

# ME, MYSELF AND I

To celebrate the International Photography Exhibition 163, we feature two accomplished finalists. Wendi Schneider blurs reality and fantasy in her hand-gilded art, while Lewis Fisher overcomes prejudice to take his first selfie – with a little help from a friend

WORDS: KATHLEEN MORGAN AND EMMA-LILY PENDLETON

## Wendi Schneider

**She rises early and makes her way to the coffee trees or climbing roses outside her window, camera in hand, before she has even thought about breakfast. She takes pictures as others might stretch or yawn themselves awake.**

Wendi Schneider is describing a typical day in a hectic schedule that involves fusing her two passions – photography and art – in hand-gilded works that blur reality and fantasy. Two of these, taken from her signature body of work *States of Grace*, have been selected for the International Photography Exhibition 163 (IPE 163), opening at RPS House, Bristol, in April. They will be seen alongside the work of 56 other image-makers from across the globe, in the latest edition of the world's longest-running exhibition of photography.

"I'm basically a workaholic and, up until recently, rarely sit down during the day," says the artist, whose 1930s Tudor-style home in Denver, Colorado, is hung with images by Steichen, Stieglitz, Käsebier, Brigman and De Meyer. "Once up, it's pretty much a non-stop dance for me, beginning to layer images on my computer or scurrying to the studio to check prints in progress.

"I usually make photographs when walking our dog as the day ends, though I also shoot during the day when the light calls me, and when the neighbourhood Cooper's



'Locust', 2016, from *States of Grace* by Wendi Schneider



'Flamingo', 2012, from *States of Grace* by Wendi Schneider

hawk frolics in the birdbath. Evenings usually find me working with images on my iPad while old movies play in the background.”

Schneider creates shimmering photographic objects layered digitally with colour and texture, then printed on translucent papers and backed with thin sheets of white gold, moon gold or 24k gold leaf. The effect is a luminosity that varies with changes in the light.

“I’m driven by the search for grace I find in the meditative state of flow, when the awareness of time and space disappear,” she explains. “It’s that magical moment when the senses align – when my eyes and essence are engaged. My work is a celebration of the senses anchored in the visual. Though the process can be frustrating at times, making work has always been my refuge. I make work because I need to.”

Her love of art is rooted in her Memphis childhood – she is from a family of artists and would often visit antiques shops with her mother. As an adult, Schneider began her own collection of art and objects while living in New Orleans, and is particularly drawn to

**“Those many hours daydreaming beneath sinuous swaying branches were the foundation of my fascination with the grace and serenity I find in organic forms”**

Art Nouveau, Arts and Crafts, photogravures and silver, platinum and gum prints.

“Most of my [childhood] was spent outdoors roaming the neighbourhood, singing, drawing, antiquing with my mother, or perusing my mother’s art history catalogues secluded in the attic,” says Schneider. “I mostly remember seeking solace and solitude under our weeping willow tree which backed up to a tiny farm. I imagine those many hours daydreaming beneath those sinuous swaying branches were the foundation of my fascination with the grace and serenity I find in organic forms.”

Schneider began practising as an artist following an education in art history and painting. Her interest in photography was sparked during the 1980s when she began taking photographs of models as a reference for her oil paintings. “I was mesmerised by the alchemy of the emerging print in the darkroom and realised my photographs were more successful than my paintings in expressing my feelings,” she says.

Missing what she calls the “sensuousness” of oils, she began to fuse her two disciplines, layering paint onto her

photographs. "Once I began to paint on the surface, I knew I had found my art form."

Moving to New York City in 1988, Schneider worked across different genres, with commissions in fine art, magazine photography, book covers and advertising, moving to Denver in 1994. When she became pregnant, Schneider left the oils behind, adding design, art direction and marketing to her photography.

In 2010, she reconnected with her gallerist in New Orleans and saw the gilded photographs of Louviere and Vanessa. Later she attended a platinum and gold leaf workshop by fine art photographer Dan Burkholder, an early champion of digital technology. "We didn't spend much time gilding, but it was all I needed to begin experimenting with gold leaf on vellum," she says.

*States of Grace* has evolved since it began in 2012, though Schneider doesn't think of it as a 'series' in the conventional sense. "My early work was mostly defined by process – hand-painted silver gelatin or Polaroid

**"I was mesmerised by the alchemy of the emerging print in the darkroom and realised my photographs were more successful than my paintings in expressing my feelings"**

transfer. [With *States of Grace*] I was again drawn to the graceful organic forms of my early work – flowers and women – adding insects, birds, trees and other living things in which I could get lost in the details."

