

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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We talked to Peter Lindbergh, the number one fashion photographer who established the Big Five supermodels

Kiara Souganidou



He visited Athens for a day, for the opening of his exhibition featuring photographs with the most famous supermodels of the world. I met him at Gagosian Gallery, Kolonaki.

Peter Lindbergh is now considered the most sought after photographer in the world. He is the one who coined the word “supermodel” in 1990 for the fashion industry. It was this same year that he did the first shooting of the Big Five supermodels together – Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista, Tatjana Patitz, Christy Turlington and Cindy Crawford. His photographs are mainly black and white and he never retouches faces or bodies. “I only use Photoshop on digital images for technical reasons,” he told us during the Press conference, today at noon, at Gagosian Gallery on Merlin Street, just a few meters away from the demonstrations at Syntagma Square. I could hear the noise from the demonstrations coming through the gallery’s open windows, but in there, surrounded by the most iconic photographs of the second half of the 20th century, I felt again a citizen of the world, like I used to feel a few years back.

“I can answer your question by explaining that I retouch my photographs to improve the digital effect. I prefer the traditional film but you can’t shoot with film nowadays, it’s too slow. But digital photography does not capture the atmosphere, the details, the depth of field. It took me two years to find ways to correct the digital files. It’s funny though, the world progresses and I’m trying to make new things look old.”

What is it that you see in your model during the shooting?

“It is her aura, the relationship growing between us, the air in between us. My model always has something that intrigues me, and this has nothing to do with beauty. The model is the person I approach in order to depict her aura.”

Most of your models are naked. What does nude symbolize for you?

“My relationship with the model. Of course I don’t mean a sexual relationship, I mean a personal one. When a model poses naked for you she offers you something and you take it. And from that moment on, your relationship changes forever. For me, the nude symbolizes this act of offering. You know, Christen (McMenamy), I had been trying to persuade her for two years to pose naked for me. She would not answer. She wouldn’t say yes or no. One day she arrived and said ‘OK, I’m ready.’ This altered the relationship I felt I had with her. We didn’t become a couple, we didn’t get married, but we know we share something deeper now. Nude is like porn: you can be secretly watching porn for years, not telling your wife, and nothing happens. But the minute you reveal it to your wife your relationship changes forever.”

You studied painting at the Berlin Academy of Fine Arts. What turned your attention to photography?

“Mere luck. I was quite a good student at the Fine Arts Academy, I always worked more than everyone else! I started with painting and then I discovered conceptual art – I was bewitched! Conceptual art gives you the freedom to do anything at all. Absolute freedom was amazing! But then, I felt a void. I felt that my fellow students as well as other artists treated art as an idea. They were like ‘I’ll do this and it will be fantastic. I’ll do that and it will be completely different,’ etc. The idea was always important. But there was no connection with yourself as an artist, with what was inside you, inside your heart, your stomach. So at this point I said ‘What am I doing here?’”

So what did you do?

“I left. I stopped working for eight months and spent my time thinking. In fact, I didn’t do anything at all during that time, which was phenomenal for me, because I always used to work like mad. At some point a friend of mine told me to go to a photographer who was looking for an assistant. And I did. There, in photography, I found this very link I was missing. We used to shoot everything, not only fashion. Commercials, portraits, anything. And I loved every bit of it!”

So then you decided to study photography?

“Yes, in Düsseldorf. And I was working at the same time because as I said, I always liked working hard. I worked for commercials but I also liked working as a press photographer. I admired *Henri Cartier-Bresson*. *I tried everything.*”

And what was it that made you turn your attention to fashion?

“Beauty – but the way I saw it.”

What was your way of seeing beauty?

