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Obituary

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# Anne Noggle

Pioneering woman photographer and pilot famed for her portraits of the ageing process

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The American-born Anne Noggle, who has died aged 83, managed to cover two of the 20th century's most emblematic careers. She was, first, an aviator, flying with the Women Airforce Service Pilots (Wasps) during the second world war. Then, on retiring at 43, she became an art photographer.

Taking as her themes the body and the ageing process, Noggle did not shy away from depicting people, mainly women, in a decaying, even primaeval state suffused with sexual energy: among her work is an extraordinary series which shows her recovery from a facelift operation.

The photographers Julia Margaret Cameron, who depicted eminent Victorians, and Diana Arbus, whose penchant was for the freakish, were Noggle's influences. And indeed, stately grandeur met the outlandish in her own work over a 40-year period. Fascinated by the psyche, she was steeped in such writing as Carol Pearson's study of archetypes, *The Hero Within*. One picture, *Stonehenge Decoded* (1977), shows light reflected on Noggle's naked torso against a New Mexico desert beneath gathering clouds; she appears a monolith while suggesting that such stone, such flesh, will return to the earth.

Exploring ageing, Noggle photographed her mother through her last 10 years, and, in 1975, made the series showing her own facelift, including the recovery process. In one picture, against a wall, she holds a flower beneath a cupped hand, but the viewer's eyes go first to hers, which are almost serene, despite the fact that, below them, are hideous bruises, even a gash - as if she were the victim of an air accident.

Noggle was aware of the paradox of making public an attempt at disguise. It was part of her philosophy. Commenting on her work in the mid-1980s, she explained: "I find young faces a tabula rasa, nothing is written there. They are empty until they reach their 40s. Then they become photographable." Not that she was ponderous. Far from it; she had great humour. A late triptych - *Stellar by Starlight* (1986) - shows her beneath a night sky, surrounded by steam and foam, which also covers two male hunks in the tub from which she rises. The intention was, perhaps, to create an adored mythological being, but, with her large glasses, joyful smile and arms held high, the effect is of a naked Dame Edna Everage.

Noggle was born in Evanston, Illinois, where she lived with her mother Agnes (a bookshop assistant) and sister in a rooming house, from which her father soon fled. Educated locally, she was enthralled by accounts of the women aviators who, it is often forgotten, emerged in the early days of flying.

At 18, Noggle was one of 1,074 volunteers chosen for the Wasps. Technically a civil service rather than a military body, it had been created to free up men for combat duties. The women, paid \$250 a month, had only a map strapped to their thigh and a Morse beam as they test-piloted planes and weapons systems across America and Canada, trained and ferried male pilots and tugged through the sky - on a very long rope - wire-mesh panels measuring 35ft x 6ft for artillery practice from below.

In due course, the men returning from abroad began to resent the Wasps, who had usurped their roles and left them with an altogether more dangerous job - as ground forces fighting the Japanese. As a result, before the end of the war, the Wasps were disbanded, unable to reap such benefits as pensions and the provisions of the GI Bill. Indeed, when any of them died on duty, the others had a whip-round to send the body home.

After the war, Noggle taught flying, performed stunts and - almost as dangerous - did crop-dusting, then joined the US air force. She served as a captain during the Korean war, but towards the end of the 1950s, after 6,000 hours in the sky and beset by emphysema, took a disability pension.

On leave in Paris, she had a revelatory moment in the Louvre, and decided to pursue art. She joined the University of New Mexico, where she studied photography with Van Deren Coke.

Always experimenting - Noggle adapted video images and curated exhibitions across the United States - she was also a fascinating talker. She could draw out others, as is evident in her books, one about the Wasps, *For God, Country and the Thrill of it* (1990), followed, four years later, by *A Dance with Death*, the result of several visits to Russia to meet surviving women pilots who had taken part in combat. As she said, "These are women to make us take pride in being a woman. It takes effort not to be awed by them."

• Anne Noggle, photographer and pilot, born June 12 1922; died August 16 2005

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