This year got off to a frenetic start, with exhibitions of her work planned for New York, Atlanta, Houston, New Orleans and Mexico. Her health, mentioned by Schneider almost as an afterthought, has dictated that she slows the pace of her working life, though she is determined it won't define her. "Degeneration in my neck has slowed me down a great deal since April 2021," says Schneider. "I have to rest more than I would like. I'm adapting, working vertically as much as possible, and have finally begun playing with oils on the surface of my prints again.

"I could probably create work from images in my Lightroom and Photo catalogues for the rest of my life, but I can't give up the joy and communion with nature I feel when photographing. I suppose you could say it's my religion."



'Egret, reflected', 2012, from *States of Grace* by Wendi Schneider

## Lewis Fisher (UK)

**A selfie is a contemporary phenomenon so common** it is easy to forget the simple act of making one may be more complex for some.

“Twenty-four billion selfies were recorded as being uploaded to Google servers alone in one year, which makes it the most common form of portrait of all time,” says the UK-based artist Richard Ansett.

The word has connotations of narcissism and vanity. But *Selfie*, a project by Lewis Fisher in collaboration with Ansett, recognised in the International Photography Exhibition 163 (IPE 163), presents the selfie as a medium of self-expression – in this case, a medium available to Fisher for the first time.

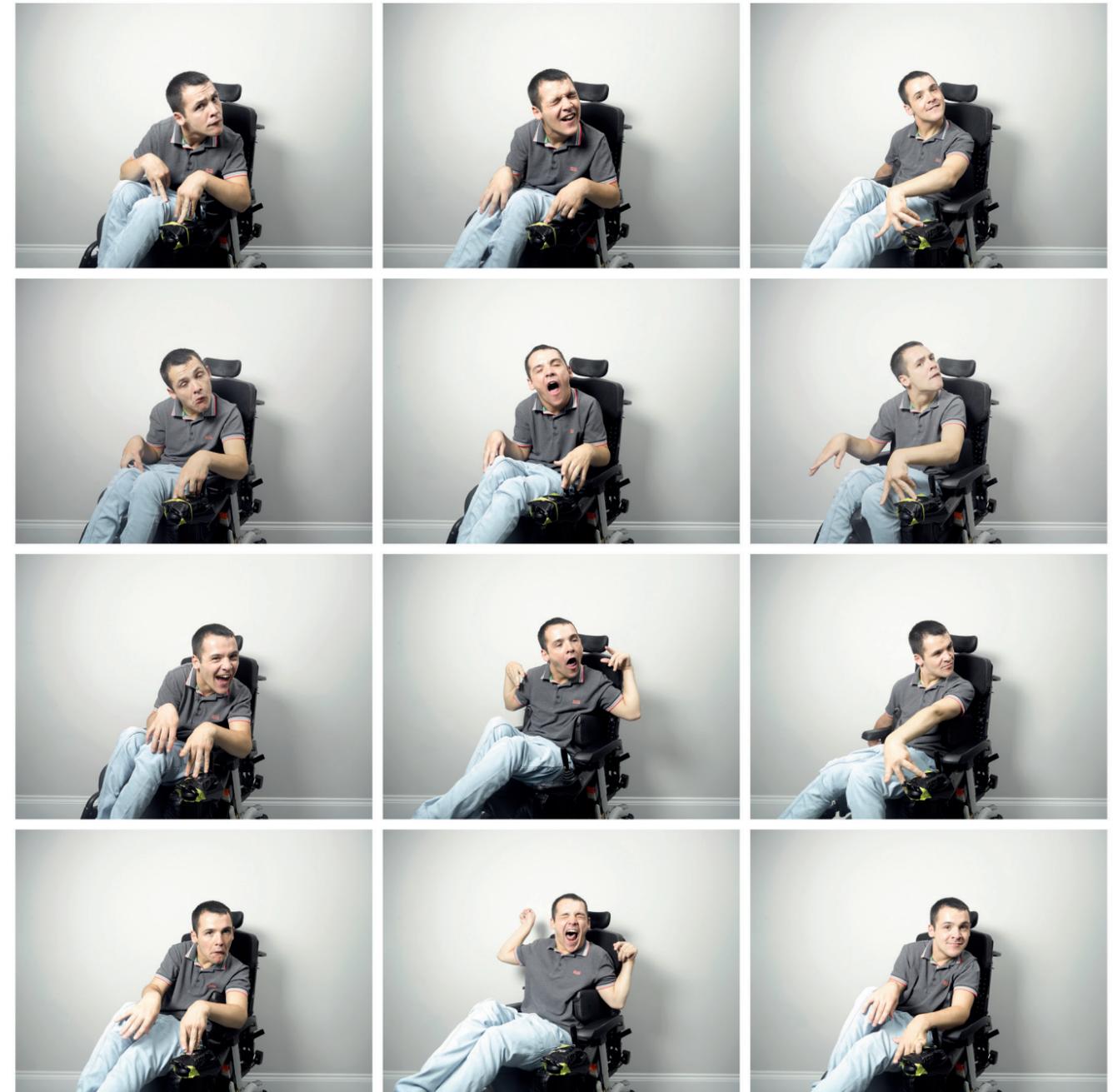
Dystonic cerebral palsy means that Fisher’s body doesn’t always do what his brain tells it to do. It affects all his limbs, head and trunk, and he uses a wheelchair and eye gaze to communicate normative speech. Low muscle tone spasticity causes extreme involuntary movements, meaning that the single moment captured by a frame doesn’t represent the myriad of movements that are his reality.

