

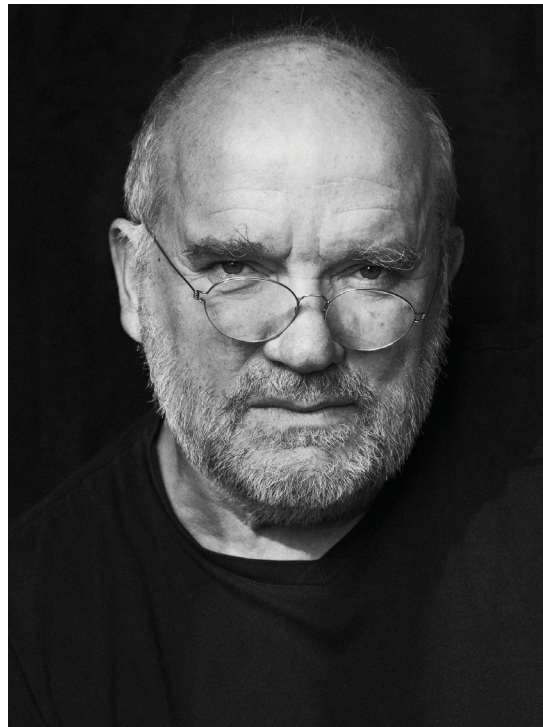
GAGOSIAN GALLERY

LIFO

Peter Lindbergh in the new issue of Lifo: “The way I look and photograph is mostly European”

One of the most important photographers of our time exhibits his work as of today at the Gagosian Gallery

Matina Kaltaki



A legend in fashion photography, Peter Lindbergh (b. 1944) is one of the most influential photographers of the past thirty years. His portraits renew the term “realism” by capturing the face’s natural beauty and avoiding pretentious posing or impressive backgrounds while, at other times they give a whole new dimension to the idea of ‘expressionism”, similar to the German interwar movies that have a profound influence in his (mostly black and white) aesthetics.

His point of view carries a certain “humanitarian” sensitivity that is unusual in the cold glamorous world of big fashion magazines. Lindbergh aims to reveal something beyond dimensions and symmetries: those qualities that are invisible at first glance and the psychological elements that might be hidden or even ignored (by the models themselves).

His photos of supermodels before they were famous (Linda Evangelista, Cindy Crawford,

Christy Turlington, Tatjana Patitz, Naomi Campbell) dressed in white shirts marked the new needs and ways of fashion photography. Two decades later, when photographing the super models of the nineties, he spoke about the photographer's responsibility of liberating women from the ideals of youth and perfection.

Peter Lindbergh (who, among others, introduced the idea of "narrative" fashion photography in 1990, with a series of photographs that follow a script) comes to Athens for his exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery. The photographs exhibited will cover his career in the last thirty years, revealing his contribution in the renewal of fashion photography – and the portrait of course, in which he cannot be surpassed.

An artist's strongest references are shaped in childhood. You were born, raised and educated in Germany (and France), nurtured by European culture – in which the arts are still very important. Is there anything "European" about the way you look through the camera lens? Your photographs remind me of Italian neorealist cinema, the French Nouvelle Vague and the black & white Bergman movies.

I grew up in a German industrial postwar environment and was not surrounded at all by any kind of culture. That environment had a strong influence on me and affected the way I see even today. I think that keeping these early impressions alive makes it much easier to find your own identity in anything you do later on. In my case I would call these influences more local than European. My idea of beauty or women in general, must be very different to someone who grew up, for example, in Venice.

Later, when at the age of nineteen I moved to Berlin, I was introduced to a variety of arts and began to see things differently. A whole new world opened up in front of the eyes of the young man I was at the time and wanted to know everything. Movies like Fritz Lang's "Metropolis" or Josef von Sternberg's "The blue angel" with Marlene Dietrich, interwar Berlin, Brecht's theater and Kurt Weil's music left a very significant impression on me. The same happened with painters like Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, George Grosz and Kirchner, Kurt Schwitters and the Dada movement, the expressionist dancer Valeska Gert.

During and after my studies additional influences included the Italian postwar neorealist cinema, Pasolini's "Mama Roma," Fellini's "8 ½" and "La Strada," Visconti's "Ossessione" and many others. Wim Wenders' movies have also been a great inspiration. We grew up in the same region, 30 miles from each other and later have become very close friends. So, yes, the way I look and photograph is mostly European.

