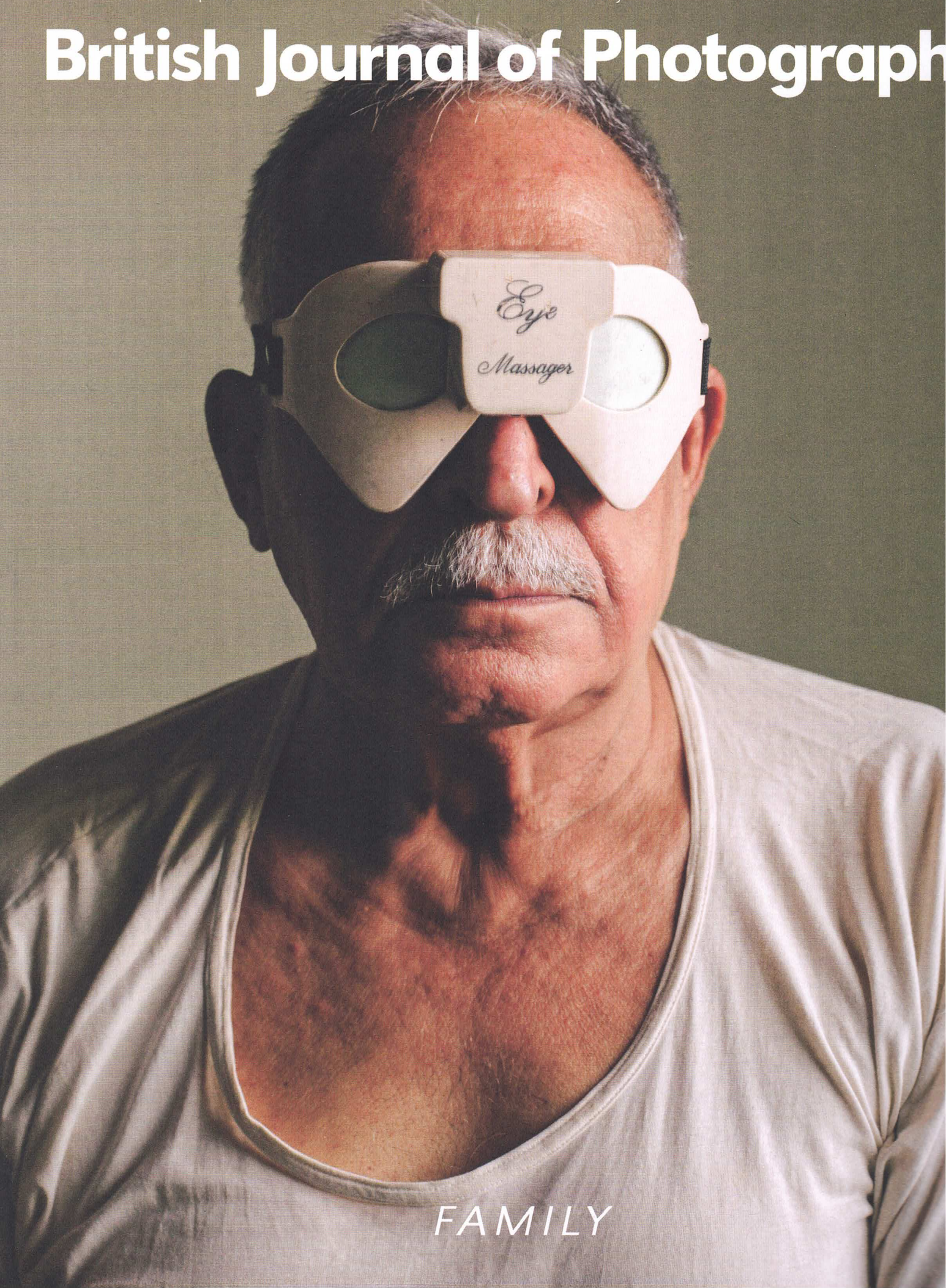


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British Journal of Photography



FAMILY

Snezhana von Büdingen's winning Portrait of Humanity 2020 series is a delicate documentation of the first steps into love, loss and womanhood

Sofie's universe is one imbued with wonder. At 20 years old, she lives with her family, eminent antique collectors, on a 16th-century estate in Eilenstadt, Germany, where grand, old paintings hang on paint-flecked walls, and verdant farmland exists as a barrier to the world. Sofie is dreamy and deliberate. She is persistent about what she wants. She refuses to rush. She also has Down's syndrome.

Snezhana von Büdingen conceived *Meeting Sofie*, a series winner of Portrait of Humanity 2020, when she was casting for a mother-daughter portrait series in Cologne. Sofie and her mother, Barbara, couldn't travel the distance but invited von Büdingen to visit them instead. "It was just special from the beginning," the Russian-born photographer recalls. "The way their family lives is a kind of art."

The poeticism of *Meeting Sofie* is captivating. The location, romantic and pastoral, could be the setting of a Renoir painting: soft light, dappled sun; sprawling greenery and rich fabrics; a world which is so free of friction and hostility that it doesn't feel real at all. "Being on that farm is like being in a different time and space dimension," von Büdingen says. "The fairytale ambience in the yard, magical light that floods the house, and, of course, Sofie's peaceful and harmonious nature."

Von Büdingen began shooting in 2017, when Sofie was 18, and continued to photograph her sporadically. The result is delicate documentation of a woman's first steps into love, loss and adulthood over several years. In one image Sofie peers eagerly over a wall, encapsulating carefree youth in a summer dress; in another, she smokes a cigarette in a thick, dark coat – a grown woman gazing knowingly into the lens.

Perhaps most affecting of all is a portrait of Sofie with her first boyfriend, Andy, enveloped by poppies beneath a darkening sky. "Her whole life revolved around him," von Büdingen remembers. "Every day she went to the bus stop and waited until he returned from work to see him for a few minutes. Sometimes she was already sitting at the bus stop an hour earlier. She still hasn't gotten over that love story."

Elsewhere in the series, Sofie appears alongside her mother, her brother and her friend Lina. Portraits of intimacy, reflection and curiosity; searing with emotion, sparing of action. "When I'm out with Sofie, I notice how people look at her," says von Büdingen. "I want them to see a girl in these pictures who, like all of us, loves, grieves, laughs and feels. Yes, she has Down's syndrome, but, in some respects, it's not of much importance." **BJP**

vonbuedingen.com



Meeting Sofie



