

Interview

Mistresses of Light

Vanda Ralevska and Beata Moore are the driving forces behind the *Mistresses of Light* exhibition, which celebrates the work of women landscape photographers and is soon to be on show at the trendy OXO Tower in London. We chat to both organisers to find out more

> Interview by Megan Croft

What are your backgrounds in exhibiting?

Beata: I have never put on an exhibition of this scale; it was a daunting task, but sharing the responsibility with my friend and fellow photographer, Vanda, made it a bit easier.

Vanda: I have been involved in other exhibitions, but similarly to Beata, I have never organised an exhibition on such a scale. It has been a very steep learning curve for me, and it certainly made it easier to share the journey and workload with my friend. Supporting each other and sharing the frustrations as well as the joys made it a life-changing experience for me.

What inspired you to put on this exhibition?

Vanda: Beata and I have shared the passion for landscape photography for years. We often wondered if there were other women who felt the same way. Let's be honest, you don't see a lot of women landscape photographers being published or talked about.

We started a community called Landscapes by Women, to support and encourage other women to share their work with the rest of the world. After running the group for three years it felt natural to do more than just show our work on social media and our website.

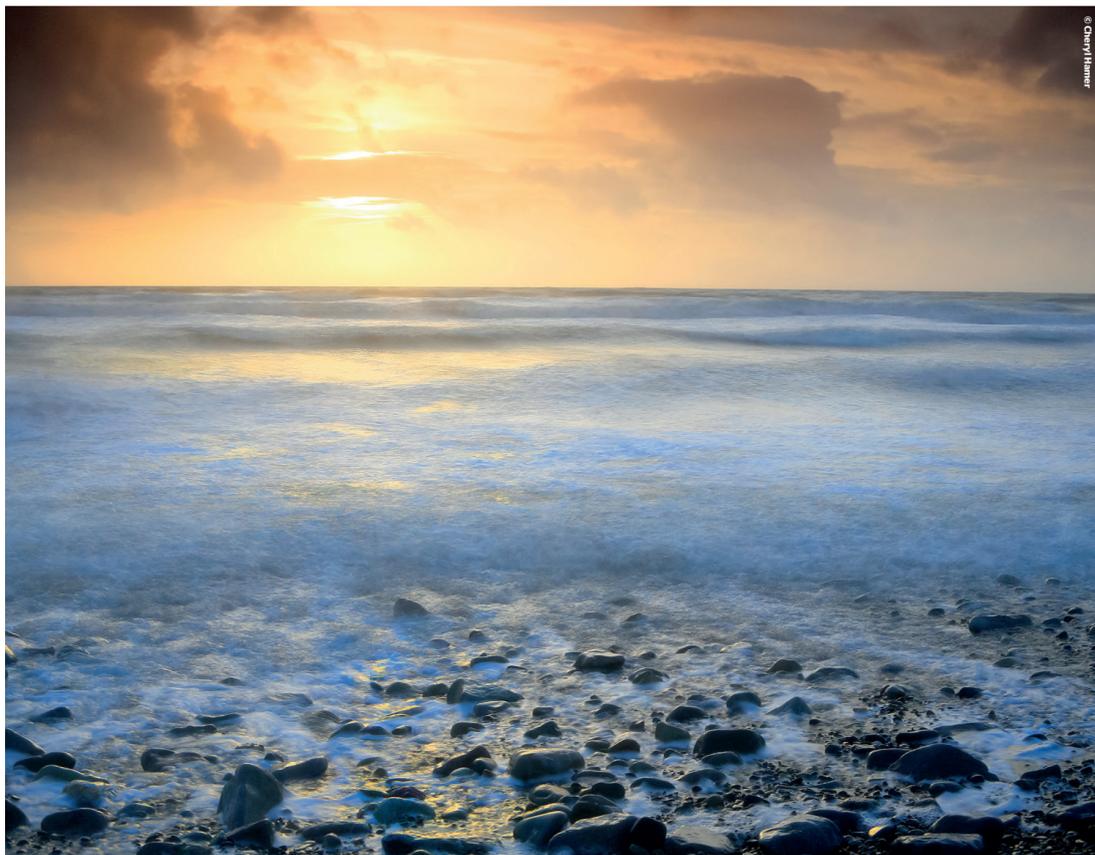
Getting to know some of the extremely talented photographers around us in person made me think about an exhibition which would bring together their beautiful work and which would show the diversity of their approaches in seeing and capturing the surrounding world.