“Like an industrial landscape. Look, I was born and grew up in an ugly industrial city. Everything around me was black and grey. Dirt and smoke. Poverty and misery. The only sight in our city was made of chimneys. But this was my city and I felt it was beautiful. I mean I saw beauty in it. Later in Düsseldorf, which is also an industrial city, I saw beauty in it as well. Other people did not understand me, they used to tell me I was crazy every time I said I liked Düsseldorf. But I do like it! So when I have a face in front of me I notice the flaws and feel the beauty. That’s why I don’t retouch my photographs. A tiny flaw on the skin may contain all the beauty of the image.”

So your inspiration has nothing to do with fashion...

“What did you have in mind? That I get inspired from the pages in Vogue magazine? Of course not! I get inspired from what there is inside me. This is what connects me with my model during the shoot, the aura, the air, my relationship with the model is what finally gets printed on the magazine pages.”

How long does it take to create this relationship with your model?

“Three minutes. It doesn’t take long. I can explain this to you: I’m really happy with my job so I get on very well with people I work with. I like all my models. And I show it to them. Not in an exaggerating way, but I do show it. That’s how trust builds up and that’s how the relationship that leads us to the photograph builds up. Sometimes of course, there are difficult cases. If my model has recently had a bad experience with a photographer, she won’t trust me either. So a wall builds up between us and prevents me from seeing her. I need to climb up the wall in order to see the face or the body. And I do it. But it takes longer.”

When you finally look at your photographs what do you see in them?

“Their story. What was happening that day. How many people we were at the shoot. What everyone was saying. What the weather was like. The helicopter that might have been flying above us making a noise that would not let me concentrate. Such things. Different from what other people think when looking at the same image.”

You mostly photograph women. Why is that?

“Because women are more expressive, I’m interested in them, they open up more easily, they are more beautiful. I like shooting women. I also like the female nude. The female body is very expressive.”

And why do you prefer black and white to color?

“Because black and white captures the delicate lines of truth in an image. Black and white captures the air, the feeling, the expression. Black and white is more sincere. You know, after the stock market crash in the United States, the Congress members used to send press photographers to depict the situation in various parts of the country so that they themselves could avoid traveling from one city to the other in order to witness the problems people were facing. These photographers were civil servants. They photographed child labor, hungry people, the despair in the eyes of the unemployed, they depicted for the American government the impact of the Big Depression on society. Always in black and white. Never in color. Black and white and dramatic.

Black and white tells the truth. Color can easily tell lies. You can use color for commercials, when you want to promote your products.”

Such was our conversation with the internationally acclaimed photographer telling us interesting things in the midst of the noise coming from the demonstrations – taking place just a meter away from the gallery. For me, having worked for women’s magazines for at least 15 years, today was a great opportunity.

By the end of the interview, his collaborator offered to take a picture of us two with my cell phone. “I’d rather not be in the picture,” I said. “Let’s take a picture of him alone, so that I can use it, I’ll look terrible and spoil the picture.” “No, no, let’s take a picture with the two of us,” Peter Lindbergh insisted. “It’s always the same mistake... Some faces with no interest at all can look divine in a picture. And really interesting faces don’t look good just because people are scared.”

Lust before leaving I asked him: **You have photographed the most beautiful women in the world! You, as a man, what sort of women do you like?**

“First of all, women with no makeup. Never in my life have I been with a woman wearing makeup.”

Apart from photography, Peter Lindbergh also enjoys shooting documentary films: “Models, The Film” (1991); “Inner Voices” (1999) – Best Documentary Award at the International Festival of Cinema, Toronto, Canada in 2002; “Pina Bausch, Der Fensterputzer” (2001); and “Everywhere at Once” (2008) with Jeanne Moreau, screened at the Cannes Festival and at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2008.

His photographs are included in major museum collections internationally – among them Victoria and Albert Museum, London; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; The Pushkin State Museum, Moscow, and many others.

His photography is represented internationally by Larry Gagosian, currently the most important art collector and owner of Gagosian Galleries.

The exhibition

Peter Lindbergh, photography

Gagosian Gallery: 3 Merlin Street, Kolonaki, Athens

Opening: 4 February (17.00-21.00), tel. 210 3640215

Duration: until 23 April