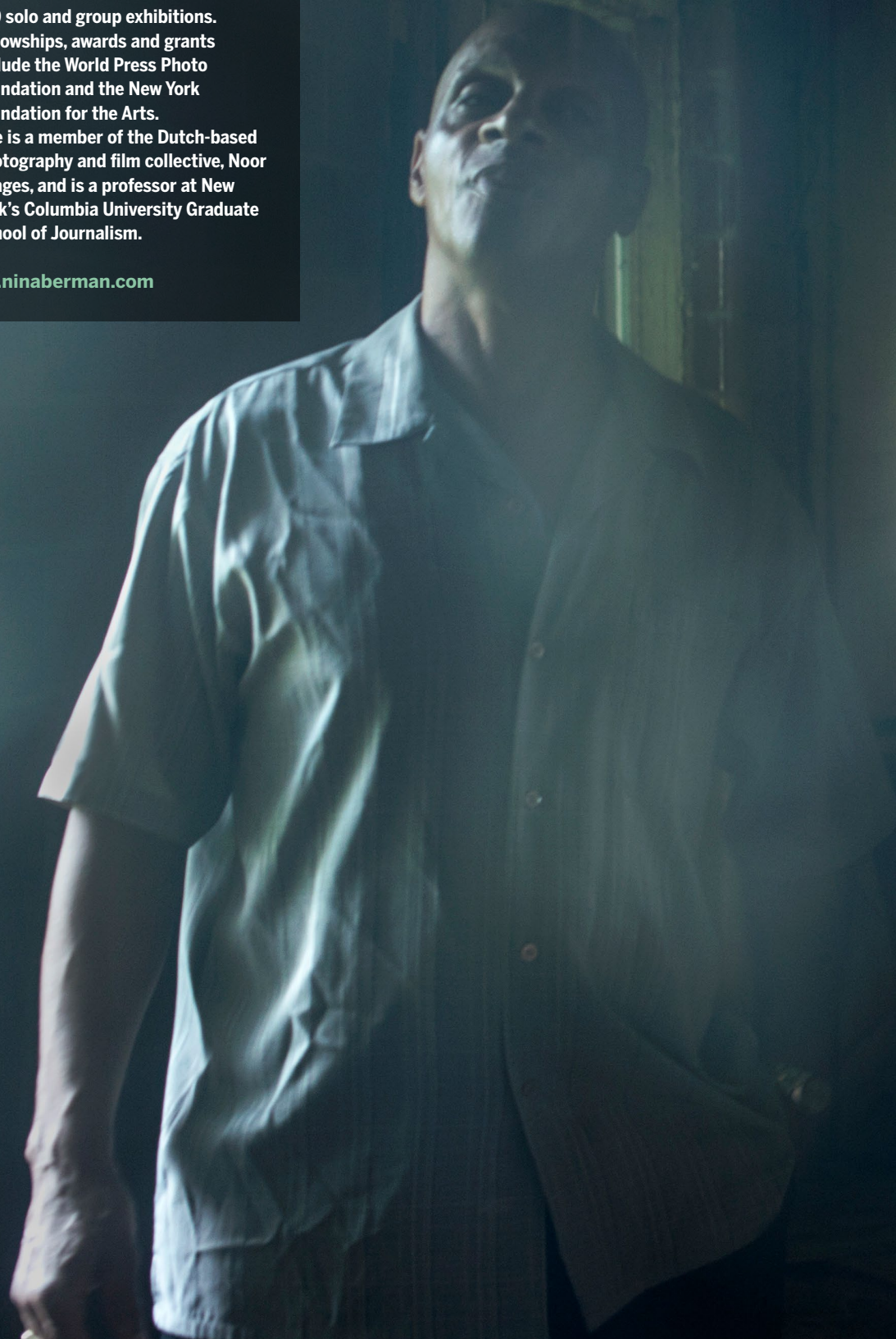




## Nina Berman Profile

- An English graduate, Nina is an award-winning documentary photographer, filmmaker, author, and educator.
- Nina's work has been shown in over 150 solo and group exhibitions.
- Fellowships, awards and grants include the World Press Photo Foundation and the New York Foundation for the Arts.
- She is a member of the Dutch-based photography and film collective, Noor Images, and is a professor at New York's Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

[www.ninaberman.com](http://www.ninaberman.com)





# Nina Berman

The photography of **Nina Berman** focuses on the contemporary stories of her homeland, but her images are the antithesis of glory and the American dream. Indeed, Keith Wilson discovers that in a year of fear and violence, Nina doesn't like what she's seeing...

