



Secrets from the boudoir

Silk, shadows, and silhouettes: we speak to a boudoir photographer to find out what we can learn about body confidence and self-love from this delicate, deeply sensual artform

Writing | Kathryn Wheeler



“I’d be hesitant to put it into Google images. It gets a little bit naughty – not safe for work, as it were,” Johanna Elizabeth says, after I admit I’ve struggled to pin down a concise definition of boudoir photography, prior to our interview.

“You can go from being in a snuggly jumper with a pair of socks, holding a mug of tea, all the way through to real fine art nudes, and even including a little bit of *Fifty Shades* in there. But you’re in bed – because ‘boudoir’ is ‘women’s bedroom’ in French,” Johanna explains.

And she should know, having been shooting boudoir portraits since 2010, and estimating working with more than 6,000 people. Women of every shape, shade, and size – dressed in delicate lace lingerie, silk kimonos, negligees, chemises, camisoles, babydolls, or nothing at all – gazing into the camera, or coyly off to the side, sensual and seductive. None of them models, none trained – all of them ordinary women, here to do a boudoir shoot with Johanna for... well, that’s the big question: who, or what, for?

Where the magic happens

“Some ladies think they’re going to turn up here to create a photo for their husband’s 50th, but they leave having had a life-changing experience,” says Johanna.



Done by yourself or as a couple, boudoir shoots are typically done to mark an occasion with the gift of the photos, commonly shared the night before a wedding or on anniversaries. What is worn during the shoot is up to the wearer, but it’s often lingerie, or a strategically draped bedsheet.

It may be easy to think that boudoir shoots are all about the receivers’ pleasure, or that they are, perhaps, objectifying or anti-progressive. But that’s not the way that Johanna sees it.

For Johanna, it’s about the journey to discovering a sense of sensuality and, in her process, this begins from the moment the clients have their first consultation. Getting together with Johanna, and her all-female team, they discuss their needs for the shoot – often the first >>>



Johanna's guide to building confidence

Look around you

Are there people in your life who drag you down? By reducing contact with them, and spending more time with those who care and uplift you, you'll feel more confident in all you do.

Self care is vital

If you feel treated well, you will feel better able to weather hard times, and more confident riding the storms life throws at you.

Reduce your social media scrolling

It can cause you to compare yourself with fake images, wear you down, and make you feel like you aren't enough. If you need something to scroll through, I adore Tumblr. You can follow things you love and be

indication of the iceberg of emotion that goes into such an intimate experience.

"It's at that appointment where we find out why she's turned up," explains Johanna. "But we dig a little bit more, and people disclose the most incredible things. It's not very often, as women, that we get the opportunity to just say what's going on, you know?"

Johanna suggests that I head to her page to read through testimonials and blogs ("with a cup of tea and a box of tissues!"), which I do. Flooded with emotional stories of body-hating turned to loving, of great life challenges, and of relationships

healed (relationships with *themselves*, that is), it's immediately obvious that something is going on here – something more powerful than overcoming the, contextually, simple challenge of baring all for a few shots. Johanna has stumbled across a real phenomenon.

Let me slip into something more comfortable

Without meaning to sound melodramatic, a colossal shift in our attitudes to sex and bodies is taking place – and boudoir photography, and the women that Johanna works with, are caught in the motion. In their numbers, women are reclaiming their

Learn more about Johanna
and her work by visiting
johannaelizabeth.com

sexuality, and one way that we can see that happening, is in what we've got on under our clothes.

A quick look into consumer trends for lingerie reveals that this move towards a more empowered, self-celebrating vision is happening on a traceable scale. Leaning away from the bust-emphasising push-up bras, popular in the 90s and 00s, retail insight platform Edited marked a sharp increase in the sale of comfortable, functional bralettes, as their padded pals dropped in stock by 36% in the past two years.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with adding a bit of 'oomph' to your underwear, but if these market trends – combined with retailer campaigns such as Tu by Sainsbury's 2019 'All Boobs Welcome' and Dove's ongoing 'Be Real' – tell us anything, it's that we're hungry for acceptance, and we're prepared to go out and get it. And with more plus-size models taking to the lingerie runway, the right to feel sexy and sensual in your own body is, finally, making waves.

So where does boudoir photography come in? Well, centering yourself as the focus point of your sexuality, and expressing your body in a way that feels good to you, is what boudoir is all about. But the



journey to a place where you are able to unabashedly celebrate yourself is immense, as Johanna knows intimately.

“ We're doing it to feel sensual – it's a *feeling*. It comes from within

Bedroom politics

Our sense of sexuality is irrevocably entwined with our sense of confidence – no matter who with or how we're having sex – and we face a host of hurdles to get to a place of security.

“I think it's because it's intrinsic to us as humans. It's in our DNA,” Johanna ponders. “We're sexual beings, but things get in the way – life gets in the way, parenthood gets in the way, being exhausted

gets in the way, being married to the wrong person gets in the way.

“Now, I prefer to say our photos are sensual, rather than sexual. Because sexual, for me, indicates that we're doing it to look sexy. We're not. We're doing it to feel sensual – it's a *feeling*. It comes from within. I could put anyone in a bra and pants and put them in a glamour pose, but who's it for?”

Who is it for?

That's the million-dollar question, and Johanna raises a really interesting point. Take one of her images and put it next to a standard shot you'd find on any adult site. They both might be women in lingerie, but there's something totally different about Johanna's photos, and it's something you might not be able to quite put your finger on.

It may sound very abstract to say that empowerment is >>>

something that you just sense, rather than are able to check off a list, but it's true. Through the lense, you can somehow tell that the shots that Johanna produces are centred around the subject's own relationship with her sensuality, rather than presenting a commodity up for consumption.

"Do it for you" – it's a phrase we hear over and over again. But what does that actually look like? How do we know we're *doing it* for ourselves?

““ What we're doing here, is a celebration of the female form

"Of course, there are things that I won't do as a photographer," explains Johanna. "I don't like the thumb under the bra strap, coming off the shoulder. It's little things that set images apart. But what we're doing here, is a celebration of the female form. It's her being able to express, and reconnect to, well, herself. She may not have seen her since she was 24 and suddenly she's like, 'Oh my God, she's back.'"

As Johanna sees it, it all starts with the action of prioritising yourself. A boudoir shoot is an investment in yourself, and a luxury one at that, but the principle of investing in yourself, and seeing your sensuality as a serious and important thing that should be celebrated and



appreciated, is the same whether you're in Johanna's studio, or in your daily life. And that, in essence, is what "doing it for you" is all about.

Pillow talk

What does it mean to be sexy in 2021? Or, more importantly, what does it look like to love yourself?

Put simply, it's different for each of us. Any expression of sexuality comes with a host of social and political tags that a lot of us will spend a long time unravelling. Putting them to one side for a second, when we start to take time to properly

and purposefully tune into our bodies, we discover the strength and beauty that has been there the whole time – enabling that experience is Johanna's vocation.

It turns out that, yes, boudoir is a style of photography, but it's also a mindset that honours the body, just the way it is. It puts you front and centre, it not only celebrates your sensuality, but it takes it seriously. And whether you do it in front of a photographer, or at home on your own, there's something undeniably special about treating yourself to time, attention, and a little bit of lace. **IN**