“I was told by doctors and school staff growing up that I wouldn’t be able to do a lot of things that ‘normal’ people can,” says Fisher, who is 26. “I have always been aware [that I couldn’t take a selfie] – but it became more obvious when smartphones became more popular. I’ve never had much interest in photography because it’s not something I could take part in – until Richard helped me.”

The pair first met in 2015, and during that portrait session associated with a BBC show Lewis was filming, Ansett started to ask himself some difficult questions.

“I was greatly conflicted by the normative requirement to capture an image that would represent Lewis’s disability in a ‘palatable’ way,” he says.

“I found myself negotiating around his involuntary movements hoping to capture an image, by chance, that represented him in an ‘acceptable aesthetic’ way.”



From the *Selfie* project by Lewis Fisher, created in collaboration with the artist Richard Ansett



“I think non-disabled people do not see a selfie as anything important, but to me it was a huge achievement,” says Lewis Fisher, seen below reviewing images with Richard Ansett



This internal conflict triggered thoughts of a project for Ansett, who decided to capture all aspects of Fisher’s movement. Those early images have sat in his archives unpublished or exhibited.

“Back at the studio I explored thoughts of using the many rejected images from the sanitised representation of disability chosen by the commercial commission,” continues Ansett, “but I felt I was unable to present this work publicly without Lewis’s full complicity. The concept of the *Selfie* project was born from this realisation: that Lewis should not only be part of the conversation, but should be the owner of the work.”

It was only after contacting Fisher again to ask if he would consider ‘re-shooting’ his portraits as selfies that he revealed this was one of things he’d been told he could physically never do.

“I have always looked at selfies as something I would love to do, but never would be able to,” says Fisher, reminding us how this small act, that many take for granted, has the power to connect him to his peers. “It is something popular with people my age, so I felt like I was missing out.”

As with many people, Fisher feels self-conscious in front of the camera: “I don’t want to look disabled, so I

**“I was told by doctors and school staff growing up that I wouldn’t be able to do a lot of things ‘normal’ people can”**

try to control my movements, which is hard for me to do. There is a lot of pressure to conform to stereotypes. As a disabled man, it can be hard when everyone is expected to be and look ‘perfect’. In many photos I look sad, angry, down or shocked, when actually this is how my body reacts. My spasms can make me look like I’m cheering with a happy expression, but this may often be an involuntary movement. It was good to capture myself in mid-spasm and see what I look like to everyone else.”

Ansett acknowledges that many of us experience a sense of failure to meet societal expectations. “A selfie implies a self-portrait that has been posted on social media or shared publicly in some form, and therefore it betrays a concern for how others perceive us,” he says. “Any image that reinforces our negative view of ourselves will be quickly deleted. Although we are in control of our image, we are still greatly influenced by how we would like to be perceived – which might be at odds with reality.”

It’s this self-inflicted pressure to gain acceptance – and attempts to meet the impossible expectations of beauty, especially in the young – that Ansett identifies as potentially harmful.

