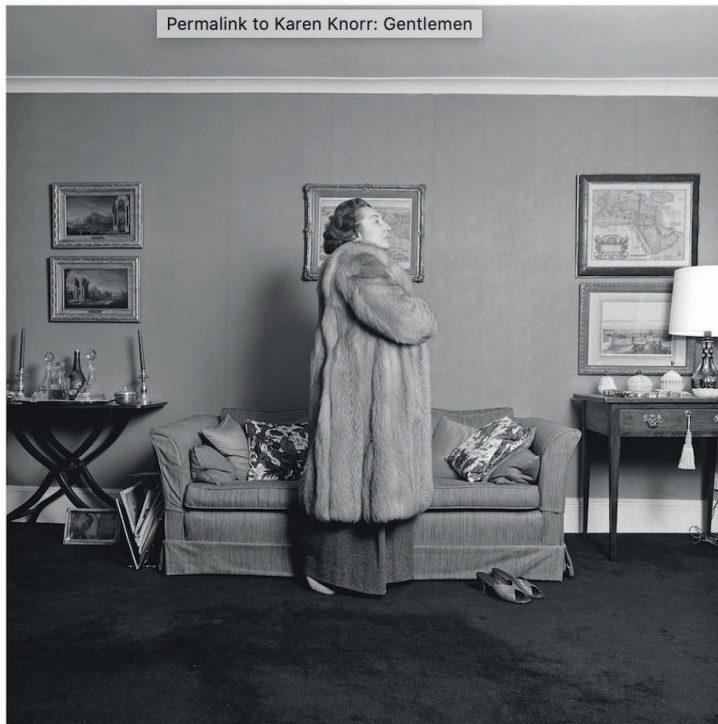


## Karen Knorr: Gentlemen

Written by Hannah Abel-Hirsch

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I believe a Woman should  
keep her kitchen clean.  
I walked into a friend's kitchen  
and saw 2 Servants  
squeezing oranges  
the sweat pouring  
off their foreheads  
into the juice.  
I did not allow my Son  
to drink it.

From the series Belgravia, 1979-81. All images © Karen Knorr.

**Granted access to the elite London gentlemen's clubs of the early 1980s, Karen Knorr exposes the power, privilege and patriarchy that continue to shape society today**

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Male privilege permeates the private clubs depicted in Karen Knorr's series, *Gentlemen* – hidden spaces where the act of exclusion protects the power of those invited in. Spread throughout St James's, a historically wealthy area in central London, grand Georgian buildings housed, and continue to house, the playgrounds of the rich: extended living rooms for royalty, politicians, new and old money. In perpetuating racial, class and gender divisions, the clubs, which Knorr photographed from 1981 to 1983, safeguarded the ascendancy of a privileged few. Now, Knorr's series will be

shown as part of the Barbican's latest blockbuster show, *Masculinities: Liberation through Photography*.

Knorr was born in Germany to American parents, grew up in San Juan, Puerto Rico, studied in Paris, and moved to London in the summer of 1976. She wanted to understand the country she had chosen to live in and reflect on her position as a white upper-middle-class woman in it. "I was trying to figure out who I was and where I stood," she says. The photographer moved into her parents' Belgravia maisonette for six months, situating her at the centre of an unfamiliar world inhabited by the British elite. The experience provided the foundation for *Belgravia* [left and pages 54-59], which Knorr worked on while studying film and photographic art at the Polytechnic of Central London between 1979 and 1981. The project comprises images and text that explore the 'everyday' lives of a moneyed elite – from a woman in furs expressing disgust at lentils [below], to her mother and grandmother lounging in their apartment in Lowndes Square. The text, drawn from conversations with her subjects, is replete with nostalgia for the British Empire, along with a sense of entitlement and privilege.



You couldn't get me to eat lentils  
even if you paid me £1  
per lentil.

From the series *Belgravia*, 1979-81.

*Gentlemen*, which Knorr worked on next, derived from her interest in the rituals and values of the English establishment. "The catalyst was me... trying to understand the establishment because I had come across aspects of it among my friends during my previous series," she explains. Gentlemen's clubs provided a fertile environment in which to do this. The series, comprised of 26 black- and-white photographs, combined with short passages of text, depicts empty, imposing interiors and constructed portraits of members, friends and club employees. Unlike *Belgravia*, the accompanying passages are fictitious and were written by Knorr. They are based on contemporary news events and parliamentary speeches published in Hansard concerning race, the role of women, and the Falklands War.

