



The Grand Old Lady of Finnish Photography

Interior photographs from the “Studio Works” – exhibition at The Photographers’ Gallery in London, 18 April 2013

Date: November 26, 2013. This document comprise **18** scanned photographs from The Photographers’ Gallery exhibition. All photographs on the walls and all the magazine covers in the vitrines are by CLAIRE AHO. All rights reserved. Copyright: JB. This document contains 20 pages. Contact details: www.ahosoldan.com, info@ahosoldan.com.(The photographs in this document are taken by Kate Elliott, TPG and by JB). Web site: www.claireaho.com

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Claire Aho : Studio Works, The Photographers' Gallery in London, 19 April – 21 July, 2013

Claire Aho's career is defined by her pioneering editorial photography and innovative colour techniques.

In the early 1950s, at a highpoint in Finnish design culture, Aho (b. 1925, Finland) established a Helsinki-based photography studio under her own name. Her prolific output spanned advertising, editorial, reportage and fashion for a range of commercial applications. She dealt with all aspects of the creative process, from casting models, set-making, styling and lighting to developing and printing her own images.

Aho's relationship to the studio space is taken as the starting point for this exhibition, and is used as a prism through which to understand the relationship with her subjects, and – in particular – her dialogue with form, colour and pattern.

Evidence of the mechanics of the image making process, such as colour charts, studio lights and backdrops are often included within the frame of the exhibited images.

The exhibition will also include a display of original materials where the images have been cropped and combined with graphics for magazine covers, advertising and packaging.

The photographs, spanning her career from 1950 to 1970, illustrate Aho's trademark vibrancy and humour, through formally inventive compositions and scenarios constantly reimagined.

Claire Aho currently lives in Stockholm, Sweden. The grandchild of the celebrated author Juhani Aho and painter Venny Soldan-Brofeldt, she obtained her first camera at the age of ten. Her work was appraised in a major retrospective at Taidehalli, Helsinki in 2011.

The exhibition comprised appr. 50 photographs together with appr. 100 original magazine covers from the 1950's and 1960's. The floor space was appr. 105 sqm. There was a broad interest from the media. A Press Coverage Report can be downloaded here:

http://www.claireaho.com/images/Claire_Aho_I_Studio_WorkS_I_Press_Coverage_Report_October_2,_2013_small.pdf More than 20 additional articles can be found via this link: <http://www.claireaho.com/mediacoverage.html> More info: www.claireaho.com


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Woman photographer in a 'Mad Men' world - 04 - 06 - 13

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Claire Aho worked as a photographer during an age when the advertising and photography world was dominated by men, as depicted in the popular television show, "Mad Men." "In the 1950s I never thought I did pioneering work. I just worked hard," she says. "The expression 'pioneer' was affixed to me later."

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CNN online, 6 April 2013

Woman photographer in a "Mad Men" world

"The elements of movements and color are part of what make her work iconic"

Claire Aho worked as a photographer during an age when the advertising and photography world was dominated by men, as depicted in the popular TV show "Mad Men" "They are ively. Alive!" photographer Claire Aho says about her photographs.

Aho is considered a pioneer in Finnish color photography. She started taking photos in 1935 at age 10, following in the footsteps of her father, Heikki Aho, a renowned Finnish filmmaker. She was one of a very few women who were producing color photos in the 1950s in Finland.

