Robert Thurman, a leading American expert on Tibet, she found a publisher. The project still took about four years to complete, and initially she had to gain permission to gain access to this very private community of 5000 monks. 'I had the honour of meeting the Dalai Lama in seeking permission to stay and photograph at the Sera Monastery. With his blessing, I was able to spend time in this secluded community, which has grown from the many exiles who made their way to India after the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1959,' said Sheila.

Polaroid Type 55 Positive/Negative film played an important role in helping her achieve the type of image she sought. 'The monks have this air of serenity about them which seems to manifest itself almost as an expression of physical beauty. I spend a lot of time in my commercial work trying to create a particular look. In this case I was simply responding to something that was already there. I did my best to capture this look of inner peace with my large format Wista camera using Polaroid Type 55 Positive/Negative film. At a certain time of day the monks would walk around within the walls of the Monastery and I would use that occasion almost like a casting session, picking out interesting subjects as they went by. I would ask my young interpreter to invite them to a temporary studio I set-up in an old garage on the site, where I used the Wista and Type 55 Positive/Negative to get in quite close. Many of the monks had actually never seen a photograph before and I think many of them were quietly amused when I gave them a Type 55 Positive/Negative print to take away.'

Sheila's instinctive use of composition and her rapport with people in front of her camera stems from many year's experience but these beautiful Polaroid images show more than just professional expertise. Portrait photographers often strive to reveal something about the subject but in doing so, they often reveal something important about themselves. There is a strong emotional context to these images, which has grown from Sheila's heartfelt respect for a community and a way of life that offers peace and simplicity as an antidote to the angst of the material world.

Photographers have often told me that they think of Type 55 Positive/Negative as a film that seems to love people as a subject. Its ability to capture fantastic detail and its tonal range certainly can help flatter skin tones and make the most of subtle lighting situations. Add these special qualities to the sensitivity and respect that Sheila has demonstrated in the black and white photographic print.

The book, *Sera - The Way of the Tibetan Monk*, was published by Columbia University Press, New York, in 2004 and a proportion of the sales goes directly to the Monastery for healthcare support. As well as many fine portraits, the book also records the many aspects of daily life in a vibrant religious community. Sheila's portrait work is also included in the UK's National Gallery collection and her fine art prints of horses can be seen at the Photographer's Gallery in London.

To see more of Sheila's work, [click here](#).