

the
grit
special

uncommon women

All images _ Courtesy of the artist and ClampArt, New York City

the photo essay by Brian Finke

INTO THE FINKE'S FLIGHT ATTENDANT SERIES

Testo/text *Alix Browne*



Brian Finke

Brian Finke spent two years flying around the world — without any real sense of destination — logging what must have amounted to hundreds of thousands of miles, to photograph the lives of international flight attendants both on duty and off. That he was able to do so in a security delay/lost baggage/lack of service/post-9/11-world says as much about his ambitions as a documentarian of contemporary culture as it does about his patience and charm as a human being.

A previous body of work found Finke trailing exuberant squads of American cheerleaders and football players — a project for which he no doubt spent a lot of time on busses. In the flight attendants, the photographer has discovered another nomadic tribe, distinguished by its own language, mannerisms, and uniforms. But what struck Finke most were not the differences between these two seemingly disparate groups, but rather the similarities —

in their efforts to maintain the front of camaraderie, in their performance of choreographed activities, in their elaborate codes of appearance.

The personification of the glamour and promise of a world in which people soar through the air — a gin-and-tonic in hand — from point a to point b, flight attendants have long occupied a privileged spot in the minds of both air travelers and the airline industry itself. The very first stewardesses (as they were called well into the 70's) were registered nurses, hired as an experiment in May of 1930 by Boeing Air Transport under the leadership of Ellen Church who had approached the company with the dream of becoming a pilot. These industry pioneers were uniformed to exude a sense of both caring and competence (hats, capes) and cast as much for their skills as their physiques—the reasoning for which was, apparently, as pragmatic as it was aesthetic. Stewardesses had to be tall enough to reach overhead lockers with ease, yet petite enough to navigate confined cabin quarters and narrow aisles. They also had to be single enough so as not to elicit calls from perturbed husbands wanting to know why dinner was not on the table. In those early days of commercial air travel a flight from San Francisco to Chicago in a 12-seat biplane minimally retrofitted for human transport could reportedly take 20 hours and include as many as 12 stops for

refueling of aircraft, crew and human cargo. It is testament to the grasp the dream of travel by air has had on the popular imagination that people didn't just walk.

In its heyday, the job of stewardess (with a mandatory retirement age of 35 upheld through the 60's it could scarcely be thought of as an actual career) was second only to that of Hollywood starlet in terms of allure. Being a stewardess was a direct route to broader horizons—like a good marriage. (The profession in fact boasts numerous models, actresses and Miss America candidates among its ranks.) Airfares were subject to government regulation until 1978, and as the industry grew, carriers began to recognize the value of their flight crews to help distinguish them from their competition.

Uniforms came to reflect fashion trends — miniskirts, hot pants, cat suits — or were commissioned by well-known fashion designers like Bill Blass, Emilio Pucci, or the French couturier Pierre Balmain who was hired to update the look of the Singapore Girl in the early 1970's. Cheeky ad campaigns like Continental's "We Really Move Our Tails For You," hinted at the level of service one could expect to encounter in the oh-so-friendly skies.

Women who might have been attracted to the job because of this very image of glamour, freedom and independence, found that it ultimately served to undermine their authority and compromise their ability to perform their duties. The old adage about Ginger Rogers, and how she could do everything Fred Astaire did only backwards and in high heels, is implicit in the flight attendants' plight. As Kathleen M. Barry, the author of *Femininity in Flight: A History of Flight Attendants* (Duke University Press), observes,

"From the first job interview onward, stewardesses were expected to remain perfectly groomed, maintain a willowy figure, and conjure an unending supply of cheer and concern for passengers." Fighting for wages commensurate to their skills and to be taken with a level of seriousness on par with their professional responsibilities, flight attendants eventually found themselves at the center of feminist debate. "I don't think of myself as a sex symbol or a servant," went the common defense. "I think of myself as somebody who knows how to open the door of a 747 in the dark, upside down, and in the water." And yet, in one particularly telling image from 1965, TWA stewardesses

protesting for better pay and shorter hours look like an advertisement for the airline — immaculately uniformed, coiffed, made up — smiling! — picket signs clutched in their gloved hands.