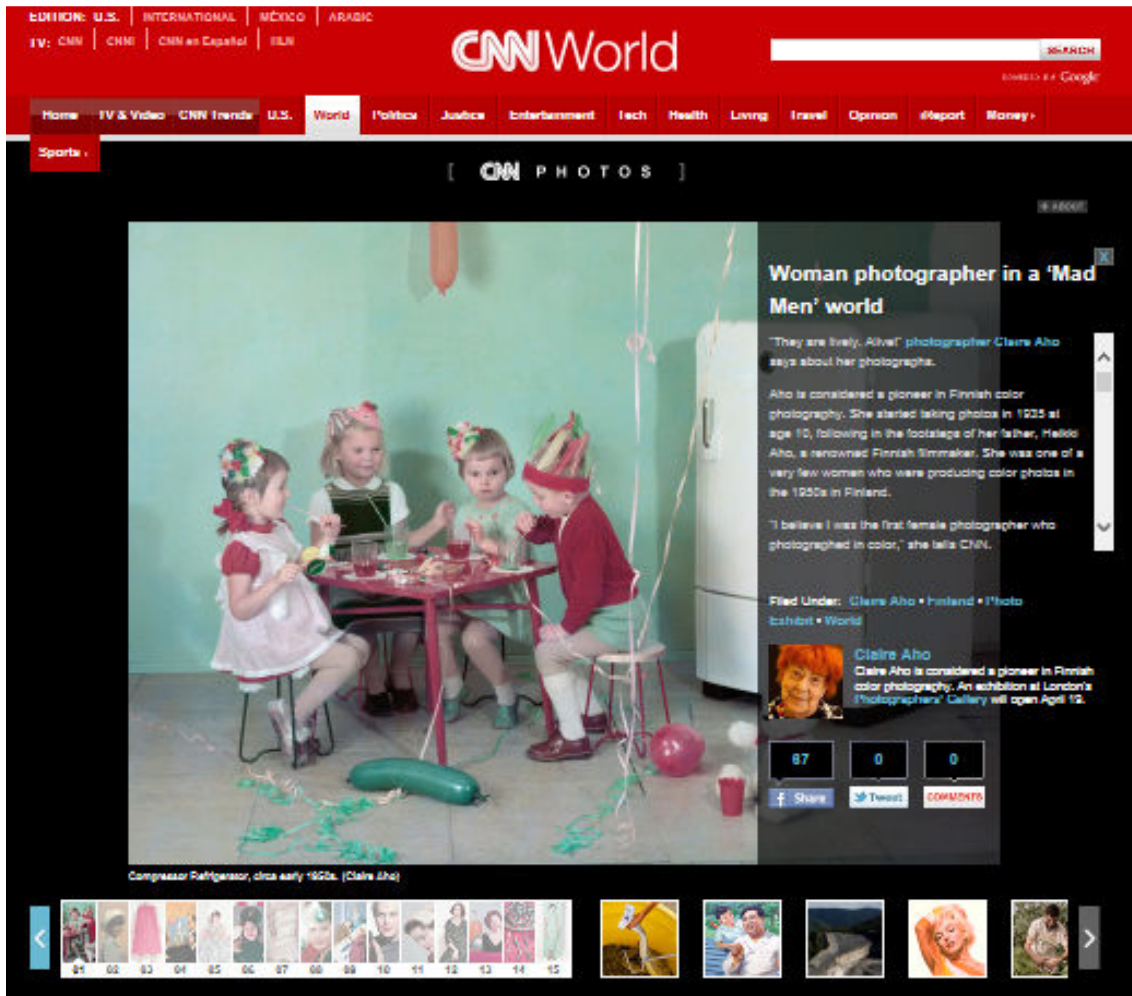
"I believe I was the first female photographer who photographed in color", she tells CNN.

She worked as a photographer during an age when teh advertising and photography world was dominated by men, as depicted in the current popular television show, "Mad Men".

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"In the 1950s I never thought I did pioneering work. I just worked hard" she says. "The expression "pioneer" was affixed to me later".

Aho's work runs the gamut from magazine and editorial images to advertisements and fashion. This breadth of high-quality color photography put her in high demand, making her one of the most prominent figures in her field at the time.



The elements of movements and color are part of what make her work iconic. She, like her father, began her career as a documentary filmmaker.

"Many of my photographs include an element of movement" she says.

A daring exploration of color is thematic in Aho's work, with a preference of contrasting colors side by side, and the hopes of displaying the idea of her "inner eye". She makes the camera work for her to get the perfect look.

