



David Bailey

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Melinda Camber Porter

"It's stupid to say that all models are stupid," said David Bailey. "The same can be said for photographers." At first the atmosphere of this house 'painted like a Jamaican brothel' by himself and Penelope Tree reeks strongly of trendiness: Radio One blaring, two Dulux dogs, one black, one white, a glamorous secretary, three television sets in one room, dark interiors, pictures of Ringo Starr and Lennon; it all confirms one's prejudices. But David Bailey, although surrounded by a plastic paradise in a world devoted to fashion and façade, retains more common sense and humanity than most.

Recently he had been in the news over the Warhol documentary that was temporarily refused a showing of television. The problems of censorship were fresh in his mind.

"I'm beginning to like England less and less, with all these do-gooders and Lord Longfords around the place. I hate the way the Church feels it has the right to tell us what we should do and think. The Church means nothing to me, not the majority of people. What has God got to do with the question of whether we should see a pornographic movie or not. The trouble with them is that you can't argue, because they're always telling you how much they love you, and discussion is impossible because they have the right answer from God's mouth. They're always going on about the permissive society. I don't know what it means or who it refers to...perhaps to people who want to think for themselves. What they're really against is sex. That's what it comes down to. We're still fighting the backlash of Victorian England. I don't understand it. Sex is the most natural thing for anyone to do."

Bailey's partnership with Andy Warhol has produced a documentary film, a book, and they were going to make a film of "Clockwork Orange" with the Rolling Stones. But although David Bailey finds some of Warhol's films boring, he thinks that he is the most important cultural figure in the last fifteen years. He also feels that Harold Robbins will be considered an important writer.

"People, apart from students and writer, don't have time to read novels nowadays. I don't know many people who will sit down and read fiction."

When I asked him whether he knew Oxford he asked me, "Wasn't that where Zuleika Dobson was?" and continued "Yes, I have been there because I was going to make a musical of the book. But I don't know much or think much of universities because I've never been to one. I've seen Joe Losey's film about all the professors setting round doing a Pinter conversation. I suppose universities are all right, but there's no point going there if you want to be a photographer. Even a photography school can ruin you. I've had assistants straight out of technical training, telling me how to take pictures. The technique isn't important, it's the way you see things. I can't think of one top photographer who has been to a photography school."

Bailey feels that the modelling world is filled with thousands of camera owners and girls with model books. "I don't call them photographers or models. There are only about ten models in the world. The sort of model who appears in the News of the World and is raped the next day isn't what I consider a model. Not even film stars would make good models. There too much competition even on this level. It's a hellish job; you've got to be prepared to tramp around all those dreadful camera owners who treat women like horse flesh. The only way to do it is to find a good photographer who likes you. If I put a girl on Vogue, she's booked for the next six months. That sounds conceited but it is true. I did it last year with a girl who was unhappy and knew she'd never be a Shrimpton."

David Bailey stressed the importance of the relationship between the model and photographer. "It's a two way thing. I can't take a picture unless she helps me. I can tell immediately whether a girl will be all right. It's a funny thing that I can't put into words. But personality and intelligence help. People think all models are stupid. Jean Shrimpton is very clever, but she's difficult now because she doesn't like work and she is doing her own photography. "

I asked him if fashion consciousness was important and if a model needed to know how to dress.

"Well, I'm not fashion conscious. You should see some of the models I use. They look like tramps most of the time. Jean is always wearing dirty jeans and sweaters. You wouldn't believe the thing that walks in is the same thing that appears in the magazine."

I tried to find out what particular qualities he looked for. But either he didn't want to give away the magic recipe or it was a matter of intuition – but he wouldn't tell me. He's constant in his preferences: "I've only used about eight girls over the last ten years."

It seems that David Bailey isn't representative of the fashion photographer. He doesn't regard the majority as photographers and recognizes the sordidness of their world. Apart from the small elite the business strikes one as depressing. Does he want to venture out of photography into something else? He might make some films, but unlike many who start off in one field to progress to another, Bailey is happy as he is. "I've taken photographs since I was twelve. It's like eating or sleeping."

It was raining when we walked outside: "I hate this dead rain. It's so dull. I only like movie-rain, not real rain." He leant me his cap so I wouldn't get wet. "What's Oxford like?" he asked. "Well, there's one television set for the whole college..." He disappeared off into Soho wearing a denim suit, unprotected from the rain.

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