



My Mother

Photographer, musician, animal rights activist and businesswoman, Linda McCartney took thousands of Polaroids, documenting the magical and the mundane of her existence with her husband Paul and her children. These images were private and not for sale. Years later, her daughters, designer Stella and photographer Mary, tell us about gathering these photos together for the first time in a new book, their memories of their mother, and Linda's dedication to living a life less ordinary.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA MCCARTNEY
INTERVIEW BY OLIVIA GAGAN







OLIVIA GAGAN: What was the impetus for making *The Polaroid Diaries* now?

MARY MCCARTNEY: When I was working with Mum in her archive, we discovered 5,000 unseen Polaroids, spanning from Mum's early career in the 1960s until the 1990s. They show another side of her photography, one we're ready to share.

STELLA MCCARTNEY: We've done books of Mum's work in the past, but we've always had the idea of doing this Polaroids book in the back of our minds for a very long time as it was something Mum enjoyed so much. She always had her Polaroid camera with her. For us they are our family photos—so the book is incredibly personal because it shows these incredibly intimate moments with our family that Mum captured.

The images feel very fresh. They're instant images, much like smartphone images today. But unlike, say, photos made with the intent of uploading them to Instagram, Linda's work feels very uncontrived. There's no set-up. Even in her more formal, commissioned photography, you get this sense that things are just happening. Was this the case? With the taking of the Polaroids, was there ever much discussion around

it, or was it just an organic, unplanned part of everyday life?

MM: They were all unplanned and a perfect way of showing Mum's overall photographic style because of their genuine spontaneity. She did not like setting-up photo opportunities but instead was always looking for the right moment.

SM: It was totally organic. Mum constantly had her camera in hand, clicking away capturing moments of our everyday life, so we just became used to it, we wouldn't try and pose or smarten ourselves up for the photos. It was always completely natural and of the moment.

In the book, you mention that you're still stumbling across new Polaroids inside old books and drawers. How did you decide which images to include?

SM: It was like a treasure trove, as there were over a thousand to go through! We had a lot of laughs as a family when going through them all and choosing what should be included, as Mum's photos were eccentric and had a lot of humour. She was a true artist and had a huge amount of talent. She was also one of the first [major] female

photographers, and maybe because of this she allowed herself to be taken seriously. As she did it more and more she started properly looking after her work, so the Polaroids were kept safe—the reason we could do this book!

In the self-portraits, your mother looks strong, often gazing down at the camera, and incredibly feminine. They seem to have so much energy. Where did images of herself fit into her wider body of work? Was she particularly interested in shooting herself and forming ideas of herself through photography?

SM: She did enjoy taking pictures of herself in different ways and portraying different sides of her personality. There's an image of Mum in the book where she's wearing a ginger wig, which I love. She would have taken it with a set-up time exposure. Her eye contact is so strong, and she has got such a presence looking into the lens. What I loved about Mum is that she cut her own hair, she just didn't give a fuck. I think this side of her emerged in the public eye, with pressure on her as a woman to look a certain way—but she was so honest to herself. She didn't dye her hair. She would just hold it up in the air and take scissors to it.

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Your mum seemed to take up Polaroid photography around the time the Polaroid SX-70 camera took off, which made the cameras a household name in the early 1970s. They were very much of their moment. Do you think she would have embraced smartphone photography in the same way?

SM: Mum was very good at embracing new things, so I think she would have totally embraced the smartphone. What I find interesting now though, with technology and all the devices we have available to us, is that now we take hundreds, even thousands of photos of everyday moments.

What I think is amazing is that, at that time, Mum had a great ability to just click once and capture the moment she was seeing and produce this beautiful work of art. Also, we’ve got to remember this was the first time you could see an instant image, so technically Polaroids were like what a smartphone can do these days. Now everything is instant.

There’s a grounded-ness to the images, too, despite plenty of fantastical elements. Lots of juxtaposition of daily life and the bizarre—like the still life of a bottle of HP Sauce with some eggs, but the eggs have all been carefully posed

and painted with faces. There’s a lot of playing dress-up.

Did life feel fantastical or very normal as children? Or a mixture of both? It seemed to be an out-of-the-ordinary upbringing, given the lives your parents led, but one that was nonetheless very much rooted in nature and home and everyday life.

SM: I would say it was a wonderful mixture of both, but my parents were extremely good at making us feel like we had a very normal life and upbringing. I will always cherish our time as a family up in Scotland, away from it all. We lived a very funky, free life up there, which I think is portrayed very well in the book. It was a simple life, and we created our own fun, we were taught we didn’t need material possessions to have fun. I think Scotland definitely brought us together as a family. I look back and have the best memories. Mum loved Scotland and you can really see that through her eyes in these Polaroids.

The playfulness around photos and clothes in your childhood make it seem inevitable that you would grow up to work in these worlds. Was there ever a sense as children that you wanted to make clothes or images yourselves, or did that come much later?

