

An expert's take on that Madonna image



Madonna has released an image of herself holding Mercy, the Malawian baby she hopes to adopt. It's in sepia. Why?

The Power of Sepia

Written by Martin Parr

Choosing sepia is all to do with trying to make the image look romantic and idealistic. It's sort of a soft version of propaganda. Remember when the colour supplements used to run black-and-white pictures of famine and hardship? Some still do. They do that because they want to make it look more authentic. But it's a fabrication. You can't shoot in sepia, so converting into black and white and then into brown makes everything feel less real.

Madonna is a clever person and this image is all part of a rigorous attempt to persuade the Malawian courts that her adoption should be allowed to go ahead.

As well as the photo being sepia, there appears to be a subtle soft pink hue on Madonna herself. I guess this is the colour of reassuring, concerned maternity. You can imagine Madonna and her team thinking this through in the same way an advertising campaign is orchestrated.

This predilection for sepia is all part of the baggage we have about photography. Despite all the above people seem to think it looks more real. Only 30 years ago, if you were a serious photographer, part of the art world, you had to work in black and white. You were almost scorned as commercial if you shot only in colour. When I first started doing colour in 1982/83 there had only been one serious exhibition in colour (that was Peter Mitchell at the Impressions gallery in York in 1979, with an exhibition entitled A New Refutation of the Viking IV Space Mission). It was a scandal in the world of photography. But it convinced me that colour wasn't the domain of the commercial and snapshot photographer.

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Some, however, still harbour the notion of a black and white humanist photographer. Sepia in particular tends to make everything look a bit romantic and almost sentimental, hence the fact that it remains such a popular choice for wedding photographs.

It suggests old values, and in our days of modernisation, we hanker after that.

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