

Olivia Gay's work centres on female issues, capturing the female body in settings that are typical of the female universe, from prostitutes in Havana to supermarket cashiers or models in an artist's studio. Since 2007, she has been photographing women involved in manual labour: in a luxury goods packing factory (*Les ouvrières de l'Aigle*, 2008), in the National Alençon Lace Workshop (*Les dentellières d'Alençon*, 2008) and, more recently, in the mechanical lace factories of Calais and Caudry (*les dentellières de Calais*, 2009).

An entire industrial revolution lies between Vermeer's portrayal of domestic activity in *The Lacemaker* and the collective photographic works of Olivia Gay; this transformation of the nation had a profound effect on the socioeconomic role of women, and with it, how they were subsequently portrayed in picture. Nowadays, the technical skills of the wheelers, warpers and clippers of "yesteryear" are something that most of us no longer understand, whilst they remain a source of pride for these 21st century women who fear their art may be dying. They are proof that this kind of skilled labour still exists, and bear traces of the women photographed at work by Lewis Hine as he travelled through an America of mass production and assembly lines to document the human contribution to modern industry. Women in front of machines had become de-personalised abstractions, devoid of personality or an identity.

In Olivia Gay's photographs however, the droning machines seem to have stopped to make way for silence. The light on the **figures**, in their gestures, and in their expressions is reminiscent of the works of the Dutch master, and seems to bring the working bodies to life. Her portraits are a juxtaposition of strong presence and absence, heroism and distress – as if combining the artistic representations of the Maestà and the Pietà, and echoing the many paintings of the Virgin Mary in the Western world's portrayal of the female figure. In Gay's work, an enigmatic icon becomes a direct presentation of modern society, almost as a mark of respect.

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