

# From Studio to Studio

*Whenever I see professional pictures of yoga teachers and practitioners gracing the cover of the latest yoga book, DVD or magazine, I have to admit that I also admire the capabilities of the photographer who captured that perfect pose and moment. And due to my keen interest in photography I was delighted to be given the opportunity to interview Karen Yeomans, a professional with a growing reputation for wonderful yoga photography to talk about life on the "other side of the lens" and the circumstances that influenced her dedicated practice. Oh, and of course... what makes the perfect yoga image!*

*I met with Karen at Double-Take Studios, a large commercial studio in east London, where she works as Head of Photography.*

I begin by asking about her interest in the subject and she informs me that she became passionate about photography at school after moving away from impressionist painting, as she found photography a more immediate and real medium. It would be this passion that would carry Karen through the traumatic period she would have to endure after being diagnosed with the condition achalasia at the age of sixteen. After looking slightly perplexed, Karen informs me that "it's an involuntary neurological muscle action that prevented food from entering my stomach."

This meant that her body relied solely on the slow intake of liquid nutrition, and the diagnosis began a series of hospital visits and painful surgical operations for Karen. "They started performing on me when I was nineteen," she recalled, "and because it's normally a geriatric condition I think the doctors were excited to get someone young enough to cope with being messed around with." During her initial operations, several people suggested Karen take up yoga to help her connect with her body, but as she explained, "sadly the classes came too late after the operations. I was at an age where I believed that they could 'fix me' without really understanding the psychological implications of why I developed the condition in the first place, which

were obviously stress-related. I stopped being able to eat and I couldn't swallow at all."

Despite these terrible adversities, a determined Karen began a photography degree in Manchester. "I threw myself into my work. It was my escape and therapy," she said. At the age of twenty-one Karen would have to endure one



final operation which involved removing part of her oesophagus so she could actually take food into her stomach. Karen also successfully completed her degree and moved to London to develop a career and began working for Double-Take as a freelance photographer on a number of editorial, music and fashion assignments. But, as Karen explained, the move also gave the opportunity to take up yoga and she began attending a weekly Iyengar class at a local church. "It was very low-key to begin with," she said, "and at first I didn't understand how it could connect me to my body. But as I gradually understood this connection, the more it became embedded into my life."

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"My early work had been raw and angry, influenced by my age and wanting to express my frustrations around gender and identity and events and issues that shaped my life. Now my photography is more soft, gentle and feminine and it's made my work more sensitive. Maybe it was already in me, but yoga has definitely bought this sensitivity out. My own work is very gentle, which comes from my yoga practice making me be more gentle with myself."

Karen's photography has ensured a successful career, and over the last eight years she has progressed from a freelance role to Head of Photography – which involves managing five national studios while still regularly shooting media campaigns, health, beauty and lifestyle assignments. "The work we do here is very aesthetic as it's for companies such as magazines, so it's all about how it looks. It is very constructive and I make other people look and feel good about themselves. It's a stimulating job which I love, but I've got more of a passion to increase my yoga photography as it's my specialist field."

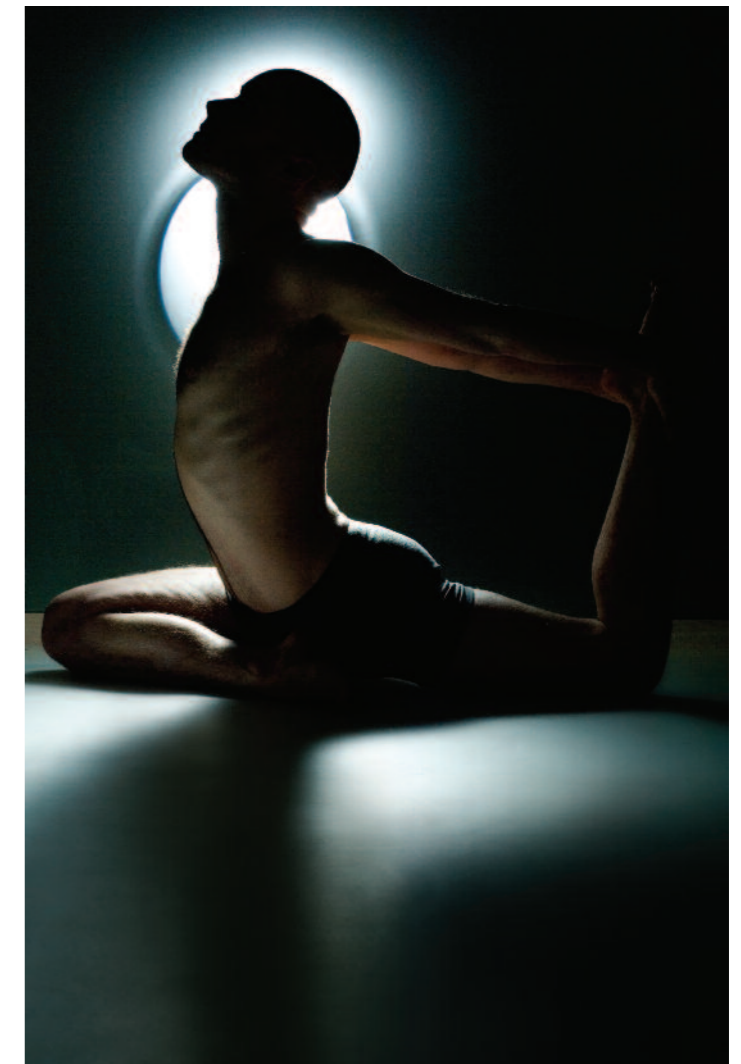
Despite working long hours most days in a highly competitive and fast-paced industry, Karen is very strict about her practice and regularly attends classes up to six times per week. "It helps me put things into perspective because as an artist it can be very emotional. Sometimes it's like a roller-coaster of untamed energy, but you need that for creativity. Yoga has helped me maintain a little space from my emotions and not to react so immediately and to keep my actions more appropriate and not to waste energy."