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For her photo shoots she often played music to help the models relax and aimed to create a fun and playful environment.

"I look for those expressions which seem to be very characteristic for (the subjects), and try to take the photo at the exactly right moment".

In her commercial work, she tried to portray women as strong and independent, with models posing in elegant and fashionable clothes. Aho looked to create a humorous and a positive mindset in each photo. The models believed she could take a good photo of them and it shows in her work, she says.

Two of her grandchildren, ages 5 and 7, seem to have creative traits and may follow in her footsteps into photography.

The exhibition of her photos at The Photographers' Gallery in London will open on April 19.

- Callie Carmichael, CNN

<http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/world/photography>

<http://cnnphotos.blogs.cnn.com/category/claire-aho/>

<http://cnnphotos.blogs.cnn.com/2013/04/06/woman-photographer-in-a-mad-men-world/>

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Claire Aho 2013 at The Photographers' Gallery in London and at her studio in Helsinki 1948
together with Helmi Helenius (to the left)

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Claire Aho and 1950s Finnish Photography

Finnish photographer Claire Aho performed a combination of roles throughout her successful career. During the 1950's she was one of a small handful of female fashion photographers in Finland; as a product and advertising photographer she was one of even fewer; and as a female filmmaker she was the only example of her kind actively practicing. 'There was only Leni Riefenstahl and me', she joked in an interview much later. It is only now that the narrative of Aho's pioneering career is slowly emerging from her private archives.

Aho has appeared on the register of Finnish photo history for some time, but the breadth and quality of her work has not yet been fully acknowledged. One of the contributing factors to this is no doubt her relocation to Sweden in the 1970's, and the fact that she did not continue her commercial practice after moving. In 2011 Helsinki Art Hall exhibited her work for the first time in a major solo exhibition, introducing her to an entirely new audience – the majority of whom were not even born when Aho was professionally active. The current emergence and re-appraisal of her work is an important addition to Finnish and Scandinavian histories of fashion, product and advertising photography.

The importance of colour

Aho's commercial practice began in the 1950's while working within the family business Aho & Soldan, founded by her father Heikki Aho and her step-uncle Björn Soldan in 1925, the same year that Aho herself was born. Aho & Soldan was famous for their documentary and PR films for Finnish industry, and both founders were

photography enthusiasts. 1950's Finland was recovering from World War 2 and there were still strict rationing programs in force, which effected the availability of photographic materials in the country. A definitive turning point was the Helsinki Olympics in 1952, when Finland re-opened its doors to international influence. The most visible and popular symbol of these new and buoyant times was the arrival of Coca-Cola onto the Finnish market. The cultural atmosphere was shifting, as the war-weary country engaged itself in frenzied reconstruction work.

