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July 4, 2013 Written by [Allegra Kirkland](#)

Close to Home: Tom Wood at Thomas Erben Gallery

Empathy may not be one of the first words people associate with modern documentary photography, but Ireland-born photographer Tom Wood has it in spades. Wood, who currently resides in North Wales, lived for twenty-five years in Merseyside, a seaside county in North West England, and photographed local residents in portraits that are relatable, real, and fundamentally sympathetic toward their subjects. Though he is often compared to contemporary British photographers such as Paul Graham and Martin Parr, who helped popularize documentary-style color portraiture in the 1980s, there is a crucial difference: Wood was a member of the working class suburban community he chronicled. Rather than an outsider looking in and satirizing what he found, Wood was an insider recognizing the inherent humor, warmth, and pathos in the faces he saw at the corner store or the pub.



Tom Wood. Untitled, 1985; C-print, edition of 7 (+2 AP). Image courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery New York.

Men and Women, a traveling exhibition currently on view at [Thomas Erben Gallery](#), presents Wood's local cast of characters in portraits taken from 1975 to 2012. The prints are small—most slightly larger than a sheet of computer paper—and the majority are frontal, closely cropped shots that show residents in a variety of settings: on the ferry, at the carnival, waiting for the bus under a leaden sky. Wood's rapport with his subjects is palpable; they appear relaxed and eager to pose, often gazing directly at the camera. While the photos, with their subjects dressed in dated cherry red blazers and headbands, clearly capture a specific place and time, the unique intimacy between photographer and subject prevents them from reading as mere period pieces.



Tom Wood. Men and Women, 2013; installation view, Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery. Photo: Andreas Vesterlund

Though the show is called *Men and Women*, it could, on first glance, just have easily have been called *Merseyside* or *People* (which was actually the title of Wood's 1999 book). This title, however, forces the viewer to consider the gender dynamics on display and the ways in which men and women are socialized to interact. There are shots of teenage girls whispering to each other or looking at the camera seductively and others of their male counterparts sneering at the camera, cigarettes dangling from their lips. Bored stevedores relax in a break room papered with busty Page 3 girls (that problematic British institution), and young mothers clutch babies to their chests.

Such consciously adopted gender roles—and the anxiety and insecurity lurking beneath them—are a recurring theme in Wood's work. In the 1994 photo *Fronting*, a group of adolescent boys in sweatshirts mug for the camera at a fairground, the bright whirligigs in the background an amusing contrast to their studied seriousness. The self-conscious posturing of the boys and men in Wood's photographs parallels the sexualized posing of his girls and women. In *Not Miss New Brighton* (1978/79), two women with fluffed Farrah Fawcett hair, brassy tans, and pouty lips perch on the hood of a car, legs open suggestively. Their brazen sensuality contrasts sharply with the elderly women in sensible shoes who sit in the garden behind them.



Tom Wood. Not Miss New Brighton, 1978/79. C-print, 15 x 15 inches, edition of 15 (+2 AP). Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

The show is as much about generational differences and the shifting moral compass of contemporary Britain as it is about gender. *Three Wise Women* (1990) depicts three of the old "pets" who so often feature in Wood's work in their signature kerchiefs and shapeless wool coats. As they ponder their spoils at a car boot sale, their bent backs and wrinkled faces reveal the ravages of age. Yet despite this unflinching honesty, his older subjects convey a quiet dignity that the younger generation appears to lack. In one untitled photo from 1985, a prim, lantern-jawed man with windswept gray hair sits at a bus stop, a rude drawing scrawled on the wall behind his head. He appraises the camera with a self-assurance that is absent in the photos of the teenage boys, who still have so much to prove.



Tom Wood. Three Wise Women, 1990. C-print, edition of 7 (+2 AP). Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

The artist's photographs speak volumes about the pressures of conforming to gender norms, the listlessness of life in small towns, the inevitability of aging. But Wood refrains from embarking on a series with any predetermined goal in mind, preferring to relinquish this responsibility to the judgment of his camera.

"I go out and take the pictures and you figure out what they mean afterward when the project's finished," Wood said in a [recent interview](#) with *Issue* magazine. "The camera is asking questions. You put it all together and you see what it adds up to."

Men and Women is on view at Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, through July 12, 2013.

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