"Now I don't let things get to me so much and I can easily let go. I'm still a perfectionist with my work, but I'm better at giving myself a break and understanding where my limitations are. Sometimes I've been so focused on my work but now I can recognise if I become too intense."

Karen's practice has also honed her yoga pho-

tography skills. "I know the best angle to shoot from to make sure everything looks in proportion," she elaborated. "I know how the alignment of a pose should look like so I can ensure that the pose is perfectly lined up. That's one of the important things about yoga photography – getting the perspective right and then painting with the light to create more of a sense of mood of what that pose should feel like. And I know the sense of each pose through my own practice."

Over the last six years Karen has become more involved with yoga photography and she



has become highly sought-after due to a combination of natural creative flair and her passion and knowledge on the discipline. Karen has been commissioned by a number of respected teachers including Jean Hall, Gemma Nash, Scott Hickman and Lucy Horton, and her work appears on websites, books, DVDs and marketing materials. But no matter what the medium, Karen assures me that "with every shoot my

intention is to faithfully recreate the energy they transmit through their teaching."

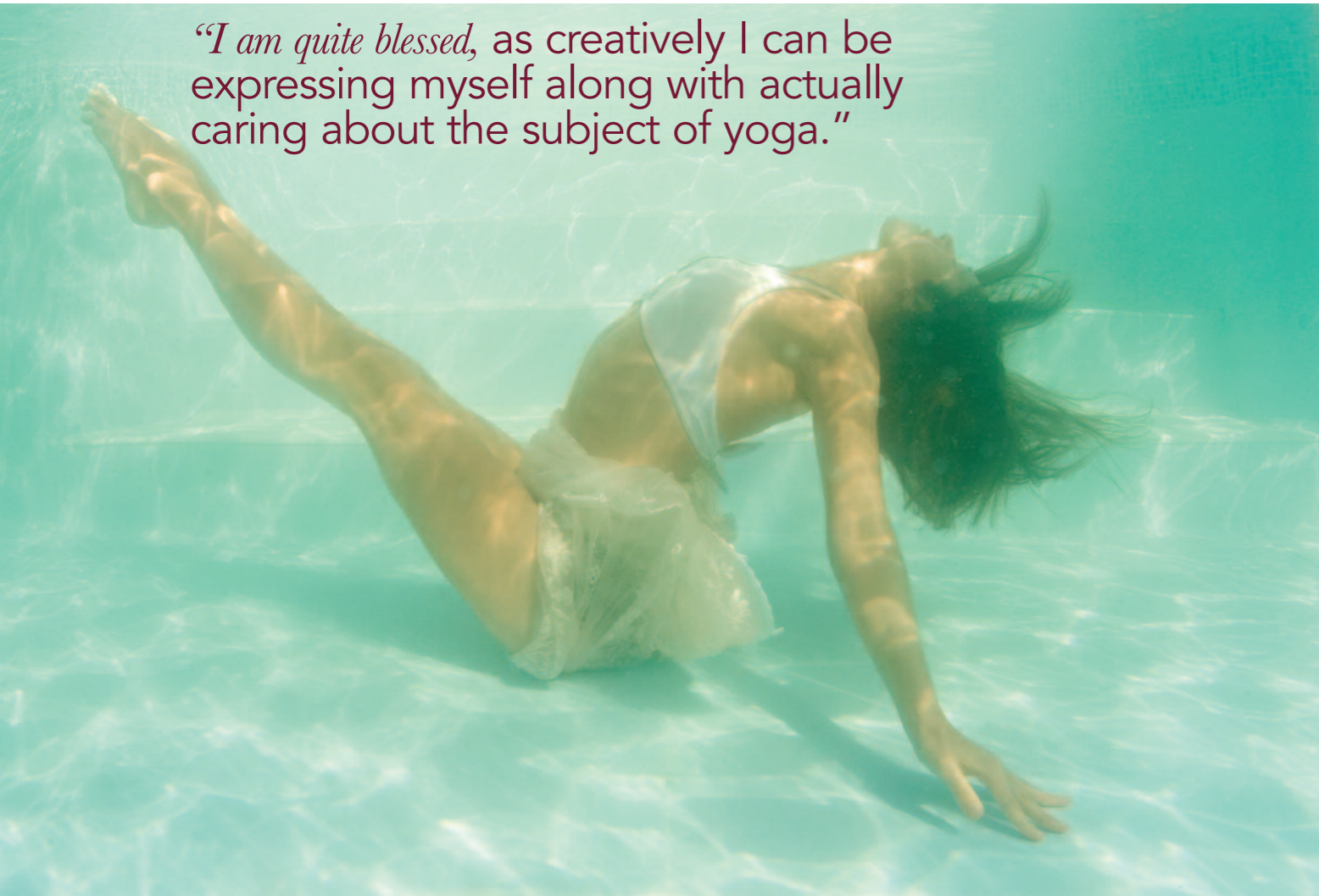
Karen also gets to enjoy photography out of the studio. "I also go on lots of retreats where I shoot a lot of photography. I've been to Goa shooting for the Purple Valley retreats where I took location shots in exchange for a week of yoga practice with David Swenson. And last year I also worked with Laura Baumann in India for her new book. We did a really beautiful shot with Lara performing a mountain pose on top of a mountain against a stunning background which I feel is a more inspiring image."

I am sure that for most yoga enthusiasts this sounds like a dream vocation and Karen admits that she is lucky to have such a job. "I am quite blessed, as creatively I can be expressing myself along with actually caring about the subject of yoga – which I love and believe in – and I've met some wonderful teachers along the way."