All images: © Nina Berman / Noor Images



**I**t is a Tuesday morning in New York when I call Nina Berman for the interview that we'd arranged two weeks earlier. Little did we realize that in the ensuing days between reaching out to fix a date and talking face-to-face via Skype, the whole political landscape of America would change. In that time, 46-year-old George Floyd was arrested by Minneapolis Police for allegedly using a counterfeit \$20 bank note. Pinned face down to the street with a policeman's knee to his neck, Floyd died in a matter of minutes. Led by the Black Lives Matter movement, protests against police brutality towards African Americans soon erupted across America, culminating in violent clashes with police, looting and even more deaths.

Then, the day before Nina and I are due to speak, US President Donald Trump poses outside St John's Church in Washington DC, holding aloft a bible for the cameras. Moments before Trump's televised walk to the church, protestors were forcefully cleared from Lafayette

Park by police using batons and tear gas. Far from quelling the protests, the President's actions are followed by further expressions of outrage, violence and street demonstrations in multiple American cities. That night, stores are looted and cars torched. It's been the biggest week of civil unrest since the '60s and I ask Nina, a lifelong resident of New York, if she's seen anything like this:

"No, I think I would describe it as an attempted coup."

It's an answer I wasn't expecting...

### Really?

Yeah, by Trump, absolutely. I think we're seeing two things... On the one hand, as a result of the (Covid-19) pandemic and the impossible economic system for most young people in the US, we're seeing intense frustration built up over decades and an increasingly militarized police, who on a daily



**I've photographed 10, 15 actions after police murders, but this one is different. Much more numbers, more rage**

**Previous page:** Richard Huntly and John Bonner inspect the abandoned building where, 45 years earlier, they had worked as child slave labour at the Florida School for Boys. The school was shut down in 1968.

**Below:** A law student at Columbia University, New York, screams his support for the bombing of Iraq at a demonstration prior to the invasion in 2003 by coalition forces led by the United States.



basis are humiliating and brutal; and on the other hand you have Trump, whose agenda is to create an autocratic United States and to dismantle our democratic institutions. He may not have largely articulated it... and I think he welcomes this violence and will run on the violence for his re-election campaign. He's been looking for something to run on, but even if he loses at the polls in November, I don't think anyone in the country truly believes that he will leave peacefully.

**From your perspective, as someone who has photographed conflict for decades, are there parallels with what you're seeing on your own doorstep?**



Well, I don't see myself as a war zone or conflict photographer. I see myself as someone who has spent her career, for the most part, studying the United States, and so I'm not surprised. I likely have a different perspective to war photographers who routinely see this.

As someone who was born in New York City and has spent most of my life here, I haven't seen destruction of property like this since 1977, during the New York blackout. I also feel the pandemic has fuelled some of the frustration. It's dangerous out there still, because of the pandemic. I will not photograph looters; I will not go looking for looters, I don't see that as the story – of course this will be the main media focus. →

**Above:** A TV news camera covering the first anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, at the crash site of one of the hijacked planes, in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.



## CRACKING UP

**AS MUCH AS NINA LOVES HER NIKON LENSES, SHE'S NOT AVERSE TO MAKING SOME DRASTIC ACTION FOR THE SAKE OF HER ART...**

I did one project on this former reform school in Florida and I had three 35mm f/1.4 lenses, which are very beautiful, and I thought that I didn't need three, so I took one of them and I started to smash it with a screwdriver.

### What?!

It wasn't easy to do, but it was an interesting feeling to do that – I cracked it and I used that lens to take pictures for most of that story. It was very interesting, the effect, it's very subtle. It took down some of the colour, you got a little flare in places you didn't expect. Most people wouldn't notice it, but it's there.



**How dangerous do you think it is on the streets now?**

I have a daughter who is very frightened for me to go outside – she sees videos of the NYPD assaulting women. If you look at who police target, it's often women, and I've been targeted at demonstrations, so she's really frightened for me to go outside and has said things like, "who will feed me and give me hugs and kisses?" So, I'm treading kind of lightly. It's hard, there's a part of me that's saying, "yeah, I want to run with them all night long," but I've also photographed 10, 15 actions after police murders, but this one is different. Much more numbers, much more rage.

