

Keep it surreal, guys

Society portraiture has never been the same since Tina Barney first turned her lens on the American upper classes. KATE SALTER enters a strange world in which fantasy and reality collide



When Tina Barney was asked to photograph the family on the left, she arrived at the smart apartment with the usual concerns about how to make a standard family portrait interesting. 'From time to time I get people who commission me to photograph their families,' says Barney. 'And usually it's a fairly conservative situation.' But as Barney was setting up her camera and lights, in walked the blonde-haired daughter wearing what looked like a makeshift bridal gown and motorcycle gloves, accompanied by a boa constrictor. Barney, an American photographer known for her acute representations of family life, thought, 'Oh, God, finally something interesting!'

The resulting photograph, *Family Portrait with Snake*, is one of the weirdest, not to say most intriguing, photographs Barney, 65, has taken. In one half of the image the mother and father seem to be posing for a traditional portrait, while in the other half the children seem intent on disrupting the familial harmony. Whether they deliberately staged this uncomfortable tableau Barney won't say, but the image captures everything she has become famous for: a family ostensibly going about a standard ritual, but rather than a sense of cohesion there is an awkwardness, with each person looking as if they are about to break away. The photograph appears on the cover of Barney's new book, *Players*, and as she says, 'The girl's face, her attitude – it's really like a group of actors.'

Tina Barney is one of America's most well-respected photographers. Born and brought up in New York, she is from a privileged background and became known for the pictures of her wealthy family and friends, images that captured a smart East Coast set. Her first book, *Theatre of Manners* (1997), featured her two sons, her sister,

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TINA BARNEY

Family Portrait with Snake (2007)

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her brother and their children, and explored the idea of the roles family members play. Her pictures often – sometimes deliberately, sometimes unwittingly – picked out tensions in the family dynamic. Barney then turned her gaze to the European upper classes, and her pictures of the owners of vast palazzi, châteaux and manor houses were exhibited at the Barbican art gallery in London in 2005.

Her new book, published this month, is a collection of past work, much of which has not been seen before. It includes some pictures of her family, her work for magazines such as *W*, her commercial work for fashion advertising, and her shots of actors and performance artists. All of the pictures, Barney says, have a choreographed quality, in which she is suggesting that ‘real people are just actors in life anyway’.

For many years Barney used her own family as subjects. She would ask them to pose for her, or repeat a certain gesture, a process that blurred the lines between documentary and staged photography and helped create a new genre of American portrait photography. ‘The reason for directing the people in the pictures,’ she says, ‘was that I wanted to create a narrative, because I wanted to say something very specific.’ She says that her family and friends were ‘playing roles, as symbols of family members’.

She has spoken before of how difficult it was photographing her own family because of the emotional investment for everyone involved. ‘I still think that,’ she says now. ‘First of all, I feel as if my family is sort of doing me a favour. But also I think that I was trying to get something that was

so emotionally personal; it’s very different to photographing strangers.’

When Barney began to take pictures of actors with the experimental theatre ensemble the Wooster Group during the 1990s she felt a great sense of relief. As she says in the introduction to the book *Players*, ‘So here was my dream – a set, a cast of characters, costumes, and dialogue. No more struggling to direct my poor friends and family into making them seem like actors playing themselves pretending to be real.’

Barney would watch a performance, take notes, then ask the actors to repeat a scene for her at a later date, when she would be on stage in the centre of the action with her large-format camera, lights, umbrellas and assistant. Photographs such as *Brace Up!*, of three actors mid scene, have the same choreographed quality as a lot of her more

Clockwise from above: a 2007 advert for Theory; *Brace Up! The Wooster Group* (2003); a 2005 advert for Ballantyne; from ‘New York Stories’, for *W* magazine (1999)

personal work, and this sense of ‘staging’ is a theme that runs throughout the book.

The book was put together by Chip Kidd, a well-known American designer, and Barney says it was Kidd who decided which photographs would sit alongside each other. Throughout the book, to illustrate the theme of ‘players’, there are similarities between the poses of professional performers and those of ‘real’ people. Opposite a picture of a troupe of acrobats in gold costumes is a sombre scene of a well-to-do family dressed in black, standing in a circle. Barney says she likes the fact that the hand of one of the performers seems to be gesturing at the opposite page, inviting you to look. The family in the photograph, which was part of a series called ‘New York Stories’ for *W* magazine, taken in 1999, seem to be arranged in a way that suggests they too are performing.



Barney photographs what she knows best. 'I've never been, "Ohh, wow, here we are in this big fancy place." It's more like, "I get this"'

Another photograph, *The Veil*, shows Barney's sister and her niece on the niece's wedding day. In the book it is placed opposite a photograph of two performance artists surrounded by a cloud of cotton resembling the niece's veil.

The book also includes some of Barney's fashion advertising work. The photograph taken for Ballantyne cashmere could easily be mistaken for another family snap, and the two pretty blonde girls in school uniform in the advert for the fashion label Theory look like exactly the kind of genetically blessed progeny who are among Barney's family and friends. In fact, the backdrops featured in these advertisements are real houses belonging to Barney's acquaintances, although the people are professional models. It is this blurring of real and fantasy that gives Barney's pictures a depth, more than perhaps first meets the eye. The fact that they don't look like fashion shoots at all is precisely the point: 'Well, that's why they hire me!' she says with a laugh.

One of the interesting things about Barney's work, besides the people she features, is how she takes the pictures. She uses a large-format camera, which is often used for portraits because of the quality of the picture it produces. It is a more laborious process, requiring the correct lighting and plenty of time to get the focus and exposure right. But Barney works very fast, taking lots of shots, which she says is 'contradictory to the history of that format, which is a very formal process'. The result is images with intense colour and resolution, which seem as sumptuous as film stills, but which still retain a sense of spontaneity.

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Barney began using the large-format camera when she wanted the viewer to be able to see the smaller objects in the images (her photographs are printed at a huge four by five feet). She says that looking through the camera's glass plate at the image upside down means she is more aware of forms, rather than of what a person is doing in the photograph. She is often pleasantly surprised, she says, when she sees the end result. In the picture of the art dealer Leo Castelli and his young wife, *Mr and Mrs Leo Castelli*, Mrs Castelli's black hair mimics the sculpture to her right, and in *New York Stories* the ghostly white face in the painting floats over the head of the mother.

In the past Barney has received criticism for focusing only on the upper classes, criticism that implies a kind of snobbery, or laziness, on her part. She has always replied that she is photographing what she knows best. She said of her Europeans series, 'I've never been, "Ohh, wow, here we are in this big fancy place." It's more like, "I get this."'

Which begs the question, will she ever go back to photographing her family again, a subject she 'gets' more than any other? 'I hadn't thought so for many years, because I didn't want to show how much we'd aged,' she says. She has been working on another project for some years that focuses on small towns in New England, but says she may be tempted to capture her family, now with its many grandchildren, some time in the future.

'I've been thinking I might use them again, but try and do something different. Well, if that's OK with them, of course.' ●

Above: *Mr and Mrs Leo Castelli*, *W* magazine (2001). Top left: *The Veil* (1998)

Players (Steidl, £30), by Tina Barney, is available from Telegraph Books (0844 871 1515; books.telegraph.co.uk) at £26 plus £1.25 p&p