Karen still continues with her Iyengar yoga practice and regularly attends classes by her favourite teachers Jean Hall, Nadia Narain, Louise Gimme and Scott Hickman. But for Karen, the classes mean more than just performing the perfect pose on the mat. "What I've learned from teachers such as Jean, Nadia and Louise has gone beyond yoga. They've help build my confidence and nurtured me creatively. Yoga is a community for me. I've met some wonderful people with similar beliefs who live their lives as true as possible and it's a really lovely thing."

Karen has also attended numerous workshops and retreats and she has also completed a foundation course with the British Wheel of Yoga. "I really enjoyed it," said Karen, "but photography is my career and I can always bring yoga into it. I may do teacher training for more learning if I have time in the future but it's not a particular aspiration. It's my pleasure."

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**Karen Yeomans**

Karen is available for private commissions. For more information and to see examples of Karen's photography visit [www.terriermad.com](http://www.terriermad.com) 07973 938304



After recently completing a shoot with Scott Hickman, Karen is planning more artistic collaborations with the illustrator Neil Durban as she points out that "elements such as energy and hard to show just with photography". Karen also plans to take more shoots featuring traditional costumes and henna designs to give the images a more religious and spiritual feel, and the ethos behind her every shot is quite admirable: "If I can inspire other people with what I am doing visually then that would be a beautiful thing."

I ended the conversation wanting to know how yoga has helped with her medical condition. "I still have problems with eating but I do cope very well, and I believe yoga has helped as I understand my body better now," she replied, "and I

know when my body is suffering or isn't at full strength. I'm more of a relaxed person now, and I wouldn't change the clarity and perception that it has given me to run my life and wanting to do the right thing. I learned the line that you need to get to before you have to start looking after yourself and then you can start helping other people."

I had thoroughly enjoyed my time with Karen and had indeed felt inspired to pick up my camera and take more photos. But more than anything I respected her for her strength, openness and sense of humour that she has maintained despite the painful suffering she has obviously faced. And that's inspiration for us all.