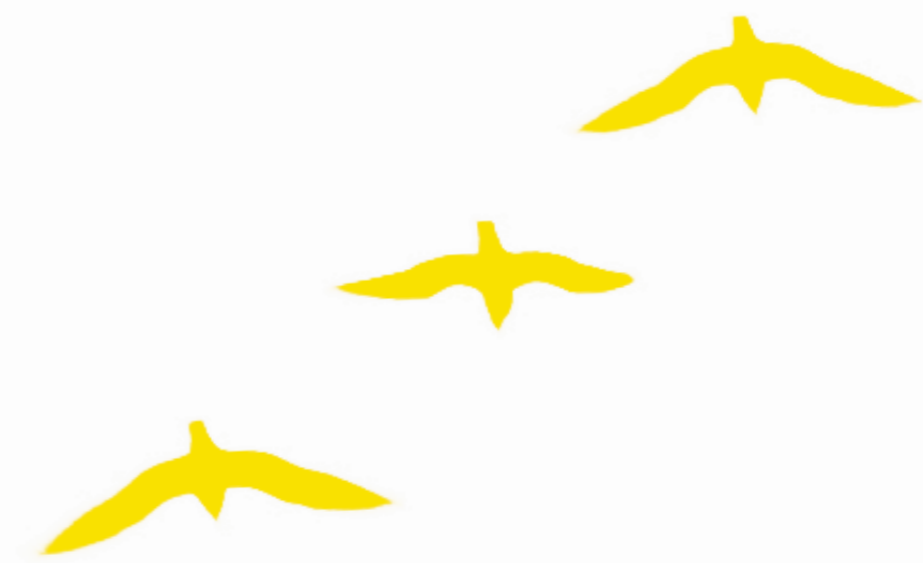
In a time of both marked increases in security and decreases in service, modern day travelers are hardly in the position to be picky when it comes to which airline has the prettiest flight attendants or the nicest uniforms. The hope is that you, and perhaps even the bag you checked, arrive at all. Today's flight attendants remain, by and large, a civilizing force, a literal reminder to fasten your seatbelt and raise your tray table, but also a symbolic one that we intrepid travelers are more than just human cargo — well, at least until the 500-passenger Airbus A380 officially takes to the skies. In that respect, neither their social role — nor their image — has changed all that dramatically. Many of the airlines Finke frequented are from countries that continue to perpetuate the stereotype of the unflappably glamorous flight attendant not to mention that stereotype's attendant nostalgia for the golden days of air travel. Flight attendants from Cathay Pacific, Air Asia, All Nippon, and Icelandair seem from another era when compared with those Finke encountered on, say, Jet Blue or Hawaiian Airlines. The fact that Cathay Pacific had reinstated its iconic red uniforms in honor of its 60th anniversary might have something to do with this. But Singapore Air still actively promotes the charms of the Singapore Girl, lauded for engendering Asian values and hospitality and whom the airline likes to think of as caring, warm, gentle, elegant and serene.

Throughout Finke's flight attendant series, there are glimpses of what air travel has in fact become. Take, for example, the democratizing attempts of Southwest Airlines where the class hierarchy has been abolished and every day is casual Friday. Or the ill-conceived (and thankfully short-lived) in-flight entertainment concept, Hooters Air, where the uniform of orange short-shorts and a tight white T-shirt emblazoned with the company logo brings the idea of casting flight attendants to meet certain size requirements to an entirely new level. In Finke's photograph, the Hooters air-hostess holds the microphone to the public address system as if she is not quite sure what to do with it. (Somewhat reassuringly, the airline also employed "real" safety-trained flight attendants who were

recognizable as such by their more modest attire.) A photo of a young flight attendant for Tiger Airways (a no-frills carrier based in Singapore) practically hurling a plastic container containing a sad looking sandwich will come as an all too familiar sight to today's budget traveler.

Finke's approach in photographing these women — and the occasional man — is neither nostalgic nor unduly 'real.' He neither glamorizes his subjects nor does he portray them in the glaring, unforgiving light that many of us have come to understand as documentary. For the most part, it is the flight attendants themselves who appear to cling to the glamorous promise of their profession (there are few beauty pageant contenders here; though one Southwest flight attendant is a part-time saleswoman for Mary Kay Cosmetics). We catch these women in their choreographed moments, familiar to the point of being generic — demonstrating safety procedures, smiling and waving as if in an advertisement. But Finke reminds us of their individuality, too. A candid photo of a red-uniformed Cathy Pacific flight attendant shopping for a toothbrush in a company store, could be accompanied by a caption ripped from the celebrity tabloids: Flight Attendants — they're just like Us!

If, on occasion, a particular image comes across as slightly surreal — and here the photo of an Icelandair flight attendant in training, perfectly composed and not a platinum blonde hair out of place as she blasts a fire extinguisher at an overhead bin comes to mind — it is perhaps because no matter how commonplace the experience air travel has become, flying is still something that inspires a certain degree of awe. Finke's photos contain in them the every excruciating minute of the 18-hour haul from New York to Hong Kong. And yet, he somehow emerges with his illusions mostly in tact. Even as we stand by and watch as the flight attendants shop for toiletries or grab a meal in the company cafeteria, or return home to the lives many of us cannot even begin to imagine they have, they maintain, in his photos and in our minds, their quintessential flight attendant-ness. It is as if we, and they, only exist in that unnatural vacuum-sealed experience, where even as you find yourself hurtling through the sky 36,000 feet above the earth at 600 miles an hour, time seems to stand perfectly still.



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