This project had a purpose beyond vanity. “I like that they show the real me, and give me a level of

independence that I have never had before,” says Fisher. “I love looking at these photos [mid-spasm], as much as I love the ones where I have good posture or feel I look my best. All the photos represent my whole life.” For him, a selfie should “show who each individual person is”. This was an opportunity for Fisher to choose which images of himself would be shared with the world for the first time.

For Ansett, it triggered opinions on the power of photography to challenge distorted views of ourselves.

“The project has focused my thoughts on the concept of self-love and how technology has both enabled human behaviour, and shaped our cultural landscape,” he reflects. “It has focused my interest on the power of dysphoria and the therapeutic value of photography.”

The project also raises questions about what constitutes a selfie. “A selfie is when the person takes the photo themselves,” Fisher offers as a definition. “This is a selfie because I pressed the button in my own time, so I knew when it was being taken.”

And to allow this to happen, Ansett had to rig a trigger system that could be used by Fisher. “It is hard for me to press a really small button,” Fisher explains. “I have one side which is easier to do things with, so once we put the button on that side and Richard helped adjust it, it became a lot easier.”

**“The project has focused my thoughts on the concept of self-love, and how technology has both enabled human behaviour and shaped our cultural landscape”**

Ansett used a Profoto trigger that offered a small, shallow button surrounded by other buttons that would destabilise the shot if they were accidentally touched. “I had to improvise a cushion around the trigger button that would soak up the impact of Lewis’s attempts to make contact with it,” he says. “We worked on this together until we found the best solution, which was a small hole cut into thick foam.”

“I don’t remember if I could see myself as my full concentration was on the button,” admits Fisher. “It helps me to press the button when looking at it.”

A laptop was set up so he could see each image as it loaded, in the same way you would normally see your images as you take a mobile phone selfie. Once Fisher adapted to the trigger, resting his finger next to the button and moving it over to make contact, the trigger was set on continual shooting so he could look towards the camera.

“It was frustrating at first, but once I got used to it I really enjoyed it,” says Fisher. “I was so proud of myself and felt very independent.

“My body is constantly moving and changing, so two different photographs can show completely different



“I was so proud of myself and felt very independent,” says Fisher, seen below discussing the project *Selfie* with Ansett





Fisher and Ansett work the trigger system that led to such liberating selfie images as the one above



things. Having a series of images gave a more accurate representation of me.”

“One photograph would give an inaccurate representation of Lewis in the context of this project,” agrees Ansett. “It was inspired by the failure to capture Lewis in a single image that fairly represented him. The series is more representative of the reality of the dominance of cerebral palsy in his life. As photographers, no matter how well meaning, we can be complicit in denying our subject their authentic voice – and we should always be vigilant of our influence on a fair representation of others.”

Reviewing the images together after the shoot, Fisher and Ansett chose which ones they would show publicly. “We then discussed which ones were our favourites,” says Fisher. “This was important to me because I wanted to show as many different versions of myself as I could.”

It was a vital part of the project, says Ansett. “We had discussed the importance of representing Lewis as a whole, and not just either a normative image that failed to address the issue, or a single challenging image of him in spasm. I felt like this was a big ask of Lewis to not deny his cerebral palsy as part of his positive identity – but he

**“My body is constantly moving and changing, so different photographs can show completely different things. A series of images gave a more accurate representation of me”**

embraced the idea without hesitation. In choosing this edit, Lewis is participating in the project beyond just the capture of his image, and demanding acceptance from us and himself for who he is.”

The series will be exhibited as part of IPE 163 at RPS Gallery, Bristol, from 16 April. This year, there were 57 photographers from across the globe selected as exhibitors – Fisher’s portraits chosen from among 8,000 submissions. “[Being selected] makes me feel like I can change people’s views on disabled people,” says Lewis. “I can show we can do more than people think we can.”

Ansett hopes the recognition will give Fisher the same confidence that similar awards have given him throughout his career. “Being selected and recognised is like being seen and heard for both artist or subject alike,” he explains. “An important element of the project is the inclusion in a public exhibition. Bringing this project to the public forum allows the project to evolve and the ideas to gestate beyond just myself and Lewis – and we are hugely grateful for that opportunity.”

IPE 163 is at RPS Gallery, Bristol, 16 April to 3 July.  
[rps.org/ipe163](http://rps.org/ipe163) [wendischneider.com](http://wendischneider.com)  
[richardansett.com](http://richardansett.com)