**Much more rage, even a week after George Floyd's death...**

More people have been killed in the aftermath of the event, so there's been a lack of leadership on the side of local officials to say, "this is our plan moving forward, this is how we're going to reform our police departments." In New York City, this discussion has not happened. My heart is in this city and I feel sad for people who have to face this constant humiliation by the police.

If my partner was a black man, or if I was a black woman who had a black son, I would be terrified every single moment of every day when that person walked onto the streets of New York, because of the police. And that's an impossible situation. That is the truth.

**How do you choose a story?**

**Some are obvious, but what about the other stories that no-one else knows about – that you feel need to be shown?**

Yeah, it's a very important question and I feel any answer I give is going to sound incomplete. It's a combination of timing and where my heart is, at the moment...

**How much of it is instinctive?**

It's hard to know what will possess you because, ultimately, if you're going to work on something for a while it has to obsess and possess you, right? And that's different from me photographing a couple of weeks on Covid, I'm not going to continue with that in any shape or form for the next five years. So, it's something that fits in with my general political



**Above: A young mourner collapses at the funeral of Luis Lebron, an unarmed 14-year-old boy who was shot dead by New York police in 1990.**

being, which is looking at situations where power presents itself as both attractive and insidious. I'm interested in that and how, for some people, it's debilitating, while for others it presents an opportunity.

**Such as?**

Like this fracking story I did. I spent five years on fracking, I'm still on this



**What can I do visually that's interesting, that's beautiful, that's weird, that's evocative and provocative?**

story. Here comes a whole industry that's created such a perfect, rosy narrative: "You're going to give us a bit of your land, it's going to be good for you, it's going to be good for the country, because we won't have to do these stupid wars anymore and we will be energy independent, and it's clean." It's like a perfect story, but it's a lie. Within all of that, what can I do visually as a pure photographer that's interesting, that's beautiful, that's weird, that's evocative and provocative? Then I have my own obsession of looking at the US military because, frankly, I'm offended that I live in a country where half of the wealth goes into the war machine. I feel that I, as a citizen, should look at that, and few photographers do, few journalists do. I'm still on that story. →





**Above:** When the Ku Klux Klan chose to march around a baseball field in a small New Jersey town in 1990, they were met by resistance from local protestors who forced them behind the ball field fence before driving from the ground and out of town.

**Right:** Hundreds of Black Lives Matter protestors and family members of those killed by the New York police (NYPD), march on City Hall, Manhattan, demanding the defunding of the police department, June 2020.







**Above:** Delegates react at the Republican National Convention to formally nominate Donald Trump as the Republican Party nominee for President, 20 July, 2016.

**Is it a story that has occupied you longer than any other?**

It's like the story of my life! I started looking at it in 1987 as a writer, when I went to Vietnam with a bunch of Vietnam vets, and I realized how little I knew. I thought that war was the most grotesque American project. If I can do my bit to reveal the insidious, oppressive nature of the American system and American foreign policy, then I'll feel I've done a good job. Today, we have these intense talks in the US within our profession about who gets to tell what story, and what right you have to tell that story; what's your intention; are you harming or not? You see that in the coverage of the riots.

**Where do you draw the line between protester and looter?**

**Depending on the side, the narrative is getting fudged...**

Yeah, but also I think that there has been a certain arrogance and a licence that's bigged into the history of photography and photographic documentary practice, which is: "I have a camera, I can travel and it is my right to the benefit of the world to photograph everything!"



**I saw myself building a career as a writer, but my metabolism isn't suited to sitting behind a desk!**

**Is there not also a naivety, particularly among those who are new to photojournalism?**

It can be both, but at some point you have to understand that your images have meaning separate from you. If you put them out there, what's your intention? What questions are you trying to answer? There's a huge social media eruption of people talking about pictures coming out of this crisis, "Hey man, that's going to be a Pulitzer Prize winner." What that person doesn't understand is that if you're a black person in America and you see that picture, you're not seeing Pulitzer Prize, you're seeing, "I feel the oppression and it's traumatizing me." Yet you're seeing it as a commodity. I see this a lot in how photographers work and it's something we should be aware of.

**This ties in with current events, but photography is a very white medium.**  
Yes.

**Thankfully there are more women who are noticed now, but it's still an incredibly white pursuit.**  
I disagree. I don't think it's a white pursuit. I think it's a white profession.

**Good point.**  
I think there are plenty of photographers that have been making excellent work, who are not white, and they have been doing it for decades and they have not been noticed or recognized. Only now are we seeing them, 'we' meaning the white dominant culture, is letting them into our space, and we need to learn from their practice.