SM: Some of my biggest memories as a four- or five-year-old were of sitting in my parents’ wardrobe, and what was fascinating was I realised my mum and dad shared it. There was this absolute androgyny. It was the period of glam rock, during Wings [Paul and Linda’s early 70s rock band]. Half the things I assumed were Mum’s, my dad was actually wearing as well. They would swap. I’ve since worn a flowery shirt out of the archive and been like, ‘Oh look at this blouse of my mum’s, it’s so cool!’ And then we’d find a photo of my dad wearing it. It’s so modern. This was years ago, but today it’s a cutting-edge conversation to have. So yes, this upbringing and being around clothes from a very young age was a huge influence on me and has heavily inspired how I work today.

Your father said: ‘Linda’s view of animals was very Disney-esque. She could see the Disney in all animals. Some of us would just look at an animal and go, “Oh, it’s a horse.” But she could see character. She helped me see, too.’ The pictures of animals are some of my favourites because they often look like they’re posing, staring directly down the lens—like they understand somehow what your mum was doing. They look like willing participants.

SM: She loved every creature and she completely made me more aware of animal welfare,

which is something that I really thank her for and something that has always stuck with me. When we were in Scotland, we would spend all day outside with any type of animal that we came across, and I remember my mum being so natural and at ease with the animals. You could see they felt comfortable around her, which is probably why she was able to capture these amazing, intimate shots that really brought out the animals’ personalities. Something I’ve always remembered is when people would say some animals were creepy, she would also say, ‘It’s mummy loves it.’

Many of the images are taken in Campbeltown, Scotland. How important was place to your mother? Would she pick up a camera and shoot anywhere? Or were their particular places that inspired her more than most?

SM: Before Mum and Dad met, Dad never really went up to Campbeltown much. So when they met it was actually Mum who made Dad re-discover the place, and they started going more and more. They loved the escape, to be miles away from everything, as did we as kids. Mum really saw the beauty in everything, so I wouldn’t say it was any particular places that inspired her. Everything inspired her, as you can see in the book... From a hamster in a shoe, to Mary and I in matching dressing gowns, to Dad brushing his teeth—things that were so ordinary yet captured so beautifully and made into these lasting memories.

There is this warmth that radiates out of the images—a lot of reds and golds and browns and yellows. Of course, this may be the chemical composition of the Polaroids, but are there any colours you particularly associate with your mother’s work?

MM: There’s no specific colours I associate, as she predominantly shot in black and white, but interestingly the Polaroids are all in colour. Mum found the bright colours of Polaroids really exciting, particularly as the colours appeared so vividly and instantly in the image. So I would say her Polaroids are one of the main ways Mum explored colour photography.

Chrissie Hynde said, ‘As a non-photographer, I always wonder, why not just use the Polaroid? They often, like a demo tape, capture the vibe better than a proper recording.’ Do you think there is a particular vibe—a mood, or a theme—your mother was aiming for in her work?

MM: Yes, she wanted to capture the person and their personality, which you can see in the Polaroid portraits. They show peoples’ character and them caught in a moment. It’s obvious they are not posed or staged photographs, as she wanted the opposite vibe and mood.

What do you think she would have made of selfie-taking today?

MM: She wouldn’t have minded it if it the photos were interesting and good compositions, but the overuse of it may have bored her. She loved to take photos in mirrors and of her reflection, even if it was just her silhouette caught as a shadow.

The foreword to the book mentions that your mother’s portrayal of home life and domesticity was quite different to a lot of female artists around her at the time. Linda’s images of home life to me seem romantic, expansive, full of freedom and imagination. How did her photography evolve with motherhood?

MM: It did evolve as we became her subjects, when before it was friends, commissioned shoots or musicians. What the Polaroids show is how Mum still managed to achieve an artistic, often eccentric image. She didn’t just take a family snapshot of her child. There was a reason to capture that moment, an artistic composition that Mum had noticed, or an element of humour or surrealism that she was trying to capture.

Culturally, what fed into your mother’s aesthetic? Were there other photographers, writers, artists who she particularly admired?

MM: Definitely. In terms of photographers, [American photojournalism pioneer] Dorothea Lange was a huge influence. She also cited the 1955 ‘The Family of Man’ exhibition at MOMA as something that really inspired her. She wasn’t interested in veneer, so [she] liked the uncontrived, real and everyday-life pictures... photographs that were not staged or set up.

How attached was your mum to specific cameras? Would she happily work with a cheap point-and-shoot camera, or did she have her favourites that she only wanted to work with?

MM: She worked with a variety of cameras but favoured her Nikon 35mm with a prime 50mm lens. That said, she loved to use different cameras

and took great pictures on point-and-shoot cameras and obviously her Polaroid cameras. Also, she made and experimented with cyanotypes [images developed using sunlight] and platinum prints, which inspired her to use a 10x8 large format camera for a while in the 1980s and 1990s.

And finally, what do you feel is the most important, lasting thing about Linda’s work?

MM: She had a real message in her photography that she wanted to portray: a message of optimism and kindness, which can be found in humanity. Another lasting thing is that she wanted to highlight that there is injustice in the world, such as the suffering of animals and the planet for human gain, and therefore wanted her photographs to inspire more kindness, community and compassion. Mum always felt there was such strength in being kind.



All images courtesy of Mary McCartney and Stella McCartney and TASCHEN Linda McCartney, The Polaroid Diaries Linda McCartney, Ekow Eshun, Reuel Golden TASCHEN £ 40