Was it difficult to decide to study Fine Arts? Which were the critical moments in your spectacular career?

Not really! After spending a year in Berlin I only had one wish: to become an artist. I attended evening courses in the Academy of Arts because I had no money at all and needed to work during the day but I soon changed my mind and hitchhiked to Arles in the South of France, where Vincent van Gogh (whom I admired deeply) lived and worked. After eight months in Arles I decided to do a two year trip through the South of France, Spain and North Africa. Only when I came back from there did I go to an art school, in Krefeld (by Dusseldorf), to study what was then called "free painting".

After I finished studying, I was very influenced by conceptual art, by the fascinating ideas of artists like Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner. It was a critical moment in my –by then- not at all "spectacular career". I felt that I drifted more and more away from my own identity and preferred to stop everything I was doing as an artist and think about how I would like to continue. The eight months that followed were

the most difficult period in my life, until someone offered me a job as a photographer's assistant. As I was trying to find a new angle for my artwork, I took it.

Many of your photos, especially the portraits, capture a sense of sadness, a certain shadow in the look. Are these psychological elements discovered while photographing or is it just your ability to look deep into your subject and reveal their hidden qualities?

I think that everyone is closer to his real self when exposed to the feeling of melancholy. Something poetic takes place when people, women particularly, stop controlling themselves and expose their deeper feelings and emotions to the man with the camera in front of them. The "space" between the photographer and his subject, this is what you photograph. It is not the outside, the shape, the bone structure or the architecture of a face that interests me but the invisible part of the subject, the inner psychological quality that you can capture if she or he is willing to give it to you.

By the way, I have to defend myself concerning your term "sadness", nobody I've ever photographed looked sad. (I smile and I'm not sure...)

There is an ethical/political relationship between art and the market. Isn't it annoying the ease in which the market absorbs and presumes upon the artists' work? How easy and unrestricted is the process for an artist working in fashion photography?

This never ending discussion about art being still art or not when working on command -or lets call it "applied art"- becomes useless. If the art market takes the role of a demanding client, would this be the end of art? Likewise, the question whether a photograph is art or not, is quite useless. The quality and power of the photograph does not change, no matter if it gets labelled as art or not. It is not the label that makes a photograph interesting, original or moving or.....

What were the most interesting years of your career? When I look at your photographs from the "golden era" of super models (late 80s and 90s) that made history in the pop culture of my generation, I wonder: after the great economic crisis which started in the USA in 2008, can we still say that the '90s were the era of great vanity, with a disastrous zeitgeist of wasting money and thoughts in insignificant things and false ideals?

The most exciting years are now. In the end of the eighties the models later called supermodels represented for me a change from the other women in fashion magazines that were exposing their social status without great sensibility. Because of this I began to look for other women, who could speak for themselves and did not need rich husbands to do so. While trying to explain to Mr. Liberman of Conde Nast how I imagined this "new woman" I was led to the white shirt pictures for American Vogue (for which I refused to work before).

However, when I showed Mr. Liberman and Grace Mirabella, the then editor of American Vogue, the photographs they didn't say much and refused the pictures. Four years later, in the book celebrating Vogue's 100th anniversary Anna Wintour declared that same the most important of the decade. There is so much more I could say about the 90s, but I better leave it here....

A Greek song has the following lyrics: "the color of the eyes doesn't change / only the way they look". Has the way you look at the world changed as years go by?

I would say instead that it is what we actually see that changes.

New technology allows everyone to shoot high quality photographs. With the current photo-mania in mind (millions of photographs are posted on Facebook and Instagram), what do you think is the photographer's role today? Many people claim to be so exhausted by the mass visual culture and the amount of bad, silly photographs that are everywhere on a daily basis that they declare interest in photos prior to the digital era...

There is a good way not to get tired: just don't look at all those pictures! I have nothing against the concept that everyone is a photographer now and that this produces trillions of pictures every day. A real photographer, someone who has his own point of view and a long history of taking interesting pictures, will always stand out if his work is interesting enough. But I must say that the "real" photographers can only learn from the lightness or easiness of some of those photographs you see from time to time in the sea of useless pictures everywhere. I have learned to shoot digital with the exact same poetry as I did on film. It took me a while to learn it but it was of major importance to me, to bring back the poetry in my own photography.