I feel white photographers have a big place in photographing white supremacy and photographing oppression, but they have to find a way to do it that's different. It can't just be, "I'm going to photograph another instance of someone's face in pain," right?

**You went to Vietnam back in 1987 as a writer, is that how your career started off?**

Yeah, I started as a writer in college – I was a writer and photographer for local independent papers. Then I went to grad school and did both, but I got a job offer as a writer and I saw myself building a career as a writer, but my metabolism isn't suited to sitting behind a desk! It really isn't.

**Ha, that's a great line!**

I can't fight it, there's nothing I can do about it! I also felt I was already a decent writer, but I didn't feel like I was a great photographer, so I thought I should try and learn this.

**When you first picked up a camera, did you take to it naturally?**

Yeah, I loved it. I had a typical story. My dad gave me a camera and it was a little rangefinder, I was 17 and I shot black-and-white film and processed it in my bathroom.

**It's still the best way to start!**

Yeah, I think so. It's nice to enter a magical world where you're actually making something and you're not sure how it's going to turn out.



## BAD LANGUAGE

**THERE ARE CERTAIN WORDS THAT NINA IS CAREFUL TO AVOID WHEN DESCRIBING HER OWN ACTIONS AS A PHOTOGRAPHER...**

**Some photographers describe themselves as either a sniper or a machine gunner. Which one are you?**

Neither. I don't use those words. Men use those words. I think it's crucial for photographers to get away from this language of killing. I say, "I don't shoot a picture, I make a picture." I don't take a picture,

I don't capture. This word 'capture', which was not in our vernacular as analogue photographers, has become part of the language in the digital age: 'great capture', right? I never say that, I always felt uncomfortable with that word. I am witnessing that moment and being present in that moment, and not sniping or shooting.

Professionally, I photographed the first 10 years of my career with transparency colour film, so you had to be a really good photographer to use that film, right? But the thrill and total excitement and anxiety as you waited for your film to come back from the lab is a feeling that digital photographers do not have. I think that anxiety and excitement helped motivate me to become a good photographer.

**There are a lot of photographers who still choose to do some projects on film. It's a decision that has nothing to do with economics or practicalities!**

Right, nothing! It's an artistic response, I also think that if you want to overexpose your pictures a little bit you can't do it that well with digital. If you want a certain look in the whites or white tones, digital still is not good at that. It's also the discipline of, 'I'm not going to make 400 pictures, I'm going to make four pictures.' You just look at the world very differently then.

**What was your first Nikon?**

My first Nikon was an FM2. I still have one and I still have all my old Nikon manual lenses and I still use them. I love the quality. You put some of these old lenses on your digital cameras and you feel like you have more of a film look. Then I used F3s and then F4s, and that was my last

Nikon film camera. I used Vivitar flashes, the 283 and 285. When digital came out I went to Canon, then I switched back and I've been with Nikon for 11 years. Now I'm using the D850 and the Z 7.

**What do you think of the Z 7?**

I find the viewfinder of the D850 is better, but the Z 7 is almost like a street camera, so that's my go-to.

**It must suit your style better?**

Yeah and I'm someone who likes to use flash, because I photograph lots with colour, but also in black and white, and there are some great flash systems now. I'm interested in them making a pancake lens for it.

**What's your go-to lens?**

It's funny, because I never worked with zooms, but I've been using the 24-70mm, which is nice. My go-to lens before the zooms was a 28mm or 35mm. If I carry two cameras, I'll carry the old 180mm f/2.8. I don't use any of the new longer lenses, because they're too big and heavy. I don't need autofocus, I have a beautiful 85mm f/2, which is tiny, the old Nikon one, and I use that with an adapter on the Z 7.

**You're a journalism professor at Columbia University. Is mentoring your students one of the most satisfying aspects of that post?**

Oh yeah, I love when I see my students making great work. It's so thrilling and I love being able to hire some of my former students who want to work with me.

**What's the best piece of advice that you give to your students?**

I say to them, allow yourself to be uncertain – to make mistakes – just to know that there is not some secret way to make a picture. And to find out what they want to learn about the world and what inside them gives them a special talent to do that.

**It sounds like they have to learn to appreciate themselves, not others?**

Be open and listen. People think that photography is about seeing, but it's about listening as well. That's what I teach in journalism school, because that's what they're supposed to do: hear stories and viewpoints. That's how I try and motivate them. ■

**Next Month**  
Andrea Bruce,  
documentary  
photographer