Beata: The idea behind the exhibition is to showcase and promote the work of female landscape photographers. I am convinced that an exhibition in such a prestigious location will give women photographers more exposure and a fair share of the attention they deserve. Lately, I have seen more and more work by very talented women so I asked myself, how can I bring their unique and compelling images to a wider audience? What better way than an exhibition in London?

What can visitors expect from the *Mistresses of Light* exhibition?

Vanda: In my opinion there is something for everybody. The visitors can admire stunning grand views or the intricacy of intimate landscapes, black & white images depicting quintessentially English countryside, serene long-exposure seascapes, soft tones of autumnal scenes or extraordinary light on the shifting sands and dunes. The variety of individual interpretations connected by the magic of light on the land and sea.

Beata: I firmly believe that all visitors will find something interesting in the exhibition. There are classic and modern images, open vistas and details, plenty of colour but also sublime monochrome. The images flow effortlessly, taking viewers on an artistic journey through landscapes and light.



Above Pebbles and Pastels by Cheryl Hamer.
Right Golden Waves by Sue Bishop.

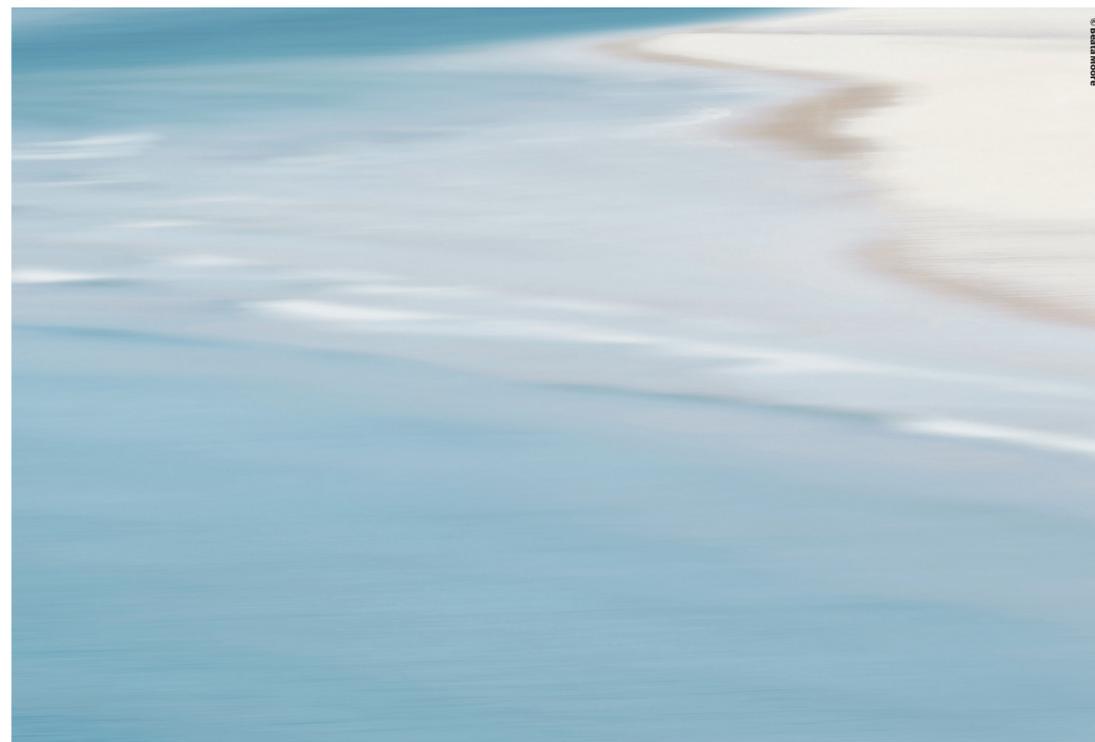


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Above As Dawn Greet the Day by Vanda Ralevska. **Below** On Shifting Sands by Marianthi Lainas.



