

## **Alternative Visuals and Storytelling in Women's Surfing**

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It seems like I have always been a contrarian – pushing back against whenever I felt something wasn't right, and coming up with my own solutions. I began questioning authority in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, when my Brownie Troop leader announced that our group would work on a Beauty Badge. Being a tomboy, it's not what I thought I had signed up for and asked why our troop was not allowed to go on camp-outs like the Cub Scouts. The troop leader responded by asking me to leave the troop, citing my bad attitude and lack of cooperation.

This “bad attitude,” coupled with my DIY work ethic honed in the punk and mod scenes of my high school and college years laid the foundation for me to teach myself to surf in 1985 at the age of 21, and, in a response to the lack of women being represented in surf magazines, create my WaterWomen photo series in 1995 and subsequently make surf documentaries, beginning in 2001. The punk and mod mottos of the late 1970s and 1980s were simple – if you don't like the music on the radio, form your own band. Don't like what the night clubs are offering up? Rent a hall, ask your favorite bands to play and DJ in between the sets. No interest in what mainstream music magazines are writing about? Write and publish your own fanzine and talk about the music and scenes that interests you. It doesn't matter if you don't know how to do any of it - you'll figure it out as you go along. I did all of this, and more. As John Lydon of PIL and the Sex Pistols says, “Anger is an Energy,” and my own anger about the way women were being portrayed in the surf industry and surf media, harnessed in the right way, has led me to creative film and photo projects that have been described by journalists and reviewers as inspiring and educational as they are beautiful and entertaining.

As Krista Comer points out in the 2019 Institute for Women Surfers Oceana Curriculum, women surfers talk about wanting “better” or “different” kinds of images and stories about women's surfing, but what does that really mean and what does it look like?

By me offering up a different visual narrative, I'm demonstrating that a different way of visualizing women is possible and will find an audience. In 1996 when I finally picked up a camera and began the WaterWomen series, after thinking about it for a year, my imagery was radical compared to what was being shown in surf media and by the surf industry. My photos and films are a way to start important conversations about how women are film and photographed, and how their stories are told. My projects celebrate women surfers as athletes and enthusiasts, not objects to be gawked at, and their bodies marketed and sold. Now these ways of seeing are more mainstream than they were in 1996, but still not mainstream enough.

When you begin your own creative project around women's surfing, it's important to ask yourself the following questions:

1. Why are you doing it?
2. What are your goals for the project?
3. Who is this project for?
4. What are you trying to say?

I encourage anyone embarking on a creative project relating to women's surfing (or any subject for that matter) to read about Best Practices in capturing stories and images. I come from a public television background and I have a degree in journalism (magazine writing emphasis) and adhere to both disciplines' guidelines.

The American public television documentary series *Frontline* has great journalistic guidelines that will be helpful if you are making a surf documentary or doing some sort of non-fiction storytelling project:

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/about-us/journalistic-guidelines/>

For oral history best practices here is the website most people refer to for information before conducting interviews: <https://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices-revised-2009/#best>

For photographers, I like the National Press Photographer Association website with their code of ethics: <https://nppa.org/nppa-code-ethics> and best practices: <https://nppa.org/page/3178>

If you are filming or shooting photos on the beach, think about how to approach your subjects. Ask them if it's okay to take their photo. Tell them in a few sentences why you want to take their photo or film them, and what you will do with it. Get your subject to sign an appearance release if possible. Let your subject tell you how they want to be identified. DO NOT ASSUME ANYTHING – including the person's gender, race, religion, etc. It is for them to tell you – not for you to put the person in any kind of category.

No means no. If the person does not want to participate in your project, accept their answer and walk away. It is their right to say yes or no, not for you to demand that they participate.

Your subjects are giving you a gift of their time, their story and their image. Many of the women I've filmed and photographed are initially worried about how they will be filmed or photographed. I think this is because women are so used to being judged and exploited. They sometimes are uncomfortable and worried when we start, so in these cases, I talk with them, answer their questions, and put them at ease before taking a photo or turning on the video camera. Getting your subject to relax leads to a better photo or more interesting interview.

Create a situation of mutual respect and a partnership between you and the subject. It is important that your subject is comfortable with what you are asking of them, and that you foster a feeling of trust. Your subject is trusting you to not make them look bad on camera. Think about camera angles. Where your lens points is where a viewer's eyes are going to be led. Never point your lens at a woman's crotch or chest. Photograph and film your subjects in the same way you'd want to be depicted.

There are many surf films in which Americans, Europeans and Australians go to someone else's country and film their surf fantasy. These kinds of surf films often use the local people as visual

“props” to the story, and locals are rarely interviewed nor shown surfing. Someone else’s life and community is not a colorful backdrop to your surf film. Be careful of clichés and exoticizing other people’s cultures. Consider including locals in your film or photo essay. But let the person tell their own story. They don’t need you to interpret their story for them. This is especially important when interviewing women in other countries. I feel that it is best to let the person answer a question in the language they decide to talk in, and use subtitles to translate for your viewers. DO NOT SUMMARIZE OR INTERPRET FOR YOUR SUBJECTS!

I encourage all of you to create projects that offers up alternative visual and storytelling in women’s surfing. It’s much needed and the more alternatives there are to mainstream surf culture, the better. Have fun, celebrate diversity and create!

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