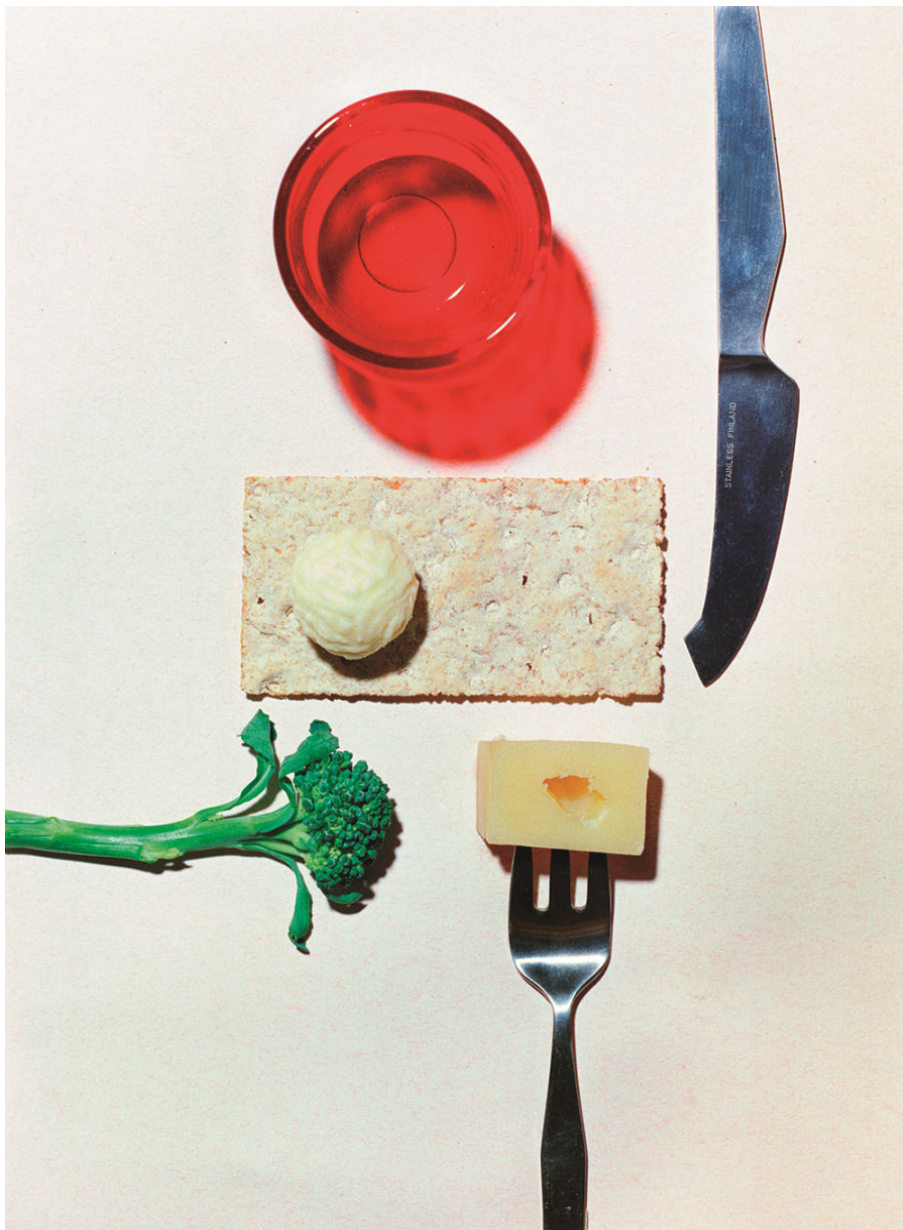
The Finnish magazine industry was also recovering. Regulations on paper stock were lifted and the amount of pages in individual magazines began to rise. Colour was the sign of new, affluent times: aptitude for colour photography and printing which had almost disappeared during the war years, re-emerged in post-war Finland.

Heikki Aho was one of the first to re-engage with color processes. His mail orders from the United States included guidebooks and Kodak's 9×12 cm colour slide film sheets, compatible with large-format studio cameras of the time. Aho & Soldan film company

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was expanded to include a studio and a colour laboratory on their premises, situated right in the center of Helsinki, in Northern Esplanade.

Aho was responsible for the new studio and the color laboratory. An assistant was hired, and Aho's father Heikki enforced strict quality control. He checked each color photograph with extreme care before they were handed over to clients, often using a densitometer, the non-compromising tool of the day for the measurement of technical quality



Stainless Finland, c. mid 1960s © JB, courtesy of the artist

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One might approach colour in two ways. Firstly, we might consider an element of realism, such as the photographer striving to match colour in an image to what we perceive in the real world. Secondly, the alternative to a realistic element, is the expressionistic element, capable of evoking emotions and allowing for certain distortions to take place.

In Finland during the 1950's there was a strong need for realistic colour photography, as fashion and product photography turned from black-and-white to colour. One could still find an occasional hand-coloured black-and-white photograph in Finnish magazines at the time, despite the fact that colour films had entered the international market in the 1930's.