Above Fallen Flight by Deborah Hughes.
Left Harris Blues by Beata Moore.

Charlotte Gilliatt - exhibitor

I have been a member of the Landscapes by Women community for over two years now. We are quite a close-knit group, always offering support and inspiration to each other. The exhibition just seemed to be the next logical step for us. For me, being part of *Mistresses of Light* is a huge opportunity, not only to display my work next to some of the most influential female artists in the business but also at one of London's premier venues! The chance of an opportunity like this coming around again is pretty slim... who wouldn't be attracted!

Exhibition

Why have you gone for a women only exhibition? Have you noticed or experienced an absence of women in the landscape genre?

Vanda: In the past I thought there was an absence of women in landscape photography. However with time I realised that it was just a perception. There are many talented women who enjoy taking photographs in the great outdoors, they just don't seem to be known to the public. Therefore I think, and hope, that by bringing together an all-female exhibition the perception might change; and women in general will be inspired and encouraged to show more of their work to a wide audience.

Beata: I am aware that art knows no gender, so possibly the next exhibition will present work by both men and women, but at this stage, I feel strongly that women photographers could benefit from more publicity.

What was the reason for favouring landscape as the genre?

Beata: I am a landscape photographer and this genre is the closest to my heart. I love taking images of everything in the natural world, from wide vistas to the smallest details. I share the same passion with many female photographers from Landscapes by Women. Our perception of landscapes is incredibly varied but we share the passion for them, so the choice of a genre was really obvious.

What kind of photographer did you want involved in the exhibition?

Vanda: I suppose a photographer who has a similar approach to photography to mine: being true to themselves, having passion for the beauty that surrounds us, and finding joy in what they do.

Beata: One word describes the kind I was looking for: passionate! I don't mind classic or progressive, colour or black & white.

How did you come by and decide on the final 12 exhibitors?

Beata: Although I know many more talented female photographers, it is the size of the OXO gallery that dictates how many images can be displayed there. All the approached photographers willing to take part and presenting a strong portfolio were accepted in the exhibition.

Vanda: We couldn't accommodate all the photographers we wanted to because of the size of the venue. Though we are hoping that we can find a larger space in the future.

How and why did you come to host the exhibition at the OXO Tower?

Vanda: I walk past the gallery every day on my way to work, and see many exhibitions there. It is an ideal place to show your work. The extraordinary light, the remarkable space, the vibrant location in the middle of one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

Beata: For years I have been visiting OXO and have been enchanted with the great light and atmosphere of it. I love everything about it, the high windows allowing plenty of light from outside, the vibrant energy of the area combined with the restful influence of the River Thames.

We are very proud that the selection panel of the OXO was satisfied with the quality of our images and the idea behind this exhibition and as a result, that we have secured such a prestigious gallery.

Were you quite selective in who to involve and who not to?

Beata: Yes, the selection process had to be established and we were very lucky to work with a great panel that was assessing submitted images.

Vanda: We were selective about the images displayed, but not about the photographers



Top Three Trees in the Mist by Linda Wevill.

Above Frosty Morning on the Wey by Rachael Talibart.

Above right Frosty sunset at Monsal Head by Karen Frenkel.

Right Boat Arriving in Fog by Susan Brown.

Left Bow Beech Calm by Sarah Medway.

Cheryl Hamer – exhibitor

I feel it's really important to get more women involved in photography for all sorts of reasons. The Landscapes by Women community is a fantastic way to do this, and the exhibition will really help to raise the profile of women in photography - and inspire more women to express their creativity in this way.

