

Photography My best shot

## Sharon Lockhart's best photograph: blind girls reading braille at the Los Angeles public library

'The best moment came when they felt my face to see who I was'

Interview by **Karin Andreasson**

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This photograph makes some people feel uncomfortable. Perhaps they feel guilty about looking at blind people. But at the same time viewers stay looking at it for a long time. It draws attention to the fact that the viewer can see – but the girls are reading braille words through touch that someone looking at the photograph can never see.

I knew Alma and Liana really well by the time we made the picture. I met them at the Braille Institute in Los Angeles, where they were both in the choir. This was the first time that I worked with people who couldn't see what my concept was. I normally show my subject a Polaroid of how I want the final image to look, and we work towards achieving it. I couldn't do that with these girls, and that was a great challenge for me. I had to completely change my way of communicating by describing something visual with only language and not photography. It made me more articulate.



They don't see themselves as victims' ... Sharon Lockhart's photograph of blind girls reading Photograph: PR



We talked about the importance of light because Liane could feel it on her. The contrast between the light coming through the window and the dark library emphasises seeing and not seeing. I remember when we were shooting how heightened the sound was for us. It was a really powerful experience.

My inspiration was a photograph of two blind boys reading braille by German portrait and documentary photographer August Sander, taken in 1930. It was from his series, *People of the Twentieth Century*, in a section called *The Last People*. These portraits were of people of people who live on the outside of society, forgotten. I felt the same way about the people I met at the Braille Institute – they aren't seen or heard.

My image is very contemporary compared to Sander's. It's subdued – the clothing is monotoned, but texture and touch play a role in the image – the braille, the ribbing in Liana's sweater echoes in the wall behind her and the surface of the table is polished. I deliberately chose to shoot in the public library in LA because there is so much texture and fabric in the building. It's a large photograph – five feet across, so you can see that detail.

The girls don't see themselves as victims. They were born blind, but they see in a different way, which was particularly interesting for me as I make art for people to experience through looking. One of the best moments for me was when they felt my face to see who I was – no one had ever done that. I had goosebumps.

CV

Born: 1964, Massachusetts, US.

Studied: Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, and San Francisco Art Institute.

Influences: Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, August Sander

High point: "Spending a month in Poland this summer making my new film."

Top tip: "Make friends and have a good life. Don't work too hard."

- Sharon Lockhart's solo exhibition, including her new feature-length film *Rudzienko*, is at FACT Liverpool as part of the Liverpool Biennial until 26 October. Details: [fact.co.uk](http://fact.co.uk)