

How to portray women of mathematics?

Geneva, February 18th 2019

Let me thank Susanne Reffert, Anton Alekseev and Patricia Parraga for setting up the exhibition here in Geneva. To my knowledge, it is the first time it is shown in Switzerland, the home country of one of the protagonists of the exhibition, Karin Baur who is presently working in Graz and Leeds. Another protagonist, Kasia Rejzner is here present today.

This exhibition, which brings together 13 female mathematicians from thirteen European countries, has toured around Europe and well beyond, to South America, Africa and Australia.

Its very title "*Women of mathematics throughout Europe. A gallery of portraits*" raises two questions. How do you portray a mathematician and is there anything specific about portraying a female mathematician? Noel Matoff, who observed our strange world of mathematics for some time before actually making the photographs, chose to portray the women standing in front of a board full of "their mathematics". The photo shooting would typically take place after 30 to 45 minutes explanations delivered by the portrayed mathematician on her topics of interests. The mathematician would address her explanations to me, a lay person trying to get acquainted with her work. Noel, who was very impressed by the enthusiasm these women would show during their explanations, chose to portray them proudly standing in front of the resulting board, at that stage covered with formulas.

One might ask why not portray the mathematicians in action, while actually writing on the board, since this is a typical posture for a mathematician, when teaching maths to students or explaining research results to her or his peers. There are actually photographs "in action" at the bottom of each panel, yet the main portrait is that of a static women standing in front of the board. Beyond the aesthetic and technical reasons which I will leave for Noel to comment on, opting to picture women looking at the viewer rather than the board, is motivated by our choice to put the subject, here the portrayed woman, in the forefront.

Mathematics tend to be viewed as objective, leaving little place for the feelings and emotions of their author. Yet in a male dominated mathematics community and as members of a minority, women are inevitably reminded of their gender, which constantly brings them back to their subjectivity. This is reflected in the portraits by the relative position of the subject, the mathematician standing in the forefront and looking at the viewer, and her mathematics behind her, written on the board in the background.

Also, portraying women while looking at the viewer, enables the photographer to capture the pride and joy on their faces. As you can read from the interviews in the accompanying catalogue, all thirteen mathematicians without exception are happy to have chosen mathematics as a career with no regrets in spite of the obstacles and sacrifices this might have meant for them. I believe that Noel managed to convey this sense of satisfaction through her pictures. Let me leave it to you to judge hoping you enjoy the exhibition!

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