



that awkward phase
 PHOTOGRAPHER KARIN LOCKE HELPS
 PUNTERS UNLOCK THEIR INNER NERD.

WORDS NICOLE THOMAS

We've all been there. Mottled backdrop. Pre-pubescent sibling nestled closely to the side. The god-awful call – "Saaaaay, Twisties!" – followed by FLASH. And quick as that, you're immortalised in all your awkward glory.

Apologies if this takes you back to a place you've paid a therapist a lot of money to recover from. But if that's the case, you might need to hibernate for a while, because professional happy snapper Karin Locke is bringing back the awkward family portrait. No pouts allowed here. And that angle that you've just mastered after at least 100 selfie deletions? Say bye-bye. This is all about gelled hair, sweatbands, nylon and ill-fitting prescription glasses. And while it does sound terribly reactionary in the world of image curatorship that social media has thrown us into, it was actually inspired by the humble ugly jumper.

"I'm from Canada, so ugly Christmas sweaters are a thing," Karin explains. "I threw an ugly sweater party, and as a portrait photographer I thought it would be fun for my friends if I set up a backdrop and took some photos. A little while later I decided to throw another party with the sole intent of taking awkward portraits. There is that awkward family portraits website, and I guess that's where the idea first stemmed from. Mostly it was, 'Hey, we're all wearing ugly jumpers and we're having a dinner party and this will be really funny,'" she laughs.

While her pictures inspire cringes and laughter in equal amounts (and maybe a repressed flashback or two), Karin reckons there's something more cathartic than pure hilarity going on. Intentional ugliness as a kind of liberation, maybe? "It's the exact opposite of image crafting. It's the exact opposite of social media... I feel deep down people sort of hate the fact that we're all so addicted to such a fake existence. Taking ego out of the portrait is very liberating for people," she says.

Karin's big antipodean break came in 2013 when the producer of Melbourne's Darebin Music Feast said in passing that she wanted a photographer who could channel Wes Anderson. Suffice to say, it was a match made in (ugly jumper) heaven. The festival set Karin up with a photo booth, a budget for props and the perfect forum for young and old to get their geek on. High school students, young families, wee tots – it was an all-ages event. Funnily enough, she's even noticed "a lot of people have used them as their profile pictures on facebook". How's that for harnessing your screaming inner geek?

Karin is having so much fun helping subjects shed their shiny social-media shells for a hit of *Royal Tenenbaums*-style awkwardness that she plans to create a whole series of awkward shots. But when it comes down to it, all she really wants is to share the love. "I just want to keep taking pictures of people and making people happy. And if that's awkward pictures or really nice, good portraits, I'm definitely into that." ❁