# Unite Joburg Photographer Interview 4: Stephanie O’Connor

Stephanie O’Connor is next up in our interviews with the adidas Originals Unite Joburg Exhibition photographers. The trans-Atlantic jetsetter was on the streets of busy Parkhurst on a Saturday morning to capture its hustle. She shares with us some of the things that make her tick and keep her drive going.

**AREA3:** Joburg is a melting pot of cultures and diversity. As a photographer in this city, how does this diversity affect your work?

**Stephanie:** The diversity in Joburg not only adds to my work, but it defines it!  As a freelancer, there is no limit to what I shoot in a month; from corporate portraits, to stylish people at THE WKND SOCIAL to live performances and most recently a very involved wedding ritual that I shot with my eyes closed half of the time. I love the diversity in people and culture; it will always be at the forefront of my work, including a personal self-portrait series I plan to start on in 2014.

**AREA3:** Portraiture is such a subjective thing, and that’s what makes it interesting. When you’re doing portraits what do you try to capture?

**Stephanie:** I try my best in portraits to capture the essence of the person.  This is often difficult when you haven’t spent months of time with someone.  Shooting people has made me a better listener.  If I am able to spend just 15 minutes with the person before we shoot, I get an idea of how comfortable they are with me, and how comfortable they are with being in front of a camera, and I watch out for mannerisms and quirks that make them who they are.  I like to ask them outrageous questions to see how they respond.  Those are great indicators for me.  Then while shooting, I throw out random comments or continue to ask them questions so they focus less on the camera, and more on our own interpersonal interpretation.

**AREA3:** Do you have a special connection with the neighbourhood that you chose to shoot in?

**Stephanie:** Not particularly.  I was initially campaigning for downtown Joburg, close to Nordt taxi rank, you know right in the nitty gritty of it all because this is what I experience daily.  However, when I first moved to Johannesburg, Parkhurst is one of the area’s I use to frequent regularly as I use to live in Parktown North.  As someone who comes to Parkhurst (mostly for the Ribs @ Botega), it was awesome seeing the variation of passer-by’s that you normally wouldn’t pay attention to on an afternoon lunching outing.   I enjoyed it.  The people were friendly and fun.

**AREA3:** In working with adidas Originals, how have you represented originality in your portraits?

**Stephanie:** I think all photographers express originality in everything they shoot.  It’s their individual eye and personal life experiences that make shooting even the exact same subject different.  I didn’t know how to answer this question fully until a recent interview with myself, Anthony and Chris. Anthony mentioned what he was looking for in the people he shot in the street, and I realised that what I was looking for was completely different.  As much as possible, I love capturing people in their natural or happy state.  One of my favourite shooting tactics with portraits is to get a surprise reaction from my subject by yelling out an animal they must mimic.  The results are fabulous!  I’ve been doing this for about six years now, and I don’t see me stopping anytime soon.

**AREA3:** How does it feel to be part of such a multifaceted campaign like Unite Joburg?

**Stephanie:** From the first time I was contacted about this project, I was excited.  I loved the idea of bringing people together through their diversity, and celebrating those differences at the same time.  A lot of the time, artists are underpaid and unappreciated for the work that they do, but here adidas Originals celebrated not only the public, but the artists’ involved in this project.  Photographers, very much like history book writers, are historians of cultures and subcultures.  I couldn’t have been more excited to work on a campaign that, in its simplicity, says a lot.

**AREA3:** You had the opportunity to meet and spend time with Danny Brown in person. Any pearls of wisdom?

**Stephanie:** I only had a chance to meet Danny at the adidas banquet Dinner, and he was rather quiet (maybe enjoying the meal too much…).  I didn’t have much of a chance to really talk to him.  He seems a bit eccentric, but I’m pretty sure that somewhere underneath all that crazy you might find a genius.

The Unite Joburg Photography Exhibition, featuring portraits by [Hanro Havenga](http://whyhelloclarice.wordpress.com/), [Chris Saunders](http://www.whatwasparadise.com/), [Anthony Bila](http://www.anthonybila.com/), [Justice and Innocent Mukheli](http://iseeadifferentyou.tumblr.com/) and [Stephanie O’Connor](http://www.connervarinblog.com/), will be up in [AREA3](http://www.area3.co.za/blog/)  from 3 December until 9 February 2014. (Closed for the holidays from 20 December 2013 to 13 January 2014.)

Photograph by: Adriaan Louw

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