This is one of the ways that I am trying to raise my own profile within the world of photography. I love what I do - both making my own images and helping other people to develop, and this will enable me to build on both of those things. I run some workshops exclusively for women to provide a supportive environment in which women can express themselves photographically, and therefore play my part in inspiring female photographers. The exhibition dovetails with this wonderfully and I am very happy to be part of such a groundbreaking enterprise.

Exhibition

involved. We wanted to create a show that would portray the diversity of our work but that would also work together as a whole.

What were people's reactions when the idea was pitched to them?

Beata: It was a very enthusiastic reaction. We had overwhelming support from day one and a lot of practical help from all the participating ladies.

Vanda: Yes, we had a very positive reaction from the members of the group. We are very grateful for all the support and help we are getting from the participants along the way.

Were the pieces curated specifically for the exhibition?

Beata: Most of the pieces are new and were not exhibited anywhere else. There was no official brief, as I felt strongly that each participant should show their favourite subject and technique. After all, freedom of expression underpins art and allows artists to flourish.

Vanda: The images for the exhibition were curated. We wanted the individual participants to express themselves through their art, but at the same time we wanted to make sure that the whole display has a natural flow, and creates a lasting experience for the potential viewers. We worked together with a panel of photographers who have an extensive experience in organising exhibitions to help us and hopefully succeed in our original aim.

Deborah Hughes - exhibitor

Women bring a unique perspective to landscape and nature photography. A photograph taken embodies the photographer behind the lens as much as the subject in front of the camera or the camera itself. Showcasing women's distinctive frame of reference is not about setting apart or lines in the sand, but a celebration and enlargement of our humanity. I am honoured and delighted to be a part of this exhibition.



You have said in the exhibition introduction that it emphasises the importance of photography in contemporary modern art, tell us more.

Beata: Many people still argue that photography is not an art form. I strongly believe that as an individual expression of our vision and creativity is involved, it is art.

The fact that we use technology (cameras and computers) may confuse some people, but it is not the camera but the photographer that makes the image. It is high time to focus the attention of the art world on the qualities of photography, be it literal or impressionistic. Hopefully, the exhibition on this scale, in central London, will create a lot of interest and persuade people that the place of photography is firmly established in modern art.

Vanda: As Beata mentioned, quite often photography is not considered to be art. However if art is defined as a creative skill resulting in works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power, then I believe that photography has its rightful place in this category. I hope the images in this exhibition will demonstrate that camera work can be, and should be, considered an art form; that the showcased works are not just recordings of reality but express the exhibitors' perceptions and emotions, and hopefully convey those personal impressions to the viewers.

To me photography is in part the experience of being in a particular place and trying to capture the emotions that the moment in time evokes in me. Similarly to the artists who paint their works of art based on the emotions they experienced.

What are you hoping to achieve with the exhibition? What are your ambitions for it?

Beata: I just want to celebrate the fact that there are more and more talented female photographers around and to bring their unique images to a wider audience.

Vanda: For me the exhibition is a celebration of our passion for landscapes and photography. A celebration and joy of sharing that passion with so many other people.

Do you have any plans to do something similar again in the future?

Vanda: At the moment, I am just trying to focus on the task in hand, and hopefully, together with the rest of the participants make this exhibition a success. After that I am sure we will start thinking about the next steps and potential future exhibitions.

Beata: I am sure that in a couple of months I will forget about the mammoth administrative and organisational tasks associated with such a large exhibition and the thrill of executing such a rewarding event will push me into a new artistic adventure.

> See it yourself

The *Mistresses of Light* exhibition, consisting of the 12 photographers' landscape images, is on at London's OXO Tower Wharf gallery on the South Bank, from Wednesday 9 September until Sunday 13 September. It's open daily between 11am and 6pm. Admission is free. oxotower.co.uk/events/mistresses-of-light