Colour control was new; it required skill and proficiency, and there were not many photographers who could guarantee the permanence and accuracy of colors along the whole production line, from garment or product through to the photograph. Clare and Heikki Aho excelled at this.

Fashion for magazines

Aho trained in photography while travelling with the Aho & Soldan film crew in Lapland and elsewhere in Finland, and also studied journalism. In the early 1950's she started to work primarily in the studio, creating fashion shoots for the magazine *Sorja*. Founded in 1944 and changing it's name several times, the magazine lasted until the 1990's and was the longestrunning fashion magazine in Finland.

Assigned regularly by women's magazines from the established publication *Eeva*, to the more modern *Me Naiset* (We Women), Aho shot fashion stories and celebrity portraits. This was a time when a new and modern type of celebrity was emerging in Finland, one who was becoming known to the public, via newly available television sets. We see many of those television personalities in Aho's pictures, either posing for individual portraits or acting as fashion models.

1950s' fashion became spectacularly lavish, as the nation threw itself into a spending spree after the meagre war years. Influenced by photojournalism, Aho occasionally took her models and garments outdoors to the market place or to the parks.

Two iconic Finnish design labels, *Marimekko* and *Vuokko*, were founded around this time, and Finnish design in general was collecting awards in Milan and other design fairs the world over.

Aho participated in this boom of Finnish design with her pictures of garments, furniture and glass. Underwear was still considered a very delicate area of fashion photography, and Aho, being female, certainly had an advantage when navigating issues of modesty

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with her sitters. The models often wanted to remain anonymous, and so faces were hidden inventively with crops, poses and even masks. Aho was not the only female photographer who turned this to her advantage. In Finland, fashion photography has traditionally been the field where women photographers have been able to develop and sustain successful careers.



Figura Bra Campaign, c. mid 1950s © JB, courtesy of the artist

Product abstractions

From the made-up models and tulle dresses of Aho's fashion shoots, to the cool practicality of her product shots, the photographer shot all manner of consumables. One can imagine her agonising for hours over how to make the *Kis Kis* candy from Finland's best known sweet factory *Fazer* 'fly' in the air with the help of transparent nylon thread – each shot requiring precision timing as the studio lights melted the chocolate. Aho's product photography at the time appeared to border on magic: the spectator falling completely for her imperfect illusions. Sixty years later, in the age of digital tricks and perfection, the images reveal these naïve constructions.

Aho patiently created these illusions and built carefully composed still-lives complete with coffee packets, soft drinks and other foodstuff. She had learned the rules of composition as a child from her grandmother, celebrated artist Venny Soldan-Brofeldt, and wife of author Juhani Aho. Aho's grandmother used the lid of a cigarette box, in

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which she had cut a square, to compose her paintings (the very act of smoking cigarettes was a radical, emancipatory gesture for a woman at the time). She taught the same trick to young Aho and encouraged her to take up photography. Aho maintained a keen eye for composition across her broad spectrum of image-making, but never was it more evident than in her product shots.

What is remarkable about Aho's product compositions is the clear desire to abstract. Commercial photography may not be the most natural arena for such effects, but in many examples of Aho's work she managed to marry her own formal interests with the commercial aims of the advertiser. Aho's staged and directed images can be seen as tableaux of early consumer culture.

In the 1950's consumption was still optimistic and innocent; the happy consumer had no idea that the miraculous detergents would prove to be harmful to the environment, or that smoking would lead to lung cancer.

New devices and electronics were developed to assist in day-to-day chores of the home. The refrigerator, one such newly available item, is photographed by Aho, stuffed with packaged food and drinks, alongside a model whose smile reflects the shiny optimism of the new appliance.

In Aho's advertising images we can still glimpse a time when consumer culture was untainted by cynicism, shame or guilt. Almost sixty years later it looks like a lost continent. The photographer herself is still alive and well and, with the help of her son, may bring forth new treasures from her extensive archive.

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Rosenlew Compressor Refrigerator, c. mid 1950s © JB, courtesy of the artist

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