Accessing the gentlemen's clubs was not easy, especially as a woman. Knorr was undeterred and, although it took her over a year, managed to

photograph in several institutions, including the Conservative Party's club, the Carlton Club, which had only granted Margaret Thatcher an honorary membership, despite her being prime minister. Knorr would often work during the early morning before the members arrived. She became familiar with the various staff – the secretaries, the porters, the men who wound up the clocks. “They thought I was interesting,” she says. “They could not tell my class background because of my American accent. I was exotic. I was young.”



There is nothing  
wrong with Privilege,  
as long as you are ready  
to pay for it.

From the series Belgravia, 1979-81.

Knorr had transgressed an invisible boundary and was aware of the power involved in doing so. But that was not the point. “I was not interested in that kind of power,” she says. Rather it was a matter of revealing these hidden spaces in order to deconstruct the hegemonic masculinity contained within them. “It was very much me mapping those symbolic terrains in which only male power could exist and into which women had to be invited,” she says. The photographer was able to infiltrate areas that would otherwise be forbidden, such as the smoking rooms, but occasionally she was admonished. “Once I interrupted a member,” she recounts. “I was there a little later, and in the middle of taking a photograph. He wanted to pass, and I said, ‘Stop.’” Knorr had crossed an invisible line; the patron was livid.

The photographer was aware of her identity as a white upper- middle-class woman when making the work. She interrogates and critiques the patriarchal values and rituals of the club members depicted, an approach legitimised by her relationship to them. However, there were moments when her position shifted. “I put my power in check when I came across the only black person,” she says. The man is depicted standing front on, holding a silver tray and teapot as if ready to serve us [below]. The text beneath reads: “Men are interested in Power. Women are more interested in Service.” Says Knorr: “I asked him to pose like that because I wanted to problematise my position as a privileged white woman to a black servant.”



Men are interested  
in Power.  
Women are more interested  
in Service.

From the series *Gentlemen*, 1981-83.

The scenes that comprise *Gentlemen* may appear natural, but they are constructed. Knorr set them up to express the issues that she was exploring. “I have always said the work is fiction based on fact – constructed documentary based on contemporary facts and ideas,” she explains. The photographer employed “social actors” – club members, employees and friends. One image depicts a suited man standing beside a house of cards [below]. He was Knorr’s friend who posed as her assistant; the house of cards was readymade. The pair set up the scene, but as they were about to shoot, the club secretary decided that he needed to measure the bridge room. “He was obviously worried and wanted to check on us,” she says. “I wasn’t sure if they would let me get away with it – to what extent could I stretch the rules?”

The passages that accompany each image emphasise the photographer’s interests and concerns: the bellicose language adopted by the press and the country’s political parties to commentate on the Falklands War, and enduring racial and gender discrimination, including the practice of the eldest son receiving exclusive rights to inheritance. “There are two voices that alternate,” explains Knorr. The text beneath photographs depicting “social actors” is written in the present tense, and passages that accompany empty interiors take the past tense and evoke the nostalgic reminiscences of a gentleman wandering through his club. “I wanted to emphasise the materiality of the language and the way it is pronounced,” says Knorr. “The language is not transparent, it does not explain, rather it is poetic and emphasises certain words, which come out of a tradition of irony that you find in England and Ireland in the 18th century – think of Jonathan Swift and Joseph Addison.” Images and text work together to parody the patriarchal values and rituals upheld by the individuals and institutions depicted.



The Time has Come  
for us to play the Trump card.  
The more implacably we Play  
our hand in the Falklands affair  
the more likely we are  
to have a hand to play.

From the series *Gentlemen*, 1981-83.

Knorr's images remain relevant today, reminders of an exclusive boys' club who retain influence throughout society – which is one reason they were selected for the Barbican Art Centre's new exhibition, *Masculinities*, in the show's second chapter, devoted to 'Power, Patriarchy and Space'. The gentlemen's clubs also live on, symbolic of the patriarchal values that linger within contemporary British culture. *Gentlemen* is so powerful because it exposes these realms, revealing the male privilege they were, in part, established to protect. The series parodies this social structure and in doing so draws attention to the problematic nature of it. "It is that self-perpetuating system that is, in a sense, the foundation of even today's contemporary politics," reflects Knorr. "We have not changed enough."

Karen Knorr's *Gentlemen* series will be shown as part of *Masculinities: Liberation Through Photography* at the Barbican Art Gallery from 20 February until 17 May 2020.